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MABEL.

A Novel,

BY EMMA WARBURTON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MABEL

CHAPTER I.

To your household Gods
Return! for by their altars Virtue
dwells,
And Happiness with her.

There was something so pleasant in the feeling of the cheerful fire, that Mabel, who, for many days, had been up early and late, could not resist its influence; her thoughts began to wander from the book which she had again taken up; her heavy eyelids closed, and she fell asleep.

Again she was, where memory often carried her, in their happy cottage at Aston; she was again kneeling by her sister's side, holding her little hand in hers, and watching her tranquil sleep. Again the rumbling sound of many feet, and many voices, stole upon her ear, the air was thick with smoke—a smell of burning, and then, again, that fearful, hoarse, deafening cry of "fire." [2]

She again awoke, startled at the sound, and, before she could analyse her remembrance, or distinguish the past from the present, she perceived that she was in flames. Her dress had fallen too near the fire, and had become ignited. Lucy was at the door, screaming fire, and calling wildly on the names of all in the house, for assistance. Caroline rushed to her, but retreated with a scream, just as Hargrave, who had been attracted by the sound of his name, came towards them. Quickly passing her, as she remained screaming with terror, he was by Mabel's side in an instant, and wrapping his powerful arms around her, he laid her on the floor as if she had been a child; then, folding the rug over her, he very soon succeeded in extinguishing the flames. [3]

Caroline, reassured, now entered the room, and Lucy pattered back again, with her naked feet, into bed, and drew the curtains closely round her.

"Why, she has fainted!" cried Caroline; "and see how her chest is burnt," she added, tremblingly pulling aside the dress, which gave way to her touch, and displayed a scar upon her fair bosom. Hargrave turned aside his head, but she saw that he was pale, and that his hand trembled as he supported the senseless form of the beautiful girl. "Look," added Caroline, directing his attention again to her, "I shall remove this chain, for I am sure it will hurt her."

It was a small linked, gold chain, of African workmanship; and when Caroline drew it from her neck, she perceived that it was attached to a simple gold locket, large enough to contain a portrait. Holding it up, she said, laughingly:— [4]

"Here is a secret; I must have just one little peep."

As she said this, she applied her finger to the spring, and was about to unclasp it, when Hargrave, suffering Mabel's head to rest upon the floor, started forward, and putting his arms round her, not only arrested her purpose, but took the locket from her hand, thrusting it, as he did so, into his bosom.

"It is sacred," he said, trying nervously to smile away Caroline's rising anger; and anxious to avoid a retort, he took Mabel in his arms, and carried her to the next room, where, laying her upon the sofa, he begged Caroline to watch her till he should return with a medical man.

The poor girl was not long left to the care of so angry a nurse, for the good-natured cook, upon whom she had made a very favourable impression, hurried up-stairs, and busily tried her numerous list of restoratives from fainting. She brought with her, too, a plate of raw potatoes, and a knife. [5]

"And if," she said, "Miss Villars would but scrape a little of them, there was no knowing how it would cure the pain."

Caroline forced herself to comply, but knowing the stain which her fair fingers might sustain from such an employment, she drew on a pair of white gloves to protect them.

"Only look at her pretty neck now," lamented the cook, in tones at once of admiration and pity, which sounded ill in her young mistress's ears—rather as if she intended to detract in some way from her own acknowledged beauty—and she contemplated, with some uneasiness, the fair white bosom, and the beautifully rounded arm, which the cook was regarding with so much complacency.

Mabel soon, however, opened her eyes again, and looked wonderingly about her; when she saw how Caroline was employed, she smiled, almost with a look of gladness, as she eagerly thanked [6]

her for the trouble she was taking for her.

Mr. Mildman, the medical attendant of the family, soon made his appearance, and, after a slight examination, dispelled every fear of any serious consequences, commended the skill of the cook, and said he should not interfere with her remedy, except, indeed, by a little soothing medicine, or, perhaps, a little ointment to allay the irritation of the burn, gently commiserated with Mabel on the terror she had suffered, made a few jocose compliments to Caroline on her usefulness, and hurried away again.

"I thought," said Caroline, returning to the sitting-room, "that Mabel professed to have too strong a mind to faint for such a trifle—Mr. Mildman says it is a mere nothing."

"If," said Hargrave, severely, "you had as many bitter recollections connected with that terrible word 'fire' as she has, poor orphan, you would believe that the strongest nerves would fail, sometimes."

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Mrs. Villars looked entreatingly at her, and managed, by dint of many signs, to suppress the angry reply which was rising to her lips. This she the more easily did, as Hargrave seemed bent on making her forget the rudeness of which he had been guilty; he laughed and talked and sang, and did whatever they asked him, with so good a grace, that, in a few minutes, he succeeded in restoring her good humour, even to her own surprise, and led by his example, and rejoicing in its magic effect, the whole party were soon in the gayest spirits—though none gayer than Hargrave himself.

Meanwhile, Mabel, having escaped from the hands of the cook, who wished to imprison her to the sofa, returned to Lucy's room—and, fearing that she might be prevented from remaining with her, suppressed every sensation of the acute pain she was suffering, lest, perhaps, she might lose the only opportunity of winning the wounded heart of the wilful and fickle girl.

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Had the high mental abilities she possessed, usurped the power over her heart, which her fond father had once feared, she might have looked on her companion's sorrows with contempt, as she saw her, by turns, forgetting, without contending with affliction, at others, bending before it in despair. But the path of sorrow had not been trodden by her in vain. Under its chastising influence, she had learnt the softer feelings most fitting a woman's nature, and could see, with childish simplicity, the value of a single spark of Heavenly flame above all the mental light, which, without it, might illuminate a world. She had placed, with careful hands, the veil of charity over eyes which could have detected faults under the shrewdest disguise; and, while she could not hide from herself the fact that Lucy was selfish, weak, and vain, she hoped, and, perhaps, not unjustly, that a better nature might slumber beneath, waiting but the kindly culture of a friendly hand to call it into life and being.

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As she now sat, trying to read, her companion watched her with covert attention, and, as thoughts of high and holy purpose spread their influence over her countenance, she regarded her with wonder, not unmingled with awe and pleasure.

Then she perceived, with some curiosity, that Mabel raised her hand to her neck, while an expression of pain died upon her lips; then, as if recollecting herself, the hand wandered in search of something, and, not finding it, she rose, and looked about the room, and then in the next, but returned again, disappointed.

"What are you looking for?" enquired Lucy, at length, seeing how troubled her face became.

She started at perceiving she was noticed, and replied, with ill affected carelessness—

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"I had a chain round my neck which I can't find."

"Oh," said Lucy, "that is quite safe—for Henry has it for you."

"How did he get it?" said Mabel, her face and neck suffused with deep crimson.

"Caroline wanted to look at it—but, just as she was going to raise the spring of the locket to see what was in it, he put his arms round her, and took it from her—not very polite certainly—but your locket is safe—for I do not suppose he will look at it, as he took it from Caroline."

Mabel covered her face with her hands, and Lucy saw, with surprise, that tears were trickling through her fingers—but presently she brushed them aside, exclaiming—

"How silly to be put out by such a trifle—promise me, dear Lucy, not to say how vexed I was at nothing."

"No, Mabel—it would indeed be unkind to notice the few unreasonable moods in which you ever indulge."

[11]

Neither said more at that time—and Lucy, as had been her habit lately, was silent for some hours.

The evening had closed in, Mabel had excused herself from appearing at the dinner-table; and, as it was now too dark to see to read or work, she laid aside her book, and seated herself to remain awhile unoccupied. Then Lucy raised herself a little, and leaning her head upon one hand, looked attentively at her, while she said, in a low tone—

"I have been thinking, these long, long days, of all the wrong I have ever done you. Nay, do not interrupt me—let me condemn myself as I deserve. When I first went to Aston, I well remember how kindly you tried to make me happy, even while I was turning you into ridicule, in order that I might prevent Captain Clair admiring you. With the wish to shew my superior nerve, and spirit for fun, I persisted in being one great cause of poor Amy's accident, while I called you prudish and old maidish. When I was in despair, you turned from your own grief to comfort mine; and yet

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so selfish was I still, that when I refused to leave you to nurse alone, it was only because I loved Captain Clair. When I found he loved you, I left you without remorse—and, oh! when she was dying—the poor child I had helped to murder—I was acting a part at a fancy ball, without one thought but of the admiration I excited. You came here. I felt, at first, that I could have done anything to please you; but I soon forgot you again—for I was once more infatuated, and could see nothing, think of nothing, but Beauclerc. I left you alone, to contend with my sisters, who were prejudiced against you—and when you interfered, for my good, I met you with peevishness and ill-humour. And how have I been punished—that very ball was the beginning of my unhappiness. When I went to the fancy ball, I deserved to meet Beauclerc, and to be deceived in him as I have been. And now, mother and sisters all desert me—none can bear to witness the workings of such a frivolous mind as mine—none stand by me—none care for me—but you, you whom I have most injured—no one but you thinks my spirit worth preserving from its sin and worldliness. Oh, Mabel, you have entirely conquered me—but I dare not promise anything—I am so very, very weak."

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"It is for such a moment as this," replied Mabel, "that I have waited and watched. Lucy, you are dear to me, because I have thought and prayed for you so long. I know how difficult it is to do right, when you have long done wrong; but I know, that if you try, there is no difficulty you will not overcome."

"And if I do not try," said Lucy, tears gathering in her eyes, "what is to become of me; I leave nothing but trifling and despair behind me. Only point out some way by which I can shew I repent, for I know I must be doing something, or I shall fall back into idle habits again—only point out something for me to begin with, and I will get up to-morrow—for I am not ill—only unhappy."

[14]

"I can tell you, then," said Mabel, "of one social duty, of which you never think, and, without performing it, I can scarcely believe that a blessing can rest either on your worldly fortune, or your eternal hopes. Pardon me for speaking severely—but why has your father, upon whose hardly earned wealth you have rested so much of your pleasure, why is he left alone to feel that no one cares for him?"

"But, do you think he would care for my company? and, besides, you are always with him."

"He would indeed care, if you would but try to please him—and I shall give up my place, when you are ready to take it. Indeed, my duty lies elsewhere, and I must soon obey its call. I would not have any one ignorant of their real talents through false modesty," she continued, "because they are weapons lent us by Heaven, which we must either use, or abuse, or leave to rust in our hands. You know you have a winning way, when you like—it has been your snare in society—but it may make your peace at home."

[15]

"I will try," cried Lucy, smiling, "no one can give comfort as you can; but I will not talk, I have wasted too much on words already."

"But one thing more," said Mabel—"can you bear now to let me speak of Mr. Beauclerc?"

"I meant to have forgotten him," replied Lucy, shrinkingly; "but what of him?"

"He has written to me—and, if you will let me, I should like you to hear his letter."

"Very well then," she returned, but her countenance had fallen.

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Mabel read—

Lucy blushed when she came to the commendation of "her artless candour and ingenuousness."

"Well," she said, "I forgive him, he can ask no more."

"Nor does he," replied Mabel, "but you can do more, and I strongly advise you to do so. It would not only be generous, but prudent, to aid in making a reconciliation between him and his wife; for, if he reflects, and the world comments on your conduct, it had better be on your generosity than on any thing else. I carefully bring forward these motives, because it is dangerous to pique oneself on doing a noble thing, when, being prudent, it serves our own purpose. Will you do this, dear Lucy?"

"I will try," said she, very slowly, as if with difficulty, "but Millie and I have quarrelled."

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"She had cause for irritation, if she believed that you were flirting with her husband; and I am sure you can allow for any thing she may have said under that impression; for, without intending it, how greatly you must have pained her."

"Yes, Mabel, yes, I have pained every body and lost my own peace as well. Oh, what would I give to be conscience free—free from all the petty wickedness of which I have been guilty. Believe me, all the time that Beauclerc seemed flirting, he was only talking seriously, and he never would have been so much with me had I not attracted him by a thousand artifices—pleading my own ignorance and great admiration for his talent, which I really felt, but ought not to have spoken. But you will not reproach me, for I am bitterly punished, and even your contempt is disarmed. I will go to Millie, yes, I will do every thing so that I may win peace at last. Oh that to-morrow were come; but, that it may be blessed, I will pray to-night. Now, dearest Mabel, do go to bed, you look so pale and ill, and I have been talking and keeping you up, and how your poor neck must pain you—I shall ring for that good tempered cook to come and dress it for you."

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"Good night love." And so the girls parted for the night.

To-morrow came, and Lucy rose, pale, but composed, and this satisfied Mabel more than any

greater display of ardour.

"It is difficult," she said, turning from the mirror, which reflected back her altered features, "but it may bring me peace. Give me your arm, Mabel dear, and then we will go to the study—my face will look strange there, after that of the intellectual Mabel."

"Hush and take courage, we shall see which will be the favorite soon. Believe me, much as I value my uncle's favor, I shall be glad to resign it to you, if we cannot both be loved." [19]

"Do not make me cry," returned Lucy, "I have shed tears enough—see how heavy my eyelids look."

Arm-in-arm they proceeded to the study, where Mr. Villars was seated at his work, no longer a disappointed student. He looked up, with a little surprise, on seeing Lucy, but, without a moment's hesitation, she advanced towards him, and, laying her hand on the table to steady herself, for she trembled with weakness, she said—

"Papa, the world has vexed me, will you let me come to you, for then I shall be safe."

She could scarcely have chosen a better introduction, for, had she offered her services and her company, both would probably have been now declined; but Mr. Villars was a kind-hearted man, and the speech touched him, and he replied, taking her hand— [20]

"Come, my poor girl, whenever you like, for you are right in saying you will be safe with me, and I need a companion when Mabel is out of the way."

Then Mabel drew her to her own chosen seat by the fire, and gave her a footstool, telling her, that, if she liked, she might go on copying something she had begun, and when she was tired she could tack some papers together, with the needle and thread which she placed ready for her hand, on the little table where she had laid some writing materials.

As she busied herself in these little preparations, it was beautiful to see how her cheek flushed with rich color, and how bright her eye sparkled, and then, as she gently moved away and left them to themselves, how cheerfully she looked back upon them; as if, in that kindly glance, she left a blessing behind her, when she departed.

CHAPTER II.

 [21]

Ridicule is a weak weapon, when levelled at a strong mind.

Trusting that this introduction to her father's study might be to Lucy the beginning of a life of usefulness and activity, Mabel took her work to the common sitting-room, which, during Lucy's illness, she had rarely entered. But now she began to feel conscious, that solitude, and retirement were becoming too dear to her, and she resolved, rather to court, than avoid the society which the house afforded, however uncongenial it might be. [22]

She found the sisters at work, or rather, at something which might better be termed an excuse for work. Caroline was leaning over her embroidery frame, engaged in talking with Selina, who was twisting silk over a small lyre, intended for the formation of a watch guard, which was to be presented, not to any person in particular, but as a gratifying remembrance to any old gentleman, at whose house she might next have the pleasure of staying. Maria was hemming a silk pocket-handkerchief, covered with innumerable foxes-heads; intended, perhaps, for some gay hunting friend.

They all looked up upon her entrance, as if to say, they scarcely cared for this addition to their party, and were not very pleased to see, that she had relieved herself from the restraints of her sick-room attendance. If this caused, for an instant, a painful sensation, she instantly checked the thought, with that ready self-control, which she had taught herself to exercise, ever since she had been old enough to observe the unhappiness caused to her mother, by too great an indulgence of her original sensitiveness of disposition, which, from its extreme delicacy, could scarcely venture into the every day world without carrying back to retirement food for reflection and regret. She was, therefore, prepared to meet the world in all its roughness, and had saved herself from a great deal of trouble and annoyance, by never taking offence till it was too plain to be mistaken; and, from the effects of this early curb upon her temper, she had almost begun to believe the world as kind as her own warm-hearted zeal would have made it. [23]

Taking her seat by Maria, who was a little apart from her sisters, she offered her assistance in her work. Even Maria had learnt to abate something, in her presence, of her natural sharpness—and she received the offer with something like politeness. [24]

"There," she said, carelessly selecting a pocket-handkerchief from the bundle which lay at her feet; "if you like to take the trouble, you will save mine, for I am heartily tired of them."

Mabel's nimble fingers were soon engaged, while Maria gave her a ludicrous account of the fatigue she had been enduring.

"I am no great worker," she said; "and this long side has taken me more than an hour, moaning

bitterly all the time; but, then, I reflect, that as I am no beauty, I must do penance, since being agreeable is in fashion just now; and if I did not keep Mamma on tenter-hooks, expecting an offer now and then, a sorry life I should lead. So, with these pleasing thoughts, I turn again to the everlasting hem, where the silk will unravel for ever, provoking the deploring eyes of a hundred foxes, which I think must be the ghosts of all the men who are mourning, not that I jilted them poor fools, but *tout au contraire*. Well-a-day, I think I was made for hunting foxes rather than fox hunters. There, I shall rest while you are working for me."

[25]

So saying, she took up a novel which lay open on the table, and which had occupied her attention at intervals—placed her feet upon a chair, and soon became quite absorbed.

Mabel excelled in needle work, for in her own home her fingers had never been idle, when her mind had not been seriously occupied. Many a light, happy hour had she passed in superintending the domestic requirements of their cottage, or in exercising her ingenuity, to supply the want of new fashions, on a cap for her mother, or a dress for herself or Amy, and now, with the rapidity of habit, she ran over the ground which Maria had found so heavy, in comparison with the more tempting pages of the light book by her side.

Her companions, however, were not very agreeable, for Caroline and Selina were carrying on a whispered conversation, and occasionally a word reached her, only sufficiently distinct to make her guess, that she was the subject of observation; together with half uttered allusions to landing-place conversations, slyness, &c., which made her cheeks tingle rather unpleasantly. Once too, Caroline had asked her what had become of Lucy, in a tone which seemed to imply that her duty was to be with her, forgetful that, if so, the duty was self-imposed.

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She was then not a little relieved when the loud sounding bell announced a visitor.

After a longer delay than usual a gentleman was introduced by the name of "Morley." All eyes turned instantly upon him, and Mabel's were interested in a moment. He was short in stature, and the bony strength of his limbs, joined to great leanness, gave his person an angular appearance. His features were strongly marked, the flesh had shrunk from the high cheek-bone, leaving it more strikingly a feature of his face; while his complexion bore the bronze of many an Eastern sun, heedlessly encountered, for it was nearly copper colored. This, and a slight stoop in the shoulder, gave him an appearance of age; while his hair of untinged black, the arched eyebrow, and piercing eye, spoke almost of youthfulness. That eye was the single attraction of his face, and so rigidly still was every other feature, that it seemed the only weapon of offence or defence, made to express the hasty fire of an enthusiastic mind, or the milder sensations of the heart beneath. If it closed, it left the countenance in stern and harsh composure, with something upon it that spoke contempt of pleasure and defiance of pain; as if, upon the rack, every nerve had been wound up for endurance of severest trial, and utterly refused a compromise. But open, that eye gazing with all its power, it forced the observer's thoughts back upon himself, and seemed there to detect the slightest shade of falsehood or deceit, which might before have slumbered unperceived.

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His dress too, partook of his singularity, for it seemed made for a stouter and taller man, and hung loosely about him, in shabby *negligé*; and over all he wore a kind of thick Spanish cloak, which, like his face, had had a tolerable share of wear and sunshine, and helped, with all the other ingredients of face, figure, and dress, to mark him for a "character."

All the girls were a little surprised. Selina assumed, with admirable quickness, her pretty mean-nothing smile, and Maria laid down her book, and, being in the back-ground, indulged in a full stare; while Caroline said she feared there was some mistake, as her mamma was not acquainted with the name.

"Very possibly," replied Mr. Morley, "but I conclude your servant acted by your orders when he said, that if I wanted to wait for Colonel Hargrave I had better do so here."

Caroline slightly colored, as she was fully aware that any gentleman of marriageable rank and age had rather too free an introduction to the house, and was seldom allowed to leave it without having had a tolerable opportunity of falling in love. This general desire of the mistress to admit all gentlemen, was pretty well known to Jones, their accomplished serving man, who had been in the family long enough to comprehend and half sympathise with its views; and he seldom suffered a stranger's call to end without admittance to the drawing-room by some clever mistake. And without too severe a scrutiny of Mr. Morley's appearance, beyond the intuitive feeling that he was a gentleman (a point in which servants seldom err) he had persuaded him that it would be better for him to wait for Colonel Hargrave in the sitting-room, where the young ladies were. But Caroline was not quite so quick in this discovery, and treated him with an air of condescending haughtiness, as she said—

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[30]

"If you wish to speak with the Colonel, pray take a seat; he is only gone to put a letter in the post for me, and I expect him back directly."

Satisfied with this display of her influence, she bowed to a chair which Mabel, springing up, instantly gave him; for, quickly reading the gentleman under the disguise of eccentricity, she was anxious to atone for Caroline's manner, which too plainly testified her idea that he was a tradesman calling for orders, or a supplicant, begging pecuniary assistance.

"Thank you, Miss Lesly," said he, in a voice of peculiar depth and melody.

The sisters exchanged glances. So little do we naturally like to be overlooked by the most indifferent people, on the most indifferent occasions, that Caroline's eye grew dark as she imagined that her cousin had already become an object of remark; forgetting that the difference

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in her dress might easily distinguish the orphan.

The mention of her name seemed to Mabel to claim something like acquaintance, and, seeing that her cousins were unwilling to shew him any politeness, she at once endeavoured to draw him into conversation. At first he seemed to pay little attention to the trifling subjects, which, at the commencement of a conversation, almost necessarily form an introduction to others; but, at length, as if roused by the tones of her sweet voice, he eagerly entered upon a topic of foreign interest, which she casually mentioned, with as much eloquence and enthusiasm as he had before shewn indifference.

Mabel, at the same time, shewed that she was perfect mistress of the subject she had introduced, in all its details, and, without once violating that delicate calmness in debate, which feminine modesty should never exceed, she drew out his opinions, and stated her own, with so much truth and elegance, that Maria laid down her book, and listened with wondering attention. [32]

In a house where every thing was display, Mabel had never yet found or sought, an opportunity of shewing the talents, which vigilant and miscellaneous reading had richly cultivated. She had infused, rather than spoken, her sentiments, but now, her tongue unloosed by the evident pleasure she was giving, and her mind recalled to old subjects of interest, she spoke as if a sudden spell had wakened her energy.

"I see," said Mr. Morley, after watching, in silence, the flushed cheek and sparkling eye which added emphasis and sincerity to what she said, "I see that you would tell me that 'Honesty is the best policy,' in public as in private life. If there were many women in this world who could enforce this doctrine in the same manner, we should not so often see, the husbands, brothers, and sons, of old England, erring from that golden rule. Cherish such sentiments, for the fountain of the heart should be pure and holy, since the current of the world can so soon soil its waters. I can better excuse an erring practice than an erring principle, for the one may be the result of a thousand strong and bitter temptations, but the other must be the effect of ignorant or wilful wickedness and ingratitude. The good may fall seven times in a day, indeed, but the man of corrupt principle is too low to fall at all. If you feel as you speak, and act as you feel, you are a noble girl, and worthy to be a statesman's wife." [33]

Every word which he uttered with the tone of unquestioned authority, went, like a poisoned sting, to Caroline's heart. She bent over her work, with affected contempt, but she would have given much, if, at that moment, she could have struck him as the Asiatic would a slave. Greatly, too, to her mortification, she saw the side door, which connected the room in which they were sitting, with the drawing-room beyond, open, and Hargrave entered. [34]

"Pardon me, my dear sir," he said, hurrying to Mr. Morley, and taking his hand; "but as I came to meet you, the sound of your voice overpowered me—and, waiting to recover myself, I overheard part of the conversation in which you were engaged."

As he said this, he turned his eyes towards Mabel, perhaps expecting, to see something in her countenance, of the animation expressed by her words; but her face was suffused, as with the brightness of the rose, shrouded by evening dew—her eyes were bent on the ground—and, as if, like that lovely flower, her head were too heavy for her slender neck to support, she bent it also beneath his glance. Could this be the tranquil, self-commanding Mabel, blushing, perhaps, because she perceived, that, while seeking to draw a timid stranger into conversation, she had been insensibly gratifying the same wish, on his part, and had been, unconsciously, displaying her own powers to his observation. [35]

Mr. Morley gently touched the arm of the younger man, who turned round, as if to introduce him to Miss Villars—but, as he did so, the hall-bell again announced a visitor.

"Come, my dear sir," he then said, changing his purpose, "come to my room, before we are inveigled into fashionable talk—I must have you all to myself."

And he dragged rather than led him from the room, just as Mr. Stokes, a sporting gentleman from Gloucestershire, was announced.

Maria started from her lazy position, flung aside her book, and darting to Mabel, snatched the pocket-handkerchief she was hemming from her hand, almost disordering her hair by the violence of the action, and then hurriedly seated herself, as if she had been working. This little diversion, in her favor, was covered by the retreat of the two gentlemen, and the necessary pause at the door, as the one party retreated, and Mr. Stokes entered, whip in hand, with splashed boots, and the dress which most became him, his red hunting coat, which gave point to his blunt, off-hand manners. [36]

Mabel pitied, and struggled, with her accustomed gentleness, to excuse her cousin's rudeness, as she listened to Mr. Stokes's blunt compliment on Maria's needle-work, and his animated account of the chace, from which he had just ridden home.

Some accidental allusion to Gloucestershire soon told him that Mabel was from his native country—and being a great lover of everything that seemed like home, he began talking to her so fast, that she had little need to say anything to help forward the conversation. Maria was evidently annoyed—and Mabel did her best to be silent; but it was an unfortunate afternoon, and seemed destined to make her worse enemies than she had before. Her silence could not be imputed to stupidity by the dullest, who looked in her face; and the squire, charmed with the idea of having made her shy, which he deemed the effect of something in himself, and, at the same time, feeling the charm of retreating beauty, pursued what he deemed an amusing advantage, addressed all his jokes and stories to her, and called for her approval of his quotations from their county [37]

dialect, which were so inimitable and so familiar, that she could no longer suppress her smiles. Maria bit her lips to conceal her vexation. True, he laughed just as immoderately over the use she made of the whimsical slang of the day—called her a "funny fellow," and taught her pretty oaths, which, after all, are but a kind of paper currency for sin. Yet, when he spoke to Mabel, he insensibly assumed more respect for himself and her; for few men are so quick at discovering where respect is really due, as those who are the most ready to lay it aside, when in their power to do so.

Maria was shrewd and penetrating. Her self-love had received too many rebuffs in the gay world in which she lived, to blind her to the truth—and she had not listened more than one tedious hour—for the Squire paid long visits—before she discovered that she had made a fatal mistake in his character. She soon perceived that neither the roughness of his manners, nor the random style of his conversation, had left him insensible to the purity of a deep, blue eye, or the magic influence of feminine delicacy and refinement.

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And was it to win the heart of such a man that she had so studiously dropped the little she had possessed of feminine reserve, to adopt the coarser and freer manners which she had imagined a sportsman would most admire. She felt the ground was lost, which she had no power to retrieve, and her spirit chafed, with all the bitterness and mortification which those must feel, who have in any way debased themselves to obtain any worldly object, and are conscious of it only when they find themselves disappointed. She would have been still more chagrined could she have divined that nothing but her having so rudely snatched the handkerchief had given a turn to Mabel's thoughts, and prevented her leaving the room, since by doing so, she would have appeared either snubbed or affronted.

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Poor Maria! she had never believed herself so near marriage before.

Scarcely had they reached this height of discomfort, when another morning visitor was introduced—Miss Lovelace, with a multitudinous number of light ringlets and narrow flounces. With a nod to Maria, which meant—"I see you are better engaged," she took her seat near the two elder girls, and was soon deep in an account of a charming ball, which she had attended the night before, with which she mixed many hints of her own conquests, together, with her indignation at all the spiteful things people said of her, and the Misses Villars.

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After talking, with the utmost rapidity, for half-an-hour, she suddenly changed her tone to one of commiseration, as she enquired—

"And how is poor Lucy?"

"Thank you, she is down stairs to-day," replied Caroline.

"Oh, I am so glad—for I heard such dismal accounts of her, last night, I could not help coming to see how she was. I won't ask to see her—but I do so pity her."

"I suppose her story is half over the town," said Caroline; "silly girl—of course, mamma knew nothing about it, or she would have seen into it before."

"Did not she though?" said Miss Lovelace, with great interest, gathering materials, as she was, for the next visit. "Why, every one saw it long ago, and said she was dying for him—the wretch."

"And what do people say now?" lisped Selina, as if she were talking of the reputation of a hair pin instead of that of a sister.

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"Why, you know, now, the truth is in every one's mouth—quite the talk of the day. How it was known that he was married, I cannot tell—but my maid told me—and all my partners were talking of it last night. I told young Philips I would never waltz with him again, if he did not find some innocent way of murdering Mrs. Beauclerc, and bringing Lucy's love affair to a happy conclusion. And the best of it is, young Philips himself has been as bad, for he has been wandering up and down the Circus like a mad thing, for this month past, trying to catch a sight of Miss Foster, and contented if he only saw her shadow pass the window."

Here they all laughed, and Mr. Stokes chimed in.

"What is that story about Miss Lucy Villars and Mr. Beauclerc? I heard something of it at the hunt, from young farmer Sykes—but I thought it might be delicate ground."

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Mabel did not wait to hear the answer to this last remark—for when the sisters so coolly deserted the standard of delicacy, she felt she had no right to interfere; and blushing, more for them than for Lucy, she left the room, rather too precipitately—for Mr. Stokes, having, the minute before, whispered a compliment, which she had been too occupied even to hear, he attributed her flight to the sudden admiration she was conscious she was exciting. As the door closed upon her, he remembered how often he had joined Caroline and Maria, in laughing over the eccentricities of their country cousin, whom he had never before seen—and, fearing a repetition of the same remarks, or their ridicule, if he refused to join in them, he took up his hat, and rapidly apologising for having made such a complete "visitation," he wished them good morning, and departed, without waiting to hear more than he could help of Miss Lovelace's answer to his question.

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Mabel had no sooner escaped from the drawing-room, than she hurried to the study. Her first glance told her that Lucy had been exerting herself beyond her strength to appear cheerful and happy, for she looked pale and wearied; and no sooner did she see her enter, than she went to her, folded her arms round her, and laid her head upon her shoulder—then, raising it again, that she might look her in the face, and thank her for all her kindness to her, she burst into hysteric sobs.

Mabel drew her away, led her to her own room, and caressed and soothed her again into tranquillity, when she made her go to bed, and then stopped and praised her first day's effort so warmly, that Lucy almost smiled her thanks.

She then returned to the study, where Mr. Villars was waiting, in some alarm. Taking her hand, he enquired, anxiously—

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"How is my child?"

"She is much better, dear uncle—but she is very weak, you know, yet—and her spirits are uncertain—though she tried to exert them, lest you might think her dull. I shall give her entirely to you to take care of now."

"My good girl," he replied, with the thick, husky voice of suppressed emotion, "when I worked, for so many long years, at a business that I hated—I dreamed of such a time as this. The last few hours have been the happiest I have spent since my retirement. And is not this your doing? How true it is, that we often entertain angels unawares."

She tried to speak, while tears of hallowed pleasure dimmed the sparkle of her deep azure eyes, her lips trembled, and her cheek flushed; then stooping over the hand that held hers, she kissed it, drew herself away, and fled from the room.

She might have said to herself—"What! have I devoted so many weeks to his service, and yet a few hours from the truant Lucy give him more pleasure than all those of my unwearied service!"

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But no such thought, even by its most transitory influence, sullied the heart of the self-devoted girl.

CHAPTER III.

[46]

Merrily, merrily,
Welcome and sweet,
Ready hearts, waiting
them,
Sabbath chimes greet.
Mournfully, mournfully,
Yet do they fall
On the dull, worldly ear.
Deaf to their call.

CULVER ALLEN.

"Who is your fat friend?" enquired Caroline of Hargrave, when they met at dinner.

"The gentleman who called this morning," he replied, drawing himself up with much hauteur, "is my uncle."

Mrs. Villars cast a look upon her daughter, which seemed to say, half in entreaty, and half in reproof.

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"Oh, your unfortunate tongue."

At the same time, Hargrave, perhaps, perceiving that Mabel's quick glance was upon him, suddenly changed his manner, and seemed, by the gentleness of his tone, anxious to apologise for the short feeling of anger Caroline's query had occasioned.

"I had not time to introduce him this morning," he said, "before the entrance of Mr. Stokes; but I was otherwise going to ask my aunt to give him the *entrée* of the house, as he is a perfect stranger here, and his only object is to see me."

"Oh, certainly," said Mrs. Villars, with one of her blindest smiles—"any friend of yours is welcome here, as a matter of course; I shall be delighted to know him."

"He is a singular being," returned Hargrave, smiling his thanks; "and those only who are familiar with his peculiarities, can see through them, the greatness and goodness of his heart. There is no man to whom I owe so much—and few whom I esteem so highly."

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"Indeed," said Caroline, "one ought not to judge so hastily of strangers. I am sure, I beg your pardon, for speaking of him disrespectfully."

Hargrave's timely change of tone had thus prevented the display of temper which Mabel had foreseen and dreaded.

"Pray do not mention it," he rejoined, quickly; "I ought to have forestalled observation, by introducing him to you—and you said nothing, after all—I only thought you looked contemptuous—so I was too hasty, and it was my fault. You may, probably, never have heard of him, for he has not been in England for many years. He is my maternal uncle, the son of my grandmother, by her first husband—my own mother being a Lesly. I have heard that, when a very young man, he was of such enthusiastic temperament, that he entered the church mission, which took him abroad, for a long time, where, amongst heathen and savage life, he devoted himself to the work he had undertaken with great success, enduring, cheerfully, every kind of privation, being separated

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from the society of his equals, and without reserving to himself a single solace, but the one feeling that he was performing his duty. One cannot help admiring such a character," he added, hastily, as if excusing his energy, and concluding the last words in a tone of cold considerative philosophy.

"Well, and has he never been home since then?" enquired Caroline.

"Yes," replied Hargrave, "he returned about twenty years ago to take possession of a large property in Northumberland, which he inherited by the death of his elder brother—but after converting all that could be alienated into ready money, he let his house and land to a friend, upon whose charity to his poorer tenants, he could fully rely, and did so, at a rent sufficiently low to enable him to expend what otherwise might have come direct to him, in useful improvements. It was during his stay at Aston, with my father, that I first saw a little of him; but I cannot say I knew him till we met as strangers, a short time ago, in India, where I found him devoting his wealth to the advancement of Christianity."

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When he reached the last word, he uttered it in so incoherent a tone, that it seemed as if he had some difficulty in pronouncing it; and, as soon as dinner was concluded, he retreated to his room, in one of those moods, when, by common consent, they always left him to himself. He did not make his appearance again that evening; and when Caroline retired for the night, her chamber being above his, she could still hear the hasty tread up and down his room, which varied the dull silence which ever now and then preceded it; and next morning, when she woke, the first sound that greeted her ears, was the same hasty tread, resumed with the dawning light.

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It was Sunday, and knowing that Hargrave would most likely absent himself, as usual, for the whole day, she resisted her disposition to take another nap, and got up, anxious not to lose the chance of seeing him, and, perhaps, having a *tête-à-tête* before breakfast.

Of all the days in the week, Sunday, in that house, was the least comfortable, particularly at breakfast time.

Every one was late, and never came down at any particular time—and somebody was sure to have a cold, and require breakfast sent up-stairs—joined, too, to all this, was the stiffness originating in the feeling that they were in Sunday costume, composed of dresses which required a great deal of care to be taken of them.

Caroline often secured to herself the pleasure of giving Hargrave a cup of tea before the others made their appearance; and Mabel, having, unluckily, made her *entrée*, one morning, at what she deemed so inopportune a period, avoided being early ever afterwards.

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Caroline, having, this morning, been fortunate enough to secure her position, made a rather ostentatious display of her care for his comfort.

"There," she said, when he came in, "I have made you some toast—and your tea is quite ready—no, I mean your chocolate—for you must try that this morning—it is best quite hot—so I have got it in this little pot by the fire, for, see, I have been making it myself."

"Thank you," said Hargrave, in a sufficiently discouraging tone, as he accepted her services.

"You are a naughty boy," she returned; "you never say anything more than that sulky thank you."

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"Because I am really sorry to give you so much trouble," said he, sincerely; "I am so accustomed to wait on myself, that—"

"Say no more, you sulky creature," cried she, with one of her blindest smiles; "'virtue is its own reward'—so I will give you your chocolate without any thanks. But I wish you would not go away to-day—do come with us to the Octagon?"

"No, thank you—I am engaged."

"Why, you are as punctual to your engagements, as if you were courting some country lass, in your Sunday's best. I am afraid you are doing no good. You are not going, I hope, to act the play of the lowly lady over again?"

"What was that?"

"Why, do you not remember the story of the young lord, pretending to be a country-man, or artist, or something of that kind, and so marrying a young lady—no, not a lady, a poor girl, I mean—and never telling her till he took her home to his grand house?"

[54]

"Oh, yes, I do, now you speak of it. Not a bad idea, upon my word—it would be something novel to be certain of exciting a disinterested affection."

Caroline's cheeks tingled—she had never got him so near the subject before.

"Are you one of the sceptics on that point, then?" she enquired.

"No—yes—well, I really do not know—but I am, at times, puzzled to think what makes women marry sometimes so badly, and often with so little consideration."

"Oftener for love than you suppose," said she, leaning over his shoulder, to put a tempting white nub of sugar in his chocolate, suspending it awhile as she held it.

"Perhaps so," he replied, attacking his plate of ham, which she had been thinly slicing for him, with very good appetite.

[55]

"I suppose," said she, "having Aston Manor, and its goodly acres, tacked to your other accomplishments, makes you suspicious?"

"Not unjustly so—no—no—I would soon contrive some test by which to try the woman I admired, if I doubted her. Thank you, no more chocolate, I am going."

So saying, he rose, and drew on his gloves, and wished her good morning—leaving her in a pleasing reverie.

"Ha, master Henry," she observed to herself; "you are not so deep, but you let out a secret, now and then. So you are testing me, are you—I understand."

As she indulged these thoughts, one by one of the breakfast party strolled in, and conversation was soon briskly engaged in on the bonnets, shawls, and gloves, which they intended wearing, interspersed by some hints from Caroline, on the agreeable nature of her morning's *tête-à-tête*. Before the meal was fully concluded, the bells from the different churches began to ring, but, somehow, they were not in harmony with the voices of the little party, as, one after another, they took up the same solemn tune, in different notes, all speaking the same language, but in such harsh tones, it seemed as if the sisters disliked them, for they rose up hastily, and hurried off to dress for church. [56]

Neither did those bells seem to speak less harshly, when they intruded their voices into the quiet study; yet there was a sadness, too, about them, when they found Mr. Villars seated there, at his table, surrounded by books and papers—his inkstand, and letter-drawer, and scraps of his book—and wearing his dusty coat—and as his pen ran rapidly and unceasingly across and across the paper, they seemed to whisper, still in sadder, sadder tones— [57]

"No man can do seven days' work."

Perhaps he heard that whisper, for he stopped, and listened, and laid his hand uneasily upon his aching brow; and when he went on again, trying to shut out their voices, something darker and darker stole upon his mind, and he stopped and listened again to the same sad tones—sadder, sadder still—as he heeded them more and more.

But merrily, merrily, merrily over the hills and green meadows—up from the busy town, and borne upon the rippling waters of the Avon, came those bells—when Mabel sat at her garret window, and looked out upon the small peep of blue sky, which was not shut out by the dark walls and tall chimney pots, which surrounded her—and as they fell upon her ear, they whispered—"We are glad sounds to those who listen for us as you do"—But back with those bells had her thoughts gone to the student, in his silent room—and the expression of her face grew more and more sad. [58]

"I cannot leave him there," she said, to herself; "but what can I say to him? Oh, is there not enough. I will tell him how he is wasting himself week after week without rest. I will tell him, that knowledge so acquired is like the manna of the wilderness, which only turned to corruption, when gathered on the Sabbath. Yes, surely he will listen to me, for truth is so plain—I will go now."

The light of enthusiastic fervour brightened her saddened countenance—and once again stopping to take sweet counsel with the bells—she left her room full of strong resolve. But when she reached the study door, and laid her hand upon its lock, she paused, tremblingly. Often had she come before, on the same errand, and as often had retired, unheard, and disappointed at her own timidity. Now, her beautiful cheek flushed, and her heart beat so loudly, that she laid her hand upon it to still its beating; yet trembling, throbbing, uneasy, as was that heart, it was true to its purpose still. [59]

She had sat in her garret room for more than an hour that morning, thinking of what she should say—she had listened to the Sabbath bells, as one after another they took up the same hallowed tone—and still she had found no words strong enough and meek enough to speak to him. Yet had she come.

Mr. Villars raised his head, as she entered, and, after a quick greeting, went on with his writing. Across and across the paper went the unwearying hand. She stood at the other side of the table, hoping he would look up and say something—but he still continued writing. [60]

On went the bells—from the venerable and gray stoned Abbey belfry—from the good, old-fashioned, little church of Walcot—and, far as the ear could reach, from the ivy-covered tower on the hill—on they went—and Mr. Villars continued writing—and Mabel stood irresolute, for all her eloquence was gone; but, at length, she stammered forth—

"Uncle, will you come to church?"

He looked up—her very soul was in those few words—and in the tearful eyes which seconded her request.

On went the bells.

He laid down his pen, and looked at her—but her eyes were fixed upon the ground.

"Who is going?" he said, at length, looking more fixedly.

"Lucy and I."

"Very well then, make haste and put on your bonnet, for I hear the bells." [61]

He did hear them indeed, for what a clatter they made, one after another, as if they *would* be heard.

Mabel ran away all joyousness—very soon she had her bonnet on, for that took little time, and then she was down with Lucy—getting her shawl, and finding her lost gloves, and her prayer-book, and then, all pleasant bustle, as if she feared he would change his mind, down again to her uncle's study, ready with the soft brush to smooth his sleek hat.

And then they were in the street, and taking their way, not to any of the fashionable places of worship, but down the shady part of the old town to a little church which seemed to hide itself from view, so small that the imagination could scarcely wander round its walls, from the voice of the venerable preacher, whose simple but well chosen language brought conviction with it. There too, the white-haired, aged clerk, in his stiff quaint reading desk, and the twelve old pensioners, nearly as old as himself. And then so few to listen they could not choose but hear. [62]

Mabel felt tremblingly happy, for she had succeeded in her desire to get her uncle to break his bad habit of remaining shut up on a Sunday. She saw, too, that he was happier, as they walked home together, though he often looked, when he met any one he knew, as if he had been committing some crime. But however that might be, he himself proposed going in the evening, and gladly did she consent, and when they walked home again through the lighted streets, talking of what they had heard, alone, for Lucy was too delicate to venture in the evening air, she felt happy indeed. And when they reached home again no one was more ready to join in the conversation over the bright fire where the sisters sat, glad to welcome Hargrave back from his mysterious absence. And Mr. Villars too, as he went to bed that night, could scarcely understand why he felt such pleasant fatigue, not that fatigue which makes the very heart ache, and keep the eyes awake with uneasy watchfulness, but which closes them in light repose, and bids them open again in cheerful, buoyant hope to the light of day. [63]

For many a long week, indeed, he had not welcomed Monday morning so pleasantly. The sun shone so brightly that the spendthrift might almost have been excused for being guided by the presence of the ill-fated swallow. The Spring air was light and warm, and the rich, pink blossom of the almond supplied the place of leaves and flowers.

Colonel Hargrave was as gay as the sunshine, as he stood joking with the little party lingering over the breakfast table.

"Pray, ladies," said he, "how do you mean to make the most of this lovely day?" [64]

"By keeping you with us, for the first thing," said Caroline.

"You wicked creature," said her mamma, by way of adding point to the observation; the object of which, however, remained rigidly indifferent. Nobody could say he flirted; he withdrew from all approach to such a thing, with the rapidity of a frightened girl. Mrs. Villars tried to believe, though against her better judgment, that he was timid, yet he had received sufficient encouragement to have made a boy propose; but never by muttered word or tender look had he taken advantage of it, never had he been betrayed into a *tête-à-tête* walk—never had he offered Caroline a present which had not a fac-simile in one to each of her sisters. In short, he was the most impenetrable being possible.

"Oh, for a ride," said Mabel, "far off into the country—would it not be delightful—why do you not go?" [65]

"The very thing," said Hargrave, "let us take the day while we have it. You will go, will you not," he said, referring the matter to Caroline.

She readily agreed, and after a short discussion about the horses, which he engaged to procure from the livery stables where his own horse was kept, she went to prepare for the ride, with her sisters, while Hargrave hurried off, full of sparkling good humour.

Mabel would willingly have joined them, but she had no riding dress, and she checked the expression of a regret, lest it might damp their pleasure, little thinking, poor girl, how little they cared for her; and though she sighed for the air of her own Cotswold hills, she took up her needle and tried to work cheerfully. But accustomed as she had been, to the bracing air of Gloucestershire, her health had begun to vary under the enervating influence of the Bath air. Added to which, she had lately endured much fatigue, varied only by the pleasures derived from the industrious workings of a happy spirit, and she now began to feel, what she had before only readily sympathized in, the seemingly causeless depression which weak health so often engenders. For this, however, she severely reproached herself, for so slow and imperceptible had become its progress, that, unconscious of bodily weakness, she attributed her mental depression to a faulty principle. And now she taxed herself, thinking she must have relaxed the reins of self-government, or she never could feel so slight a disappointment so acutely, for she felt the tears starting to her eyes, when her cousins entered, fully equipped. Caroline and Selina looked overpoweringly charming, in becoming hats of the very last fashion, and even Maria seemed determined to rival her sisters, and partly succeeded, by the air of fun and off-hand carelessness, which, as she had once explained, never left a person time to scan her features. [66]

Presently, in Hargrave hurried, looking pleased, healthy, and doubly handsome; he could not refrain from complimenting the sisters, but he had hardly heard their smiling reply, before he perceived Mabel sitting by the window, and struggling to look indifferent.

"What!" said he, in a tone of pique, "are you not ready, Miss Lesly—was not the ride your own proposition?" [67]

Mabel never knew how very easy it was to cry before, but with affected calmness she replied, as she tried to smile—

"I would willingly have accompanied you, but I have neither hat nor habit."

He looked at her for an instant, half angrily, but there was something so constrained in her smile, that it led him, for the first time, to observe that the color was waning on her cheek, and he looked earnestly at her as she hastily laid down her work and left the room. [68]

"Selina," he said, gravely, for it was evident that something vexed him, "you said one day that you had two habits—cannot you lend her one?"

"It is so shabby that I did not like to offer it, and now it is too late—I am very sorry I did not think of it, but it is too late now you know," she said, seeing the gathering storm on Caroline's lowering brow. "We are keeping the horses waiting, come along," she added, hurrying to the door, "do come."

Hargrave quietly seated himself.

"I am not coming," he said, "I cannot go and leave that poor pale girl, at home."

"Oh, there are Lucy, and papa, and mamma," cried Maria, "I will ask mamma to take her to the Pump-room."

"Lucy never rides now," said Hargrave, "or we would not consent to leave her at home, either. The Pump-room on such a day as this—it makes my head ache to think of it." So saying, he threw down his gloves and whip, laid aside his hat, and took up the paper. [69]

The party were at a stand still. Hargrave looked seriously annoyed, and Caroline verging upon a storm.

"What shall I do?" said Selina, in a perplexed tone, looking from one to the other.

"Go and find your habit," said Hargrave.

"But it is so shabby," she said, looking fearfully at Caroline.

"You know Miss Lesly is above such trifles, besides, she can decide that."

"But there is no hat."

"There is one hanging up in the hall that looks like a lady's hat, for it has strings, try that."

"That old thing, covered with dust?"

"I dare say she will put up with it, if you will only find it, if not I am afraid we must stay at home." [70]

"What shall I do?" she whispered to Caroline, in a trembling voice.

"Do as you like," she retorted, angrily, and aloud, as she turned to the window.

"Do come," said Selina, turning again to Hargrave, "Caroline never likes waiting with her hat on, it makes her head ache."

"I am sorry to hear it," replied the inexorable Hargrave, without moving.

"Well, here's a fix, all about nothing," cried Maria.

"I am sorry you think so," said Hargrave.

"Come, come, do not look like a methodist parson, while we are wasting all the sunshine. I have half a mind to gallop off by myself, and make the neighbours stare. Come, Selina, do go and get your habit, for I see Henry is determined to make Mabel a Guy—for the old hat is only fit for a bonfire. I did intend being charitable with it, on the last fifth of November, but I forgot it luckily." [71]

Thus urged, Selina at length retreated to find her habit, which, when produced, was found to be in very good condition. But Maria's description of the hat had been more truthful, for the dust of repeated house-cleanings seemed to have settled on its unlucky beaver; and Maria, having climbed up to reach it from its peg in the hall, threw it down in disgust, raising a cloud of dust which threatened to soil her new habit.

Hargrave, however, who was now entirely restored to good humour, seized it as it fell, and began brushing it with great vigour.

As he did so, the door bell rang, and, before he had time to retreat, Mr. Stokes entered, whip in hand.

"Just in time, I hope, Colonel," he cried, "if I may be allowed to join your party—a ride—why it is the very thing—I see four side-saddles, and I am sure you cannot monopolise four ladies—may I go?" [72]

Hargrave being in a compliant mood, replied gaily—

"You are welcome, I am sure—for I shall be glad to be relieved of half the burden. Ladies are troublesome creatures—particularly this one. Here, Maria, the hat will not hurt you now—run off with it—and try and persuade Miss Lesly to wear it, if you can."

"It has raised dust enough to make you doubt it, certainly," she replied, running gaily up-stairs, with her habit tucked over her arm.

There was some little difficulty to find Mabel, however, for she was gone to her own room, and no one was anxious to climb up to the top of the house to fetch her. At length, however, by dint of loud calls at the bottom of the stairs, she was made to know she was wanted.

When, by this means, she was brought down, she could hardly understand the combined movement which had so soon produced all that was required for her enjoyment of the ride—but [73]

putting on the habit as quickly as she could, and tying her black veil on the old hat, she hastened, without much question, to gratify the sisters, who scarcely allowed her time to snatch up her gloves, and tie on her hat, before they hurried her down stairs.

Maria could not check her desire to prevent her studying her appearance, since that might render her so much more charming in the eyes of her esquire—but she excused herself by thinking that she might get plenty of admirers without taking Mr. Stokes. Could she have guessed the powers of her own fascinations on his heart, Mabel might have aided her—but as she did not—nothing destroyed the faultless grace of her easy movements, which made everything suit her—however unlikely it seemed—and the look of pleasure and gratitude with which she regarded the party, was quite sufficient to nullify the foil of an ill-fitting habit, and a dust-worn and tumbled hat.

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"Thank you," said Hargrave, as he passed her, to hand Caroline and Selina down.

And Mr. Stokes could scarcely withdraw his eyes from her, as he walked by her side to the hall, not talkative, as usual, but in silent observation.

"Now," said Hargrave, as the horses drew up, "I have only been able to hire three gentle horses. This beautiful creature is high-spirited, and very difficult to manage," he said, laying his hand on the neck of one of the horses, as he pawed the ground, in rather a threatening manner; "but I thought that you would not mind him, Caroline—for you care for nothing in horse-flesh."

Caroline, however, was perverse, and chose that day to be timid. Indeed, the idea of Mabel's sly rivalry, as she called it, haunted her like a phantom—and she thought it certain, that if one staid behind, it would be she, so that she insisted on choosing the very quietest horse. Maria was already mounted by Mr. Stokes, whose services she had demanded—and Selina was always timid.

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Hargrave bit his lip.

"Oh, I am not in the least frightened," said Mabel; "I never am timid."

"But you have not been on horseback so long," suggested Hargrave.

"No—but never mind me."

And before he had time to argue further, she had accepted Mr. Stokes's hand, and sprang lightly to her saddle.

"Well," said Hargrave, "it does not much signify—for I promised the man that I would hold one of his bridles."

Caroline no sooner perceived, that by her wish to disoblige her cousin, she had robbed herself of his constant attention during the ride, than she repented—and saying, that she knew she was very frightened, offered to change places with her—but it was too late—for Mabel, with guileless heart, did not see the hidden motive, and persisted on keeping her horse; and Caroline had nothing to do but to mount her own, and rue her perverseness.

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How provoking to see him carefully adjust the reins, and placing one in Mabel's hand, take the other over his arm, looking, as he did it, so manly and handsome. Even Selina's constant smiles provoked her, when she saw her by her side, and knew that even Maria was better off, riding with Mr. Stokes behind, while she looked only like a chaperone to the party.

To Mabel, the feeling that she was again on horseback, afforded exquisite pleasure. The hysterical sensation had passed, leaving her only more sensitive to the pleasure which followed it, and her spirits rose with a buoyancy and lightness, which, for many months, had been strangers to her; she did not stop to analyse the various causes which contributed to her light-heartedness, while the air she breathed—the noble animal she rode—the blue sky—and the sparkling sun-light—everything around her seemed to reflect the gladdened likeness of her own thoughts. She seemed again the light-hearted being, whose gay smile and merry laugh had carried joy wherever they went—before clouds of sadness and trial had darkened her life's dream of happiness.

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The veil which had been thrown over her beauty by the withering hand of grief, was, for awhile, withdrawn, and her eyes sparkled with dazzling brilliancy, brighter, far brighter, even than in days gone by, as she turned them on her companion, who was riding by her side in embarrassed silence, watching the fiery eye, or impatient toss of her steed, to which she seemed indifferent.

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They had now left the town behind them, wrapped in its shadowy mist, and had entered on the country so peculiarly beautiful, in its vicinity.

"And is it to you that I owe this exquisite treat?" she enquired, checking the rapid canter into which they had broken, on perceiving how really apprehensive he appeared.

"I believe you owe it more to yourself," he replied, shaking off his embarrassed air; "since they all declared you would not wear that old hat."

"Then I owe it to your superior discrimination, that you knew I did not care for such a trifle, in comparison with a ride. It reminds me of old, happy old times—and I feel like a new being."

[79]

"Ah, I used, in my old days of lofty aspiration, to look on good temper as the virtue of second rate characters, and I believed that great minds must be fickle and changeable."

"And if you have altered your opinion, why do you not practise your new doctrine?" she said, archly.

"You allude to my getting out of temper at dinner on Saturday; but then you must own I instantly

recovered myself."

"I do not mean then only; but I often see the flash which denotes the inward storm, though no thunder follows."

"What, am I to sit unmoved, and hear the best motives misjudged—self-devotion ridiculed—the mourner made to feel all the bitterness of grief—and the orphan without a friend?"

"If you speak of me," replied his companion, with a gay smile, "do not forget that I have some friends left still; but if I had none, no champion of mine should use the weapons I would not wield myself; and, remember, I can change my position when I like." [80]

"How?"

"By changing dependence, if it be so—but I do not like to call it that—for independence."

And she leant forward, and patted her horse's impatient head, with a look of childish unconcern.

"Then how can you remain here if you have the power to leave?"

"You will think me vain if I tell you," she said, carefully smoothing back the mane, which would get on the wrong side.

"No, no—tell me why? for you make me curious."

"Well, then—I hoped Lucy had some real affection for me—and I thought I might influence her, as I hope I have done—and I was deeply interested in my uncle—for he has been so kind to me—and I like him so much. Besides, had I any right, without good cause, to cast off my aunt's protection, since it was a pledge which she had given to my dear mother. No, I should have had no right to do that, at first—and I could not, had I wished to do it—for I had not spirit then to leave the refuge of the lowest hovel, had it given me shelter. There were many discomforts here, which were yet preferable to being so entirely unprotected, as I soon shall be—we women shrink from the idea of being our own protectors. But I cannot stay much longer where I am unwelcome—a few more thoughts for Lucy—a few more efforts to make them all love me, and then I think I shall go." [81]

"But where will you go?"

"Oh, I have thought of that. There is a school friend of mine—a very dear friend, too, though I have not seen her for many years—she is now, poor thing, a widow—and, young as she is, has a family of six children, almost unprovided for, while she herself is in weak health. Now, I am thinking of offering to go, and live with her, and take charge of her children's education; for, you must know, that my aunt has more than six hundred pounds, which belong to me, the interest of which will furnish all I need, and enable me to do without a salary." [82]

"Your aunt has your money, you say—how is that?"

"Why, mamma lent it to her, at different times, when she so warmly promised a home for us; but then, unfortunately, my dear mamma lost the written promise to repay it, which she had for the money; but then, that makes no difference between relations—a debt of honor must be binding; only I am uncomfortable about asking for the money, as my aunt would find it difficult to get such a large sum, I fear. And this is another reason which has kept me so passive." [83]

"You were not once so unsuspecting," said Hargrave, "as to think a debt of honor as good as a security."

"No; but then I had those to care for who made me feel as cautious as a man. Once more, I am a weak woman. But what do you think of my plan?"

"I think it a very good one, if you can get your money, but private security is always bad, and you have not even that. Do you consider to what a life you are dooming yourself?"

"Not so bad as thousands, for, remember, I shall confer, as well as receive a benefit, for my friend cannot afford a governess, and is too unwell to educate her children herself. So I shall place her under a slight obligation."

"And doom yourself to a life of drudgery." [84]

"Be quiet," said she, raising her whip playfully, "you ought to inspirit, and not discourage me—you should speak of the advantages of such a situation, of the influence it affords—of, in short, any thing but what you are talking of."

"You are a strange girl, Mabel," he said, looking steadily down upon her glowing face, "were I you, I should be rebelling, proud, or grovelling in despair."

"I am afraid you might."

"Why do you think so," he returned, in a tone of pique; "have you charity for all, and none for me?"

"Because," said she, almost sadly, "I should be so, if, like you, I trusted solely to my own strength."

He was silent for a few minutes, and then he said, thoughtfully.

"I am afraid there is no one like you."

"Yes, thousands, who have shewn in the world far more brilliant examples of the truth of what I believe, who have died unheeded and unrewarded on earth." [85]

They were here interrupted by Caroline, who trotted up to them, leaving poor Selina by herself.

"I wish," she said to Mabel, "you would let me have a canter on that horse; mine is such a stupid animal."

Mabel looked puzzled.

"How dull you are," said Caroline, in a voice which she believed only reached her ear. "Cannot you see that Henry wanted a *tête-à-tête* with me; did he not say as much, though I was not going to let him have me whenever he liked."

"Yes, that was true," thought Mabel, "he had said he meant the horse for her, and for how long after had he been sad and thoughtful." She felt a choking sensation of pain, "had she then so thoughtlessly been keeping them asunder, while she only talked of her own affairs. Were not these almost the only kind words he had addressed to her, since she had entered the house—how wrong she had been to prize them so highly." As these quick thoughts passed through her mind, withering as they did the effects of the glad sunshine which had preceded them, she turned her eyes timidly and almost apologetically to Hargrave. There was a look of deep seated annoyance on his face. "Ah, he thinks I shall still refuse to take the hint"—she thought—and laying her hand lightly on the pommel, she quickly disengaged herself from the saddle, and jumped down before Hargrave had time to prevent her.

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"Now then," cried Caroline, in delight; "come Henry and help me to mount."

Hargrave descended as slowly as possible, and, as sulkily as he well could, gave his assistance to both, then slowly mounting his own steed, he took the bridle and rode on in silence.

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In vain Caroline tried to get something beyond a monosyllable—she was quite unsuccessful; Hargrave fenced himself in one of his most bearish humours, and, when they entered the town again, he called to Mr. Stokes, and begged him to take the rein he held, and take every charge of Miss Villars; and when he found him nothing loath to shew his horsemanship, he politely gave up his place by his fair cousin's side, and, turning his horse's head, urged him back again. At first the horse was obstinate, and would not part company so easily; but Hargrave tried the power of his spurs, with more success than he had done that of his whip, and they started off at a furious gallop, and were soon out of sight.

CHAPTER IV.

[88]

She whispered to revenge—forgive,
forgive.

POLLOK.

While the riding party was so occupied, Lucy walked alone to the Circus, and as, on her way thither, she passed some well-known shop or house, she could not help wondering to herself how very long it seemed since that foggy morning after her first meeting with Beauclerc, when, with glowing fancy and light steps, she had hastened to her friend Millie Foster, in order that she might have the pleasure of describing him. Since that meeting, their acquaintance had tacitly dropped, Miss Foster had never sought her, and Lucy was not sorry to avoid a friend, who seemed likely to prove too officious an adviser. She being rather inclined to agree with the Scotch damsel who says:—

[89]

I'll gie ye my bonny black hen
If ye will advise me to marry
The lad I lo'e dearly, Tam Glen.

Often now, as she walked, she paused, for she was weary, and very, very changed; and pale was the cheek that had then been so bright and glowing. Often her spirits failed, and she seemed inclined to turn back, and urge to herself her aching limbs as an excuse for her failing purpose. Her airy form dragged rather than tripped over the ground; yet still she went on.

[90]

As she was thus proceeding, with her eyes bent upon the ground, fearing, that, if she raised them, some unwelcome acquaintance might recognise her as the lady with the married lover, some one knocked slightly against her—they both stopped to apologise.

It was Beauclerc.

He looked timidly, as if he would enquire for her if he dared.

"Give me your arm up this hill," said Lucy, with gentle calmness. "I am tired and faint."

He offered it instantly, though rather surprised, and she saw that he was pale and thoughtful.

"I am going," she said, quietly, "to see what I can do for you; but I can do little, and you can do much. Give me an hour by your watch to be alone with her—then force your way in—this is all I can do. Good-bye. You can wait in the Circus."

[91]

She took her hand from his arm; he made no reply; but the look of remorse which met hers, spoke more than words could do.

Lucy went on with a quicker step, and did not again stop till she reached the well-known door, and then she hastily rang.

The old butler made his appearance as usual, but looked vexed to see her.

"Is your mistress at home? and can I see her?" said Lucy.

"She is at home, ma'am; but she has been very ill, and I do not think she will be able to see you."

"She will not see me, you mean; but I must go to her. Good Geoffrey, tell me where she is," she said, passing him quickly.

"Not with bad news, as you came before," said the old man.

"No, no, no—only let me go to her," she cried, with the impetuosity of a spoilt child. [92]

"You will find her in her own room, ma'am; be careful, whatever you do, for she is very poorly."

"Where is your master then?"

"He is gone to London on business, ma'am; but he will be back to-morrow, I hope."

"Show me to her room—no, stay, I will go alone."

She passed him, and ran quickly up-stairs, and stopped at the door she well knew, and tapped gently.

A moment's pause succeeded, and then a slow and reluctant permission to enter was given; and she opened the door, and paused, for an instant, on its threshold.

In the lonely and darkly hung chamber, which was mostly ornamented by heavy bookcases and frowning pictures, sat the once happy wife. Her white hand, as it rested on the volume, which, with many others, lay before her, was thin and attenuated, and though there was not a trace of tears on her cheek, or in the dark beauty of her eye, yet that cheek was pale and sunken, and the eye was hollow and heavy, while the heavy tresses of her raven hair seemed to oppress the head, which she was resting on her other hand, as she read. [93]

When Lucy appeared, she raised her head, glanced at her, for an instant, and then resumed her reading.

"Do not turn away from me," said Lucy, advancing, "nay, you dare not, for you have used me ill. It is I, not you, who should be angry."

Millie looked at her in haughty surprise; but the speech had had its effect—she was roused.

"I injure you," she said, contemptuously, "I may have suffered the moth to take its wanton flight after one attempt to warn it; but I certainly did not hold the fire to its wings." [94]

"But if you would not stretch out your hand to save that moth when you could, you have done wrong. You are infinitely more clever than I am; but a child knows right from wrong—and I tell you that you were wrong—yes, very, very wrong."

They say a child's questions can pose the learned—certainly the words of a dissipated but repentant girl puzzled the intellectual Millie, who had encircled herself with the stern barriers of injured virtue, and had been contented.

"Yes, you were wrong," repeated Lucy, gathering strength and courage as she spoke, "for a few thoughtless, wilful words of mine, for the sake of your own rash vow to expose me to the ridicule, which none dread more than yourself, you have made me the laughing stock of an idle town—you have brought scandal on the head of him you have vowed to honor—and you have perilled my happiness, and my honor, as a woman ought not to peril that of her worst enemy, much less one whom she once called friend." [95]

"I?" said Millie.

"Yes; when you refused to speak the one word which would have opened my eyes, you did all this. And yet you dare to look upon me as upon some foul thing which your delicate eyes must turn from with disgust and loathing—but it shall not be. I dare you to speak your thoughts. I tell you, that wild butterfly of the ball-room, as I have been—the plaything of an hour—I dare to stand before you, and to say that I would hide my face for shame, had I exposed another, body and soul, as you have exposed me."

As she stood, with the glow of indignation on her face, a film seemed to fall from Millie's eyes, and, laying her head upon the table, she groaned aloud. Lucy's first impulse was to rush to her, but she remembered the look of anguish which Beauclerc shewed when they parted, and she restrained herself, remaining impatiently watching the large tears which found their way through her thin fingers. [96]

"I have wronged you, Lucy," said Millie, sobbing, as she raised her head, and glanced timidly at her; "forgive me."

"Sacred things," returned her companion, "seem profaned by such thoughtless lips as mine, but I have heard that there is a law, and no earthly one, which says, 'forgive, or never be forgiven.'"

"Forgive me, then," said Millie. "Oh, you do not know how I loved, and what I suffered—how my spirits have been wrung and agonised—how, day after day, have I sat here and thought, till, in the anguish of my heart, I believed my senses had forsaken me."

"And did you never feel all this time," said Lucy, steadily, "that you too had done something wrong."

"Not till this moment," replied Millie, her tears now flowing unchecked; and Lucy, as she watched them, almost wondered to see how they softened her features, and turned them all womanly again. [97]

"Till now," she continued, "I believed myself injured, and supporting my injury with the dignity of a Roman matron; but I had not forgiven, no, not in my inmost thoughts. I believed it to be beyond all necessity."

"Did you never remember that he was alone, and in prison, reaping the bitter fruits of deceit?"

"I did; but he deserved that, and more."

"I have heard," said Lucy, meekly, "that we have no right to judge, and that nothing but mercy and forgiveness suits us fallen creatures. But more; did you never think that when those prison horrors were over, prosperity and wealth succeeded. Did you not know that you were supremely loved still? Did you not know the power your intellect gave you to direct his aright? You did; and yet you left him to the flattery of such foolish admiration as mine." [98]

"Spare me, oh, spare me," said Millie; wringing her hands, "why do you torment me so?"

"Oh, Millie," Lucy replied, hurrying to her, and kneeling by her side, taking her hand in hers, and looking up entreatingly. "I don't know how I have had the courage to talk as I have done, but it was to make you forgive him. Oh, do Millie. You know he never admired me, he only wished to make me his friend, to reconcile you, for you would not even take in his letters, and what was he to do, unless he forced you back, as you know he has a right, but he wants you to come willingly."

At this moment the clock struck, and Lucy continued even more earnestly.

"For my sake, for his, for yours; for, look how pale and ill you are, and I know you love him, and he is so unhappy." [99]

All this was hurriedly spoken, almost in a breath, for she heard a footstep upon the stair—it came nearer, they both looked to the door, it opened, and Beauclerc entered. Another moment, and he had lifted his weeping wife in his arms, blessing Lucy as he did so.

She waited but one minute longer—to see them together, and then she left them, and ran down stairs. The old butler was waiting anxiously.

"All is well," she said, as she flitted past him. He was going to ask further, but she was gone down the hill, and across the streets, and home, before she stopped to think, and then she went to the garret chamber to seek for Mabel. She found her sitting on her travelling trunk—with her habit on, but her hat laid at her side—thinking sadly, and seriously; but when she saw her, she looked up with ready interest. [100]

"I have said all you told me, and something more," said Lucy, flinging her bonnet down, seating herself on the floor, and laying her head by her side, upon the box.

"Well, and what success did you meet with, my sweet Lucy?"

"Oh, it is all right between them now, for I met him going there, and told him to meet me when I had been with her one hour. He did, and so I am sure I left them happy."

"And are you not more happy yourself, dear Lucy?"

"Yes, I think I am—I hardly know—yes, I believe I am; but I am a new traveller in your track," she said, looking up with a smile.

"And every step is hard to take—I know it, darling, I know it," Mabel said, fondly smoothing the entangled ringlets of her light brown hair; "but you will go on—I know you will, for it leads to happiness at last." [101]

CHAPTER V [102]

O, envy! hide thy bosom, hide it deep:
A thousand snakes, with black
envenomed mouths,
Rest there, and hiss, and feed through
all thy heart!

POLLOK.

Caroline had no sooner returned from the ride, which had been to her full of disappointment, than she went to her mother, and begged her to find a remedy for, what she termed, their dependent's insolence. Mrs. Villars attempted, but in vain, to parry her angry threats—for Caroline was a stranger to the early discipline, which makes a person submit to what is right, for right's sake—and her mother's doctrine of expediency was too deeply engrafted in her disposition, to allow of her adopting any other rule of conduct. Why she imagined that her cousin stood in her way, she scarcely knew herself, except that she felt by instinct, that there was a superiority about her, which placed herself in a lower position. She had never, either, forgiven her resistance of her first attempts to humble her to what she deemed her fit position in the [103]

family—and though she had since abstained from any such open attack, her anger had not been the less strong, because it smouldered in silence.

She was conscious that she appeared to less advantage in contrast to Mabel, and she now resolved to remove her. This she boldly declared to her mother, in violent terms, refusing to listen to any excuses, for, what she termed, her bold behaviour—and the latter saw, with horror, that she had raised, in her own family, by careful culture, a power of evil, which was urging her still further in the path of sin and fraud.

[104]

To do her justice, she never began with the intention of doing wrong—she always believed herself led on by circumstances, and compelled by expediency. The remembrance of purer thoughts, shared with her more romantic sister, rose to check her at every step, though seldom strong enough to restrain her altogether.

But it was not so with her daughter—she had no such hallowed nursery recollections—she had often heard her mother's praises of her beauty, but never her prayers for her purity—and, with strong, unrelenting terms, she demanded, what her mother wished, but feared to do?

Mrs. Villars was afraid to refuse, and yet did not know how to gratify her—for how could she send Mabel away without repaying her money? She felt she could not dare to tell her husband, that she had spent such a sum in trifles, which she had now forgotten, or, in the purchase of fashions, which had long grown old; she did not even dare to tell Caroline, that she had been guilty of such meanness. It was impossible to decide; and anxious to gain time, she dismissed her daughter with promises and caresses, hoping to discover some method of evading the annoyances which menaced her.

[105]

But as time passed on, they only thickened round her—while Caroline became daily more impatient of delay.

From the first day of his introduction to Mabel, Mr. Stokes never appeared to lose sight of her—the slightest chance of meeting was sufficient to bring him to the most unlikely places; and Maria was too shrewd to be ignorant of the nature of his attentions—for there was too much seriousness about them to be easily mistaken, and she watched his movements with bitterness.

[106]

Caroline no sooner perceived this, than she hastened to sympathise with her, with more warmth than she had ever before displayed; while she still further fired her jealousy, by artful remarks upon Mabel's beauty and prudery, two qualities which Maria had never possessed, and led her, with little difficulty, to join in begging their mother to get rid of her as soon as possible.

Indeed, with some shew of reason, for spite of every drawback, furnished by circumstances, they, little knowing the one sorrow of her heart, imagined her at the height of her triumph, and secretly rejoicing over them.

Clair still continued to seek her society—and she, perceiving, at once, from the frankness of his manner, that they met on different terms, rather encouraged his visits—for, in her close attendance upon Lucy, she believed that she perceived a secret regard for him, mingling with all her actions and feelings, forming a part even of her very errors. Much then as she had lately learnt to esteem Clair, she could not help cherishing the hope, that the altered girl might find in him a supporter in her new ideas of life, while she, with all the grace which had charmed his laughing hours, might, in his graver moments, become now a fit companion.

[107]

With these thoughts, though she felt the indelicacy of forwarding such a scheme by any direct means, she encouraged his intimacy with the family, that he might have an opportunity of judging for himself of the alteration which had taken place in Lucy's character.

This required but very little coloring, to be set down as coquetry; but when accused of it, she only laughed, and told them to wait, and see.

[108]

Nor was this all. Mr. Morley, who seemed to haunt his nephew, like his shadow, sometimes condescended to bestow some marks of high favor on Mabel, and as Mrs. Villars seldom acted herself without some covert motive, she easily believed that the pleasure with which Mabel received those transitory attentions, was rather caused by her hopes of eventual advantage; for as Hargrave had said, that a large landed property still remained, and as he had no children, the question of what was to become of it at his death, might be one which she was answering to her own satisfaction.

Still the money difficulty remained strong as ever, and made her evade all the schemes of her two daughters, till she perceived that her niece was gaining ground in the favor of all around her; and, though unaware of it herself, was becoming the great attraction of the house. This was an evil which must be checked, and she thought again and again, till, at length, an idea occurred to her, which, though she, at first, rejected, she finally adopted, reasoning with herself, that the interests of her dear children required every sacrifice.

[109]

One other difficulty also remained in the affection of Mr. Villars, which rendered him deaf to every insinuation against her—indeed, on the contrary, he remarked, with pleasure, her returning animation of spirits, and took every opportunity of introducing her—thus helping her popularity, to his wife's great annoyance.

To gain her husband, therefore, became a point of importance, as she wished to remove Mabel, at least, with an appearance of kindness; and after many a struggle with her better-self, she resolved to make a bolder attempt, and, choosing one wet afternoon, she went down to the library, to settle some money matters. Mr Villars, too glad to bring his wife to anything so steady as accounts, which she generally avoided, willingly gave her his attention, though to do so, he

[110]

had to lay down a page of his book, and forget a brilliant idea.

She did not, however, give very much time to figures, and soon managed to enter upon her real business; and when she closed the book, over which they had been looking, she said, with one of her sweetest looks, and she really did look well when she liked—

"My dear, I wish to talk to you about something which is very much on my mind."

"Well, my dear, say anything you like, I have plenty of time."

"You know, then, how kind and good you have been to me in allowing me to bring my niece here—I do assure you I have felt it deeply, though I have never said anything about it before, it was so like you. Well, now I think it is time to carry out my original intention, and relieve you of the burden, by providing for her in some way. Now, I was thinking if I could get her a place as companion or governess, what an excellent thing it would be for her." [111]

"My love," said her husband, "make yourself perfectly easy; your niece is no burden to me; she is perfectly welcome here, as long as she needs a home—and with regard to her pocket-money, let her fare as the other girls do."

Here, thinking he had settled the matter to the perfect satisfaction of all parties, he took up his book.

"But, my dear," began his wife, and he laid it down again, "consider how unjustly this would be acting; to lead her on with false hopes, when, eventually, she must be unprovided for. How much better to inure her to work when she is young. Indeed, her dear mother entreated me to see to it, and how can I neglect her wishes?" [112]

"Depend upon it, Caroline, your sister would, when thinking of her orphan child, gladly have exchanged a life of hardships, for one of comfort and repose. Why did you not assure her that I would take care of her?—you know I am neither parsimonious nor poor."

"Ah! but, indeed, I should be more satisfied if I did as I promised."

"You would wrong yourself and me—do not think of it."

"But you must see what a drawback she is to our daughters settling; and, really, for their sakes, poor things, it is to be thought of. I am getting quite anxious about them, having all four out together, and she makes a fifth. Not that I mean, for an instant, to say that she is more beautiful, or has a better figure, or does anything better than they do; for her voice wants a good deal of tuition—but she has an artful way of doing things, which makes her get on, and persuades every one to like her; why, the very servants would rather do anything for her, than any one else. And, only think of her mock modesty, pretending not to care how she looked, and attracting more attention all the time, when she went out riding with that old hat, which hung so long in the passage. Really, her airs require a little pulling down." [113]

"Caroline," said Mr. Villars, much vexed at the altered tone of her argument. "I never approved of the plan of depreciating others when they stand in our way, and I once hoped that our daughters—possessing every natural endowment—would not need such a false elevation. Surely they can be admired on their own account, and not simply because there is no one else to admire. Johnson says, 'Every man ought to aim at eminence, not by pulling others down, but by raising himself; and enjoy the pleasure of superiority, whether imaginary or real, without interrupting others in the same felicity.'" [114]

"I am afraid," replied Mrs. Villars, who had listened with some impatience to this quotation, "such moralizing will not get us on in life—the world requires management, at least, I have always found so, and, therefore, I do think that we are not doing our duty by our children, in letting this girl always outshine them. I am sure no parent would be further from such a wish than yourself."

"But I do not see how doing a wrong thing can serve them. You spoke, just now, of the necessity of Mabel's supporting herself, eventually, but if she is admired, as you say, and as I think she deserves to be, why not give her the chance of being married; she can have but one husband after all."

"Only one husband!" repeated Mrs. Villars, "why she acts as if she wanted twenty. How can you tell what is going on, shut up here with your books? First, there is Clair, who paid such attentions to Lucy at Aston; see how she treats him now she has got him on her books—why just on, and just off, ready for any emergency." [115]

"I never saw anything improper in her conduct, indeed, I was pleased with the respect he paid her, seemingly apart from love or pique."

"Why one would think that you sat down here and invented people's conduct as you wished it to be; but surely, love, you must have seen the very pointed attentions Henry paid Caroline, before that insinuating girl came to the house?"

"No, indeed, I never knew anything more than you told me, and, for my own part, I never saw anything like attentions even."

"You never see anything, I declare, but I tell you he did, though you do seem to doubt it—you should see how she manœuvres to appear angelic in his eyes. More artfulness I never met with; so cheerful, so forgiving, and so everything, when she likes, that really it is quite provoking. Poor Caroline says she cannot bear it." [116]

"Why does she not imitate the rival she cannot outshine, for she has sufficient natural grace and talent to make her fascinating. Oh! Caroline, I fear there was something wanting in our children's

education."

Perhaps she agreed with him, for she did not stop to argue the point, but continued in the same tone.

"I do declare this is not all, and you shall know what she is; of that I am determined. There is Mr. Stokes, whom I expected to come forward for Maria, has taken to dangle after her, and she has found the art of pleasing him too, poor silly man, by always pretending to avoid his attentions, and, as if this was not enough, she puts another iron in the fire, for safety, and tries to make a fool of Mr. Morley, poor old man. Why, if this goes on, we shall be the laughing-stock of the place."

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"There can be nothing ridiculous," replied Mr. Villars, "in protecting an orphan niece, without home or friends. I cannot believe that Mabel tries at anything of the kind, nor do I believe, that if my daughters act properly, she could hurt them if she did try."

"But," said she, entreatingly, "you will consent, won't you, dear, to let her take a governess's place, for a time at least, only till Caroline is married?"

"I will not, indeed, consent to anything unjust. There is a certain prejudice existing in society against the position held by a governess, and I should think it most injurious to her interests if I allowed her to assume it, unless I meant to neglect her altogether. Do not, I entreat you, let a mistaken love for your children, make you neglect what you owe to yourself. Remember, that, as the sister of Mrs. Lesly, you owe something to poor Mabel; and you cannot offer, as an excuse for refusing her a refuge, that I am unable or unwilling to allow you to go to the lengths of even romantic generosity. We owe her much for the good she has done our Lucy."

[118]

"What! In making her a prude and a saint; there is an end of her chance of settling, I see clearly —"

"I do not see why, for there is nothing exaggerated about her tone of feeling—but I know we always differed in the management of our children; I have grieved enough over it, but it is now too late to remedy our mistakes, we can only trust to circumstances; they, with Mabel's assistance, have worked a striking change in Lucy. There, let us say no more about it, you would be sorry to do an unkind thing, I know."

[119]

Saying this in a tone of more than usual decision, he left the room, thinking sadly over the selfishness of his wife and family, which this conversation had laid so openly before him.

No sooner had he left the house, than Caroline and Maria went to the library, anxious to hear the success of the interview. Poor Mrs. Villars stood like a culprit before them, when obliged to confess that their papa had gone, with the understanding that the matter was ended, and Mabel was to remain. The mother and children seemed to have changed places.

"Well, I did think you would have managed better than that," said Maria.

"I do not think you half tried," said Caroline.

"Try yourself, then," retorted her mother.

"That, indeed, I will not; you brought the evil into the house, and it is but fair that you should have the pain of removing it."

[120]

"Well, well, my dears, I will do my best, only do not be so angry with me—go and get ready for dinner, there's dear children, I will try again."

"Soon then, if you do at all," said Caroline.

"Yes, very soon, dear, impetuous girl."

Satisfied with this promise, they went to prepare for dinner.

Unfortunately, as it happened, Mr. Villars was met, not far from his own door, by Mr. Stokes, who skilfully managed to get him to ask him in to dinner. That he had but one object in doing so, was evident, by the pointed attentions he paid to Mabel; and, in the evening, having managed to get her to play a game of chess—he kept her over it for an hour or two, refusing to see any of her mistakes, or to take any of the pieces she carefully threw in his way. She grew more and more impatient, when she saw that he was bent upon keeping her; and when she had been nearly three hours over the game, she begged him to allow her to give it him.

[121]

"On one condition," he replied, "that you will allow me to give you any thing I like in return; this, for instance," he continued in the same low key, glancing down significantly at the large strong hand which rested carelessly on the chess-board.

"No no," said Mabel, blushing from her neck to her forehead; "I gave you the game, but I will never take any thing in return."

The last few words were said with decision, and point, though covered by the appearance of jest, as she rose and left the table. Maria saw every thing, and marked well the expression of Mr. Stokes's face, so serious, so unlike his usual jocular tone.

"It will be too late," she said to herself again and again, "if I do not take care, but I will trust to my wits still." Mr. Stokes soon afterwards took his leave.

[122]

Before they went to rest, the mother and sisters found an opportunity of talking over Mabel's coquetry—and so far strengthened themselves in the idea of the necessity of removing her, that Mrs. Villars determined to do so, whatever came of it.

Mourn not the perishing of each fair
toy,
Ye were ordained to do, not to enjoy,
To suffer, which is nobler than to dare;
A sacred burthen is this life ye bear,
Look on it, lift it, bear it solemnly,
Stand up and walk beneath it
steadfastly;
Fall not for sorrow, falter not for sin,
But onward, upward, till the goal ye
win.

F. BUTLER.

The next day was unusually warm. Heavy clouds had been slowly rising up from behind the hills all the morning, till they covered the whole sky, and frowned darkly down upon the gay city—and the air was hushed with heavy silence. Mrs. Villars and her daughters were sitting in the drawing-room, at work; and Colonel Hargrave sat at a side table, near the window, touching up a sketch, which he had that morning finished, of the venerable abbey. Mr. Villars, too, walked into the room, for people love to be together when a storm is coming. He took up the paper, and sat down. Lucy looked fondly at him from her work—and then walked to the window to look at Hargrave's drawing, and to whisper him to come away, in case it lightened—for, between them, a friendship had sprung newly up—she had thanked him for all that had before offended her, and he was always ready with some little act, which shewed he felt a kindness for her. [124]

He told her he was finishing his sketch for her album—and she thanked him frankly, and not with the blush, as formerly, which is as often the tell-tale of a sinful, as of an innocent heart, and reminded him that he had promised her some lines for her album, as well, and she would go and fetch it. [125]

"Well," said he, when she returned with it; "bring me a pen, for I have just made an impromptu."

She brought him a large goose quill, and, after carefully mending it, he wrote as the sky grew blacker and blacker, the following lines:—

"As the sun-light on the fountain,
As the ivy on the tree,
As the snow upon the mountain,
Or the moonlight on the sea.

"As the zephyr gently blowing,
As the dew-drop on the rose,
As the rippling water flowing,
As the sun at evening's close.

"So is woman in the beauty,
Of a heart unstained by sin;
When bright eyes beam with purity,
Which they borrow from within." [126]

"There," he said, passing her back the book, "now I will finish the sketch; but," he added, under his breath, "do go and look for Mabel, the storm is coming up so fast—I hope she is not out."

"No, she is in her room I dare say, but I will go and find her if I can."

So saying, Lucy left the room, bearing the album with her, to read the lines to Mabel.

As soon as she was gone, Mrs. Villars looked up from her work and said to Hargrave—

"I want your advice, Henry, on a little matter."

"I shall be most happy to give it," he said, gaily, still intent upon his drawing.

"Well, then, do you not think the most prudent thing we could do for Mabel would be to get her a nice place as a governess?"

"Really," replied he, shrugging his shoulders, "really, that is a matter which must so very much depend upon yourself, that I must be excused giving an opinion." [127]

Caroline remarked, with pleasure, that he did not seem surprised.

"But Henry," continued Mrs. Villars, "as a friend of our family, do you not think that, the kindest and best thing that can be done for her?"

"It shall not be," said Mr. Villars, laying down his paper, "with my consent."

"Yes, but Henry," she said, still speaking to him, "do you not see what an artful flirt she is, and

how injurious she is likely to prove to my daughters."

Hargrave only gave another doubtful shrug.

"And see," she continued, "how useful she has contrived to make herself to Mr. Villars."

"No, no," said Mr. Villars, speaking entirely to his wife, "she has been so disinterested that far from trying to ingratiate herself, only, she has made Lucy my constant companion, and so quietly has she withdrawn from my notice, that I could now very probably part with her, without any loss of comfort; but Caroline, you cannot imagine the misery and horror from which she has saved me." [128]

He stopped, and then continued in a more agitated tone of voice—

"I have studied the history of the human mind too deeply, to be mistaken in myself, and I am convinced that, e'er this, mine would have sunk into that ruin which has wrecked many a better and wiser man than myself. There was inertness in my ideas, sameness in my thoughts, a sense of causeless misery and perpetual fear; all fatal signs of that derangement, which the worst and the best shrink from with terror, as something too dreadfully vague for contemplation. What I might have been now, had I not received, as it were, a fresh impetus from that angelic girl, I tremble to think; for what I am, I feel grateful to her as the second cause." Here he bowed reverently, as if a holier name mingled with his silent aspirations, and as he did so, the first flash of the thunder storm played round his head, and gave almost majesty to his words—at the same time that the side door, behind him, leading from the best drawing-room, opened, and Mabel glided in and stood by his side. Her manner was perfectly collected, but there was a deep red spot upon each cheek, and her eye glistened, as she cast it round the room. [129]

"You have been listening," said Caroline, when she had recovered from the sudden effect of her entrance.

Mabel turned directly to her, and replied—

"I went into the drawing-room to read and watch the storm—a few minutes since I heard my own name mentioned, and, while I hesitated whether I should come here at once, I have heard what has deeply gratified me. To you, dear sir," she said, turning to her uncle, "I owe very much—very much kindness and support I have received from you; I will not repay it by being the cause of discord in your family, for one moment longer than I can help—nay," she said, placing her hand fondly in his, "do not say any thing; you can offer me a home I know, but not a welcome—that you cannot command." Then, looking to her aunt, she continued, "it was at your express desire, ma'am, that I came here—not only your desire, but your entreaty—but do not think I meant always to encroach upon your kindness. This will convince you, that I did not." Here she handed her an open letter. "And now I must solicit the favor of a few moments alone with you." [130]

Mrs. Villars turned pale, but immediately rose, and Mabel, gently pressing her uncle's hand, followed her from the room.

As she had stood there, her indignant face turned upon them all, the lightning had flashed about her unquailing form, and when she was gone they were all silent, as if her presence had awed them still. [131]

"What do you want with me?" said her aunt, when she had closed the door of the breakfast room, behind them.

"Will you have the kindness first to read that letter?"

"Well, I see from it that your friend—let me see where does she live?—Oh, yes, I see, at Stratford—romantic place certainly, Shakespeare and all that—well, she says she will be happy to receive you—eh?"

"Yes," replied Mabel; "she was an old friend of mine, and not being well off, or in good health, I have offered to educate her children for nothing."

Mrs. Villars opened her eyes.

"Thus you see, aunt, I shall be able to do very well; for my little fortune, small as it is, will keep me in dress." [132]

Mrs. Villars smiled kindly, saying, that though Mabel had not been perfectly candid, still she rejoiced to hear that she had not been left without resources, as she had imagined.

This speech was spoken so smoothly, that Mabel was puzzled.

"Surely aunt there was nothing left for me to tell—the only money I have, is in your hands, and when you can conveniently let me have it, or part of it, I shall carry my plan into execution."

"There must be some mistake in this, my dear. I have no money of yours, except the half sovereign you kindly lent me the other morning. What do you mean?"

She was astonished; but she answered quickly, though respectfully—

"I am speaking of the six hundred pounds my mamma lent you, from time to time; and which you promised to keep safely for me." [133]

"I promised, my dear," said Mrs. Villars, with well feigned astonishment. "I never said or thought of such a thing; but I will tell you how this mistake arose. I did borrow the sums you mention, from time to time, as you say, and you may remember, when your poor dear mother and I met last." The lightning flashed in her eyes, and she covered them with her hands; but the rain had begun to patter against the window, and the thunder rolled, at longer intervals; as the storm

abated, she became bolder, and continued—"Well, at that time, we were very long alone, as, perhaps, you remember. Then she said to me—I remember the very words, and where she was sitting, poor thing—'Caroline,' she said, 'I never had the courage to tell you, that I have often vexed so deeply, to think that, when I married, I accepted a larger portion from our father's generosity than he gave you; and I shall never die happy till I have made it up to you—in order to do that, I shall cancel all your obligations to me, and give you a hundred more to-day.' I begged her to think of her children, and the answer she made was remarkable. 'I would rather leave them honesty than money.' It was so like her, poor thing."

[134]

Here she put her handkerchief to her eyes, while Mabel watched her with mingled pity, contempt, and indignation.

"Well, my dear, she went to her old secretary—you remember it, I am sure."—Of course she did, a thousand remembrances clung to every old-fashioned article of that dear home; but duplicity and cunning were before her, and she was too shocked to think of them now—"From that secretary," continued her aunt, "she took a bundle of papers. I saw my own writing, at once, and knew them to be the securities, that is, the written promises I had given her for the money. I stretched out my hand to take them, but she put it back, while she threw the papers in the fire."

[135]

"There was no fire," said Mabel, as if thinking aloud.

"No, you are right," said Mrs. Villars, colouring violently, for, from that moment, she saw she was suspected. "I meant to say she burnt them at the taper I had lighted to seal a letter. And now, you see, there has been a little mistake, which I am sorry for; had you spoken before, it might have been avoided; but, perhaps, you divined what is really the case, that if I wished to give you the money, I have not got it by me; and, therefore, I must take advantage of my poor dear sister's generosity."

Mabel did not, for an instant, doubt her aunt's falsehood; but, immediately remembered that she had nothing to plead but her own assertion of her mother's words, unsupported by any evidence. On such proofs, to obtain her money, appeared at once, to be impossible, and no other reason would have led her to expose a relation, to the charge of the meanest subterfuge and falsehood; but, though she said nothing, her whole soul was in her face, and Mrs. Villars writhed under its expression. Hoping to arrange a compromise on good terms, she handed her five sovereigns, saying—

[136]

"There, my dear, ask me for more when you want it."

"Thank you," said Mabel, pushing back the money, "I have sufficient for my present wants; but, as I shall be obliged to find a different situation from this," she added, taking up the letter, "I shall be glad if you will allow me to remain here a little while longer."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly; and I should be glad if you could remain here altogether—that is, if you would not make yourself obnoxious to Caroline—that is, if you would not be quite so independent."

[137]

"I have done nothing to offend either of my cousins," said Mabel, her bosom heaving with emotion. "I have not deserved the treatment I have received, either at their hands, or yours, and you know I have not."

"If this is all the return your sainted pretensions can make," said her aunt, chafing herself into a passion, "for all my kindness to you—if you have not one word of thanks to offer me, you are but a poor companion for my daughters. I must make an example of you, and, therefore, I leave you to yourself. I care not what becomes of you. Go," she screamed, with shrill violence, as she herself advanced to the door, and, as if either satisfied or ashamed, burst from the room, as if it were contaminated.

Mabel covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears; indignation and a sense of desolation, struggled within her, and sob after sob burst from her, with a violence which, though natural to her temper, was usually suppressed entirely.

[138]

Suddenly she heard a step, and, before she could recover herself, Mr. Morley stood before her, coming as he did, in his customary shadowy manner.

"Why do you weep," he said, in a tone of severity.

"I have quarrelled with my aunt."

"Well?"

"And I wish to leave this house as soon as I can."

"Have you done wrong?"

"No."

"Then what have you to fear?"

"Myself, for I am deeply agitated."

"What, you fear that you cannot forgive. Rise, Mabel, and face the storm, not of worldly trouble, but of your own passions, drive them back; do not sit down and weep over them as one who has chosen no other trust than her own, weak, defenceless heart. There are more eyes upon you than you imagine—the weak to find confidence, and the fool and the scoffer, to find jest and scorn. And, besides, what are you called upon to do—to leave a house where dependence would grind your spirit, or envy calumniate, and make you seem vile in the eyes of others."

[139]

"And what have you to endure? A few years of honest labour, re-paid by the wide spreading opportunity of sowing the seeds of virtue in the hearts of many, who, in years to come, may bless you for the happiness which the stability of their first principles has cast upon their households—which may again send forth fresh seeds of virtue to new generations, disseminating to children's children the thoughts and principles which were first inculcated by you. Is not this influence enough for you, though you yourself may live and die unheeded, and soon forgotten—your better part will live in others. I do not speak to you," continued Mr. Morley, as with one hand extended, he seemed rather to address an assembly, "as valuing such paltry things as wealth, or praise, or idle ease, but because you are, for a moment, forgetting what you do value—for these are times when temptations take us unawares, and, in a weak moment, have the power to surprise us, and I tell you again, Mabel Lesly, that the wicked and the wavering watch your movements for derision or guidance."

[140]

Strong medicines should be given to strong minds. Mabel's fears, and sorrow, and indignation, vanished, before he had ceased speaking.

"Thank you," said she, ardently, "the staff that can prop up the falling indeed deserves thanks, and I am grateful that you have come between me and weak and wicked thoughts. But do go further, and give me some advice—I will go any where, happily, only I cannot remain here."

[141]

"Well," said he, slightly relaxing his exalted tone, to one more suited to common life, "we will see what can be done."

Here he drew the last edition of the *Times* from his pocket, and glanced down the advertisements, with rapid attention.

"There is nothing here," he said, at length, "nothing wanted, but a companion for an old lady, any one else will do for that, and you might stagnate in such a position. I will go out amongst my friends, and enquire for you."

"Something immediate," said she, earnestly.

Mr. Morley frowned.

"You are impatient of enduring a few days of discomfort, how can you meet a life of labour?"

"That would be ease to my present position."

[142]

"Pride, pride, will that ever be uppermost? But do not fear me, I always finish one thing at a time, so that I shall not be long about my business. Let me see; what is the list of your acquirements—sound English education, music, singing, French, a little German, a little Italian, and a little Latin. Umph! I think that will do—good-bye."

So saying, he glided from the room, with noiseless tread.

Mabel retired soon after to her own room, where she employed herself till dinner time, in writing letters to many of her friends, and particularly to her old school-fellow, expressing her regret at not being able to go to her, as she had hoped, without a salary—finding it necessary to maintain herself entirely.

This occupation did much to restore her self-possession, by the time when it was necessary for her to appear at dinner. But there was so much restraint thrown over the little party, by the remembrance of the scene of the afternoon, that the usually social meal passed in dulness and silence; when, however, they all went to the drawing-room, to amuse themselves for the evening, the spirits of the sisters rose, even to more oppressive gaiety—though Lucy sat apart from them in silence, perplexed and troubled.

[143]

Caroline had seated herself near the window, in order that she might display, with greater advantage, a portfolio of her own drawings, to Hargrave. They were very neatly executed, and the copy was as like the original as might be, yet Mabel could scarcely think them worth the high encomiums which he bestowed upon them, while Caroline blushed and evaded his compliments, though evidently gratified all the while, and willing to receive as many more as he chose to cater for her.

"I wish," thought Mabel, "that they would not laugh quite so loud, my spirits are out of tune to-night."

[144]

Just then she heard Caroline whisper something to Hargrave, as she leant forward, over the little table which parted them, so far, that a curl of her silken hair touched his cheek. Her sensitive ear caught the word, "governess," slightly spoken, while Hargrave only replied by a shrug, and a slight elevation of his eyebrows; and when Caroline whispered something, with a still more provoking expression, he actually laughed aloud.

Mabel was conscious that she was turning giddy, and she rose with the intention of leaving the room, when the door opened, and Mr. Morley beckoned her to come to him.

"Have you thought it over," he said, when she came to him, in the passage.

"Oh, yes," she replied eagerly; "and I have written to several friends."

"Right, never depend on any but yourself. As it happens, however, I have heard of something. Put on your bonnet, and come out with me."

[145]

Without remaining to ask any questions, she did as he desired, and was soon walking by his side, along the lighted streets.

"Not very pleasant, there, eh?" he enquired, elevating his eyebrows, to designate the house they

had left.

"Not very," she answered, in a low, half choked voice, and they said nothing more till they reached the White Lion Hotel. Then, when they heard the hum of its business within, Mr. Morley suddenly stopped, and enquired if she were frightened.

"I might have been, yesterday," was the reply; "but, to-night, I feel nothing so much as the anxiety to be free."

"Free," muttered he; "free; that is a word for men; the more our intellectual range is unfettered, the freer we are to pursue unbeaten tracts of usefulness the better; but free is a dangerous word on the lips of a woman." [146]

"You mistake me, sir," she said, blushing; "I did not mean free from constraint, for that I must meet with in the situation I am trying to obtain; but, indeed, it is very hard to stay where I am, neither useful nor welcome. If this be wrong, excuse me, to-night, for my feelings have been sadly tried."

"Excuse," he said, severely; "that is a word which has been fertile in wrong. Excuse—excuse," he continued to mutter till they had entered the hotel, where he enquired, rather fiercely, for Mrs. Noble, and they were soon ushered into the apartment, where the lady, he enquired for was sitting. She was a stout, heavy, weighty looking person, with a sallow complexion, a pair of small, dead black eyes, and hair of the same dull, heavy hue, shading a forehead of no ordinary expanse; and her countenance gave an idea of cumbrous intellect. She was seated in an easy attitude, from which she did not care to move, by the dinner-table, on which lay some early strawberries. [147]

"This is Miss Lesly," said Mr. Morley, whose manner was still ruffled.

Mrs. Noble acknowledged the introduction by a heavy bend—and a still heavier stare, while she slowly begged them to be seated.

"Mr. Morley has, no doubt, been kind enough," she observed, at length, turning to Mabel, "to explain the nature of the situation I have to offer, and I conclude you feel inclined, and able to undertake it."

"No, indeed," said Mr. Morley; "I have done nothing of the kind."

"Then I must explain that I have eight children under fourteen, whom you would have to instruct. You can, I believe, undertake French, Latin, German, and the ordinary branches of a sound English education, together with music?" [148]

"I think I could, with children of that age, and if you would let me try, as I have no other interest now, I could devote myself entirely to them."

"I do not offer more than thirty pounds a year."

"It will be quite sufficient for me," replied Mabel.

"The weather is warm," returned Mrs. Noble, after a long silence, which she suffered without the slightest appearance of impatience; "You had better take off your bonnet and shawl."

Mabel hesitated, but Mr. Morley interposed.

"Take them off; she wants to see what you look like."

"You are quick," said Mrs. Noble, laughing, drowsily.

Mabel instantly laid aside her heavy crape wrappings, with a blush and half a smile, as she stood as gracefully erect, as if for the artist's hand to sketch. [149]

Mrs. Noble fixed her small gimlet eyes upon her face, as if she would have read every sign which might be found there. Beauty rested in every line of her fair features—yet, few would stop to call her beautiful, even when asleep. Candid, intellectual, gentle, affectionate, high-minded, pure—any thing but beautiful. And nothing gained more upon the confidence of others, than the confiding way she seemed to have, as if she could not help believing that all were as truthful and true hearted as she was herself.

"Good," said Mrs. Noble, "good, if I read that book right—I care not how soon my children learn it by heart."

Mabel looked up, and light played in her eyes, and danced about her countenance. It is so pleasant to be trusted when we mean to be trustworthy. [150]

"One thing I have forgotten to mention," observed the lady, after another long pause, which she sustained with as much composure as before. "One of my little girls is a great invalid—indeed, is unable to walk, and I must stipulate for something more than common kindness to her."

"I had a little sister, who could not rise in her bed," was the affectionate reply, and while her eyes moistened, the mother's filled with tears.

"And when may I come to you?" enquired Mabel, a little eagerly.

"I must make some little arrangements for you," replied Mrs. Noble, "otherwise I would take you with me; but you may come to me this day week, and you will then join me at Weymouth. You must come by the coach, and a servant shall be waiting to meet you, and bring you to me. Did Mr. Morley tell you that I wished you to accompany me, in a few weeks, to the south of France?" [151]

"No, ma'am; but I shall be most ready to go there."

Perceiving that there was no more to be said, Mabel put on her bonnet, and, with Mr. Morley,

wished her good evening.

"Well," said her companion, when they were again in the street, "you have to fight the battle of life under new circumstances, that is all."

"Yes, that is all," said Mabel, cheerfully, "and with many thanks for the helping hand you have given me."

"I fear you will not be sufficiently tried to bring out the whole strength of your moral character, which I wish, for your sake, to see developed. She half loves you already."

"I wish that were true," said Mabel, laughing. "I am not sufficiently heroic to object to anything so pleasant as that. I should be quite miserable if I could get no one to love me." [152]

"For shame!" said Mr. Morley, turning sternly upon her. "Is it not sufficient pleasure to feel that you are doing your duty."

"Sufficient to make me do it, perhaps; but still, there is something so pleasant in being loved by those about us, that I would not willingly place myself in a position where it was impossible, unless called upon by some imperative duty."

"Earth—earth—earth," said Mr. Morley, stopping at the door in Sydney Place, "clinging every where—mixing with every thing."

"Oh, do not be angry with me," said Mabel, "for such a little fault."

"Oh, earth, earth," he repeated, even when the door opened, "your spirit is every where." And turning away, spite of everything she said, he went off down the street, repeating still between his teeth—"Earth—earth—earth." [153]

CHAPTER VII.

 [154]

It hath done its sacred
mission
Sorrow's hand was sent
to cure,
Bless it for the bitter
anguish
Thou wert called on to
endure.

CULVER ALLEN.

"Only one week," thought Maria, "and the house will be cleared of a nuisance; but I must play my cards well for this one week, short as it is, or my game will be lost."

She was standing in the drawing-room as she said this, dangling her bonnet by one string, for she had just come in from their afternoon's walk in the park, and from busy, shopping, fascinating Milsom Street. [155]

"Let me only keep things right for one week," she continued, to herself, "and I have him; but I fear it is but a desperate chance."

She was interrupted in these meditations by a brisk rapping at the street-door, and, very soon afterwards, Mr. Stokes made his appearance, and Maria's quick eye immediately saw signs of a proposal in the carefully arranged morning costume, and the very precise tie of his cravat, though, that the same proposal would not be meant for her, she saw with equal readiness.

His first enquiry was—"Whether it was quite true that Miss Lesly was about to leave them?"

"How tiresome," said Maria, "then I suppose every one knows it; and yet we have been so anxious to keep it private."

Here she looked much vexed. [156]

"What has gone wrong, then?" enquired the Squire.

"Oh, nothing," said Maria, in a tone which implied everything had. "It is true, we are obliged to send her away; but there is no use making a talk about it. It is no business of anybody's, is it?"

"Oh, dear no," said the Squire, nervously.

"I should think one's poor relations might be sent to their native obscurity, without everybody's taking it up," added Maria.

"Yes—but she seems so sweet-tempered. I should have thought her a great acquisition to your family party."

"You do not really mean to say you think so?" said she, looking as if she would say—"I know you are a better judge than that"—"She is sweet in company, I know—but in private she is as haughty as a young duchess—She even finds fault with mamma. She comes of a good family, certainly; but, I fear, she is something like the dregs of the cask, only a little bit turned sour." [157]

Mr. Stokes began whipping his boots, as if greatly annoyed at the dust upon them.

"Oh, dear," said Maria; "let me get you a duster."

She instantly sprang to an old arm-chair, and bringing one from its secret recesses, began dusting his boots, upon her knees, before he had time to prevent her.

"Well," she said, rising, and resuming her seat, and glancing at his large, but well-turned foot, "there is nothing to be ashamed about."

"Really," he said, jocosely, "I ought to feel flattered."

"Well," said Maria, resuming the conversation she had interrupted, "I am thankful I have not a pretty face—it is the fruit of more mischief than enough." [158]

Mr. Stokes gave another stroke to his boots—(there was not a particle of dust remaining on them.)

"Oh, I forgot," said Maria, unlocking her work-box; "I have not given you your last pocket-handkerchief—Is not this beautiful work?"

Mabel had finished it for her.

As she said this, she held it so close to his eyes, that, for gallantry's sake, he was forced to kiss the hand that offered it.

He did so; and Maria gave him a very gentle slap on the cheek, at the same time, bringing her half laughing, half pouting face so near his, that, forgetful of better manners, he gave it a kiss.

Maria only laughed still more, saying—

"Oh, you naughty man—fie, for shame."

The Squire laughed, too, though not so gaily, for he had been turned in a purpose which he hoped would have secured his domestic happiness, so that he soon shook hands with her, and hurried away. [159]

Maria was delighted with the success of her interview, and went about the house in the most evident spirits.

But in the evening came a P. P. C. card from Mr. Stokes; and she learnt that he had started for Gloucestershire.

Maria was so put out with this information, that she could have killed flies, rather than have revenged her injured feelings on nothing; and she eagerly seized the better opportunity of gratifying herself by spiting Mabel.

Every discomfort that she could throw in her way—every allusion before strangers to her destination, as a governess, were eagerly used for her annoyance. If she were out of spirits, she asked some question, which forcibly dragged into sight the worst points of her position—or pitied her in that tone and manner, which has placed pity as akin to contempt. [160]

But, with all this, Mabel contended only with patience and good temper, though she, sometimes thought, that hours of heavy trial were scarcely so difficult to bear, as the perpetual annoyances by which she was surrounded.

Had one discontented word, one passionate or impatient look escaped her, Mrs. Villars would have had a lighter conscience; but, as it was, she would willingly have entreated her to remain, had it not been for Caroline, whose fiery temper so greatly awed her. Alas! unhappy woman, few would envy you. The thought of the orphan's money, procured for past wanton and thoughtless expenditure; dresses, flowers, and finery, which were now only encumbrances; shows and visits, which had answered no purpose—these were but slight compensations for a wounded conscience. [161]

"Only one week," also soliloquised Lucy, as she sat near the old-fashioned window, of the study, and looked out, sadly—"only one week, and Mabel will be gone; and yet nothing I can say can stop this cruel act."

She leant her elbow on the window sill, and supported her head with her hand.

That face, once so light, and fickle, and coquettish, had acquired, now, that modesty and sobriety of expression, which, some think, once lost, is never again recovered.

Her step was more thoughtful, and the light, ringing laugh, once so fickle, and so joyous, but so often heedless and unfeeling, was now seldom or never heard—and in its place, there was a bright look—it could scarcely be called a smile—that seemed to say, she tried to be happy, rather from the fear of giving pain, than, as before, in the buoyancy of an untamed spirit, seeking indulgence for the selfishness of a spoilt, and unchecked fancy. Could it really be Lucy, upon whose lip the unkind word died before the angry flush that preceded its thought had passed from her cheek. Could it be Lucy, who listened with unaffected interest and humility, to the high-toned conversation of her father; or, with girlish playfulness, enticed him to take the walk his health required; and, as he did so, led him where the birds carolled, and the sun shone on green meadows, beside the beautiful Avon—sometimes alone, but often with Mabel—and, when with her, listening, rather than attempting to join in conversation, drawn from the well-stored mind of each. Could this, indeed, be the wild girl whom Mabel had watched with such untiring care, fearing lest the follies of the gay world might again ensnare her, and lead her from peace and hope, back to vanity and heartlessness again. It was, indeed, the same Lucy, though very, very changed, as she sat now by the study window, listening more to the echo of her own thoughts, than to any real sound. [162] [163]

The essence of spring will find an inlet to the heart, if possible—and though the view of the shady little court, on which the window opened, was bounded indeed, the air from the pure sky blew fresh upon her forehead, and seemed to speak of the green fields and budding flowers it had left behind.

Who has not felt, when the opening year is returning to its activity, and when sober autumn, and hoary winter, have given place to their young sister spring, who hastens to sow her seeds, and send forth the buds which are to furnish summer blossoms and fruits, and the harvest time of plenty and rejoicing—a sensation he scarce can comprehend—urging him to activity.

Who is so sluggish as never to have heard an echo in his own bosom, warning him to be up and doing a something, it signifies not what, if good or prudent, in preparation for coming years—to cast off the sloth which has fallen upon him, and, like the budding year, to begin life afresh.

[164]

Spring and autumn, summer and winter, flit over our heads, and as they pass to their grave, in the bosom of eternity, leave us their warning; and, though the lesson is too often unheeded, we cannot think but that it will come to all.

As Lucy sat there, the bells from a distant church began to ring, and, sometimes, bursting on her ear, at others, retiring, as if they would lead her fancy with them far, far away, added still deeper emphasis to her thoughts; but she was presently disturbed from them, by the sudden entrance of Captain Clair, who apologised for breaking in upon her solitude, by saying, that Mr. Villars had requested him to find a book there for him.

"And where is papa, then?" said Lucy; "I have been waiting here so long for him."

[165]

"He has been walking up and down Pulteney Street with me," said Clair; "and we were talking of something which he wishes to find in this book."

Though he laid his hand upon the volume, with little difficulty, he still lingered. But Lucy said nothing to tempt him to remain.

"Why do you always so carefully avoid me?" he said, at length.

"Because you are like an evil conscience, always bringing up hard things."

"Is there not a way of soothing the remembrance of the past, without banishing it, by repenting, rather than forgetting? and that remedy, I think, you have already tried. We have both erred—let us forgive."

"I have repented," said Lucy; "and I do forgive you; do not think there are any petty jealousies between us. Yet, I must confess, I am not quite pleased with you."

[166]

"Why?"

"Because you courted Mabel in prosperity, and forsake her now, when she needs friends, if ever she did. I am so unhappy when I think of losing her."

"I see you have altogether mistaken me," said he, quickly; "your cousin would not accept me, were I again to offer myself. I have such good reasons, indeed, for believing so, that I have felt it my duty to banish every feeling approaching to love, when I think of her. Do me the justice to believe, that, foreseeing such a time as this, as I did when I first proposed to her, it is very unlikely I should draw back now?"

"Yes, it is, indeed," said Lucy; "but I wish it had not been so—I should be so happy if she were not obliged to go away so far, and to spend all her life in teaching."

[167]

"I wish, indeed," he replied, "it could be avoided; but you can do nothing, and, therefore, cannot reproach yourself. Only be as kind to her as you can, though, I know, you need no injunction about that."

"No, indeed, not now," said Lucy, with a sigh; "but do not keep that dear papa of mine waiting. He will be ruining himself at the first bookseller's, if you do not go, and take care of him."

Clair smiled, and taking up the book, hurried away; and Lucy went up-stairs, to make another useless effort to persuade Caroline to get their mother to make Mabel stay.

Shortly after she had left the room, Mabel herself entered, and, seeing it unoccupied, took up a book, to wait for her uncle's return.

She had not waited very long, before he returned alone.

Mabel advanced timidly to meet him.

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"Dear uncle," she said, "I want you to tell me that you were not offended with me yesterday."

"Offended with you, my poor child," said he, kindly; "far from it. Sad I am, indeed, about many things. I cannot bear the thought that my daughters' unkindness forces you to fly from us."

"Do not blame them, do not think of that, dear uncle, and believe only, how thankful I am that you have already shewn me so much kindness. I do not need consideration as much as I did, for I am quite resigned to all my losses now, and can go into the world and meet it with courage."

"I wish you were not going on Wednesday, either, for I have business which I must attend to that evening, and I should like to have spent it with you."

"Better as it is," said Mabel, smiling faintly, "I could not bear the thought of its being a last evening."

[169]

"No, no,—not the last by many times, I hope," said her uncle, "but I shall be up to see you into the

coach in the morning, and, perhaps, may go a stage with you. But now I want to ask you how much money you will require for the present?"

"None, I thank you," said Mabel, smiling at the coolness with which he, evidently, hoped to surprise her into taking some.

"You pain me," he said, taking out a well-filled purse. "See, I have been to the bank to replenish my store for you, you will not grieve me, I am sure."

"No, no, dear uncle," said she, putting aside his hand. "I accept your kind offer, but will not take it now. Should I lose my health, or ever be really destitute—should all my bright visions fail, and leave me one among the many who know not where to find their daily bread while every friend shrinks from them—then I will come to you for my purse, but not till then. Nay, you know not how I prize my independence, do not take from me the only bright speck I see at this moment in my future course." [170]

"Noble-hearted girl," he said, looking almost proudly on the bright and beaming face which was turned to him. "Mind, I take that promise, and I shall return this purse to a place of safety, where it shall remain untouched for you. Ah, but I wish you could be with us still, I grieve, beyond expression, over the cause of your departure."

"Oh, no, indeed, it is much better for me, very much better, if you knew all—do not think of it again; when I have got over the pain of parting from you, my kind, good uncle, I shall be very happy I have no doubt."

But her lips trembled as she made this assertion, and, feeling her courage fail, she hastily left the study to spare him the sight of her agitation. [171]

CHAPTER VIII.

 [172]

Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in his glowing hands;
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.
Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with might,
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight.

LOCKSLEY HALL.

On the day before that fixed for Mabel's going, a grand ball was to be given at the Assembly Rooms, to which Mrs. Villars and her daughters readily engaged themselves. For this party Caroline and Maria made the most elaborate preparations, for the sake of triumphing over Mabel. They perpetually interrupted her small but neat preparations for her new situation, by begging her just to do this or that little thing for them, though they would not ask her for the world if it made her melancholy. [173]

Mabel did everything she was asked to do, struggling all the while to suppress the contempt with which these petty annoyances inspired her. Still the week dragged heavily on, and she could not help rejoicing to think it was so near its close.

On the morning of the ball, Caroline requested her, half condescendingly, to dress her hair in the evening, for Mabel's taste in dress was very superior. She consented at once—and, in order that she might give her undivided attention to her, for this last time, she spent the afternoon in finishing her simple packing.

When she had nearly completed it, Lucy knocked at the door, and, when she entered, Mabel saw that she had been crying. [174]

"Would you believe it possible?" said she, scarcely able to speak for indignation, "but mamma insists that I should go to the ball to-night, spite of everything I say—I did so hope to spend this last night with you. What shall I do?"

"You had better go," replied Mabel, "if my aunt wishes it. You have promised to practise self-denial, and we must not choose amongst our trials which we will bear and which refuse."

"But how cruel it is to you!"

Mabel's lip quivered, for she perceived the hidden purpose of this command.

"I should like you to stay very, very much," said she, "but yet I must persuade you to go, yes, even for my sake, do not let it be said that I encourage you in disobedience."

"No, no, nothing shall be said against you which I can help," cried Lucy, "and I will go to the ball, if you wish it—but I should be so happy to stay with you, I shall try and get some friend to bring me home early; but let me help you, dear Mabel." [175]

"I have done, thank you, only, like all travelling trunks, this lid will not close—jump upon the top of it and press it down for me."

Lucy did so, but her light weight had very little effect on the obstinate trunk, so that they were

obliged to stand hand-in-hand upon it, and stamp it down with all their might. They could not do this without laughing, and then Mabel leant down and turned the key in the lock, and kissed her fair-haired companion, when she raised herself again, and they jumped off the defeated trunk.

But now that all was packed but the bonnet and travelling cloak, and the neatly folded umbrella, the room looked again as desolate as it did when she had first entered it; and yet so many hallowed recollections of resignation learnt, and evil thoughts subdued, were connected with that poor room, that Mabel felt that she could readily have wept at parting from it, for the last time, but checking herself, she went with Lucy down stairs, and busied herself in choosing her a dress for the ball. [176]

After dinner, she retired immediately with Caroline, and, glad of employment, was soon, almost gaily, twining the silken tresses of her raven hair, with more than her ordinary skill, and talking, all the while, of flowers, and braids, and ornaments, as if she had no other thought that night. And how could Caroline fail to be satisfied, when she cast her proud glance upon the mirror, where dark eyes spoke back the same proud smile of conscious beauty—yet, as they turned in their fever of admiration, from their own reflection, to that of Mabel, an uneasy sensation of envy again fired her jealous fancy.

In the simple dress of the orphan girl—simpler even than usual, for it was the travelling dress of the following day; in the delicate color, scarcely heightened by the interest she had been taking in her toilet, there was surely nothing which could account for Caroline's uneasy look, and yet she felt herself inferior. [177]

"Come girls, come Carry," cried Mrs. Villars as she passed the dressing-room door. "Why, Carry, love, you do look brilliant to-night; just one more peep at the glass, and then come down."

Caroline drew over her shoulders an ermine tippet, with considerable attention to the becoming, and, having adjusted it in graceful carelessness—followed, with her sisters and Mabel, to the drawing-room. Colonel Hargrave was standing by the fire, fitting on a pair of white gloves, looking remarkably handsome and *distingué*, and certainly well deserving the approbation of the proud beauty.

"You look positively killing," said Caroline, who had no eyes for any but him, "you must dance first, as usual, with me, remember." [178]

"With much pleasure," said he, bowing, and at the same time offering his arm.

Mabel looked at them, for a moment; truly they were a handsome couple as they stood side by side, prepared to leave the room.

Hargrave's eyes met hers with that look of almost infantine joyousness, which Clair had described as peculiar to him. From that time Mabel felt as under the influence of a shadowy dream. She turned aside to put on Selina's shawl.

Selina needed every body's assistance, she never did any thing by herself.

It was time to go.

"Well, my dears," said Mrs. Villars, "we had better wish Mabel good-bye, to-night, as I fear we shall not be up in the morning. I have given orders that your breakfast shall be all comfortable," she added, half turning to her niece, but avoiding her eye, "good night, my dear, a pleasant journey." [179]

"Good bye, aunt," said Mabel, seriously. How she pitied her shuffling confusion!

"Good-bye, dear," said Caroline, with an assumption of kindness which she could well afford, as she leant on the arm of the handsome Hargrave, "you will write and tell us how you are going on."

She did not answer; she felt her heart swelling, and she wished them gone.

Selina gave her a pretty, insipid kiss, and Maria bade her good-bye, hoping she would soon learn to keep the brats in order. But Lucy lingered, to fling her arms round her, and promised to be up so early in the morning; and when she tore herself away, and ran down stairs, they were all gone. Hargrave had gone without a word. The slight bustle of retreating steps followed the closing of the hall-door, and she was left to spend her last evening alone.

It is very sad to be alone—quite alone, in every earthly sense; yet, she tried hard to reconcile herself to the coldness and unkindness of those who, while they enjoyed their charming party, had left her without one soothing word, to encounter what, to the most resigned, must still be a trial—the entering, for the first time, upon a strange home. Mabel thought of Mr. Morley's rallying words; but the heart will not always be heroic, and she seated herself at the table, with little inclination for any employment; yet, trying hard not to think all the while. [180]

At length, after she had sat there—she knew not how long, but it seemed an age—the door stealthily opened, and the cook, who seldom, on ordinary occasions, emerged from the kitchen, forced half her body into the room through the opening, which was as small as possible; sufficient to admit her head and shoulders, and no more.

"Please, Miss," said she, "you'll excuse my bringing in your tea, for the rest are gone to a dance, and there is nobody in the house but me. Miss Maria begged Missis to let them go to-night." [181]

Mabel instantly assented, and she presently appeared, shyly, bringing in the tea-tray, on which she had placed a tiny tea-pot, which she said her master always used when he breakfasted alone, and she said that the great one looked unhandy for one.

"Thank you, cook," said Mabel, on whom an attention was never bestowed in vain; "that looks nice and comfortable."

"I am sorry you are going, Miss," said she, stopping to look at her, "for I like to see a kindly face about the house; but, I beg your pardon, Miss, here's the toast nice and hot, and the tea has been made some time."

Saying this, she retreated, leaving her to wonder how the influence of a kindly face could penetrate to the kitchen. The few kind words of the servant, however, had not been offered without effect. [182]

Presently, cook again appeared, and peering in as before, with a face full of mystery, said—

"If you please, Miss, Colonel Hargrave is come in, and wants to know if you will give him a cup of tea."

"Certainly," replied Mabel, in surprise.

"I told him you would," said the cook, handing in a cup and saucer, which she had providently provided, and then departing again.

In a few more seconds, Hargrave himself entered the room.

"What!" said Mabel, "are you so soon tired?"

"Yes," he replied, "and do you not think I have done my duty?—for I danced once with Caroline, and took the trouble of seeing them all provided with partners, two or three deep, before I stole away."

"Here is tea and toast then," said Mabel, trying hard to speak cheerfully; but, to be at ease, was out of the question, with Hargrave seated directly opposite to her, and looking at her, as she felt, only more steadily, because she had not courage to raise her eyes. She played with her spoon, as if it were a curious piece of mechanism, which possessed some secret spring, which careful handling might discover, and then, seeming to fail in this, she traced, in imagination, the flowers on the table-cloth, with so much attention to the subject, that she quite started when he spoke again, and the voice was so like that of years gone by, that it seemed to come from the grave of old recollections. [183]

"Does not this remind you," he said, "of a time, long ago, when we used to have tea in your shady arbour, on the old table I made for you; when that dear child was on my knee, and there was the dish of strawberries, on which you so prided yourself, and the little tea-pot, which Betsy used to keep so bright?" [184]

Mabel turned away her head.

"Yes—that was a sunny time—I see you have not forgotten it, nor our long walks, when I carried Amy over the wet fields, with you by my side, caring very little for all the stiles, and broken hedges, and deep ditches, which only made the walk more pleasant and exciting; and then, as we went, how we talked of noble deeds, and seemed, in our fancy, to emulate them—how many bright visions came with the merry carol of the birds, the glad sunshine above us, and the innocent flowers at our feet, and with the echo of our own wild gaiety, as the hills sent it back upon our ears. But do you remember that sparkling trout-stream, where, as I fished, we sat for hours, without speaking a word, thinking of—I know not what; but quite enough to make us still and happy. Oh, Mabel, Mabel, will you refuse to recall those happy scenes again. Will you not say the word which would send me back, almost a boy, to my native hills again?" [185]

For an instant a bright, sunny light, illumined her countenance, but in that same instant it had passed, leaving nothing but darkness and sadness behind, and her lip quivered with agitation, when she rose and tried to answer him, but her voice failed her many times before she could say, in trembling accents—

"You have placed a gulf between us, and you know I dare not pass it."

Hargrave rose also, and staying her in her purpose of leaving him, he took both her hands, holding her from him, that she might see all the intense affection, which glowed in every line of his manly face.

"Only tell me you love me still," he said, in a low, thrilling voice.

"Oh! Henry, let me go," she cried, looking timidly at him; "this night of all others. Oh! let me go." [186]

"What!" he said, loosening her hands; "am I not worthy to speak to you? But I have deserved all this—richly deserved it; the guard I have placed upon my feelings must have seemed an insult."

"No, no, Henry; oh! do not be angry," she said, entreatingly.

"At least hear me then," said Hargrave, advancing one step to meet her, while his face grew pale as he spoke. "I am no longer that daring infidel you believe me, but a sinner condemned by the very creed I profess; little as I deserve it, will you take me back—back to that very innermost heart, in which I was once enshrined?"

Was there any doubt to be implied in the cry of joy, with which Mabel sunk upon his breast. He looked down upon her with love and pride—such love, breathing in every changing expression of his features; but they were silent, there were no words that could have spoken all the happiness of that one moment. Time seemed to have gone back, and placed them as they were six years before, in all the fond and trusting confidence, which, till then, had received no check. [187]

But now a loud knocking and ringing announced the return of the gay party, much sooner than

had been expected, indeed, for they had missed Hargrave, and, without him, and the certainty of knowing where he was, the ball was nothing.

Their feet were on the stairs.

"Mabel," he said, almost breathlessly, as he released her waist, and drew her hand within his arm, "there is no mistake between us—you will be my wife—say you will?"

He bent his head to catch the murmured reply, and, at the same moment, the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Villars and her daughters stood aghast at the spectacle that presented itself. [188]

How beautiful Mabel looked, clinging to his arm, blushing, and trembling, and shrinking from the astonished gaze of her aunt and cousins. But for one moment only, and then, flitting past them, she was gone.

"Sir!" said Mrs. Villars, drawing herself up and advancing to the attack, "your conduct surprises me."

"Stay, madam," said Hargrave, with manly honesty, "I owe you an explanation for my strange inconsistency, and I am ready to give it at once. Mabel Lesly and I were lovers from children, till we parted six years ago; she then refused to be my wife, because she disapproved of my ideas on religion, and, with much violence on my side, we parted. The obstacle is now removed, and she will be mine. Why I delayed the explanation till this night, and why I waited to see her tried to the very last, is a matter of which my feelings must alone judge." [189]

"Whatever your feelings may be, you certainly have no right to trifle with those of my daughter."

"I trifle with your daughter's feelings!" said Hargrave, as his dark eye flashed fire, and made her almost quail before it. "There is not one word, or look, or action of mine that will bear such an interpretation. I should despise myself had I been guilty of such meanness. I might as well be accused of paying attention to all four of your daughters; I am grieved that you should think me worthy of such an accusation. I hear Mr. Villars, let me ask him—let me clear myself at once."

"No, no," said Mrs. Villars, in alarm, throwing herself before him, "say nothing to him, and I will not say another word about it."

"But, if I have done so, it is fit that her father should know it, and redress her injuries. Let me call him." [190]

He attempted to pass her, but she held him back, and burst into tears.

"Not for worlds," she said; "he will never forget it."

"Then you retract what you said," he replied, sternly.

"Yes, yes, I do," she cried.

And Hargrave walked back to where he had before been standing, and instantly recovered his good humour. Mrs. Villars soon followed her daughters, who had retreated, from different reasons, before; while he, late as it was, went down to the study, where he found Mr. Villars, and fully acquainted him with the facts and feelings which had led to this unlooked-for change in Mabel's life—over which he most heartily rejoiced.

Meanwhile, burning with ungovernable passion, Caroline pursued Mabel to the garret chamber, and, after insisting on her opening the door, attacked her with such rapid accusations of cunning, meanness, and duplicity, and in language so loud and inflamed, that Mabel felt powerless to answer her. It seemed as if all the malice of the last few months had been concentrated in that moment, when she stood at her open door, loading her with invectives, almost as inappropriate as they were undeserved. Where she would have stopped the mad passion which overcame her, it is difficult to say, but the stealthy opening of the doors of the servants' rooms, which were close by, and the suppressed tittering and whispering which issued from them, recalled her to something like a sense of what she was doing, and, pulling the door to with violence, that sent an echo down all the long stair case, she descended, to revenge herself further on her mother. But Mrs. Villars had taken the precaution of entrenching herself behind a carefully fastened door, and though she could not shut her ears to the distant rumbling of the storm, she escaped its first fury. [191]

Poor Mabel, spite of all her happiness, cried herself to sleep, that night. [192]

CHAPTER IX.

 [193]

Yet must my soul unveiled to thee be
shown,
And all its dreams and all its passions
known,
Thou shalt not be deceived, for pure as
Heaven,
Is thy young love in faith and fervour
given.

What a breakfast they had next morning! Mabel agitated; Lucy frightened and silent; and the rest tired and wofully cross.

If Caroline had looked most beautiful the night before, she was now quite the reverse. Some indeed say, that there were lines made by passion on her face, which never quite wore away again, but grew deeper as she grew older. However this may be, there she sat that morning, looking, every minute, ready to break out afresh with some bitter remark, should occasion offer; particularly, as, under the impression of happy circumstances, Mabel's countenance seemed to grow more and more beautiful.

[194]

Colonel Hargrave, the servant told them, had taken his breakfast with Mr. Villars, and had since gone out.

This was a momentary relief to Caroline, it seemed like coldness or inconstancy; and whenever she saw Mabel's eyes turn anxiously to the door, she caught the glance, and returned it with one of malicious exultation. At length, however, he came in, looking so happy, that all her short-lived triumph was over.

Gently, and unobtrusively pressing Mabel's hand, and bidding the others good morning, with cheerfulness which was not responded to—he told her, that he had been to place a letter, written by her uncle, in the hands of the Weymouth coachman, for Mrs. Noble, and that he had received many promises of its safe delivery.

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Mabel thanked him, and waited anxiously for even a ceremonious invitation from her aunt to remain with them, but none came, and no one spoke. Lucy, vexed and ashamed, stole away, and her sisters remained, in perfect silence, secretly determined to put the lovers out of countenance. Mabel could scarcely believe how very happy and how very uncomfortable she felt at that moment.

"I came in partly to ask you to take a short stroll with me, Mabel," said Hargrave, turning to his betrothed, and looking, in truth, rather impatient to be gone.

She got up instantly, and went to put on her bonnet, while the mother and sisters remained in the same dead silence, till her return, seeming determined to keep aloof from all their proceedings.

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But they were quickly gone, and passing by the busy streets, were soon on their way to the country—where they seemed to breathe freely, and insensibly slackened their pace. How gloriously the sun shone that day, over the green hills and valleys—and what sweet odours did the earth yield back as willing incense. They felt, and enjoyed every thing, even while they seemed to have no thought for any thing but each other.

"I tremble to feel so happy," said Hargrave, at length, speaking almost for the first time, as they lingered by a low stile which interrupted their walk, and turned to gaze around them; "knowing myself to be so unworthy—but I am, really, very, very happy; and at this moment, when I have regained all that impenitence had lost, I feel, indeed, forgiven. I have a hundred things to say, and yet, while we are alone, it seems happiness enough to be silent."

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"It has all come so rapidly," said Mabel, "that I feel in some fairy dream. Do tell me how, and why,"—she hesitated.

"How, and why, we are standing here as we are," he replied, with a smile; "but, tell me first, do you not feel as you used, when we wandered on the hills, at Aston. I scarcely think six years have passed as they have done."

"Come, talk seriously, dear Henry," said Mabel, "or my heart will break for very happiness; tell me what has worked this blessed change."

"It is a long and painful story, love," returned Hargrave, "but I will tell it now, and then we shall quite understand each other. Do you remember that dark day on which we parted; when, with all the pride which made my spirit so cruel, I cast you from me, and saw you fall against your mother's knee, as if a look of mine might crush, but could not turn you, because you would not follow my free spirit in the unfettered liberty it had made for itself?"

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"They tell me, that, after that day, sickness laid you low, but only strengthened the principles for which you had martyred your affections. They tell me, that, in watching her child, your mother grew ill, and that you rose from sickness to be her nurse, and that you managed her affairs, and once more became the light of that loved home; they tell me poverty came, year by year, and that the little which had been saved became the prey, of a rapacious woman. That then came sickness, and trial, and death, in all its gloom—your home destroyed, nothing left but blackened ruins to remind you of the past. I know that you have since been subject to a thousand little vexations, and annoyances; a cold welcome, and a zealous watch. Now, tell me, have you never repented the hour which parted us?"

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Mabel looked up timidly.

"Nay, never fear me; I can bear the truth, now."

"No, Henry; you know I have never repented."

"Ah, well I do," he said; "there could not have been such an angel calm round your whole being, had there been an unsettled principle within."

"Now, listen; when I turned my back upon Aston, as I believed, for ever, in my mad fury, I might have kept my purpose, had you turned upon me, in your beauty, and spurned me as I had spurned you; but that deep, beseeching look, that prostrate form clinging to the earth in its

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wretchedness, but, without a frown or reproach for me—I carried it away—that last glance of yours; it haunted me, and would not let me go, though I turned upon it in fury, and would have beaten it madly back.

"I need not tell you with what haste I exchanged my place in the English army, to one in a regiment starting for India; or, how I fought upon its burning plains, amongst the brave and the victorious. Even then, that last look pursued me. I studied with the learned, in Eastern lore. I was praised for my knowledge. Learning and enterprise were my pursuits—my society, the bold, and free-thinking; and my mind and imagination unfettered. But, what the world calls vice, that I knew not—there was something in the long forgotten, but not unfelt, impressions of childhood, and a mother's purity and love, that kept me back from that—and, while my charity was profuse, and my hand dealt bountifully to mankind, I proudly turned upon the professors of religion, and, as I held their weak points up to scandal, I bade them acknowledge the superiority of my moral code."

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"Oh, Henry, say no more," cried Mabel.

"Do not shrink from me, because my confession is unreserved, but hear it to the very end. All this time, I forgot that pride and malice were in my heart, though I did sometimes feel what I have since seen expressed by Luther: 'An evil conscience is like a tormenting spirit, it is alarmed in the midst of outward prosperity.'

"So I continued till about a year since, when, one evening, I was at supper with a large party of friends, whose views corresponded with my own. With them there were some strangers, and amongst them, a strange old man, who regarded me attentively. I remember speaking more freely than I used, that night; and, conscious that I had done so, I left the party earlier than I had intended, partly because I was anxious to escape from the eyes of that strange man.

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"The evening was delightful, and, instead of returning to my tent, I took a stroll in the moonlight. Much to my annoyance, I soon perceived that I was followed by the very man it had been my whim to avoid. Turning round, to confront him, our eyes met again, and I stood transfixed by the strange expression of his face.

"'I have heard,' he said, after looking at me for a while, 'hundreds of miles south, of your charity, and your munificence. I came to see their author, and am disappointed.'

"'Since you have done me so much honor, may I ask whom I address, sir?' I said, with overstrained politeness.

"'Your mother's brother, Mr. Morley,' he replied, 'who hoped never to have seen one, in whose veins ran kindred blood, defile his intellect, as you have done.'

"This strange introduction only led to a long and heated argument on religious subjects, in which my unexpected casuistry so far baffled him, as to leave him without an answer; and I parted from him in triumph.

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"The next day, he found me again, and told me that he had sat up the whole night, till he had prepared himself with the answer he could not, at first, command. If he had thought to convince me in my perverseness, he was mistaken—for obstinacy has an answer for everything; but there is something in genuine enthusiasm, and self-denying energy, which always claims respect, and though I argued as obstinately, it was more respectfully than before. He came to me again and again, and the same topic began or ended every conversation, and left me as hardened as ever. Ah, Mabel, it is a sad confession for such ears as yours; but I never have deceived you yet, and I never will."

Mabel's bright eyes were dimmed by tears; but her hand rested confidently in his, as he continued—

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"One evening I was sitting alone by the light of the moon; my thoughts had travelled, unchecked and unbidden, to England, and as I thought, I drew from my bosom, the first and only keepsake I had received from you, the small clasped Bible, in which you had written my name and your own. I had often tried to throw it away, but could not—wherever I went, it accompanied me, a silent reproach, but nothing more. That night, I opened it, and read; before I was aware, my uncle, who had entered unperceived, approached me. I would have hid the precious volume, had I had time; but he saw it, and I threw it carelessly aside. He took it up, and opened it. I never shall forget the look of benignity and pleasure which lighted up his features at that moment. Are they not worn out and haggard now? but they seemed beautiful then, as he said—

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"'There is hope.'

"'No, uncle, that will not do,' I said, attempting to laugh, 'it is only a keepsake.'

"He looked at the first page, and repeated, softly—'Mabel, Mabel.' I do not think he ever forgot the name; and, from that time, it was associated with good and holy things.

"Anxious to change the subject, I prevailed on him to walk; and, as we went, I engaged him in talking over lighter topics, for I felt unable to renew our customary arguments that evening.

"As we strolled on, we came upon a group of many peasants, who were eagerly engaged in looking at something in their centre, and talking loudly all the while. Wishing to observe what had attracted them, we drew nearer, and soon perceived that they were standing round two wretched women, who, with their caps torn under their feet, and their hair streaming about their faces, were fighting, with the fury of demons, using, at the same time, the most fearful imprecations, while the mob cheered and irritated them by turns. I was leaving the spot in

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disgust, when my uncle, passing his arm through mine, prevented my doing so. Though I had passed through many horrible scenes, I felt sick when I looked on this.

"At length, one of the women, with a horrible shriek of triumph, held up, to the crowd, a handful of hair, which she had torn from her adversary's head; but, as she turned slightly to do so, the other took the opportunity of tripping her up, and they both rolled on the ground, struggling together, and the crowd closed round them. I turned a sick look on my uncle, who, far less moved than myself, exclaimed, in an emphatic voice—

"Who would spend an eternity with such companions?"

"The boldest arguments he had used never made so strong an impression upon me as did these words. I broke from him, and pursued my walk alone. I, who had turned with disgust from every moral deformity—I, to whom refinement was as the breath of life, to be classed with such wretches as these.

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"The words fastened upon me; they seemed burning their impression on my very brain. That night I spent upon the floor of my apartment; conscience was awakened, and it was beyond my power to lay it to sleep again. For the first time, I felt the full consciousness of sin, and how terrible was the load; my spirit was weighed down, and the arguments which had upset the weak or wavering, and scoffed at the strong, failed utterly before that power of conscience. In the morning, my uncle found me in strong delirium, for the strength of my body, robust as it was, had fallen before the terror of that one wretched night. I wildly reproached him, and begged him to leave me to the curse which he had brought upon me; but what could turn such a man from his purpose? He who employed his time in persevering efforts for the happiness of thousands, now devoted himself entirely to me. After weeks of illness, I rose from my bed pale, emaciated, and wretched, but humbled to the dust. My first effort, however, was to seek my former friends, and to urge my own doubts upon them, but, those I had had the power to lead into error, laughed at my pain, and mocked at my scruples. I had lost caste with them, and retired from their society loaded with the most bitter ridicule.

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"In this miserable time came a thirst for England, my health required it, I retired from the army, and returned home. Did it not seem like a judgment upon me, that I reached my own village, but to find it in flames? No one can tell what a store of repentance I laid up that night: at the story of old Giles, which you may have heard from his own lips;—the rebuke which everywhere raised itself against me;—the wretchedness which on all sides appeared to upset my ostentatious moral well-doing; and the death of that poor child in her simple faith. Was not this a fit welcome for the returning infidel?"

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Mabel placed her hand upon her forehead; for there was terror in the remembrance of that awful night. And, then when he spoke again, the thought seemed to have passed from him, and his voice was low, and thrillingly gentle.

"I dared not seek you then; I dared not bring to you uncertain repentance; and that it was not complete, I knew, because I could not even then humble myself to ask your forgiveness. But directly I came here, I found out one of my boyhood's friends, a good and simple-hearted clergyman, and with him I have spent every Sunday since I first arrived in Bath. The benefit I have received from him has been very great; and all that was left of pride or revenge in my heart, you have long since subdued by your gentleness and patience, and more than all, have I admired, the frankness which enabled you to avoid the error of foolishly seeming entirely to have forgotten me, while you preserved the most delicate reserve on all occasions. Mabel, dear, dear Mabel," he said, taking her trembling hand in both his, "you have entirely subdued me, and, cost what it may, I will not forfeit the smallest chance of regaining your confidence, for aught else the world has to offer."

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"It is yours, dear Henry, without reserve," said Mabel, raising her trusting eyes to his, "I give it back with all the unchanging love I have ever felt for you, and for no other."

As Hargrave gazed down upon her, with pride and affection, there was a moment's happy silence, and then she looked up again, more timidly, while her lip slightly trembled.

"And can you say that you have loved no other?"

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"I can indeed," he replied, while a half, well pleased smile, stole over his countenance. "In all my wanderings, no other image but yours has accompanied me, and much as I tried to banish it, it has been unrivalled."

"I do not speak of your wanderings," said Mabel, half catching the smile.

"Oh! I see, you mean your cousin. No: I honestly tell you, that I have never been led, even by the many petty plots by which I have been surrounded, to do anything which could place my conduct, with regard to her, in a doubtful light. Had I done so, I should have grieved deeply; and such a heartless act would have been a canker in my present enjoyment. I do own, that when I saw you thought so, I did not undeceive you, because I was anxious to see how you would act under an impression, which so often brings out evil, if any exists; but if you knew how much of our future happiness was at stake, you would forgive me for placing it beyond a doubt, that you were the same self-devoted, noble girl, who could refuse all that I had to offer, when her conscience called on her to do so."

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"But forgive me," persisted Mabel, "why did you stay here so long; did not that look suspicious?"

"Well," said Hargrave, as they now walked on side by side, "I think I can explain that too. You know that when you were at Aston Manor, I could not be there, and wanted some plausible

excuse for remaining away; no better offered, and every thing was done to induce me to remain in Bath; but I suppose you will not be quite satisfied till I tell you, that when, after a visit of a few days, I was pressed to remain, I agreed, only on condition that I should be allowed to pay for the extra expense, which my prolonged stay might cause; you will believe that I have done this in no grudging manner. And besides, the game and venison from Aston, and other luxuries of the kind, have been always at your Aunt's command. As I knew that I had a secret motive to serve, by remaining here, I felt that I could do no less with any satisfaction to myself. I do not think your cousins or uncle knew of this agreement, but Mrs. Villars regarded it as a whim of mine, and said if I liked to increase her pin-money, I might. Are you satisfied love?"

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"Quite," said Mabel, musingly.

"I do not think, however, that I shall remain here beyond to-day—with them, I mean—for my popularity is gone—and my temper would be sorely tried, for little purpose—so I have taken rooms at the Lion. Besides, I have another purpose to serve, by remaining there, as it is near the Abbey—and I should like to be married there."

"Yes—but—"

"Yes—but—" repeated Hargrave, smiling on his blushing companion; "tell me, is there any reason why you should not be mine at once?"

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Mabel glanced at her mourning dress, and burst into tears.

"Do you remember," he said, gently, "my asking you to let me see your little sister, that night, alone? It will be a comfort to you, to know, that, young and childlike as she was, I entrusted my secret to her, and she died in the confidence of an hour like this, when her Mabel, her dear sister, would be the honoured mistress of a happy home. Consider, dearest, how you are placed; you are not even offered a formal welcome here—and I tremble to think how much unkindness you must yet experience. As to going to other friends, no one would advise it, when, in your husband, you can find one, who can so fully sympathise in your feelings—and, I promise you, that, for the remainder of the year, we will continue quietly in the country, bent only on serving our poor tenants. The shorter time we linger here, the better—for I long to be away, and alone, sharing that confidence which I could not give even to you, so freely as I could to my wife. Do not trifle with me—say you will be mine, before this month has passed away."

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"So soon?" said Mabel.

"Nay, if you love me—why should you hesitate? I am sure you will not."

Mabel looked down—she always had been afraid to contradict him, since, when a child, she had looked up with veneration to his superior strength and height.

"You doubt me still," said Hargrave, turning aside his head, with such a look of vexation, that she was quite conquered.

Taking his hand, as she had often done in those old, childish quarrels, she looked up in his face, and whispered gentle words, which brought the smile back again.

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"And now, my love," he said, as he drew her closer to him, taking from his pocket the chain and portrait, which Caroline had so eagerly desired to examine, and placing it again upon her neck; "let me give you back your own. Little can you imagine the exquisite pleasure I experienced, when I discovered that the portrait of your undeserving lover was still so faithfully preserved. Nay, blush not, my darling—when love has been once confessed, there can be no indelicacy in cherishing it to the very death. It will be very, very hard for me to retrace what has been lost—but with my sweet wife to help me, there is nothing I will not dare; and, knowing that you are so good and truthful, and untouched by the world, as I have found you, through all these trying months, I have learnt to trust all my aching conscience to your care."

He paused to look down upon the tearful face of his betrothed—but she was too much affected to reply.

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How gloriously the sun shone on, and how blithely the birds carolled—and how pleasantly hummed the bees, in their busy search over the clover fields. That was a day to be well remembered.

"Well," said Hargrave, when they entered the town again, "we must temporise with our present difficulties. I suppose you would not like me to bribe my aunt into peace while you remain?"

"Oh, dear no—only tell her what I have not the courage to say—and leave the bribery, as you call it, to me. I have a little treasure, a great treasure it seemed once, in case of need, which I can now readily part with—I mean, the box of plate which was saved from that terrible fire. It is a coveted thing, and, therefore, will be a welcome present, that will pay for any fancied obligation; and I will send for it directly."

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"A brilliant idea, truly; but only behold, here is Miss Lovelace—for the sake of gossip she shall be at our wedding."

"What do I see," said that young lady, coming up with her ringlets and flounces, quite in a ferment, with surprise—"Miss Lesly, why I thought you were at Weymouth, by this time; well, I am quite glad to see you."

"No doubt," said Hargrave, gaily; "the street is not exactly a place for explanations—but, depend upon it, you shall be one of the first to know the reason of this change in Miss Lesly's arrangements."

Raising his hat, as he passed her, he left her in a perfect ecstasy of curiosity; but whatever her after assertions, as to the depth of her penetration might be, it is pretty certain, that she did not arrive near the truth, after all her conjectures.

"Surely," thought she, "that ill-tempered Miss Villars has actually spoken the truth, and they are to be married—and Miss Lesly remains to be a useful bridesmaid." [219]

That she was not over pleased, when she arrived at this conclusion, might be inferred from the toss which she gave her little head, ringlets and all, as she went on her way.

Meanwhile, Hargrave, having accompanied Mabel home, immediately resigned her to all the discomforts of her situation, while he went to seek an interview with Mrs. Villars.

CHAPTER X.

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Unfaithful one! from seed of
tares
No golden grain can spring:
Unhappy one! the wind, once
sown,
Shall but the whirlwind bring.

CULVER ALLEN.

Amongst all the curses pronounced against the rebellious Israelites, few, perhaps, in reality far exceeded that one—"Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in." It struck to the very heart of domestic peace, destroying that sanctuary, which, dark as the world around may be, we look to as a shelter and a solace. If the curse be there, what other blessing can reach us with any effect! [221]

Such was the punishment which the cautious, wily woman of the world had been so carefully storing up for herself—for this she had chained her own temper—for this she had submitted to many weary vexations—for this she had been lavish in indulgence, even when her tired spirit would have willingly—so she believed—have turned from the cunning and fatiguing artifices of perpetual deceit—for this she had entered "into the fields of the fatherless," to find, only too late, that "their Redeemer is indeed mighty."

The curse for which she had so strenuously laboured, had entered into her very household, and her own daughters were turned against her.

Colonel Hargrave found Mrs. Villars in tears when he went to explain his wishes, and the reasons which led him to desire an early and private marriage. [222]

"Take her when you like, and the sooner the better," exclaimed the goaded woman; "I care not when, and I only wish you could take away the ill she has brought with her."

Colonel Hargrave, who was accustomed to nothing but flattery in that house, felt a little surprise at the boldness with which the veil was now thrown aside.

"I hope," he said, at length, "that you will allow her to remain with you for the next three weeks. I wish this as a favour, because I would not have her forced to seek the protection even of old friends, at such a time—but I may as well add, that I know as well as yourself how little you have done your duty to your sister's orphan, and I make this the only condition which will force me to keep silence on the subject."

"Give me that promise and you shall not have cause to complain," said Mrs. Villars, apprehensively. [223]

"It is yours," he returned, with great self-possession, which contrasted well with her pale face, and conscience stricken manner. "It is my particular wish," he added, "that our marriage should be as simple as possible, on account of the circumstances, which attend it. Any undue display would only hurt Mabel's feelings, as her year of mourning is not ended; but alone and friendless as she is, without a home at command, I say, with no hesitation, that the only thing she can do is, to accept that one which will ever hold her as its most honored mistress. But as even a private marriage may put you to some inconvenience, you must allow me the pleasure and privilege of providing against it."

As he said this, he placed a purse upon the table, which Mrs. Villars greedily laid her hands upon, and then he left the room, wondering, almost with some amusement, at himself, for the pique he felt at the sudden withdrawal of the adulation to which he had been accustomed, even though he had always seen its hollowness. [224]

As he went down stairs to leave the house, for he had already announced his intention of removing to the White Lion, he met Lucy coming up, with such a bright blush upon her cheek, and looking so prettily agitated, that he stopped to enquire if any thing were the matter.

"Oh, I want Mabel—where is she—what have you done with her?"

"She went up stairs to take her bonnet off, and I think she will be glad of your company, to rouse her from certain little fears of a ceremony not very distant."

"Very well then, I will go to her," said Lucy, blushing yet more, and running past him. As he went on, he met Clair, coming from the study, and, as their destination was the same, they walked off arm-in-arm, talking of something which appeared entirely to engross them, till they reached the hotel, where they had dinner together.

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"Oh, Mabel," said Lucy, when she had found her sitting in her own little room, "can you find time to think with me for one minute?"

"Of course I can," said Mabel, making her sit down on the trunk beside her.

"This dear old trunk, how I shall always love it," said Lucy, "how often we have sat upon it talking together; and to think of the trouble we had to shut it up, only last night, and how miserable we were then, and how happy we are now." She hid her blushing face on Mabel's shoulder as she went on. "You know I have such a strange thing to tell you. While you were out, I went into the study to find papa to get him to walk, and there was Captain Clair, talking to him; so directly I came in, up gets papa, and, saying he has something very particular to see done before he goes out, makes me promise to wait for him, and then gives me such an affectionate kiss, and hurries off—cunning papa—and then what do you think happens."

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"I think I can guess," said Mabel, with a kiss and a smile.

"No, I am sure you cannot. Arthur told me, Captain Clair, I mean, that he had been talking to papa about me, and that he loved me now, though he once thought he could love no one but you, and indeed, dear Mabel, he spoke so kindly and affectionately that—"

"I understand you love," said Mabel, embracing her, "I thought so—I hoped so a long time since."

"You thought so," said Lucy, "impossible! I never could even have dreamt of such a thing yesterday."

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"I tell you so," replied her cousin, "because I always knew his love for me only arose from the enthusiasm of circumstances; while those same circumstances only made him disapprove of you, as much as you did of yourself. I knew he could not see you so changed without really loving you."

"And do you think I shall ever be good enough for him?"

"Only keep as you are, and he will be quite satisfied."

"And, do you know that the doctors say, that if he returns to India it will kill him; and he has been for a long time wishing to become a clergyman; and now he has quite made up his mind, and he has entered his name at the college, at Dublin, which is the easiest way he says."

"That will be very, very nice, for we shall keep you both with us," exclaimed Mabel. "I am so very, very happy."

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"And," almost whispered Lucy, "he so much wishes to be married on the same day that you and Henry are; but I hardly know whether mamma will consent."

"Oh, I dare say she will," said Mabel, "and I am glad of it for your sake."

Further conversation was interrupted by the dressing bell, and Lucy hurried away.

As Mabel had anticipated, there was little difficulty in getting Mrs. Villars's consent, when it was formally demanded by Clair, for in this piece of unexpected good fortune she hoped to find, at least a temporary respite, from the malice of her two disappointed children. In this, however, she was mistaken, for the marriage of their sister was no satisfaction to their jealous minds, and they did not fail to show their impression of their mother's injustice, on every occasion, and quite destroyed the pleasure she would have taken in providing Lucy's *trousseau*.

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Mr. Villars looked upon the marriages as peculiar pet schemes of his own, and laid aside his writings to aid Mabel and Lucy in the choice of dresses and laces, with the most perfect good-humour and enjoyment. And when Lucy spoke with regret of leaving him, and felt half inclined to delay her marriage, for his sake, he would not hear of it, declaring that he should keep up a constant correspondence with both, and whenever he felt dull, if it were possible now that he had so much to do and to think of, he should run over and see them, wherever they were, and so recruit his spirits. For the present, he was almost their constant companion, for both Hargrave and Clair had so much to do, in a little time, that they had very little leisure at their disposal. There were settlements to be drawn, and Hargrave's was a very long one, licenses to procure, and a great many things besides, which, on such an occasion, were of no small importance. Besides which they were planning a visit together to Aston.

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On the afternoon before they started, however, they accompanied Mr. Villars and his fair companions on a shopping expedition, and a pleasant afternoon they managed to spend. Hargrave, too, had his purchases to make, which he did with some pride in his own taste, of some beautiful Irish poplins, which he ordered to be directed, with his compliments, to Mrs. and the Misses Villars, together with some lace scarfs, which he thought would look very pretty at the wedding.

In due time they were delivered, and opened with much pleasure by Mrs. Villars and her daughter Selina, who seemed as tranquilly placid as ever, as if determined to find pleasure herself, whatever happened. She was just in the act of gathering the material in her fingers to see how well it would look made up, when Caroline entered.

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"What is all this?" she cried, looking round upon Hargrave's present.

"Oh, my dear," said her mother, anxiously, "these beautiful poplins are from Henry Hargrave,

who begs our acceptance of them, and hopes we will wear them at the wedding."

"And what do you mean to do with them?" enquired Caroline, looking at her fiercely.

"Why to wear them, of course, my dear; will you not do the same?"

"Not I, neither will you; I will have no such cringing ways done within my knowledge." Here she looked significantly at her mother, and then walking to the table, she began, deliberately, to refold the dresses, which they suffered her to do without interruption, hoping that she was relenting towards them. But when she had carefully folded every rumpled yard of the dresses, she placed them as carefully in their separate papers, and then tying them altogether, she wrote on the outside, and rang the bell. [232]

"What are you doing, dear Cary?" cried Selina.

"You will see," said Caroline, and at that moment, their man-servant appearing, she turned to him, and said—"Take that parcel to Colonel Hargrave, at the White Lion, with mamma's compliments."

"Stop a moment, my dear, do consider," said her mother.

"Ma'am," replied her daughter, "no consideration is necessary. James, take the parcel."

And, without waiting further orders, he took it as she directed, leaving Mrs. Villars vexed and annoyed, but too timid to remonstrate.

Caroline, however, was disappointed at the satisfaction of knowing that Hargrave was annoyed, for he never even alluded to the subject. [233]

The next morning, Hargrave and Clair set off, early, on their journey to Aston. The day was bright as a May morning could be desired to be, and the country, through which they drove, full of lovely home scenery. They had hired a phaeton, and took their own pace across the country—Hargrave driving, and delighting his companion with one of his very best humours, now sparkling with wit, or laughing in the merriment of his heart, and then suddenly changing his tone to one of deeper earnestness, as they spoke of the future or the past.

It was not till the close of the evening, that they espied the well-known landmarks of the little village—the simple spire of the rustic church, and the many windowed halls of Aston Manor.

As they entered the village, Hargrave suffered his horse to bring his tired trot to a walk, while they both eagerly looked around. Hargrave tried to fancy what his bride would feel, on the first sight of a place so loved, and so changed—and he thought, perhaps, she would have liked the old place better after all. [234]

"Still there is nothing sickly in Mabel's mind," he said to himself, as he looked round, and considered how very greatly it was improved in reality. Here, were well drained roads, raised pathways, and neatly built houses, which might have proved models for many an English gentleman's estate, well lighted, well ventilated, as they were, and slightly ornamented besides, with the simple porch, and the little gardens which surrounded them. It made his heart beat high with that quick sensation of pleasure, which is almost pain. And there, too, on the site of Mrs. Lesly's cottage, rose one, smaller indeed, but still sufficiently like to recall it, and as then, the lawn in front sloped down to the road—and all beside, even to the simple gateway, seemed like the time gone-by. And, for the first time that long day, Clair looked sad, for he remembered when he had first looked upon it—and he thought of the graceful child, in her almost infantine beauty, as she sat and twined, with so much care, her fading wreath of the wild lily. [235]

Little did he then think, that her dying wreath—dying even as she twined it—might so soon be regarded as her own fit emblem.

But they have ascended the hill, and though it is May, and the day has been warm, there is a brisk column of smoke curling up from the parlour chimney of the dear old rectory. They got down at the Hargrave Arms, and leaving their phaeton, just as they are recognised by the landlord, stroll on together.

It looked so like home, that old garden, as they entered it, they could almost fancy they heard the good rector's step in the well-known walks, and by the neat bee-hives; but no, the shutters were closed, and through their creeks issued a small stream of bright light, just giving a sly hint of the comfort they left in the snug parlour within. [236]

To raise the window of the glass-door, and to spring into the passage, was but the work of one moment, and in the next, they were in the snug parlour itself, and shaking hands with Mr. Ware and his sister with a heartiness which nothing could exceed. And how the good man's face glowed when he welcomed his dear old pupil back, and, in the warmth of that one greeting, assured himself that he was "just as he used to be when he was a boy." And how, not altogether, or even one at a time, scarcely in any connection either, and certainly not as long stories are sometimes told, they made him understand why they had come, and all the changes which had taken place—and best of all, that Mabel was coming back to be mistress of Aston Manor, and Lucy—happy hearted Lucy—was to be Clair's wife, would all take too long to tell. But that they were a thoroughly comfortable and happy party, that night, there is no doubt. Then, as it grew later, Mr. Clifford, the young architect, returned from a long day, spent with some friends, and Hargrave was delighted to see him. [237]

"Your work has been done almost with the rapidity of magic," he said, speaking kindly to him, for it had been his first essay. "I was quite pleased with what I saw as we lingered through the village."

Mr. Clifford looked much gratified by his approval.

"I am come down," Hargrave continued, "partly for the purpose of letting these cottages to those most deserving, and most honest; and you, my dear sir, must assist me," he said, turning to Mr. Ware; "my bailiff has already given notice, that they should all assemble in the large room, at the new inn, to-morrow, and you must come with me to see that I do justice."

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"Most willingly, my dear Hargrave," replied Mr. Ware, whose countenance looked one continued beam of delight.

"And the next morning," continued Hargrave, "we are going to run away with you, as we cannot think of being married by any one but you."

Mr. Ware looked still more pleased, as he, at first, modestly declined, but very easily suffered himself to be persuaded to take the office assigned him.

"Now then, I have another plan to propose," pursued Hargrave. "You all know the little hamlet of Cheswell, over the hill—and how, of late years, it has increased to look more like a village of itself—and you may, perhaps, know how valuable the stone quarries have become to this estate. Well, I am thinking of erecting there, a small church, together with a snug house for a clergyman, and school house for the neglected children of that neighbourhood; partly from the knowledge of the great utility of such a measure, and partly because I wish to give some public testimony of my respect for the ordinances I once abused."

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He colored deeply, as he made this confession, and then continued, more rapidly—

"I intend to endow this church property—and if, by the time it is finished, Clair is in orders, I shall present him with it. Why not, my dear sir, let him remain with you, till that time. I am sure," he added, with a bow to Miss Ware, "my cousin Lucy cannot learn to keep house, at once with cheerfulness and economy, better anywhere than here."

"Delightful," exclaimed Mr. Ware. "Arthur, my dear fellow, I have long known your intention of leaving the army; and may venture to say that your plans have not been settled with lightness and inconsideration. Will you come and live with us, for the present? Lucy can be with your aunt, whenever you may be forced to be long absent—you need not doubt that she shall be as welcome as you are."

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"Should Lucy consent, I will gladly accept your offer, dear uncle," returned Clair; "but help me to thank Hargrave for this unexpected, unlooked-for kindness."

"No, no," said Hargrave, rising, and looking really embarrassed—"oblige me, by not saying a word. Come with me—I am going to carry you with me to the Manor. I shall sleep there to-night, for the first time, for more than six years—come and help me to do the polite to my faithful housekeeper."

"Ah, Colonel Hargrave," said Miss Ware, as she pressed his hand with reverence, for, with all his faults, she never forgot that she owed to him the happy home they had enjoyed, for so many years, "you will be welcome there, indeed, for you are come back to make us all happy."

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Hargrave looked still more embarrassed, tried to say something, and failed—so seizing Clair by the arm, he hurried him off, without waiting for another word.

The first sound which greeted his ear, on the following morning, was a merry peal from the old church. He started up, and almost glad to find that Clair was still sleeping, he went, alone, to every part of the house, so well known, and so well remembered. Once again he felt master of his own—and the spell which had sent him forth a wilful wanderer was broken for ever.

With what pleasure he loitered from room to room, and then out to the green-houses and gardens; and, sometimes, he almost started, as some once familiar object distinctly recalled to mind the days of his boyhood. And then he would pause, to fancy how beautiful and how happy all would be, in the sunshine of his Mabel's presence.

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But now Clair came to seek him, and they returned to a hearty breakfast, and then hurried off to the rectory, to fetch Mr. Ware and young Clifford to come with them to the inn, where already many an anxious peasant awaited them.

And when they did reach it, it was no light task to answer all claims, and equally to distribute favors, to the many who sought them.

Clair's head began to ache, many times, from the heated air of the large but well-filled room, and he, many times, strolled back to the rectory, to refresh himself.

Mr. Ware went back to his regular lunch, and dinner—and even Clifford found many opportunities of absenting himself; but still Hargrave sat on, apparently unwearied, as one after another sought his hearing, and laid claim to this or that disputed tenement. And his patience was well rewarded, by the satisfaction which he had afforded—for, towards the close of day, when the last claimant had been satisfied, the room was still thronged by those who were anxious to thank him for the attention he had shewn.

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"Before I bid you good night," said Hargrave, rising as he spoke—and, as he did so, the fading rays of the evening sun played carelessly with his dark hair, and shed a light upon his face; "I have one question to ask you. Is there one among you, who will disapprove of my leniency in continuing this man," here he laid his hand upon the shoulder of his bailiff, who, with eyes fixed upon the ground, stood next him, and had been near him all day, "as my steward. If, since the night of the fire, he has done one wanton, or careless act—if he has neglected my interests by

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injuring you—speak, and he does not continue a day longer in his office; but, if not, I am not the man to close the gates of mercy against the repentant; and I say, that he shall have full opportunity of atoning for the past. If he has done wrong, in any one single instance, speak—if not, hold up your hands."

Every hand was raised, and the timid, but grateful expression, with which Rogers ventured to raise his eyes for the first time, seemed to say that the testimony thus given him was deserved.

"Very well," said Hargrave; "then he is my steward still, and long may he do his duty—but, my friends, remember, that I shall now be almost constantly with you, and I invite you all to dine on my grounds—on my wedding day, for I shall soon give Aston a mistress, who is already known, and loved, here. Mr. Clifford, who has already done so much for your comfort, will be kind enough to superintend your gaiety, and join you, I hope, in drinking my health. The only thing left me to ask, is your confidence, and your love, my good people, for I am come back to make a home among you."

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The buzz of approbation which echoed through the long room, and even into the court-yard, beyond, might have satisfied him—but when, with a smile, he drew from his pocket a wig of shaggy hair, of the reddest hue, together with the slouched hat of a traveller, and placed them upon his head, they exclaimed, as with one voice, "The stranger!" and almost rent the place with their acclamations, pressing, at the same time, so closely round him, that he was glad to escape by a side door, from their eager protestations—and, as he paced rapidly up the path, through the fields, to the manor, he could still hear, in the distance, the untired hum of many voices, talking in surprise over the little romance of which he had been the hero.

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There were many happy hearts in Aston that night, but none happier than that of its repentant master.

CHAPTER XI.

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O breathe those vows all
hopefully,
A blessing from above
Is resting on the sacred bond
Of hallowed human love.

CULVER ALLEN.

"As soon as you have prepared your drawings for the new church, we shall be glad to see them," said Hargrave, to young Clifford, as he took up the reins, and drove off from the rectory with Mr. Ware, and his nephew. There was such a magic in that simple pronoun, 'we,' that he could not forget it long after it had passed his lips, leaving the young architect to indulge a long day dream on his kindness, which was to end in the happiness of one other patient young being, long plighted to his uncertain fortunes. Hargrave had, indeed, been determined to be lavish of the blessings which he had, himself, so bounteously received, and already reaped the fruits of well-doing in the pleasure it gave him.

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Before evening they reached Bath, where the good rector was received with unaffected delight by Mabel, and with much timid apprehension by his nephew's intended bride, who was, however, soon reassured by the kindness of his manner.

In the midst of all this busy happiness, Caroline and Maria continued to make themselves often remembered, and poor Mabel had to endure very much at their hands, and to experience so many complicated annoyances, that she looked to her marriage as to a haven of rest. She had received from Mr. Ware the box of plate, of which he had the charge, and presented it to her aunt, and, so far, had discharged all duty to her: but, though she had been cruelly injured, she could not help sincerely pitying her, since so much painful dissension had sprung up between her and her daughters; at the same time, that she must deeply feel the disappointment of all her schemes.

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But time hurried on till the first of June, which had been fixed for the double marriages, and on that morning the bells of the venerable Abbey startled the passers by with such a merry peal, as left little doubt of their import. It really would be difficult to calculate the exact quantity of Macassar oil and scents, which were expended in the two hours which Miss Lovelace spent at her toilet, on the occasion; but, certainly, her ringlets were in the very best order, when she arrived in Sydney Place, and the pink silk dress which had been presented to her, with its numberless tiny flounces, from her very waist to the ground, became her exceedingly. Unfortunately, the party was, she found, very deficient in beaux—but, as scandal was to her, almost as rich a source of amusement as flirtation; she contented herself by keeping her eyes open, and noting down facts in her memory with wonderful precision; subject, indeed, to a coloring of her own, with which she always heightened events in narration much in the same way as that in which the lights and shadows of a highly finished picture often far exceed those of reality.

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She proved herself, indeed, a most useful bridesmaid, for Selina, who alone would consent to appear at church, required quite as much attendance as the brides, and, in this way, she learnt a great many secrets that morning, which were afterwards circulated no one could imagine how. In

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her readiness to do any thing for "dear Miss Lesly," she found out that she had all this time been sleeping in the servants' attic, and in a room not even so well furnished as theirs; and she drew a strong contrast between its humble appearance, and the beautiful pearl bracelet which she fastened round her wrist—bearing testimony, in her own mind, to the rare beauty which, on the morrow, she piqued half her friends, by describing in the most glowing colors—because she alone had been present to see how lovely Mabel had looked in her simple bridal attire, standing in all the modest dignity of her nature, in that small, mean, garret chamber.

Then, as she stepped into the carriage, which was to take her to church, attended by the eccentric Mr. Morley, she noted, from the window, the exact degree of emotion shewn by the two brides as they left the house, Lucy being supported by Mr. Villars—nor were the liveries and horses, belonging to the fashionable equipage which lingered near the church door, forgotten, or the more modest looking one, which stood near it, and had been hired by Clare, for the occasion. Lightly did she trip up the aisle, and take her place, casting a pretty glance round her, which told her, at once, that a venerable man, with hair of silvery whiteness waited for them, by the altar, and that Hargrave and Clair, with their own chosen friends, were standing by, looking very handsome, indeed, but much more serious than she thought necessary; still, it became them very well, and made them look more interesting—she did not take time to consider the touching solemnity of the ceremony she was come to assist in, or to read in Hargrave's earnest manner the steadfast resolutions, which were never broken, of loving, and protecting, and confiding in that fair being, whose light step soon trod the silent aisle, and brought her, in all her trusting affection, to his side—in all the purity of untainted womanhood, to plight her single-hearted faith to him, and, without a doubt, to place the happiness of a life-time in his keeping.

How peacefully upon his wearied heart fell the blessing which was pronounced with trembling lips, and how proudly he led her away when all was over, and whispered—

"Nothing can part us now, love."

And how happy Arthur Clare looked as he led the blushing Lucy to the carriage, trembling as she was, so much, that he was almost obliged to lift her in. But Miss Lovelace's powers of observation were still further called into action, when she reached Sydney Place again; she could scarcely believe her own eyes, indeed, as she afterwards affirmed, when she met Caroline and Maria, for the first time, and found them wearing old silk dresses, rather more faded than those they usually wore of a morning. The pink silk flounces, and the glossy and well arranged ringlets suffered a simultaneous shock—nor could she resist, slightly raising her eyes as they encountered those of Hargrave, who, she instantly noticed, remarked the intended slight.

She saw, too, that Caroline did not even make a shew of congratulation; indeed, so many other instances could be observed of the intentional neglect of the refinements of a marriage festival, even of the simplest kind, that she did not wonder that Hargrave seemed impatient to be gone, and that, when he had secured the hand of his fair bride he should hurry her into the carriage and seat himself beside her, with a look of indescribable relief, as they drove rapidly away—leaving Lucy and her husband to a more prolonged leave taking.

Miss Lovelace, finding that with the departure of the wedding party, her services were deemed concluded, only remained to take a peep at the disappointed family circle before she departed.

She was not slow in divining the state of things amongst them, and Mrs. Villars's altered looks betrayed much of the annoyances she suffered. Indeed, as she afterwards remarked, in giving an account of the wedding, poor Mrs. Villars aged very fast, and as for Caroline and Maria, she had never seen girls expose themselves as they had done; she was sure, indeed, after the way in which they had treated the lovely Mrs. Hargrave, they had lost their chance of settling, if, indeed, they ever had any. As for herself, she said that she had determined to have nothing more to do with them, for that handsome Colonel Hargrave was better than the whole family put together.

To such heartless scandal, we must leave Mrs. Villars and her daughters; but reluctantly, most reluctantly, for we feel that they were intended for something better.

CHAPTER XII.

Who would not have an eye
To see the sun, where others see a
cloud,
A frame so vernal, as in spite of snow,
To think it genial summer all year
round;
I do not know the fool, would not be
such
A man.

SHERIDAN KNOWLES.

Once again we must change the scene, and, for the last time, take a peep at the lovely village of Aston.

Two months had passed since the events recorded in the last chapter; and one busy year had gone its round since the time of Captain Clair's first visit to the rectory. He was now fully established there, with his cheerful little wife. [258]

Miss Ware shook her head when she first heard of this intended arrangement; but no one approved of it more highly than she did now; for all the winning little graces, which had made Lucy the admired coquette of the ball-room, used, with a higher motive, made her the pet and pride of the home into which she had been adopted.

Miss Ware was perpetually discovering something new to love in her, which she always prided herself in being the first to perceive—nor did Arthur Clair ever seem disposed to contradict her—too glad to see his wife admired and loved.

In his aunt's eyes, indeed, no one could do anything so well—no one could feed the poultry with so much care and fondness for them, or arrange the flowers in the vases, or run about to the cottages, with such grace as did the little coquettish Lucy. And in all this Clair was well inclined to agree, for to him she was all that affection could be, looking up to him with half real and half sportive reverence; humouring his whims, and winning him from his faults. Sometimes she would come and seat herself on the sill of the open window, in the room where he was studying, and calling round her, from the yard, turkeys, ducks, chickens and pigeons, would feed them from the large, wooden bowl, which she held upon her lap, turning with a light laugh to to her husband, when anything occurred to excite her merriment. But when she saw this tired him, and he really wished to read quietly, she would run away with her motley group of followers, and then, escaping from them, would stroll back again, and, seating herself by his side, would take up a book and read in silence, till he himself proposed a change, and they would go out together. [259]

On the day to which we must now call attention; they were all standing in the garden, prepared for a walk. Mr. Ware's hat had been smoothly brushed, gloves—always unwilling companions of his—were in his hand, while his sister displayed her best mantle and bonnet, and took his arm with an air of greater ceremony than was her wont, looking, now and then, at Lucy, who was as carefully, but more gaily dressed than herself. They were, in fact, upon their way to Aston Manor, to make the bridal visit, as Colonel and Mrs. Hargrave had returned the evening before. [260]

As they strolled through the village, they found so many causes to make them linger, that they spent twice as much time as was needed on the way. Old Giles, whose new cottage lay the nearest to the Manor gates, could not help persuading them to come in and take a peep at his room, which was filled with every moderate comfort, to which he had ever been accustomed. "Which was a good return," he said, "for the foolish story he had told about himself and his young master, at the inn, little dreaming that that master was the most attentive of his listeners; and to think that he had come down that morning early, to tell him that he should always have a pension from the family, and never want for anything again. Was not that more than he deserved?" he asked, with tears in his eyes. [261]

Heartily congratulating their old friend, the little party proceeded to the Manor.

They were not unexpected, for Mabel was waiting their coming. She was sitting in the room which Hargrave had dedicated expressly to her, though with the reserve that it should not be termed her boudoir. Here were paintings of the most exquisite art, and books of the first authors in poetry, science, or the light literature of the most generally known of the modern languages, while the work-table, and the sweet toned cottage piano, were not forgotten—nor the harp, whose expensive music had been so long laid aside. On the table before her lay an open parcel of the last new books, from Town, which she had been attentively considering, and, at the window, which opened to the ground, stood Hargrave, sometimes looking out upon the sunny Italian garden, whose bright flowers bloomed in untiring loveliness, but oftener looking in upon his bride, who was to him the glad sunshine of everything on which his eyes rested. [262]

Laying aside the book, which had, for some time, occupied her, Mabel rose, and hurried to meet her friends, with that true, genuine warmth of manner, which at once told them, that all the affection they brought with them was entirely returned.

And then, Hargrave was with them, welcoming all, with the frank-hearted cheerfulness which had so long been a stranger to him. [263]

They had so much to tell, that half that sultry afternoon slipped away before they were aware of it; and Hargrave, leading Mr. Ware out into the garden, told him how they had risen early that morning, and, before any idlers were stirring, had gone down to the church-yard to see the tomb of Mrs. Lesly and her child.

"And how did she bear it?" enquired Mr. Ware.

"Much better than I had expected—but not better than I might have hoped," replied Hargrave, with some emotion—"for she has, I am sure, nothing to regret, with regard to them; and remorse, after all, is often half the cause of our deepest griefs—nay, she must feel, that if they have any knowledge of her present fortunes, they would only rejoice with her; but it is a trial to her, at first, coming back here—and you cannot think how anxiously I have been watching her all the morning." [264]

"Nay, you have no cause for that," said Mr. Ware, kindly, as they turned again to the window; "if Mabel could make herself happy in adversity, do you think it possible that she would be unhappy with you?"

Hargrave returned the compliment by a cheerful smile, which was altered to one of exquisite sweetness, when Mabel came out, beaming with delighted pleasure.

"Look, love," she said, holding up a book to him, "see what I have found in the parcel—"The Merchant's Recollections!" my dear uncle's novel, published already. What a pleasure for dear Lucy—I am going to let her carry it away with her to look at first."

"And yet you are dying to read it, all the while you are giving it away, my sweet wife; but give this copy to Lucy, and I will order another from town for you. Mabel has been talking of you, all the morning, my dear sir," he said, turning to Mr. Ware, "sending you, in imagination, the first papers, books, flowers, and fruit, and thinking how you will dream old times are come back again."

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"Hush," said Mabel, "those were all to be surprises."

"Oh, I quite forgot that; but now you will be bound to carry your long dreams into reality; but one thing, remember, dear sir, that in all my wanderings, I have ever looked back, with the greatest regret, to the loss of your society, and I am selfishly anxious to secure as much of it now as possible."

"If I am a welcome guest," replied the good Rector cheerfully, "you will no doubt very often find me a ready one, for, though we have lived in seclusion so many years, I have not lost my taste for that society, which a house like yours ought to afford; indeed, without my friend Mabel, I scarcely know how I should long have got on without it."

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"Thank you, thank you," returned Hargrave, "let me ever be the same to you as I was in sunny Italy, with no constraint between us, but that of self-respect; and now love," he said, turning to Mabel, "go and put on your bonnet, and we will shew our friends your beautiful Arab, and our intended improvements, and then we will walk to the village to see your two old servants; you had better go there at once, and then all fear of visiting the old place will be gone."

Mabel's pretty straw bonnet was soon put on, and she was walking with them through the gardens and pleasure grounds, giving her own happy tone of feeling to every thing they looked upon; for wherever she stirred, there, life, and industry, and comfort were sure to appear. She was now the half idolized mistress of a wide domain, and more well stored wealth than she could afford time to calculate, and, wide as her influence was likely to extend, would she spread abroad the sun-light principles of her own pure heart.

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And, as she goes forth with Hargrave, leaning fondly on his arm, and bringing forward a hundred plans, which would call forth his energy, and bring a blessing on those around them—we will leave them, not sluggish and contented, as if the cares and exertions of life were ended, but happy in their restored love to begin it anew.

THE END.

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Transcriber's note:

A Table of Contents has been added to this ebook for the reader's convenience.

In general every effort has been made to replicate the original text as faithfully as possible, including some instances of no longer standard spelling and punctuation. In particular there was a tendency for characters to ask semi-rhetorical questions punctuated with a period instead of a question mark; this has not been changed since it may be a stylistic choice, not a printer's error. However, punctuation errors that appear to be of typographical nature have been repaired (for example, many missing opening or closing quotation marks have been added). Hyphenation and accent marks have been standardized.

The following changes were made to repair apparent typographical errors:

- p. 20 "gave her a footstool, telling" telling changed to [telling](#)
- p. 25 "she took up a novel whieh" which changed to [which](#)
- p. 50 "to the advancement of christianity." [Christianity](#) capitalized
- p. 65 "sparkling good humonr" humonr changed to [humour](#)
- p. 83 "too ununwell to educate" ununwell changed to [unwell](#)
- p. 88 "forgive, forgive. POLLOCK" POLLOCK changed to [POLLOK](#)
- p. 95 "and, laying hear head" hear changed to [her](#)
- p. 110 "chosing one wet afternoon" chosing changed to [choosing](#)
- p. 113 "good deal ot tuition" ot changed to [of](#)
- p. 115 "pleased with the repect" repect changed to [respect](#)
- p. 120 "have the pain of romoving" romoving changed to [removing](#)
- p. 144 "to Hargrave, as she lent" lent changed to [leant](#)
- p. 144 "the hoom, when the door" hoom changed to [room](#)
- p. 148 "offer more than thirty ponnds" ponnds changed to [pounds](#)
- p. 157 "resuming the conversar tion" conversar tion changed to [conversation](#)
- p. 174 " carcelly able to speak" ' carcelly' changed to ['scarcely'](#)
- p. 175 "Mabel lent down and turned" lent changed to [leant](#)
- p. 233 "the well-known landmarks ef" ef changed to [of](#)
- p. 235 "It looked so liked home" liked changed to [like](#)
- p. 245 "much for you comfort" you changed to [your](#)
- p. 245 "pocket a whig of shaggy hair" whig changed to [wig](#)

p. 257 "CHAPTER XIII" XIII changed to [XII](#)
p. 257 "Two months had passed since the the" extra 'the' removed
p. 263 "sure, nothing to regret" nothing changed to [nothing](#)
p. 267 "bnt happy in their restored" bnt changed to [but](#)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MABEL: A NOVEL. VOL. 3 (OF 3) ***

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