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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NURSE ELISIA ***

George Manville Fenn

"Nurse Elisia"

Chapter One.

The Elthornes.

Crick!

"There: just as I expected. The old story. Hard and indigestible as lead."

"I'm very sorry papa, dear."

"Sorry! What's the good of being sorry? You know how I suffer from indigestion, and yet you persist in giving me eggs like that for my breakfast."

Mr Ralph Elthorne, of Hightoft, in the county of Lincolnshire, threw down the knife with which he had given a savage chop at the side of an egg, as if to cut off the top at a blow, pushed away his plate so that the silver egg-cup fell over sidewise, finishing the breaking of the egg, and letting a thick stream of rich yellow yolk begin to flow, while the irritable gentleman made a snatch at the toast-rack, and uttered an angry ejaculation.

"Will you take tea or coffee, papa, dear?" said the sweet, rather delicate looking girl seated at the head of the table; but there was no reply, and after exchanging glances with the lady, a good-looking, sun-tanned young fellow on her right said:

"Let me send you some of this, father," and he "made an offer" at the hot water dish before him with a glistening spoon.

"Eh? What is it, Al?"

"Kidneys, sir."

"Bah! No, I've got leather enough here. Look at this. Does that idiotic woman in the kitchen call this dry toast? Look at it. Only fit to make soles for shooting boots."

"Rather caky," said the young man, with his mouth full. "Not bad kidneys; nice and hot."

"Well, Isabel, how long am I to wait for that cup of coffee? No, I'll take tea."

The girl, who had poured out two cupfuls tentatively, started up from her chair, and took the cup of tea round to the other end of the table, placed it beside the rather fierce looking elderly man, bent down and kissed his forehead, and hurried back to her place.

"We never did have but one servant who could make the toast properly," continued the head of the family. "How is she, Isabel? When is she coming back?"

"Very soon, I hope, papa. Neil mentions Maria in his letter this morning."

"Eh? Neil written to you?"

"Yes, papa."

"Humph!" ejaculated Mr Elthorne, making a dig at a pat of butter as it floated in water in the cooler, splashing some of the water over the cloth, and harpooning the said pat so insecurely that it dropped off his knife before it reached

his plate. "I think it would be more creditable to Neil if he wrote a little more often to his father."

Alison Elthorne exchanged glances with his sister, and his lips moved as if he were speaking words which Isabel interpreted to mean, "Got out of bed wrong way."

The breakfast went on. Mr Elthorne placed a pair of spring folding glasses on his well-cut aquiline nose, and took up and frowned at a letter. "When's Neil coming down?"

"He did not say, papa. He writes that poor Maria causes him a great deal of anxiety."

"Poor Maria? I think she ought to be very glad and grateful. It is wonderful what is done for the poor in this country. Here is this girl, taken up to London free of expense, placed in a magnificent institution, and receives the attention of such an eminent man as—hah, not a bad cup of tea,"—a long breath drawn after a hearty draught—"as Sir Denton Hayle, without counting that of Neil. Is your aunt coming down to breakfast, or is she not?"

"She will be down soon, papa. She—she rather overslept herself."

"Rubbish! Idleness! Pure idleness! She knows how I hate to see an empty chair at the table. Professes to keep house, and is never in her place at proper time. Keep house, indeed! Eggs like leaden bullets; toasts and kidneys like leather; tea half cold and not fit to drink; and—"

"Now, papa, dear, you said just now that it was not a bad cup of tea."

"Eh? Did I? Humph—a *lapsus linguae*," said Mr Elthorne with a grim smile, for his breakfast was softening down his asperities. "Alison, ring that bell."

The young man rose slowly and straddled to the fireplace after the fashion of men who are a good deal in the saddle, rang, and came back to the table.

"Been in the stables this morning, Al?"

"Yes."

"How did The Don look?"

"Oh, right enough, but I don't like him any better, sir."

"Prejudice, Al, prejudice. Because I let someone else choose him instead of you. Wants an older man to judge a horse."

"Dare say it does, sir. But I would not have given a hundred pounds for The Don—nor yet thirty," added the young man *sotto voce*.

"Bah! Prejudice, boy. Sound wind and limb; well bred."

"Granted, sir. He is all that you say, but he has a temper. You wanted a quieter animal—a nice weight-bearing, steady cob."

"Indeed!" said Mr Elthorne, sarcastically, "or a donkey. I'm growing so old and feeble."

"You rang, sir," said the quiet, staid looking butler.

"Yes; send one of the maids up to ask Mrs Barnett—humph! Never mind."

The butler held open the door for a rather stout, florid looking, middle-aged lady to enter, which she did in a hurried, bustling way, pressing her *pince-nez* on to her nose.

"Good-morning!" she exclaimed. "I am so sorry, Ralph. I hope I have not kept you waiting."

"Oh, dear, no," began Mr Elthorne. "Oh, hang it all, Anne, do mind," he continued, as there was a click caused by the encountering of two pairs of spectacles, as the lady kissed him, and then bustled on to salute Alison with a similar kiss to that bestowed upon his father.

"Morning, my dear. Good-morning once more, Isabel, my dear."

"And how are you now you have come?" said Mr Elthorne gruffly.

"Oh, not at all well, Ralph, dear," sighed the lady, as she settled herself in her chair and spread her snowy napkin across her knees. "What have you there, Alison, dear? Yes, I'll take one. Coffee, please, Isabel dear. It's very chilly this morning."

"Very," said Mr Elthorne sarcastically. "You should have a fire in your bedroom."

"Well, really, Ralph, I think I will. It is so cold getting up."

She sneezed sharply. There was a faint click, and a tiny splash in her cup.

"Oh, dear me, look at that!" cried the lady. "Isabel, my dear, will you pass me the sugar tongs. Thanks."

Alison burst into a fit of laughter as his aunt began solemnly to fish in her coffee cup for *her pince-nez*.

"You shouldn't laugh, my dear."

"Enough to make a donkey laugh," said Mr Elthorne grimly.

"Did you mean that term for me, sir?" said Alison sharply.

"No, Al, no," said his father coolly. "If it had been meant for you I should have called you an ass."

"Thank you," said the young man.

"Quite welcome, Al. You are one sometimes." Alison frowned, but his annoyance passed off as he saw success attend his aunt's diving apparatus, for she made a successful plunge, brought out the dripping glasses, and began placidly to wipe them upon her napkin.

"The springs of these glasses do get so terribly weak," she said, and then paused to raise her head, throw it back, and gaze plaintively up at a corner of the ceiling.

"Er—er—er—er—"

"What's the matter, Auntie?" said Alison mockingly.

"Tchischew!—er—tischew!" she sneezed. "Oh, dear me, what a cold I have caught!"

"Be careful, then, not to put on damp spectacles, or you may make it worse," said Mr Elthorne, smiling.

"You don't think so, do you, Ralph?"

"No, Auntie; papa's making fun of you."

"You shouldn't, Ralph; it really is too bad, and before the children, too. But I'm afraid I'm going to have a very bad cold. I wish Neil would make haste and come down."

"What for?" said Mr Elthorne.

"He seems to understand my constitution better than anyone I have ever been to."

"Bah!" ejaculated her brother. "He is only an apprentice to his trade. Mark my words: he'll poison you one of these days by making experiments upon you."

"Really, my dear, you shouldn't. I'm sure Neil has too much respect for his aunt to be so wicked," said the lady, going on with her breakfast very composedly. "I hope he will soon cure Maria, though, and send her back. I do miss her sadly."

"Humph!" grumbled Mr Elthorne; "that's why you were so late, I suppose."

"No, Ralph. Alison, my dear, give me a bit of that toast that is soaked in gravy; thank you, my dear. I do not say that; I know I am late this morning, but I do miss her very much. But I thought you people were going out riding."

"So we are," said Alison.

Aunt Anne turned to her niece.

"Oh, I can soon put on my riding habit, Auntie. A little more sugar?"

"Well, yes, just a very little more, my dear; thank you. Ralph, I hope you will be careful over that new horse."

"Why?" said Mr Elthorne, sharply; and Aunt Anne prattled on.

"Because Alison was saying he thought it had a bad temper, and I always do feel so nervous about horses that kick and bite."

"Perhaps you'd like me to be tied on."

"Now, Ralph, you are making fun of me," said the lady placidly. "Of course I should not."

"Or have the groom with me to hold a leading-rein?"

"Nonsense, Ralph, dear; that would be absurd; but if the horse bites, I should like you to make it wear that leather thing over its nose."

"What?" roared Mr Elthorne.

"The crib-biter's muzzle, father!" cried Alison, roaring with laughter; and the head of the house uttered a fierce growl.

"I do not see anything to laugh at, Alison," said the lady reprovingly. "I may not understand much about horses, but I have heard that their bite is very dangerous."

"Don't you go near him," said Mr Elthorne sneeringly. "Al!"

"Yes, father."

"Is Sir Cheltnam coming over this morning?" Isabel looked conscious, and glanced uneasily at the speaker.

"Said he should," replied Alison.

"Then you'd better mind what you are about."

"I always do," said the young man sourly.

"Don't speak to me in that tone, sir."

"Now, Ralph, dear!—Alison!" cried Aunt Anne, turning from one to the other as she hastily interposed, to play the part of mediator. "You should not speak so abruptly to papa. But I'm sure he did not mean to be disrespectful, Ralph."

"You mind your own business, madam; I can manage my children," growled Mr Elthorne. "A puppy! Do you think I'm blind? Sir Cheltnam was cutting in before you all the time we were out last, and I could see that Dana was encouraging him out of pique. She as good as owned to it afterward to me."

"I don't suppose Burwood would like it if he knew you called him a puppy."

"I did not, sir—I called you one."

"Don't—pray don't be angry, Ralph," said Aunt Anne softly.

"I told you to mind your own business, madam," said her brother shortly. "If you'd do that, and look after the housekeeping, I should not have my digestion ruined with gutta percha kidneys and leathery toast. Now, look here, Alison, as this topic has cropped up, please understand me. I don't like to speak so plainly about such delicate matters, but one must be clear when the future careers of young people are in question."

"Oh, dear me," muttered Alison. "More coffee, Isabel," he added aloud, while his father pushed away his plate, took off his glasses, and began to swing them round by the string.

"If that cord breaks, Ralph, those glasses will break something," said Aunt Anne, and Mr Elthorne uttered an impatient snort.

"Now, look here, Alison. I suppose you fully understand that I have a reason in encouraging the visits here of those two girls?"

"Yes, father, I suppose so."

"Humph—that's right; but don't be so indifferent. Dana is an exceedingly pretty, clever girl; a splendid horsewoman; of good birth; and she and Saxa have capital portions. One of them will have Morton, of course; in all probability Dana, for Saxa, when she marries your brother, will go to live in town. Now, I should like to know what more a young fellow of your age could wish for—the money you will get from me, Morton Court, Dana's portion, and a pretty, clever wife."

"I think you might have put the lady first, Ralph," said Aunt Anne.

"Mrs Barnett, will you be good enough to finish your breakfast, and let me speak," said Mr Elthorne cuttingly. "Then, by-and-by, you will be on the bench, and, before long, have a third of your aunt's money, for she cannot live long if she eats so much."

"My dear Ralph," cried the lady.

"Can you make any better plans, sir? If so, pray let me hear them, there is no coercion—I merely ask you all to do well, and be happy."

"Oh, no, I have no plans. I like Dana very well. She's a jolly enough girl."

"Then that's settled, sir; only just bear it in mind, and don't let Burwood be stuffing her head full of nonsensical ideas. Some girls would be attracted at once by the prospect of becoming 'my lady,' but Dana is too shrewd."

"Almost a pity that the girls have no brother," said Alison carelessly.

"Why, sir?" said his father sharply.

"Because then he could have married little Isabel, and completed the combination," said Alison, looking meaningly at his sister.

"Don't be an ass, boy. Hallo! Who's this?" cried Mr Elthorne, turning sharply in his chair as a bell rang.

"Only Beck, father. I asked him to come with us." Mr Elthorne turned upon his son mute with anger and annoyance; hence he did not notice the bright look and increase of colour in his daughter's face. "You asked him to come over—this morning?"

"Yes, father. Poor beggar, he only has a few more days before he sails for China, and I thought it would be neighbourly. Old Beck is always very nice to me."

"Oh, very well," said Mr Elthorne abruptly; and Isabel uttered a low sigh of relief as she busied herself over her aunt's cup, suddenly displaying great anxiety that the placid looking lady should have some more coffee.

"Better ask him in to breakfast, Al," said Mr Elthorne.

"Yes; I was going to," said Alison, rising and leaving the room, to return in a few minutes with a frank, manly looking young fellow of seven or eight and twenty, whose face was of a rich, warm brown up to the centre of his forehead, and there became white up to his curly chestnut hair, which was a little darker than his crisp, closely cut beard.

"Ah, Beck, come over for a ride with us?" said Mr Elthorne. "How is the vicar?"

"Quite well, sir."

"And Mrs Beck?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Alison was good enough to ask me to join your party."

He shook hands with the ladies, and there was rather a conscious look between Isabel and the visitor as their hands joined—one which did not escape the head of the family.

"Sit down, Beck, sit down," he said, cordially enough, all the same.

"Oh, I have breakfasted, sir."

"Yes; we're late," said Mr Elthorne, with a look at Aunt Anne.

"That means it is my fault, Mr Beck," said the lady; "but never mind, my dear, sit down and have some more. Sailors always have good appetites."

"Oh, well, just a drop of coffee," said the young man, for Isabel had quickly filled a cup, and was holding it out to him. "Thanks, Miss Elthorne; but really I did not mean—"

"You are on the vicar's cob?" said Mr Elthorne quickly, as he noted his daughter's heightened colour, and the young man's hesitation and evident pleasure.

"Try some of this game pie, Beck," cried Alison, pushing over a plate. "Aunt Anne finished the kidneys."

"Ally, my dear."

"Oh, thanks," said the visitor, taking the plate as he settled himself at the table. "Cob, sir? Oh, no; a friend sent me over one of his horses. I have had it these three days."

A curious look of trouble crossed Isabel's countenance, and she sat watching the speaker as he went on: "That's the worst of being ashore. Everyone is so kind. I am always spoiled, and it takes me a month to get over it when I get back to my ship."

"And when do you go?" said Mr Elthorne.

"This day fortnight, sir."

"For six months, isn't it?"

"There is no certainty, sir, I'm sorry to say. We may be ordered on to Japan afterward."

"Isabel, my dear, I am sure Mr Beck will excuse you."

"Eh? Oh, yes, certainly," said the visitor with his lips, but with a denial of the words in his eyes.

"Go and put on your riding habit, my dear. Aunt Anne will pour out the coffee."

"Yes, papa," said the girl; and she rose, and, after exchanging glances with their visitor, left the room.

"Oh, yes, I'll pour out the coffee," said Aunt Anne, changing her seat. "You are very fond of riding, Mr Beck, are you not?"

"Well, ye-es," said the young man, laughing, and with an apologetic look at his host and friend; "I like it very much, but I always seem such a poor horseman among all these hard riders, and feel as if I ought to congratulate myself when I get back safe."

"Oh, well," said Mr Elthorne condescendingly, "you would have the laugh at us if you got us to sea. Did you see anything of Sir Cheltnam?"

"No; I came by the lower road."

"Here he is—they are, I ought to say," cried Alison, jumping up and going to the window.

"Eh?" ejaculated Mr Elthorne, rising too, and joining his son at the window to watch a party of three coming across the park at a hard gallop—the party consisting of two ladies and a gentleman, with one of the ladies leading, well back in her saddle, evidently quite at her ease.

"Humph," muttered Mr Elthorne; and then in a low voice to his son: "Of course. If you had had any brains you would have ridden out to meet them, and not left them to another escort."

"Oh, I shall be with them all day, sir, and— Ah Saxa, you foolish girl," he cried excitedly, of course with his words perfectly inaudible to the member of the group whom he was addressing. "The horse will rush that fence as sure as I'm here. Oh, hang all wire and hurdles!"

"What's the matter?" cried Beck, starting from the table as Alison opened the French window and stepped out. "My word, how those two girls can ride."

"Like Amazons, sir," said Mr Elthorne proudly, as he watched the party, now coming over the closely cropped turf at quite a racing pace; and his voice was full of the excitement he felt. "Will she see it, Al, my boy? Yes, she rises—cleared it like a swallow. Bravo! With such a lead the others are safe to—"

"Well done! Well over!" cried Alison, from outside, as he began clapping his hands.

"Capital! Bravo!" cried Mr Elthorne, following his son's example, as he now stepped outside to meet the party who were rapidly coming up after skimming over the hurdle which formed part of the ring fence of the estate.

"All safe over, Mrs Barnett," said the vicar's son, returning to the table.

"Then they don't deserve to be, Mr Beck," said the lady. "I do not approve of girls being so horribly masculine. If our Isabel were like that, I should feel as if I had not done my duty to her since her poor mother died."

"But she is not like that," said the visitor, after a quick glance at the open window.

"No, my dear, not a bit. I hate to see young ladies such tomboys. But there—poor girls!—no mother—no father."

"And no Aunt Anne to guide them," interpolated the visitor.

"Thank you, my dear. It's very nice of you to say so. I'm afraid I'm not clever, but I do try to act a mother's part to dear Isabel. I don't know, though, what I shall do when Neil and Alison marry those two. They don't like me a bit, and, between ourselves, I really don't like them."

"Morning, daddy," came in a loud, breathless voice from the outside. "What do you think of that?"

"Morning," came in another voice; and the word was repeated again in the deep tones of a man, and supplemented by the snortings of horses.

"Morning, my dears. Capital! But very imprudent. I will not have you trying to break that pretty little neck—nor you neither, Dana. Burwood, you should not have encouraged them."

"I? That's good, Mr Elthorne. They both took the bit in their teeth, and all I could do was to follow."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" cried the second voice. "What a fuss about a canter. Come, you folks, are you ready?"

"How's Aunt Anne?"

"Good gracious me! Is the girl mad?" cried that lady, as there was the crunching of gravel, the window was darkened, a horse's hoofs sounded loudly on the step, and the head and neck of a beautiful animal were thrust right into the room, with the bright, merry face of a girl close behind, as its owner stooped to avoid the top of the window and peered in.

"Hallo! There you are. Good-morning! We've had such a gallop. Where's Isabel? Hallo, sailor, how are you?"

"My dear child, don't—pray don't," cried Aunt Anne. "You'll be having some accident. Suppose that horse put his foot through the glass."

"Good job for the glazier. Here Tom Beck, give Bidy some lumps of sugar."

"Bless the child!" cried Aunt Anne. "Oh, here's Isabel. Mr Beck, take the sugar basin, and back that dreadful animal out."

The young sailor obeyed her to the letter, as Isabel entered to look on laughingly, while the other touched the skittish mare upon which she was seated, so that it might join in crunching up the sweet pieces of sugar with which they were fed in turn.

"Morning, parson," said the new arrival with the deep-toned voice, to Tom Beck, as the young lieutenant went on sugaring the two steeds. "Thought you were off to sea again."

"Did you?" said Beck, meeting his eyes with a lump of sugar in his hand, and with rather a stern, fixed look, from which the new arrival turned with a half laugh.

"Yes; you sailors are here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Exactly," said Beck; "but this is to-day and not to-morrow."

"Mr Beck—take care!"

It was Isabel who cried out in alarm, but her warning was too late, for the handsome mare which Dana Lydon rode had stretched out its neck and taken the lump of sugar the young lieutenant was holding; and as he turned sharply, it was at the sudden grip, for the greater part of his hand was held between the horse's teeth.

"Great Heavens!" cried Mr Elthorne.

"Wait a moment, I'll make her leave go," cried Dana, raising her whip to strike the animal between the ears.

"Stop!" cried Beck sharply, as he caught the mare's bit with his left hand, standing firmly the while, but with his face drawn with pain. "If you do that she'll crush the bones."

Isabel uttered a faint sob, and turned white, while Sir Cheltnam sprang from his horse and stepped close to her.

"Don't be frightened," he whispered, giving additional pain now to the young sailor in the shape of that which was mental.

Isabel paid no heed to him or his words, but stood gazing wildly at the brave young fellow whose hand was gripped as if in a vice by the powerful jaws, but who, beyond knitting his brows and turning pale, made no sign.

"Here, Alison," cried Mr Elthorne, "take the other side of the mare's muzzle. She'll crush his hand."

"No, no," said the young man, quickly. "She'll let go soon. Be quiet, all of you, or you'll startle her."

The young man's words were full of the authoritative tone of one accustomed to command in emergencies; but his voice shook a little at the last, for he was oppressed by a deadly feeling of sickness which he fought hard to resist, while the group closed round him, and there was a low buzz of excitement through which came the trampling of other horses, as the grooms led them round from the stable yard.

Tom Beck felt that he could hold out no longer. He had tried and manfully to combat the physical pain at a time when the mental was agonising, for he had seen the young baronet approach Isabel and whisper to her, and he had felt that any increase of the terrible grip would mean a horrible mutilation, and the utter blasting of his career and his hopes. Despair was combining with the sensation of faintness; and with the scene around him growing dim and the excited voices beginning to sound muffled and strange, nature was rapidly conquering the education of a brave man who had been schooled to face danger unmoved; he turned his eyes wildly to where Isabel stood.

But that look moved her to spring forward, lay her hand on the mare's muzzle, and falter out vainly a few caressing words. Worse than vainly, for the mare lowered her head, and increased the sufferer's agony.

"Don't," he whispered hoarsely.

"Dana, I shall have to shoot her," cried Mr Elthorne hoarsely.

Alison pressed forward, and passed his arm about his friend's waist, for he saw that he was ready to fall, and the morning's comedy was on the point of becoming tragic, when a loud neigh came from one of the horses being led around to the front, and Beck's hand fell from the mare's jaws, for she threw up her head and uttered a whinnying answer to the challenge of Mr Elthorne's new hunter, The Don.

"Ah!"

It was more a groan than a sigh of relief from all around, while, tightening her rein, Dana cut the mare across the ears with all her might; and as the graceful animal bounded forward, she kept on lashing it furiously, making it curvet and plunge and snort, as it excited the other horses near.

"Don't! don't! Dana," cried her sister. "She'll throw you."

"A vicious beast!—a vicious beast!" panted the girl, as she still plied her whip till Mr Elthorne caught her arm.

Beck stood, half supported by Alison, watching Isabel being assisted into the breakfast-room by her aunt and Sir Cheltnam, till she disappeared, when he reeled slightly, but made an effort to recover himself.

"Much hurt, old man?"

"No," he said hoarsely; "a nasty grip. Tell that girl not to beat the mare. It was not wise."

"Now, how is he?" cried Mr Elthorne, coming back. "Help him in. Send one of the grooms for the doctor."

"No, no, sir," said Beck, with a faint laugh, as he held up the hand deeply indented by the mare's teeth. "It's nothing to mind. Shan't be a one-armed Greenwich pensioner this time."

"Oh, my dear boy! my dear boy!" cried an excited voice, and Aunt Anne came rushing out of the window with a cup and saucer. "Here, drink this."

"Anne! Don't be so foolish," cried her brother. "He doesn't want tea."

"But there's brandy in it, Ralph," protested the lady. "Drink it, my dear; it will do you good."

"Thanks," said Beck, raising his injured hand to take the cup, but letting it fall again. "Not this time," he said with a laugh, and taking the cup with his left he drained it. "That's better, Mrs Barnett," he said. "There, I'm very sorry, Mr Elthorne, I've made quite an upset."

"And I'm very glad, my boy," replied his host. "What a horrible mishap!"

"How is he?" cried Dana, cantering up with her sister.

"Oh, it's nothing—nothing at all."

"That's right," cried Saxa. "Oh, it will soon go off. Not so bad as a spill by a five-bar."

"Get a liqueur," said Dana. "I say; it has made you look white. Worse disasters at sea, eh?"

"Much," said Beck, quietly; and then to himself, "Oh, how I do hate a horsey woman."

"I say," cried Saxa; "this isn't going to spoil our ride, is it, daddy?"

"Oh, no, I hope not; but I will stay, my dears," said Mr Elthorne.

"What! and not try your new horse! I should like to have the saddle shifted, and put him through his paces myself," said Saxa, looking at the noble hunter held by a groom.

"No, no, my dear, not to-day," said Mr Elthorne hastily. "Alison will go with you, girls, and—oh, there's Burwood. Ask how Isabel is. Say it's all right now, and the horses are waiting. She turned faint, I suppose. Beck, come in; you had better see the doctor."

"Nonsense, my dear sir. I'm all right. It isn't my bridle hand. I shall not want a whip."

"Oh, no," said Sir Cheltnam; "your mount wants no whip. Shall you venture?"

"Of course," said Beck, walking toward where a helper held his horse, just as Isabel came out, looking very pale.

"Well, he has got some pluck in him, Al," said Sir Cheltnam, "even if he is a parson's son."

"Poor fellow! yes," replied Alison.

"Moral," said Sir Cheltnam laughingly, to the Lydon girls, "never give lumps of sugar to a skittish mare."

Ten minutes later the little party were mounted and moved off, leaving Aunt Anne waving her lace handkerchief from the steps.

Chapter Two.

Nurse Elisia.

The roar of the big road sounded plainly, but it was far enough off for it to be subdued into a mellow hum, suggestive to the country sufferer lying in the narrow bed with its clean linen and neat blue checked hangings by the open window, of bees swarming, and a threshing machine at work in the farm beyond the park.

And yet it was London, for the windows were coated with a sooty layer outside, and the sun shone as if Nature were afraid its beams would be too strong for Londoners' eyes, to which it came as in an eclipse through smoked glass, and a murky haze full of germs and motes was interposed between the dwellers in the city and the blue sky above.

The ward was long and clean, and every bed was occupied. The air was fairly fresh and pleasant, though dashed with the odour of antiseptics. But there was none of the faint medicinal effluvia of the sick wards, for this was surgical—the special empire of the celebrated Sir Denton Hayle, well known in his profession as the most skillful and daring operator this generation has seen. There were those who shrugged their shoulders and said he had murdered many a patient, and it was true that a percentage—thanks to his skill, a very small percentage—of his sufferers had died; but, on the other hand, he could point to those whom he had saved from an apparently inevitable early death, brought on by one of the evils of poor human nature which had heretofore set medical and surgical skill at defiance.

Maria Bellows, in other respects a stout, hearty, country lass, had been one of these sufferers, and the provincial doctors called in to Hightoft by Aunt Anne to see the upper housemaid, had shaken their heads and said there was only one thing that would save her, and that was to go up to the great East Central Hospital and place herself in the hands of Sir Denton Hayle.

Then, during one of his visits home, Aunt Anne insisted upon Neil Elthorne seeing the woman. Mr Elthorne said it was absurd, but he was quiet afterward when he heard that his son had also declared that the only thing that could save the patient's life was for her to come up to the hospital in town. Furthermore, he said that he would speak to the illustrious chief under whom he studied, and see that every arrangement was made for her reception.

Maria went up, and now lay by the open window thinking of the country, of how long it would be before the doctors made her well again and sent her back to her situation. Then she wondered how Miss Isabel was, and Mr Alison, and how soon there would be weddings at the house. For it was an open secret among the servants at Hightoft that "Master's" sons were to marry the Misses Lydon, and that Miss Isabel would become Lady Burwood.

"I shall be glad to get back," she said at last with a sigh. "I always thought London was a gay place, but—ugh!—it is dull."

"Dull lying here, my poor girl," said a sweet voice, and she turned sharply and uttered a cry of pain with the effort.

In an instant busy hands were about her, changing her position and wiping the agony-engendered perspiration from her brow before assisting her to drink a little water.

"I am sorry I startled you."

Maria looked half angrily in the beautiful face bent over her, with its clearly cut, aristocratic features and large eyes, which gazed searchingly into her own. For it was a countenance that attracted attention with its saddened, pitying look, heightened by the smooth white cap and stiffened quaint linen "bib and tucker," as our mothers termed the old puritan-like costume, the whole being strongly suggestive of the portrait of some lady of the Pilgrim Father days.

"You came so quiet, you quite frightened me," said the woman.

"Your nerves are over-strung," was the reply. "I ought to have known better."

There was something so sweet and soothing in the deep musical tones of the soft voice that it had its effect upon the patient directly, and she lay back with a sigh.

"It don't matter, nurse," she said, "but do make haste and get me well."

"Indeed, we are trying very hard. But you are mending fast. Sir Denton will be here soon to see you again."

"Yes," said the woman, with her brow growing rugged and a petulance of manner, "to hurt me again, horrid. He'll kill me before he has done."

"You do not think so, Maria," said the nurse gently, as she laid her cool white hand upon the patient's brow. "He is as tender and gentle as a woman, and he takes great interest in your case."

"But, I say, they won't take me into the theatre again, will they? Oh, I say, what a shame to call that horrid place a theatre!"

"No; that is all over now, and you have nothing to do now but get well and go back to the country."

"But it takes so long, and it was so horrid with all those doctors and people, and the chloroform, and stuff, and—"

"Do you not think it would be better," said the nurse gently, "if, instead of looking at what has passed in that spirit, you were to try and remember it only with gratitude, and think that a month back you were in a very dangerous state, while now you are rapidly getting well?"

"I don't know," said the woman querulously. "It's very horrid lying here listening to other people complaining and saying how bad they are, and no one near who knows you."

"Come, come," said the nurse gently, "you are hot and tired. I have brought you some flowers and fruit. There!"

She placed a bunch of roses in the patient's hand, and placed a bunch of large grapes before her on the bed.

"Thanky," said the woman, ungraciously, as she sniffed at the flowers. "But they're not very fresh."

"No," said the nurse, smiling; "but you must recollect that they had to be cut in the country and sent up by rail. Try a few of the grapes."

She held up a little tray, and the patient picked one or two grapes off the bunch with an indifferent air.

"Not much of grapes," she said. "You should see them in the vineries at Hightoft. Much nicer than these poor tasteless things."

"I am sorry they're not better, Maria," said the nurse with a pitying smile. "They were the best I could get. You must remember we are in London."

"Oh, yes; it isn't your fault, nurse. You can't help it."

"Eat a few more."

"No; I don't want 'em. I say, how long will the doctor be? I want to know if I mayn't get up."

"I can tell you that, Maria. Not yet. Try and be patient and trust to us."

"Oh, very well," said the girl petulantly; "but it's horrid lying here so long."

"Do you think you could read a little if I brought you a book?"

"No. It only makes me tired. I hate reading."

"Hush! Here is Mr Elthorne."

As she spoke a tall, keen-looking, youngish man approached the bed. He was handsome and with a strong resemblance to his father; but his high forehead wore a peculiarly thoughtful, intent look, and there were the lines in his face made by constant devotion to some study, and a something in his eyes which suggested that he was thinking deeply of an object which had eluded his mental grasp.

"Good-morning," he said quietly. "How is your patient?"

"A little nervous and restless, sir. Ought she not to have change?"

"Yes," said the young surgeon, taking the patient's hand and watching her intently. "As soon as we can move her, but we must hasten slowly. You will be glad to get back—home, Maria?"

"Oh, yes, sir, please, sir. I am so tired of being here."

"I suppose so," said the young surgeon. "Naturally;" and he turned to the nurse with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"It is so sad and painful, sir," she said gravely. "Poor thing! I am sure she has tried to be very patient."

"Well, we will hear what Sir Denton says."

Neil Elthorne went across the ward to another bed, and Maria uttered a little laugh.

"What amuses you?"

"Oh, nothing, nurse; I was only thinking. Of course I want to get home again. Anybody would."

"Well, be patient. You are getting better, and you must think of health and strength, and the bright country life, where you will have fresh flowers and better fruit, and be among your friends."

The nurse smiled, and then placed a little bottle of lavender water in her patient's hand.

"To sprinkle about you when you feel faint," she said.

"Thanky," said the woman, in a tone of voice which robbed the word of thankfulness; and the nurse went across to where the young surgeon was busy with another patient.

"And she knows I don't like lavender water," grumbled the woman. "Always trying to play the fine lady nurse, and showing off, and I don't believe she's a lady at all. A real lady would have brought Padchouly or Odyklone. Think I don't know. Flowers and grapes only cheap rubbish. Can't afford better, I suppose."

She lay back watching the actions of nurse and surgeon the while, and commenting thereon.

"She's an artful one, she is, with all her demure looks and mincing ways. I'm not blind. Only come here because she can wear them play-acting clothes and show off. I haven't patience with her. Lady nurse, indeed. No more a lady than I am. Yes, of course. Look at that. But it won't do, madam. He's engaged, and if I see much more of it I'll tell the old doctor—see if I don't. You're not going to trap our Master Neil, and so I tell you. I should like to set Miss Saxa at her. My word, she'd startle my lady. Well, now; look at that!"

There was not much to see, only that Neil Elthorne had spoken as they were leaving the other patient's bedside, and the nurse had turned to look at him as if half startled, and then turned away and came back seeming slightly disturbed. But by the time she had reached the first patient's bedside her face was perfectly calm again, and an unbiased observer would have said that it was very beautiful in its gentle, resigned expression.

"Let me sprinkle a little of the scent for you," she said.

"Oh, very well. If you like," said Maria ungraciously. Then quickly, and with a flash of suspicion in her eyes, "I say, why do you look at me like that? You don't think I shall die, do you?"

"Oh, no," said the nurse, smiling, "indeed no. You will get better and go."

"But lots of them do die, don't they?"

"Some do, unfortunately; but why should you think of that?"

"You've seen lots die, haven't you?"

"Yes," said the nurse gravely; "in spite of all our efforts; and I have seen many grow strong and well, thanks to the skill of Sir Denton Hayle and Mr Elthorne."

"We always call him Mr Neil at home; master's Mr Elthorne."

"And go away at last, cured," continued the nurse, not heeding the interruption, "thankful for Heaven's mercy and full of gratitude to those who have tended them."

"So am I," said Maria, shortly. "You think I'm not, but I am."

"Hush! Do not talk. You are getting flushed and excited. Here is Sir Denton."

"That's right," muttered Maria, as the nurse left the bedside to go toward a slight little white-haired gentleman, closely shaven, and whose lips were closely compressed, as, with his large, deeply-set eyes he gave a quick glance round the ward, which became perfectly still as he approached.

"Good-morning," he said. "Come, my child, this will not do. Too pale! Too much application. The nurse will have to be nursed if we go on like this."

"Oh, no, I am quite well, Sir Denton," she said, smiling, with quite an affectionate look in her face.

"Then I am an ignorant old pretender, my child," he said gravely. "Well, Elthorne, anything special to report?"

"Number forty-four, here, not quite so well as I should like to see her. Been a little feverish in the night, has she not, nurse?"

"Yes, sir," replied the nurse; "but if I might say so—."

"Of course, of course," said Sir Denton, "a little irritable."

"I think it is more that she is fretting to get away from here, than from any fresh complication."

"Let's see," said the keen-looking old surgeon, turning at once to the bed, where Maria had lain watching them and trying to catch their words. "Well," he said aloud, as he seated himself and made his rapid examination, "flowers and fruit, and a clear eye and a clean tongue. Healthy look, too, about your skin, and the colour coming back. Why, you may get up—yes, for an hour or two, say the day after to-morrow, and in another week or two we will send you back home cured. What do you say to that?"

"Thanky, sir."

"Strange woman, that," said Sir Denton, an hour later, when he was leaving the ward. "I believe that when she was made, all the atoms or particles which go to form the virtue known as gratitude were left out. What do you say, nurse?"

"The poor woman has suffered a great deal."

"Yes, but she might have shown some little thankfulness to you for what you have done."

"I, Sir Denton?" said the nurse deprecatingly. "Yes, my child, you. What I have done would have been useless without your help. But there, it is waste of words to praise you, for you are a dreadful sceptic. By the way, Elthorne, there is nothing to prevent you from taking a week's run. You ought to have it now."

"I don't like to leave till that woman is perfectly safe from a relapse."

"Well, she is now, so go. It will suit me better than if you wait to go later on. Nurse Elisia and I will see to her. I suppose you will trust us?"

"What a question!" said the young surgeon. "Well, under those circumstances I will go for a few days—say four."

"Take a fortnight, man."

"No; the time I said. I should not go down only my people consider that I am neglecting them. I shall be back at the end of four days."

He glanced sharply at the nurse as he spoke, and she met his eyes in the most calm, unmoved way.

"You may depend upon my taking every care of the patient, Mr Elthorne," she said quietly.

"Thank you; I am sure you will," he said with his brow wrinkling a little. But he mastered himself the next minute, as he gave a few directions concerning other patients in the ward.

"Tut, man! that will do," said Sir Denton, impatiently. "The conceit of you young fellows is dreadful. Do you think there will be screens drawn round all the beds just because you are out of the way? We'll try and keep your patients alive."

Neil laughed good-humouredly.

"I have perfect faith in nurse," he said apologetically. "Forgive me for being anxious about my ward."

"Partly humbug, my dear boy," said the great surgeon to himself. "But there, I don't blame him." Then aloud: "My dear Elthorne, seriously, I think change is necessary sometimes, and take my word for it, as an old experienced man, when I say that a holiday is no waste of time. You will come back clearer-headed, and with your nerves toned up. When you come back I shall myself take a few days' rest, and I can do so with the pleasant feeling of confidence that everything here in my ward will go on exactly as I could wish—thanks to you both."

"Thanks to your teachings," said Neil.

"Well, perhaps I have done my best. You are wanted there."

One of the dressers had come up and was waiting to speak, and Neil went off with him directly to the other end of the ward.

"He will be a great man one of these days, nurse," said the old surgeon quietly. "His heart is in his work, and he is having chances far beyond any that came to my lot when I was young. We have made such vast strides during the past five and twenty years. And now, my child, a word or two with you."

"With me, Sir Denton?" said the nurse, with the blood flushing up at once into her pale cheeks.

"Yes," he said, watching her keenly. "Proof positive. The colour flooded your face directly I spoke. You are as nervous as if you had been ill."

"Oh, I am quite well, Sir Denton," she said hastily.

"No, you are not, my child. You are over-strung. You have been working too hard, and you are on the point of breaking down. Your life is too valuable to us all here for your health to be trifled with."

"Indeed, I—"

"Know nothing about it," said the old man decisively. "I do, and I know that your heart is so much in your work that you would go on till you dropped. You must have change from the air of this place."

"Really, Sir Denton, I am—"

"Going to do exactly as I bid you, nurse; and I wish that you would look upon me as a very old friend, and not merely as a crotchety surgeon, who worries and bullies the nurses about his patients."

"Indeed, you have always been most kind and considerate to me, Sir Denton."

"Have I? I thought I was very inconsiderate sometimes, and found a great deal of fault."

"You have just given me proof of the interest you take in me, Sir Denton."

"Ah, well, we all try to do our best. Then, as your friend, I shall insist upon your taking a month."

"A month, Sir Denton?"

"Yes; it is quite necessary; and you, too, will come back like a lioness refreshed, ready to battle with our troubles here. Look, that woman wants you," he continued, nodding toward Maria's bed. "Don't spoil her too much. She's an ungrateful baggage. I've noticed her. Behaves to you as if you were her servant."

"Oh, I do not mind," said the nurse, smiling. "That's right. Neither do I, for we've made a splendid cure of it, nurse. It's a perfect triumph for science. I shall have to read a paper upon her case at the Institution. Morning. I shall insist upon your going away soon."

Sir Denton went out of the ward in a quick, energetic way, and Nurse Elisia crossed to Maria's bed. "Did you want me?" she said gently.

"Yes, of course I did. It's too bad for you to stop away talking to the doctor so long."

"Sir Denton was giving me instructions partly," said the nurse.

"Yes, partly," said the woman maliciously. "Things go on at hospitals that wouldn't be allowed in a gentleman's house, I can tell you."

The nurse's eyes flashed, but her voice was unchanged as she said quietly:

"What did you wish me to do for you?"

"Oh, you needn't turn it off. I'm not blind. I've seen and noticed a deal while I've been lying here. Isn't it time I had my meat jelly?"

"No," said the nurse quietly. "I should have brought it to you if it had been time."

"I don't know so much about that. Never mind. I shall soon be fit to go, and precious glad of it."

"Yes, it will be a great relief for you to get away."

"And so Mr Neil's going for a holiday down home. I suppose he can't stop away any longer without running down to see his sweetheart. Shouldn't wonder if he got married before he comes back."

She gazed in the nurse's face with eyes full of low-class cunning, expecting to see there a peculiar shrinking—the wincing of one found out. But the countenance into which she gazed was perfectly calm and unruffled.

"Can I do anything more for you?"

"No; not now. Thank ye," said the woman ungraciously; "I'm going to have a nap."

"Do," said the nurse, rearranging the pillow. "If you do not find that it interferes with your night's rest, sleep as much as you can. It gives nature a better opportunity to build up your strength again."

"Yes; but I'm not blind," said Maria to herself, as she saw the nurse go and bend over another patient, and try to alleviate her sufferings. "I've been long enough in the world to know what's what. I've seen too much here. She's a nasty, artful one. She's playing the fine lady, and mincing and using big words, and trying to lead Mr Neil on till he is getting ever so stupid over her, and then she looks up at him as meek and innocent as a lamb, and as much as to say: 'Oh, my! what do you mean?' Wait till I get home again, and master shall know all about it, and if he don't put a stop to it pretty sharp, my name isn't Maria. Such impudence! A common hospital nurse trying to lead him on. Ugh! I hate the smooth, whitefaced thing, dressed up in her starched cap and collar and cuffs, and making believe to be so

superior. Oh, how I should like to see Miss Saxa have a turn at her. I'll tell her; that I will. I haven't patience with the creature; and as for Mr Neil, he ought to be ashamed of himself."

Nurse Elisia was having her fit of musing about the same time, and her face for the moment looked troubled and strange.

Chapter Three.

Neil at Home.

"Morning, Elthorne. Had breakfast?"

"No," said Alison, as he patted the neck of Sir Cheltnam's horse, just reined up in front of the house. "No one down yet but the gov'nor and Isabel."

"Isabel?" said the baronet eagerly. "Where is she?"

"Garden, I think. No, no. Don't go after her. You'll only scare her away. If you want that to come off, you must be careful. There, walk your horse round and come in to breakfast."

"Had it."

"Then come and have another. We shan't start for our ride these two hours."

"Oh, hang it! Mr Elthorne said he wanted me to see him put his horse through his paces. He's not quite satisfied with his deal."

"Yes, and ride alongside of Isabel."

"Humph—perhaps."

"And look here, young man, if you don't wish to develop a row you had better be a little more attentive."

"I should be attentive enough, but your sister seems to prefer the attentions of the parson's boy."

"What, Beck? Oh, he's nobody. Besides, he'll be off to sea directly, and you'll be married and have a family before he comes back. That is, if—"

"If? What do you mean?"

"The governor has not thrown you over, and Neil has not knocked your head off."

"Propound, O, Sphinx. Read me the riddle."

"I mean that if the governor sees you so attentive to Saxa, he'll cry off, and if Neil notices it he will pitch into you. I should if I saw you hanging after Dana as you do after her sister."

"Rubbish, man! A few civil words to a lady who rides well."

"Sort of civil words the dad does not understand in his quiet, old-fashioned way. I suppose it is to be Isabel, is it not?"

"Of course; that is understood."

"Very well, then, behave yourself, and don't let Neil see anything, for he is as hot and peppery as—"

"You are."

"If you like. He's down, you know."

"Who is? Your brother?"

"Yes. Came down by the mail, and got in here by three this morning, I suppose. I have not seen him yet."

"Well, I like that," said Sir Cheltnam.

"Like what?"

"Your lecturing me about being inattentive to your sister. Here's the blue-jacket again."

"What nonsense! He has always been like one of us. We were schoolboys together, and he has come here, as Neil and I used to go to the vicarage, just as if it was our own home."

"Oh, all right. I should not have said a word but for the wiggling I had."

"Good-morning," cried the young lieutenant, walking his horse up to where they stood. "Neil down yet?"

"No," replied Alison. "Yes, he is. That's being a doctor. I believe these fellows can do without sleep. You knew he had come, then?"

"Yes; heard it from the postman. Ah, Neil, old fellow!"

The young doctor came up looking rather pale, but in no wise like one who had been travelling all night, and shook hands warmly with all, supplementing the grasp of his hand with a clap on the young sailor's shoulder of a very warm and friendly nature.

"You are here early, Burwood," he said.

"Yes. Mr Elthorne planned one of his rides yesterday; weather's so fine. On the make-your-hay-while-the-sun-shines principle. He wants me to try his new horse for him."

Five minutes later the young men had paired off and were strolling down the garden, waiting for the breakfast bell, which was always rung as soon as the head of the family came down.

"I'm so glad you've come down, Neil," said Beck eagerly.

"Why?"

"I wanted a chat with you before I sail. I did think of coming to the hospital, but I don't believe I could have said what I wanted there."

Neil fixed his eyes upon his companion.

"What is it?" he said. "You don't want to borrow money?"

"Oh, hang it, no!"

"What is it, then?"

The young man was silent, and began to break the twigs of the shrubs they were passing.

"Don't do that, boy, unless you want to make my father wroth."

"No, of course not," said Beck. "How absurd!"

"Well, what's the matter? You're just off to sea, I believe."

"Yes. Long voyage," said the young man huskily. "Go on; I'm all attention."

Tom Beck did not go on, but stood examining his right hand, and frowning.

"What's the matter with your hand?"

"Oh, nothing. Miss Lydon's horse gave it a nip the other day."

"Humph! Vicious brute. Those girls are more like rough riders than ladies."

Beck looked at him curiously, while the young doctor flushed under the scrutiny, and said hastily:

"Well, boy, what is it? Isabel?"

"Yes," cried Beck, snatching at the words. "You see I may be gone for two years, and I wanted—and I thought that—"

"Thought what? Is she very hard to please?"

"Heaven bless her! no," cried the young sailor eagerly. "There, I can speak to you, Neil. You have always been to me like a big brother. And you know that I care for her."

"Well, I suppose I have thought so, my lad. What's the matter?"

"That's the matter," said the sailor, giving his head a side nod in the direction of Sir Cheltnam, who was crossing the lawn.

"Humph! Burwood? You think so?"

"He comes here a good deal, and I can't help being fidgety. It's the going away, you see. Can you help me?"

"No," said Neil. "You must help yourself. Have you spoken to my father?"

"No."

"Why not? 'Faint heart never won fair lady,' boy. Go and speak to him like a man."

"All very well for an argumentative, scientific fellow like you. I can't talk; you can."

"Nonsense!"

"I know. I'm only a quiet, thoughtful sailor, and I tell you frankly, old fellow, I felt so miserable one day about your sister that I thought the best way out of it all would be to go and drown myself."

"And did you?"

"No, Irishman, I did not; but, 'pon my word, seeing how Burwood is encouraged here, I have been really disposed, not to drown myself, but my sorrows—in drink."

"And did you?" said Neil, mockingly.

"No," replied Beck dryly. "It was no good to try; they all know how to swim."

"Humph!" ejaculated Neil laughing. "You're a queer fellow, Beck. So you think you love my sister?"

"Neil, old fellow, I swear—"

"No rhapsodies, please. Be matter of fact. I don't believe it's love; it's liver. Better let me prescribe for you."

"Yes, do, old chap. Tell me what to do."

"Go straight to my father and tell him in a frank, manly way that you care for Isabel, and as you are going away for so long, you would like to be engaged."

"Neil, old fellow, I feel as if I dare not."

"Nonsense! You, a sailor, who faces storms?"

"Yes, but your father's a regular typhoon. I say, though, wouldn't it be premature?"

"Of course not."

"You would go—really?"

"If I cared for the lady, certainly," said Neil, laughing at the combination of frank, manly daring and shrinking bashfulness before him. "It is not capital punishment if you fail."

"No," said Beck thoughtfully, "it isn't. I've no cause to be afraid, have I?"

"Not a bit."

"Then hang it all, I will the first moment I can get your father alone."

"Bravo, brave man!" cried Neil merrily.

"Ah, it's all very well for you to laugh, old fellow. You don't know how bad it is. But I say, Neil, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"My dear Tom," said Neil, clapping him warmly on the shoulder, "it seems to me something like sacrilege for a man to come here to the old home, and to want to rob us of my darling, innocent little sister; but if it is to be I do not know a man to whom I would sooner see her given than you."

"Thank you," cried the young sailor warmly, and his voice sounding a little husky from the emotion he felt. "Thank you, Neil, old fellow, you seem more than ever like a big brother to me now."

"Here is my father," said Neil, quickly. "Wait your opportunity, and get it over."

For at that instant Mr Elthorne appeared at the door, looking the *beau-idéal* of a tall, middle-aged country gentleman, with many years of hearty, vigorous life before him.

"Morning, Beck," he cried. "Ah, Neil, my boy, glad to see you down already. Why, you ought to have had a few hours' more rest."

"I'm accustomed to short and broken nights," said the young man, warmly returning the grasp of his father's hand. "How well you look, sir!"

"Sorry I can't return the compliment, my boy. You look, white and careworn. Never mind; we'll soon blow the London smoke out of you. Can you manage a ride after breakfast?"

"Yes, and enjoy it."

"That's right. The Lydon girls are coming over, and we'll mount you on the old cob. By the way, I thought I heard Burwood's voice."

"He is down the garden with Alison," said Neil.

"That's right. I asked him to come over to breakfast. He is going to try my new purchase for me. But it's of no use to talk horseflesh to you. Well, my dear?"

This to Isabel, who came running out, looking very innocent and girlish.

"Good-morning, papa," she cried, kissing him. "I did not know you were down. Good-morning, Mr Beck," she continued shyly, as she let her hand rest in his for a moment, and then turned to her brother to kiss him affectionately. "I'm so glad you've come, dear Neil."

"Let's have breakfast, Isabel. Aunt's not down, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, papa, and waiting for us."

"Wonderful!" said Mr Elthorne grimly. "Run down the garden, Isabel, and fetch Alison and Sir Cheltnam in to breakfast. Will you have a cup of coffee, Beck?" he continued rather coldly.

"Thank you, sir, I have breakfasted, but—"

"Oh, he can manage another," said Neil laughingly. "Come along, Tom;" and then to himself: "Poor boy! It will be no, for certain."

Mr Elthorne took no further notice of the young sailor, but laid his hand upon his son's shoulder and pointed to a clump of trees at the farther end of the park.

"I'm going to have those down, Neil."

"Pity, isn't it, sir?"

"No; if it were I should not take them away. They shut off the view in that direction. And I'm going to make an opening out there," he continued, pointing due south. "All improvements for your benefit, sir."

"Say for Alison's, father. I shall never settle down here."

"Humph! No?" said Mr Elthorne, glancing sidewise at his son. "If you go on like this you'll be an old man before I am. I must have a talk to Saxa about you."

Neil looked round sharply.

"Well, what is it?" said Mr Elthorne.

"Nothing, sir, nothing."

"You looked as if I had said something shocking. Look here, Neil, my boy, as you are down at last, suppose you try if you cannot make up a little for lost time. You know what I mean."

"Hush! Beck will hear you," said the young surgeon quickly.

"Let him stand a little farther off, then," said Mr Elthorne peevishly; "but," he continued, in a lower tone of voice, "Saxa feels hurt; I know she does. She tries to carry it off by being boisterous and merry, but she is piqued by your coldness."

"You still foster that idea, then, sir?"

"Foster? That idea? Of course, sir; and I should like to see you display a little more warmth respecting the carrying out of your father's wishes. There, I'm not going to scold now you have come down; but just keep my last letter in mind. A bright, pretty young wife with two thousand a year and more to come later on, is not to be sneered at, my boy, and you must not quite bury yourself in London over your hospital work."

He turned sharply.

"Really, Beck," he cried, "I'm afraid I have behaved very rudely to you."

"Very, sir," thought the young man. "Don't mention it, sir," he said aloud.

"Let's see: you are coming with us this morning?"

"I think you asked me to come, Mr Elthorne," said Beck quietly.

"To be sure—of course—I am very forgetful. Come in—come in. Oh, by the way, would you mind telling your father that I cannot accede to his request. I think I have done quite enough for those people, and they must now shift for themselves. One wants to be charitable, but even charity has its limits. Come, you folks, breakfast, breakfast," he cried cheerily, as Sir Cheltnam and Alison came up with Isabel.

"Poor Beck is right," thought Neil, as he saw his father's particularly cordial greeting of the baronet. "It is time to speak. But too late, I fear, after all."

"Ah, Neil, my dear," cried Aunt Anne, kissing him affectionately. "I'm so glad to see you home again. I hope you slept comfortably. And how is poor Maria?"

"Getting well fast, Aunt, dear."

"That's right. I'm so glad, for I do want her back very badly."

"Breakfast!—something solid, and less talk," shouted Mr Elthorne loudly, and the meal progressed, the head of the house leading the conversation, and always to one topic—his new horse.

The New Horse.

"Well, Isabel," said Neil, in an undertone, as his father was loudly debating with Sir Cheltnam some vital question in which bits, bridles, and surcingles were mentioned again and again.

"Well, Neil, dear," said the girl archly; "why do you keep looking out of the window? It is not Saxa's time yet."

"Thank goodness!" he said to himself. Then aloud: "Facetious this morning, eh? Two can play at that, as we used to say when I was at home. Which is it to be—Sir Cheltnam or the sailor boy?" The arch expression passed away from Isabel's countenance on the instant. She gave a frightened glance round the table, as if dreading that the brother's words had been overheard, and then, bending down over her cup, she whispered:

"Don't, please, Neil, dear. You hurt me when you talk like that."

"Then you do care for Beck?" he said in a sharp whisper.

"I—I don't know," she faltered.

"Well, you know that he cares for you?"

She gave him a piteous look.

"And you know, too, that he is going to speak to your father this morning?"

"O Neil, dear, he must not," whispered the girl, in an agony of fear.

"But he must if he means to win you. I advised him to do so."

Isabel caught hold of the cloth below the level of the table and glanced wildly at Beck, but he could not interpret the meaning of the look, and replied to it with one full of hope.

The little party rose from the table soon after and fate favoured the sailor by giving him the opportunity he sought—Mr Elthorne crossing the hall to the library, while the others went out on to the lawn.

"Eh! Want to speak to me, Beck?" said Mr Elthorne. "Come in here."

He closed the door after the young officer, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, my lad," he said pleasantly. "Now I'll be bound to say I can guess what you are about to say."

"You can, sir?" said Beck eagerly.

"I think so," said Mr Elthorne, with rather a set smile on his lips. "You were going to tell me that you have to start for the East in a very few days—am I right so far?"

"Yes, sir, quite."

"And that, as I have known you from a boy, you felt that without hesitation you might speak to me and not trouble your father. Still right?"

"Yes, sir—I think so."

"I felt it at once," said Mr Elthorne nodding. "Well, yes, my lad, I will try and oblige you. How much do you want?"

"Want? How much?" cried the young man, starting up with his face flushing. "Did you think I wanted to borrow money, sir?"

"Yes, my lad, of course."

"Oh, no, sir," he cried; and, excited now by his position, he somewhat blunderingly, but with manly frankness, told how long he had loved Isabel, and asked for a sanction to his engagement.

Mr Elthorne heard him in silence to the end, and then said briefly: "Impossible."

"Impossible, sir?"

"Quite, my lad. It is all a boy and a girl piece of nonsense. Yes; you two have known each other from children, been playfellows and the like, but I could never sanction my child's marriage to one who leads such a life as yours."

"But, Mr Elthorne—"

"Hear me out, my lad. I tell you frankly, I like you and always did as a boy and the friend of my sons, but as my prospective son-in-law, once for all, it is impossible."

"Mr Elthorne!" cried the young man appealingly.

"No, my lad, no; so give up all thought of it at once. Isabel will leave home one of these days, but not with you. You are not the man. Do you ride with us this morning?"

Beck did not answer for the moment, for he was half stunned, but an angry flush came into his cheeks just then, for Sir Cheltnam's voice was heard through the open window. There was the cause of his rejection, he felt sure, and, full of resentment and the feeling that Mr Elthorne had not treated him well, he replied sharply:

"Yes, sir, I shall go with the party this morning, and if I tell you that I cannot give up my hopes—"

"Ah, well," said Mr Elthorne sharply, "you will think differently, I dare say, after the first smart of the disappointment has worn off."

"Ready, father?" came from the window.

"Yes. Have they got the horse round?"

"All right. Burwood is going to try him over a fence or two before we start."

"I'll come," said Mr Elthorne. "You like horses, Beck; come and see the leaping."

Beck followed mechanically, cut to the heart by the half-contemptuous, cold-blooded way in which his aspirations were treated, and in a few minutes he stood with the others looking at the noble looking animal held by a groom, while Sir Cheltnam examined him after the fashion of a dealer, and then mounted.

"I'll trot him across the park and take the hedge, and the fence as I come back. Thick in his breathing, you think?"

"Yes, I thought so," said Mr Elthorne.

"Well, we shall soon know, and if he is, I'd make them take him back."

Sir Cheltnam mounted and went off at a sharp trot for some hundred yards, curved round full into sight, and, increasing his pace, came toward them at a good swinging gallop, rose at a hedge, cleared it well, and then pressed the horse on toward a stiffish fence, which it also cleared capitally, and cantered back to the waiting party, where Sir Cheltnam pulled up and leaped down.

"I can detect nothing," he said.

"You did not take him far enough to prove it," said Mr Elthorne shortly. "I'll canter him down to the far hedge and back."

As he approached the horse, there was the trampling of other hoofs, the groom and helper bringing round the horses ordered for the morning ride, while just seen in the distance over the hedge which ran along by the road were the heads of the sisters coming over to join in the excursion.

The next minute Mr Elthorne was in the saddle, and the horse sprang forward at a touch.

"Your father rides well, Elthorne," said Sir Cheltnam. "Capital seat for so heavy a man."

"Hasn't followed hounds thirty years for nothing," replied Alison. "I say," he shouted; "better take that lower down."

For, reversing the baronet's process, Mr Elthorne directed his course straight for the fence, and was apparently about to take it at rather an awkward spot.

"He can't hear you, man," said Sir Cheltnam; "but he knows what he is about. Ah, here is your sister. I say, keep that Beck along with you this morning: he monopolised her entirely the other day." Alison did not heed his words, but started forward with a cry, just as Neil and Beck also made a rush for the spot.

Only a few minutes before, The Don had risen and cleared the fence with the greatest ease. This time, possibly from some bad management on the part of his rider, he rushed at it so clumsily that horse and man came down together with a crash; and as Neil, who was nearest, dashed forward, he could see that his father was beneath the horse, which was plunging violently in its attempts to rise, and fell back twice, crushing his rider, before he could regain his feet.

Chapter Five.

Need of a Surgeon.

As Neil Elthorne reached the spot where his father had fallen, the horse dashed off at full gallop across the park, followed by one of the grooms, who saw in it something of far greater consequence than his master, who lay perfectly motionless upon the grass.

"Any bones broken?" cried Sir Cheltnam. "Only a bit of a spill. Here, someone go for a doctor."

No one heeded his words; but Alison and Beck watched Neil curiously as he was down on one knee making a hasty examination of the injured man.

"Oh, papa, papa!" cried Isabel. "Neil, Neil, is he dead?"

"Hush, my dear, be quiet."

"Hadn't you better send for a doctor?" cried Sir Cheltnam. "Nasty thing for a horse to roll across a man."

"Be good enough to be silent, sir," said Neil sharply. "Alison, make two of the men lift one of the light iron gates off its hinges. Isabel, my child, be a woman. Run to the house and make them bring down a mattress to lay upon the gate, and tell Aunt Anne to bring the brandy, some water, and a glass."

"But, Neil, dear—"

"Don't stop to question. I know nothing yet."

"But hadn't you better send a groom at once for a doctor?"

"Confound it all, sir!" cried Beck in a low voice, "can't you see that Mr Elthorne is in a skillful surgeon's hands?"

Sir Cheltnam gave him an angry look, and turned his back, while Beck, in the matter of fact, cool fashion of a sailor in a time of emergency, bent down over Neil.

"Can I help you?" he said quietly.

"Eh? Thanks, no. I can do nothing till I get him to bed. Poor old dad!" he muttered to himself. "I little thought I was coming for this."

He had placed the injured man's head in an easy position, and in his cursory examination found that no limb was broken or joint dislocated; but Elthorne was perfectly insensible, and the young surgeon dreaded the crushing in of ribs and some internal injury.

Meantime the strong, hale, imperious man of a few minutes earlier lay there, breathing painfully, while those about him were too much occupied to notice the soft, dull sound of horse's hoofs approaching fast.

Neil started as a shadow was thrown across him, and a sharp, metallic voice cried:

"Hallo! What's the matter? Anyone hurt?"

"Yes; a bad fall," said Neil coldly, as his eyes met those of the speaker, the elder of the two Lydons.

"Well, I couldn't help it," said the girl rather resentfully. "No fault of mine."

"Poor old guardy!" cried her sister. "Don't look like a ride to-day."

"Not much," said Saxa. "Did the horse throw him?"

"Fell with him," said Sir Cheltnam.

"Looked it," cried Saxa. "I told Dan here that I didn't like the looks of the mount, but it was no use to tell the old man. He always would have his own way, eh, Dan?"

"Always," assented her sister.

"Burwood," cried Neil impatiently, "will you give me your help?"

"Certainly. What shall I do?"

"Take these ladies away somewhere; their talking disturbs the patient."

"Well, I'm sure!" cried Saxa with a laugh full of annoyance. "But we will not trouble Sir Cheltnam; we know our way back."

"Here's someone else coming who will be more civil, perhaps," said Dana to herself, as Isabel, followed by half the household, came hurrying back.

Alison was returning too, with some of the stablemen and gardeners bearing a light iron gate and the mattress, with the result that the sufferer was borne carefully back to the house.

"I say, Elthorne, though," said Sir Cheltnam, as they followed behind; "no offence to your brother, who is, I dare say, clever enough,—I forgot that he was a doctor,—hadn't you better send to the town for the best man they've got? I'm afraid your old gov'nor has come off badly."

"Neil will know," replied Alison. "He will do what is right."

"Oh, very well; I only suggested; but I say, hadn't you better make a bit of a clearance? So many people about must be bad for the patient."

Alison looked at him curiously, but he said nothing, though the idea did occur to him that it would be satisfactory if his friend were to ride off in company with the Misses Lydon.

"How is he, Neil? What do you think of him?" said Alison, after quietly watching his brother for some time.

"Bad," said Neil laconically. "I can say nothing yet for certain."

"Will he die?"

"Please God, no; but the symptoms are serious."

"Bones broken?"

"No; injury to the spine, I fear. I must have help and further advice."

"I'll send on to the town at once for Morrison."

"No," said Neil quietly. "This is not a case for a general practitioner. Get me a telegraph form, and have the message sent on at once."

"Yes," said Alison eagerly; "but tell me what you are going to do."

"Send for Sir Denton Hayle."

"Will he come?"

"If I ask him—yes."

The message was written and sent off. The Lydons, after waiting till after noon, had shaken hands with the brothers, and said they were very sorry, and then accepted Sir Cheltnam's escort home.

Neil, who had left his father's side for a few minutes to say good-bye, heaved a sigh and turned to go back.

"They don't seem very much broken-hearted about the poor old dad, Neil," said Alison.

"No," cried his brother, flashing out angrily. "I wonder sometimes whether—no, no, we can't discuss that now, with him lying like that," he added hastily, and he went back into the house to find that Beck still lingered.

Neil looked at him reproachfully and the young sailor caught his arm.

"I have not gone," he said. "I'm staying in case I can be of any use."

"Thanks," said Neil shortly. Then a thought struck him, and he turned back. "Did you speak to my father?" he said.

Beck nodded.

"What did he say?"

"That it was impossible."

Neil went hastily toward the room where his father had been carried, and found his sister listening by the door.

"You here, Isabel?" he said.

"Yes, dear," she whispered in broken tones. "Let me go in and see poor papa now."

"No, my child, not yet."

"But, Neil, I am not a child now. You have let Aunt Anne be with him."

"Well, she is older, and experienced, dear. Pray be patient. You will be helping me then."

"Yes, Neil," she said with a sigh, and she reached up and kissed him.

"That is my darling sister," he said tenderly. "But, Neil, dear, one word—pray tell me the truth. Will papa get better?"

"Heaven only knows, dear," he said solemnly. "He is very badly hurt."

He passed through the door, and closed it after him almost without a sound, and then stopped to gaze on the scene before him, feeling a glow of warmth in his breast toward his Aunt, who, in their freedom from anxiety, had always seemed to him a weak, self-indulgent woman. But self was evidently forgotten now as she knelt beside her brother's couch, holding one of his hands against her breast, and watching the pale, slightly drawn face as if her life depended upon her noting the slightest change.

"Has he moved, Aunt?" said Neil softly. She started violently.

"O Neil, dear!" she exclaimed, "I did not hear you. No, no, no," she cried, with a burst of sobbing, "he's dying! My poor brother! What shall I do?"

"Be patient and helpful, Aunt, dear. We must not think of our now sufferings now."

"Yes, my dear, and I will, indeed I will. But, Neil, my love," she whispered, as she caught his hand and held it in both hers; "don't think me unkind. I know what a good, clever boy you are, but don't you think you ought to send for a real doctor?"

Neil smiled sadly as he bent down and kissed the agitated woman, and thought of his diplomas, and the trust and faith of the eminent surgeon who had chosen him for assistant in the ward of the great London hospital.

"Yes, Aunt, dear," he said quietly. "You are quite right. I have sent for Sir Denton."

"Oh, that's very good of you, my dear. You are so young; and I was afraid, dear, that you would be too proud to accept any help, and—"

"Hist!" said Neil quickly; and he stepped to his father's side, for he had seen a quick, trembling motion about the eyes, and the injured man began to mutter.

"Quite out of the question, my lad—I have made other arrangements for my child."

He uttered a heavy sigh.

"Ride any horse—jumps well—you did not—"

His eyes open and staring now, and fixed on his son.

"Neil!" he said aloud, "what's the matter? Here, give me your hand."

He tried to rise, and a spasm contracted his face as Neil watched him anxiously and saw a confirmation of his fears.

"I don't understand."

"Don't try to move, father. You are a little hurt," said Neil gravely. "Are you in much pain?"

"Pain? No," said his father irritably. "Why don't you both speak? What does it all mean?"

"Your horse fell, sir," said Neil gently. "Lie quite still."

"My horse fell? What horse fell? How long have I been here?"

"My dear father, you must try and be calm, please."

"But I don't understand," he cried angrily. "You said my horse fell. I can't remember."

"But you will soon. Try and go to sleep."

"Don't be absurd, boy. Here, help me to get—"

He did not finish his sentence but tried to raise himself and then lay perfectly still, with his jaw dropped, and a look of horror in his eyes.

"Neil—my boy," he said piteously, "I can't move. This sudden weakness—I—yes—I remember now. The Don fell with me. Quick—tell me—am I much hurt?"

"I hope not, sir. It was a bad fall, but there are no bones broken."

"But—"

He stopped, and looked wildly at his son.

"Father, you must try and be calm," said Neil firmly.

"Ralph, dearest—pray—pray—be calm," said Aunt Anne.

"Silence, woman!" he cried harshly; and the great drops of perspiration began to gather on his brow. "Yes," he continued hoarsely, "I begin to remember clearly now. The brute fell and rolled over me. Here, Neil, you are a surgeon—tell me—not seriously hurt?"

"You are hurt, father, and it is absolutely necessary that you should be quite calm."

"Calm, sir! How can I be calm? Do you take me for a child? Send for a proper doctor at once—a man who can understand, and who will tell me the truth."

"I am telling you the truth, father. I repeat—it is absolutely necessary that you should lie still and try to be calm."

"But—"

He uttered that word angrily, and clutched at the side of the couch to try again and raise himself, but his arm fell nervelessly by his side, and he gave his son a piteous look.

"My back," he groaned. "No feeling; Neil, my boy, you know and you will not speak. Don't, don't, tell me I am to be a cripple."

"My dear father," cried Neil huskily, as he grasped his hand, "I dare not tell you that, for I am not sure. I have sent up for Sir Denton, and he will, I know, come by the earliest possible train. I hope that my fears are wrong."

"Then they are right," said the sufferer with a groan. "I know now. Great Heavens!"

He closed his eyes, and lay perfectly still, but the dew upon his contracted face told plainly enough of the mental agony he suffered.

Aunt Anne drew back, and signed to Neil to come to her side.

"Speak to him," she whispered. "Try and say something to comfort him, dear."

"It would be folly," replied Neil sadly, "and only increase his irritation."

"Oh, but, my dear!" she whispered.

"Aunt, it was what I feared, and he has grasped the truth."

"Neil!"

"Wait till Sir Denton comes, and let him decide."

He went back to the side of the couch, and sat down to watch and wait, ready to try and alleviate pain, and wipe the drops of agony from the sufferer's brow from time to time.

And so an hour passed without the patient once unclosing his eyes, but it was plain that he did not sleep; a sharp twitch across the face now and again eliciting a faint groan.

Aunt Anne had been out twice to speak to Isabel, who was weeping silently in the adjoining room.

And so the dreary day crept on with a strange silence pervading the place where all, as a rule, was bustle and activity. Alison softly paced the hall hour after hour, waiting patiently for news of which Aunt Anne was the bearer.

But she had little to communicate, and night was coming on fast when the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and a fly from the station drove up to the door, out of which stepped the famous London surgeon, who had arrived quite a couple of hours sooner than had been expected.

Neil hurried out, leaving Aunt Anne to take his place while he welcomed the visitor.

"Thank you," he said simply, as he grasped the old man's hand.

"I came down at once. How is he?"

Neil shook this head, and led the way at once into the room where Mr Elthorne lay with his eyes tightly closed; but he opened them at once as Sir Denton approached, showing that he had been keenly conscious of every sound.

Aunt Anne rose from his side, bent down again to kiss him, and then hurried out of the room to hide her tears, leaving the great surgeon to decide upon what her brother's future was to be.

Isabel and Alison were outside, and the three waited together anxiously for the great man's verdict, and all oppressed by the strange sensation produced by the sudden shock which had fallen upon the family. Everything seemed strange, and the very silence to be charged with portents.

Alison strode up and down the room, while his sister crouched by Aunt Anne's side, holding her hands tightly, and starting at every sharp turn her brother made.

It seemed an age before they heard the opening of a door and steps in the hall; and as Isabel started up, listening excitedly, Neil appeared, looking white and anxious.

"Go to my father, Aunt," he said, and then drew back to lead Sir Denton into a little room much affected by the young man, half study, half museum, where the surgeon sank into a chair and leaned back gazing at the worn, troubled face before him, as if waiting for his companion to speak.

"Well, sir?" he said at last, for Sir Denton remained silent.

"Well, Elthorne," said Sir Denton gravely.

"Don't trifle with me. I am in agony."

"Naturally, my dear fellow, and I am not trifling with you. I only shrank from giving you pain."

"Then you think—" began Neil.

"No; I am sure, Elthorne. My dear boy, you have not worked with me for years without being able to come to a decision at once upon such a case as this. I can quite understand your feelings. In your horror and despair you mistrusted yourself, or tried to mistrust yourself, hoping, I presume, that you might be wrong, and sent at once for me. Is it not so?"

Neil bowed his head; and then quickly, as drowning men catch at straws, he said:

"But, Sir Denton, do you feel absolutely certain?"

"My dear Elthorne, would to Heaven I could say that there is a doubt. There is none. You know there is none."

Neil uttered a low groan.

"It comes hard from one who feels toward you as I do, my dear brother," said the old man gently; "but we doctors and surgeons can have no concealment from each other. Your examination must have shown you that the spine is hopelessly injured."

"Yes, yes," groaned Neil; "but I clung to the hope that I might be wrong. Then you can give me no hope?"

"Yes, I can do that. With careful nursing you may save his life, and he may have many years before him. There will be little physical suffering, and fortunately for him, being a wealthy man, he can palliate much of this by attendants and the many contrivances our mechanics have invented for the benefit of the injured. It is a terrible case, but nothing compared to what it would be if some poor breadwinner had suddenly been stricken down—a case such as we have seen hundreds of times. Your father has everything to soften the hardship, and, above all, the love of his children."

"Then you feel that nothing more can be done?"

"Frankly, nothing. It is the greatest kindness to tell you so, Elthorne. As you well know, the treatment is of the simplest. Time, and a thoroughly good, trustworthy nurse. There is the prescription that forty years of earnest study have taught me to offer you."

"Yes," said Neil, after a pause, "I felt all this—thanks to your teachings. Poor old father!" he continued as if to himself; "so full of vitality, so determined and energetic, so full of plans, and in an instant all at an end."

"Oh, no," said Sir Denton. "You must look at the brighter side of the accident, my dear fellow. He will—I am speaking plainly—he will be utterly paralysed in his lower limbs, but in all probability the mental faculties will be sharpened, and from what I have seen of your father I should say he will be more energetic and active than ever."

"Thank you," said Neil warmly; "thank you—"

"Now go and break the bad news to your people at once, and all of you face the worst. You are spared a great deal. You know as well as I do that his accident might have meant a few hours' hopeless struggle against death and then the end."

"Yes, yes," said Neil. "You are right, and I will try—we will all try—to face the trouble as we should. But you will stay the night and see him in the morning."

"No, I can do no good. You will act in everything exactly as I should, and there are others waiting in agony for my return."

"But—"

"You know in your heart what I say is just, my dear Elthorne. Come, pupil, your old master trusts you," said the surgeon, taking his hand. "Forget for the time being that the patient is a relative; sink everything in the scientific aspects of the case; do your duty, and trust yourself. Now, God bless you, and good-bye."

He grasped the young surgeon's hands warmly and turned to go, but stopped short.

"I shall get someone to come and lend me a hand, so that you can stay down here as long as is necessary, but you will be able to come up for a day or two at the end of a week. Of course the first thing is to send you down an efficient nurse. Everything will depend upon her, as you know."

"Yes," said Neil huskily, and he walked out into the hall.

"I will not ask to see your sister or your aunt, Elthorne. My kindest regards, and I hope to renew my friendship with them at some happier time."

He stepped into the waiting fly and looked at his watch.

"Tell him to drive fast, and I shall just catch the last up-train. Good-bye."

The wheels grated on the gravel drive, and the sounds were dying away as Neil turned to find that the drawing-room door had opened.

Isabel ran to him and threw her arms about his neck, trying vainly to speak, as he held her to his breast, while her eyes looked imploringly into his.

"What does he say, Neil?" said Alison huskily. "Tell us the worst."

"The worst," replied Neil gloomily.

"Then he will die?" cried Alison excitedly.

"No, no."

"But he has gone so soon. Don't keep it back, man. He said he could do nothing?"

"He said that with care our father will live, but—"

He stopped short for a few moments and a sigh that was almost a groan escaped him.

"The poor old dad. Al," he said softly, "I am afraid he will be a hopeless cripple if the knowledge of his state does not kill him right off."

"What's that? What's the matter?" cried Alison sharply, as the door opened and the butler appeared. "We are engaged."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man. "Mrs Barnett, sir, rang the bell. Master wants Mr Neil directly."

"O Neil, he is worse," sobbed Isabel; and, as her brother hurried out of the room and across the hall, she followed, and they all entered together, just as Aunt Anne was coming to summon them, her ruddy face looking blanched and strange in places, while her eyes were wide open and she seemed to have been scared.

"Pray come to him, my dear," she whispered. "He frightens me."

"What is that?" said Mr Elthorne sharply. "What is the meaning of that whispering? Am I to lie here without any attention because I have had a bit of a fall? Here, Neil, quick. It is disgraceful. Anne—Isabel—you can go. I want to talk to Neil." Isabel crept deprecatingly to the speaker's side and bent down to kiss him.

He responded to her kiss, and then seemed annoyed with himself, as if he considered his conduct weak.

"There, there," he cried. "Don't hang about me, my dear. You make me hot. There is nothing much the matter. Go and nurse up your aunt, and try to teach her to be sensible."

"Oh, papa, dear!"

"Now, don't you begin to be absurd too. I'm hurt and in pain. Let me ask you one question—Is it likely to do me good to have a foolish woman sitting close to me soaking her pocket handkerchief?"

"Ralph, dear, I was only sympathetic," cried Aunt Anne.

"I don't want sympathy," cried Mr Elthorne. "I want help. I want you to go now. Shut the door after them, Alison. You can stop. Now," he continued angrily, as soon as they were alone, and he fixed his eyes fiercely upon his elder son's, "you chose to be a doctor, sir, and I gave way unwillingly. I studied no expense, and you have gone on studying up your profession. But, once for all, if I am to take any of your assistance, I warn you that I will have none of the tricks of your trade played upon me."

"My dear father, pray be calm," said Neil anxiously.

"Did you hear what I said, sir? Be calm! Am I not calm? There you are bringing out all your medical stock in trade—medical cant to bear."

Neil looked at him anxiously, and saw that he was wild in his manner, and that there was a curiously excited glare in his eyes which troubled him a good deal, and affected his words as he replied.

"Now," cried his father, "tell me at once, what did Sir Denton say?"

"That you must be kept perfectly quiet, sir, and be troubled by nothing exciting."

"Why?" said Mr Elthorne sharply. "Did he say that my case was hopeless, and that I must die?"

"No; decidedly not. Nothing of the kind, sir. He told me that you only needed proper nursing to recover."

"To recover my health?"

"Yes, sir."

"And strength?" said Mr Elthorne, gazing at him searchingly.

Neil was silent.

"Why don't you speak, boy?" said the old man sternly. "No; you need not speak. A man is a physician or a fool at forty. I am long past forty, and not quite a fool, boys, as you both know. He told you that I should be a hopeless cripple."

"He told me, I repeat, that you must be kept perfectly quiet, father, and I must insist upon your now trying to help me by following out his wishes."

"A cripple—a helpless cripple," said the injured man, without paying the slightest heed to his son's words, but speaking as if to someone he could see across the room. "I did not want telling that. A man knows. But what does it mean? Wreck? Utter helplessness? Being led about by the hand? No, no, no; not so bad as that. The brain is right. I am strong there. You boys are not going to usurp everything yet. Do you hear? I say you boys are—you boys—I say—the doctor—quick—the doctor—ah!"

His eyes glared wildly as the fit of excitement rapidly increased, till he almost raved like one in a fit of delirium, and every attempt to calm him by word or action on the part of his son only seemed to intensify his excitement, till a sudden spasm made his face twitch, and his head fell back with the angry light dying out of his eyes.

"Quick!" whispered Neil. "Run up to my room and bring down the little case on the drawers."

He raised his father's head as he spoke, and, after glancing at him in a frightened manner, Alison hurried out of the room.

An hour later Ralph Elthorne was lying perfectly insensible, with his son watching by his bedside. It was no new, thing to him this tending of a patient in a serious strait consequent upon an accident, but their relative positions robbed him of his customary *sang-froid*, and again and again he asked himself whether he had not done wrong in accepting

so onerous a task, and whether Sir Denton had not placed too much confidence in his knowledge of the treatment such a case demanded. When such thoughts mastered him he was ready over and over again to send a fresh message to the great surgeon, and it was only by a strong effort that he mastered himself and maintained his calmness. For he knew in an ordinary way a doubt of his capacity would never enter his head; all he had to do, he told himself, was to strive as he would have striven for another.

"But he is my father," he muttered, "and it is so hard to feel confidence when one knows that the patient mistrusts every word and act."

Chapter Six.

Watching the Sufferer.

"What are you going to do about sitting up?" said Alison in a whisper about eleven o'clock that night. "He must not be left."

"Certainly not," said Neil, after a glance at the bed where his father lay sleeping uneasily. "I am going to sit with him."

"That will not do," said Alison quietly. "*You* are the doctor, and must be rested and ready when wanted. You had better go to bed and I'll sit up. Aunt Anne wants to, and so does Isabel, but the old lady is hysterical and fit for nothing, and Isabel is too young."

"Of course," said Neil quietly. "But I have settled all that. I shall sit up, and if there is any need I can call you directly."

Alison looked as if he were going to oppose the plan, but he said nothing for the moment, only sat watching his brother and occasionally turning to the bed as the injured man made an uneasy movement.

They were interrupted by a tap at the door, to which Alison replied, coming back directly to whisper in his brother's ear.

"You had better go and talk to the old lady yourself," he said. "She has come prepared to sit up." Neil went hastily to the door and passed out on the landing, where his aunt was standing, dressed for the occasion, and armed with night lights and other necessary appliances used in an invalid's chamber.

"No, Aunt, dear," said Neil quickly. "Not necessary. I am going to sit up."

"My dear boy, your brother said something of this kind to me," said the lady querulously; "but pray don't you be obstinate. I really must sit up with your father. It is my duty, and I will."

"It is your duty, Aunt, to obey the surgeon in attendance upon the patient," said Neil firmly, but he winced a little at his aunt's next words.

"So I would, my dear, if we had one here; but do you really think, Neil, that you are able to deal with such a terrible case? Hadn't you better have in the Moreby doctor, and hear what he says?"

"We have had Sir Denton Hayle to-day, and I have his instructions. Is not that enough?"

"No, my dear, really I don't think it is. You see it isn't as if you were a much older man and more experienced, and had been a surgeon ever so long."

"There is no need for you to sit up, Aunt," said Neil quietly. "I can quite understand your anxiety, but, believe me, I am doing my best."

"Oh, dear," sighed Aunt Anne. "You boys are obstinate and as determined as your poor father. Well, there, I cannot help myself," she continued in a tone full of remonstrance. "No one can blame me, and I am sure that I have done my duty."

"Yes, Aunt, dear, quite," said Neil soothingly. "Go and get a good night's rest. I don't think there will be any need, but if it is necessary I will have you called."

"Encouraging!" he said to himself as he returned to the sick room, thinking that after all it was very natural on his aunt's part, for it must seem to her only a short time since he was a boy at home, when, upon the death of his mother, she had come to keep house.

Alison rose from a chair near the bed as he closed the door, and signed to him to come to the other end of the room.

"I say," he whispered, "I don't like the governor's breathing. Just you go and listen. Its catchy like and strange."

Neil crossed to the bed and bent down over the sleeping man, felt his pulse, and came back.

"Quite natural," he said, "for a man in his condition. I detect nothing strange."

Alison looked at him curiously, turned away, and walked softly up and down the shaded room, to stop at last by his brother.

"I don't want to upset you," he said, "but I feel obliged to speak."

"Go on," said Neil, "but I know what you are going to say."

"Impossible!" said Alison, staring.

"By no means. You are uneasy, and think I am not capable of caring for my father."

"Well, I can't help it, old fellow," said Alison. "I was thinking something of the kind. You see a regular old country doctor—"

"Has not half the experience of a young man in a large hospital," said Neil, interrupting him and speaking now in a quite confident manner. "We have had many such cases as this, and I have helped to treat them."

"Yes, but—"

"Pray try and have a little confidence in me, old fellow. I am sure you do not mean it, but you are making my task much harder."

"Oh, I don't want to do that, but you see I can't help looking at you as my brother."

"Never cease to, pray. Now go and lie down for a few hours. Yes," he continued, as Alison hesitated, "I wish it. I desire it. I will call you about four."

"Oh, very well, if I must, I must," said Alison rather sulkily. Then, as if ashamed of the tone he had taken, "All right. Be sure and call me then." He crossed to the bed again, stood looking down at the sleeping face, and returned.

"I say," he whispered, "what a change it seems! Only this morning talking to us as he did, and now helpless like that."

"Yes; it is terrible how prostrate an accident renders a man."

"Did—did he say anything to you about—about marriage?"

Neil started and looked sharply at his brother, who had faltered as he spoke.

"Yes, but there is no occasion to discuss that now."

"No, I suppose not, but he was wonderfully set upon our being regularly engaged to those two girls. Don't seem natural for that sort of thing to be settled for you downright without your being consulted. It's just as if you were a royal personage."

"My dear Alison, is this a time for such a subject to be discussed? Pray go now."

"Oh, very well—till four o'clock, then."

The young man left the room, and Neil sat down to think, after a closer examination of his father's state. For Alison's words had started a current of thought which soon startled him by its intensity, as it raised up the calm, pale face of one who had constantly been at his side in cases of emergency—one who was always tenderly sensitive and ready to suffer with those who suffered, whose voice had a sweet, sympathetic ring as she spoke words of encouragement or consolation to the agony-wrung patient, but who could be firm as a rock at times, when a sufferer's life depended upon the strength of mind and nerve of the attendant.

Always that face, looking with calm, deep, thoughtful eyes into his, but with no heightening of colour, no tremor in the sensitive nerves of the smooth, high temples; and as he sat there thinking, she seemed to him one whom no words of man, however earnest and impassioned, could stir, certainly not such words as he could speak.

He started from his reverie, which had in spirit taken him back to the hospital where the tall, graceful figure glided silently from bed to bed, and the colour mounted quickly to his cheeks as a faint tapping came at the door, and upon his opening it he started again, for there was a figure, tall and slight, indistinctly seen in the darkness, as if his thoughts had evoked the presence of her upon whom his mind had dwelt.

"It is only I, Neil, dear," whispered a pleasant, silvery voice.

"Isabel? I thought you were in bed."

"How could you, Neil, dear!" she said reproachfully. "I could not go to bed and sleep knowing you were sitting up with poor papa. How is he now, dear?"

"Just the same, and must be for some time." Isabel sighed.

"Neil, dear," she whispered, "I've got a spirit-lamp and kettle in the next room, and as soon as you like I'll make you some tea."

"Thank you, my dear. Leave it ready and I'll make some myself."

"No, no, Neil, dear," she said, clinging to him. "Don't send me away. I could not sleep to-night."

"But you must, dear. I want you to be rested and strong, so as to come and sit with him to-morrow while I have some

sleep.”

“Yes, dear, of course,” she whispered, as she crept closer within the protecting arm round her, and laid her head upon her brother’s shoulder.

“Come, come,” Neil whispered, as he stroked her soft hair, “you must not fret and give way. Troubles come into every family, and we must learn to bear them with fortitude.”

“Yes, Neil, dear, and I am trying hard to bear this bravely.”

She nestled to him more closely, and as he smoothed her hair again and stroked her cheek, gazing down the while at its soft outline, he could not help thinking how attractive in appearance she had grown. “There,” he said at last. “Now you must go.”

“Yes, dear, directly. But—Neil—”

“What is it?”

“May I talk to you?”

“Of course.”

“But as I used when you were at home and I told you all my secrets?”

“I hope you will, Bel. Why shouldn’t you trust your big brother?”

“Yes; why not?” she said eagerly. “And you will not think me a silly girl nor forward?”

“I hope not.”

“Nor that I should not have spoken to you at such a time?”

“Why, what is the terrible secret, then?” he whispered, as he kissed her tenderly and made her throw her arms about his neck and utter a sob.

“Ah, I see; something about Beck.”

She hid her face on his shoulder, and he felt her nod her head.

“He told me what you said to him, dear,” she whispered. “It was very dreadful at a time like this, but I could not help him speaking.”

“Oh, he told you, eh?”

“Yes, dear, and he told me what papa said.”

“Don’t—don’t talk about it, my child. It seems too terrible now.”

“Yes, dear, it does,” she said with a sob, “but the words would come. Let me ask you one thing, Neil, dear, and then I will not say another word. I wouldn’t say this, only it is so very terrible to me, and it’s all so still and quiet here now in the middle of the night, and it seems just the time for speaking.”

“What is it, then?”

Isabel was silent for a few moments, and then, with her lips very close to her brother’s ear, she whispered:

“Neil, dear, do you feel sure that papa will get better?”

“Yes; I do not think there is any doubt about it.”

Isabel uttered a sigh full of relief, and, leaving her brother, went softly to the bedside to bend down and kiss the sufferer’s brow. Then returning, she nestled close up to her brother again.

He kissed her affectionately, and led her toward the door.

“There, good-night, now,” he whispered, but she clung to him tightly, and he took her head between his hands and gazed down into her shrinking eyes.

“What is it, little one?” he said; and she feebly struggled with him, so as to avert her face from his searching eyes, but she made no reply.

“Why, Isabel, darling, what is it? You have something you wish to say to me?”

“Yes, Neil,” she whispered, “but I hardly like to tell it.”

“I thought you were always ready to tell me everything.”

“Yes, dear,” she said quickly now, and she looked up full in his face. “Neil, do you know what dear papa wishes?”

“I have a suspicion.”

"It was more than a suspicion with me, Neil. But, tell me, do you think now that he will want me to listen to that dreadful Sir Cheltnam?"

"Let's wait and see, dear," said Neil quickly. "We must not meet troubles half way. This is no time to think of such a matter as that."

"No; I felt that, dear, but I think so much about it that it would keep coming up."

"Leave it now, and we will talk about it another time," said Neil gently. "You can always come to me, Isabel, and I will try to be worthy of your confidence."

"Yes, I know that, Neil," she said quickly; and after kissing him once more she hurried out of the room, leaving her brother to his thoughts and the long watch through the night.

And as he seated himself near the bed, where he could gaze at the stern, deeply lined countenance upon the pillow, his memory went back to early days, when he and his brother felt something akin to dread whenever their father spoke. And from that starting point he went on through boyhood up to manhood, right up to the present, when, after shaping the lives of his children as far as had been possible, his father seemed determined to carry out his plans for the future.

A slight movement on the part of the patient made Elthorne rise from his seat, take the shaded lamp and go close to the bedside, but his father slept heavily, and he returned to his seat to continue unravelling the thread of his career.

A few months back his father's plans had seemed of no consequence to him whatever. Half jokingly Mr Elthorne had thrown him and Saxa Lydon together, and the bright, talkative girl, with her love of out door life, had amused him. If he must marry, he thought it did not much matter to him who the lady might be, so long as she was not exacting and did not interfere with his studies. Saxa Lydon was not likely to want him to take her into society. She was too fond of her horses and dogs, and if it pleased his father, why, it would please him.

But then came the appointment of Nurse Elisia to Sir Denton's ward, and by degrees a complete change had come over the spirit of his dream. At first he had hardly noticed her save that she was a tall, graceful woman, with a sweet, calm, saddened countenance which he felt would be sympathetic to the patients; and, soon after, half wonderingly he had noticed the intense devotion of this refined gentlewoman to the various cases. Nothing was too horrible, nothing too awful. The most sordid and repellent duties were unshrinkingly done, and in the darkest, most wearisome watches of the night she was always at her post, patient and wakeful, ready to tend, to humour, to relieve the poor sufferer whose good fortune it had been to have her aid.

Then he had thought it no wonder that Sir Denton was loud in her praise, and a certain intimacy of a friendly nature had sprung up between them, during which he had soon discovered that their new nurse was no ordinary woman, but who or what she was he had no idea, and it seemed was not likely to know, for she never referred to her antecedents.

After a time he had often found himself after some painful episode at a patient's bedside, wondering why Nurse Elisia was there. Everything about her betokened the lady, and no ordinary lady, and Neil unconsciously began building up romantic stories about her previous life, in most of which he painted her as a woman who had passed through some terrible ordeal, become disgusted with the world in which she had lived, and had determined to devote herself to the duty of assuaging the pangs of her suffering fellow-creatures.

Once he had turned the conversation in her direction when dining with Sir Denton, but the old surgeon had quietly parried all inquiries, and at the same time let him see that he was touching on delicate ground in connection with one who was evidently his *protégée*. Naturally this increased the interest as time went on, and he found himself taking note of the bearing of the old man toward the nurse.

But he learned nothing by this. Perhaps there was a quiet, paternal manner visible at times on Sir Denton's part, but on Nurse Elisia's nothing but an intense look and a display of eagerness to grasp fully his instructions in regard to some dying creature whose life they were trying to save. Nothing more; and her bearing was the same to him, always calm and distant. If ever she was eager, it was in respect to a patient, and, his wishes carried out, she was either watching at some bedside or gliding patiently about the ward to smooth and turn a hot pillow here, gently move an aching head or injured limb there; and after many months Neil Elthorne found, to the disturbance of his mental balance, that he was constantly thinking of Nurse Elisia, while, save in connection with her duties and his instructions, she apparently never gave him a thought.

All these memories came back to Neil Elthorne as he sat that night by his father's couch. They troubled and annoyed him, and he moved feverishly from time to time in his chair.

"It is absurd," he said to himself. "One would think I was some romantic boy, ready to be attracted by the first beautiful face I see— Yes; she is beautiful, after all, and that simple white cap and plain black dress only enhance instead of hiding it. And she is a lady, I am sure. But what does it mean? A nurse; devoting herself to all those repulsive cases as if she were seeking by self-denial and punishment to make a kind of atonement for something which has gone before. What can have gone before? Who is she? Why is she there?"

His questioning thoughts became so unbearable that he rose from his seat, thrust off the soft slippers he was wearing, and began to pace the room.

"It was quite time I left the hospital," he thought. "The work there has weakened my nerves, and made me ready to think like this—caused this susceptible state. Quite time I left. It is a kind of disease, and I am glad I am away before I committed myself to some folly. I should look well—I, a man with an advancing reputation—if I were to be questioned

by Sir Denton upon what I meant by forgetting myself, and degrading myself by making advances toward one of the nurses. It would come before the governors of the hospital, and I should be asked to resign. I must be worse than I thought. Too much strain. Incipient nerve attacks previous to something more terrible. There," he muttered, as he returned to and resumed his seat, "one never knows what is best for one's self. It was right that I should come away from the hospital, and I am here. Bah! ready in my selfishness to think I am of so much consequence that my poor father was called upon to suffer like this to save me from a folly. Yes; there is no doubt about it," he added, after a pause, during which he sat in the semi-darkness of the bedroom gazing straight before him into the gloom; "I have been too much on the strain. A month or two in this pure air will set me up again, and I shall go back ready to look her calmly in the face as of old, and treat her as what she is—a hospital nurse. You shall not have cause to blush for your son, father," he said in a low whisper as he leaned toward the bed and gently took the old man's hand. "You will have enough to bear without meeting with rebellion against your wishes."

He raised the hand to his lips, and then tenderly laid it back on the coverlet, bent over the sufferer, and drew back with a sigh.

"It will be a question of time and careful nursing," he said, softly. "There must be no mental trouble to hinder his progress. We must not let him feel his weakness and want of power, or he will suffer horribly. Only a few hours since, and so strong and well; but by management we can keep off a good deal, and we will. My poor old dad!"

Chapter Seven.

"Join your Ship at once."

The morning broke warm and bright, but the gloom within the fine old manor-house deepened as the facts became more and more impressed on all these that the master would, if his life were spared, never again be the same.

Isabel came softly into the room twice during the night, so silently that Neil, as he sat watching, did not hear her till she touched his arm. She stayed with him for a time, and as they sat together in those solemn hours brother and sister seemed to be drawn more together than before. Not that there had ever been any gap between them, for Neil, partaking more of the nature of their dead mother than Alison, had always been the one to whom Isabel had clung, and whom she had gone to with her troubles when their father was in his sterner and most exacting moods.

Alison, too, came twice to see how the patient was; but here, somehow, his brother's manner and words are jarred upon Neil, for there seemed a want of sympathy and a suggestion of Alison's feeling free and independent, now that the autocrat of their house, hold had been cast down from his throne.

Just before morning, too, Aunt Anne had been in, ready to assert that she might just as well have sat up and kept her nephew company, for she had not slept a wink, her eyes stubbornly refusing to support her declaration, for they looked as if they had been tightly closed for hours.

As the morning progressed, and the injured man still lay in a stupor-like sleep, visitors and messengers arrived with inquiries about his state.

Beck was one of the first, and he came in the hope that Isabel would contrive to see him for a few minutes. He was not disappointed, for he had not been seated many minutes before Isabel came into the drawing room quite by accident, to fetch some work left on one of the chairs, and in an instant her hands were clasped in those of the young sailor.

"No, no!" she cried excitedly. "You know what papa said."

"Yes," he said earnestly; "and it would be cowardly and mean of me to take advantage of his lying there helpless. See, I will try and act like a gentleman,"—he dropped her hands—"I only want to tell you, Isabel, that, come what may, I shall keep to my course. Some day, when he is well again—"

"Then you think he will get well?" she cried eagerly.

"Yes; why not?" responded Beck. "I say, some day, when he is well again, he may alter and not be so set against me, and I am going to wait till then."

"Yes," she said with a sigh.

"I am not going to doubt you for a moment, Isabel. I don't think, after all these years, you could turn from me; and when your father sees really what is for your happiness, he will, I believe, relent."

Tom Beck had no opportunity to say more, for just then Aunt Anne bustled into the room.

"You, Mr Beck?" she said. "Why, I thought it was your father."

"He is going to try and get across, by and by, in the invalid chair. He is not up yet, and honestly I do not think he is fit to leave his bed; but he says he must, and he will."

"Poor man!" sighed Aunt Anne. "Oh, dear me, Mr Beck, what a deal of—Isabel, my dear, don't wait."

"No, Aunt," said the girl quietly; and then, to herself, "Papa must have told Aunt Anne not to let me be along with Tom, or she would not have spoken like that."

Then aloud—

“Good-bye, Mr Beck;” and she held out her hand, which was taken for a moment and then dropped, as she turned and left the room.

The vicar’s son had hardly left the house an hour when Sir Cheltnam rode over to make inquiries, and was leaving his card, when Alison came into the hall and went out on the steps to speak to him.

“Can’t ask you in,” said Alison. “The governor’s very bad.”

“Got a doctor down from London, haven’t you?”

“We’ve had one in consultation, but he has gone back.”

“But our doctor here is not attending him, for I met him, and he was asking about it, and thought it rather strange that he had not been sent for.”

“Humph! You see, my brother is attending him.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Sir Cheltnam. “Well, it’s no business of mine, but if anything happened to the old man it wouldn’t look well, and people would talk about it a good deal. I say, isn’t your brother rather disposed to ride the high horse?”

Alison winced.

“What do you mean?” he said rather roughly. “Oh, nothing much. A bit haughty with me, as if he did not approve of my pretensions. Coming the elder brother a bit, and I’m getting nervous as to what it is going to be now your father is down.”

“Oh, it is only Neil’s way,” said Alison sulkily. “And you don’t seem much better. If you came over to my place, I should ask you in, and call a man to take your horse.”

“How can I ask you in at a time like this?” said Alison apologetically.

“Easily enough, and take me into the drawing room. How is Isabel?”

“Broken-hearted, nearly. This came about directly after the governor had given Tom Beck his *cong  *.”

“Then he had done that?”

“Yes; and the little girl’s a bit sore about it.”

“Cheerful for me!” said Sir Cheltnam.

“Bah! He’ll be off to sea directly, and she’ll soon forget him.”

“Then you think I had better not come in to-day? I’m off, then. Wish the old man better. I’ll come on again to-morrow to see how he is. I say, tell Isabel I called and was in great trouble, and that sort of thing.”

“Oh, yes; all right,” growled Alison.

“Pleasant sort of a brother-in-law in prospective,” said Sir Cheltnam to himself, as he cantered off.

“Takes it as a matter of course that he is to have her,” muttered Alison. “I’m not so sure.”

He bit one of his nails and watched the visitor till he was out of sight, and still stood at the foot of the steps frowning.

“Even he sees it,” he muttered. “I won’t stand any more of his arbitrary ways. He is only a year older than I am, and yet he is to lord it over me as if I were a child. Why should he take the lead in everything? Is he to do so always? Not if I know it. If all this means that a new king reigns in Hightoft, it is not going to be brother Neil.”

Almost in perfect ignorance of what was going on downstairs, Neil remained patiently watching by his father’s side. Aunt and sister had both begged him to go and lie down, insisting upon the fact that he would be quite helpless at night, and that it was his duty, so as to be ready to watch again, but he only smiled.

“My dear Aunt,” he said at last to that lady, who was greatly agitated in his behalf, “a doctor grows used to watching by his patient’s bedside, and gets little snatches of sleep which refresh him. Believe me, I am not a bit tired.”

At that moment Isabel entered the room with a telegram.

“For you, Neil, dear,” she said.

“It has been opened.”

“Yes, dear, Alison opened it. He said it must be for him.”

Neil frowned, but said no more, and taking out the telegram he read:

“The nurse leaves town this afternoon. Let a carriage meet her at the station.

“Hayle.”

"Hah!" he said, passing the letter to his aunt. "I am glad of that; it will set me free, and the help of a good nurse at a time like this is invaluable."

"But shall we be able to trust her?" said Aunt Anne. "My experience of nurses is that they are dreadful women, who drink and go to sleep in sickrooms, and the patient cannot wake them, and dies for want of attention."

"Oh, Aunt!" cried Isabel.

"I am assured that it is quite true, my dear," said Aunt Anne, didactically.

"I think we have changed all that, Aunt, dear," said Neil, smiling. "Sir Denton would not send down any woman who is not thoroughly trustworthy."

Aunt Anne pursed up her lips, and tried to look wise and full of experience—a difficult task for a lady with her plump, dimpled countenance.

"Well, my dear," she said, "I hope so; but it always seems to me that the selection of an attendant for a sick man is a lady's duty, and I cannot believe in the choice made by a man, and such an old man too. But there, we shall see."

"Yes, Aunt, dear," said Neil, smiling, "we shall see."

Aunt Anne was left in charge of the patient, very much to her satisfaction, so that Neil could go down with Isabel for a rest and a little fresh air.

As they reached the hall they met Alison, who came up directly.

"Oh, Neil," he said, "I opened that telegram thinking it might be meant for me."

"Yes," said his brother. "I heard that you did."

"Quite a mistake I hope you don't mind."

"I have other things to take my attention," replied Neil. "Come, Isabel, let's have a walk up and down in the fresh air. I can't stay long."

He led the way out on to the drive, and, after hesitating for a few moments, Alison followed, frowning, just as the sound of horses' hoofs was heard, and Saxa and Dana Lydon rode up.

"Well, how's the dad?" cried Saxa boisterously. "Going on all right? Glad of it. You boys are making too much fuss over it. Nature soon cures a fall. It isn't like a disease, is it, Doctor?"

"It's of no use to ask him," said Dana merrily. "He'll pull a professional face, and make the worst of it, and then by and by, rub his hands and say, 'There; see what a clever fellow I am.'"

"Yes," said Saxa maliciously, "when I could have set him right with some embrocation and a bit of flannel bandage."

"Glad the old man's better," cried Dana. "Here, you people look white and worried. Order out the horses and come for an hour's ride."

"Would you like to go, Isabel?" asked Neil.

"I? Oh, no," cried the girl hurriedly.

"What a baby you are, Bel!" said Saxa contemptuously. "You'll come, Neil?"

"I should like a ride," he replied, "but it is impossible to leave home."

"Next time I ask you there will be a different answer," said the girl sharply. "Don't ask Alison, Dan," she continued, turning to her sister. "He is going to be a good boy too, and stop and see his papa take his barley-water."

"Is he?" said Alison gruffly. "Perhaps he was not going to wait to be asked. There is no occasion for me to hang about at home, Neil?"

"N-no, I think not. You can do nothing."

"I'll be ready in five minutes, then, girls."

"Here, we'll come round to the stables with you," said Saxa. "I want to see The Don. Is he any the worse for his fall?"

She said this as she rode on beside Alison, her sister following, without any further notice of Neil and his sister, while the former stood looking after her, frowning.

"And I thought of marrying that hoyden!" he said to himself. "It is impossible. We have not a sympathy in common."

Then the thought of his father's expressed wishes came back, and of his lying there helpless. He had made no opposition when the matter had been spoken of last. How could he draw back now?

His heart sank low as he looked into the future with a kind of wonder as to what his future life would be bound up to a woman like that, and a feeling of anger rose within him at his weakness in letting the affair drift on so far.

"It is impossible," he thought. "She does not care for me. It would be madness—a sin against her and against myself. Yes!" he said aloud with a start, for Isabel had laid her hand upon his arm.

"There is something the matter," she said quickly.

Neil turned to hurry into the house, but his sister held him fast.

"No, no, dear. Tom is coming. Mr Beck must be worse."

Neil looked in the direction taken by her eyes, and saw that the young lieutenant was striding rapidly toward them, coming by the short cut across the park, and now, seeing that he was observed, he waved his hand.

"Go in, Isabel," said Neil quietly.

"Neil!"

"I wish it, my dear. After what has passed, you have no right to see him now."

She gave him a tearful look, and went in with her head bent down to hide her face from anyone who might be at the windows.

The next minute the young sailor hurried up.

"You have sent her in, Neil," he said reproachfully.

"Yes; why have you come back so soon? Anything wrong?"

"Yes," said the young man hoarsely.

"Your father? I'll come on."

"No, no. Read that."

He thrust a telegram into Neil's hand, which read: "To join your ship at once. Imperative!"

"Yes; and I cannot go with matters like this," cried Beck.

"But you must. Your position as an officer is at stake."

"I can't help it. Neil Elthorne, put yourself in my place. How can I go and leave Isabel at such a time?"

"What good could you do if you stayed?"

"It would help her. She would know I was near. I can't go and leave her knowing what I do about that fellow Burwood."

Neil looked at him fixedly for a few moments. "Don't play the boy," he said at last sternly.

"No; I am going to play the man," cried Beck. "Isabel and I have been girl and boy together, and our affection has gradually strengthened till I know that she loves me as well as I love her."

"Yes, perhaps so, my lad, but you heard her father's decision, and you can do no more."

"Yes; I heard his decision," said the young sailor sturdily, "and I am not going to stand by and see her given up to that man! Why, Neil, it would kill her."

"Look here, Tom, my good fellow, you must be sensible. It would be no kindness to my sister to let her feel that she had ruined your prospects."

"It would not ruin my prospects," said Beck sturdily. "I'm a good sailor, and if I lose my ship I can always get employment in the merchant service."

"Of course you could, but neither Isabel nor I are going to let you degrade yourself. My father is dangerously ill, and nothing such as you fear can advance a step for months to come, so join your ship like a man, and show that you have faith in the girl you believe to love you."

"If I only could think—" began Beck.

"Look here, Tom. I think you have some faith in me."

"In you? My dear Neil," cried the young sailor warmly, "if ever fellow looked upon another man as a brother, I do upon you. Why, you know that."

"Yes, I know that," said Neil, taking his arm and walking up and down the drive with him, "and I am going always to behave like a brother to you. Go and join your ship."

"But Isabel?"

"Leave me to act for you over that matter as a brother would. For both your sakes I will do what is best."

"But Burwood?"

"I don't like Burwood, and I do like you," said Neil, smiling. "Come, will not that satisfy you?"

"Almost. You will fight for me, then, Neil?"

"I don't think that there will be any occasion to fight for you. I think time is on your side. Lieutenant Beck's chance was very small with my father; but suppose one Captain Beck, a young officer who had distinguished himself by his seamanship in Her Majesty's service, came and renewed his proposal for my sister's hand, surely he would have a better chance of success."

"Neil, old fellow," cried Beck, facing round and grasping the young surgeon's hand, "I don't wonder that you are getting to be a big fellow at your hospital."

"Nonsense! Who says I am?"

"Oh, I've heard. I wish I were as clever as you are. I came here feeling so bad that life didn't seem worth living, and in a few minutes you've shown things to me in such a different light that—"

"You think it is worth living and sharing with someone else," cried Neil.

"My dear old fellow," cried the sailor, with tears in his eyes.

"And you will go off like a man and join your ship?"

"Yes," cried Beck, grasping his friend's hand, and speaking firmly, "like a man."

"And you go at once?"

"Directly. Now take me in, and let me say good-bye to her."

"No," said Neil firmly.

"What? After my promise?"

"After your promise. I have a duty to my helpless father, Tom, my lad, and I should be playing a very dishonourable part if I took advantage of his position, knowing what I do of his wishes, to arrange a meeting between you and my sister. That was a love-sick boy speaking, not the Queen's officer—the man whose honour is beyond reproach."

"I suppose you are right," said Beck, after a pause. "You know I am."

"Let me see her for a moment, though."

"No."

"I know you are right—just to say 'good-bye' before you—just to touch her hand."

"No, my lad. Say good-bye to me, and I'll tell her you love her truly, and that you have gone off to your duty like a man—an officer and a gentleman. That you have exacted no promise from her, and that you have taken the advice of her brother—a man who loves you both and will help you to the end. There, I must go back to my father's room. Good-bye."

"O Neil," groaned the young sailor; "this is all so hard and business-like. Everything goes easily for you. You don't know what love is."

A spasm contracted Neil's features for a few moments, but he smiled sadly directly after.

"Perhaps not," he said. "Who knows? There, business-like or not, you know I am doing my duty and you have to do yours. Come, sailor, I shall begin to quote Shakespeare to you. 'Aboard, for shame; the wind sits in the shoulder of your sail, and you are staid for.'"

"But it is so hard, Neil."

"Life's duties are hard, man; but we men must do them at any cost. Come, good-bye, and old Shakespeare again—the end of the old man's speech: 'To thine own self be true'—and you will be true to the girl you wish to make your wife. Good-bye."

Neil held out his hand, but it remained untouched for the full space of a minute before it was seized and crushed heavily between two nervous sets of fingers, while the young man's eyes gazed fixedly in his. Then it was dashed aside. Beck swung himself round and dashed off across the park as hard as he could go, without trusting himself to look back.

Chapter Eight.

Conflicting Emotions.

"Poor fellow!" said Neil to himself; "and the dad prefers that hunting, racing baronet to him for a son-in-law! Why it

would break little Bel's heart."

He stood watching till Beck passed in among the trees, expecting to the last to see him turn and wave his hand.

"No; gone," he said. "Well, I must fight their battle—when the time comes—but it is quite another battle now."

As he thought this he heard the clattering of hoofs, and hastened his steps so as to get indoors before his brother rode out of the stable yard with the Lydon sisters, and a guilty feeling sent the blood into his pale cheeks. But he did not check his steps; he rather hastened them.

"They don't want to see me again," he muttered; and then, "Oh, what a miserable, contemptible coward I am; preaching to that young fellow about his duty, and here I am, the next minute, deceiving myself and utterly wanting in strength to do mine. I ought to go out and say good-bye to Saxa, and I will."

He stopped and turned to go, but a hand was laid upon his arm, and, as he faced round, it was to see a little white appealing face turned up to his, and as he passed his arm round his sister's waist the horses' hoofs crushed the gravel by the door, passed on, and the sound grew more faint.

"Neil, dear; Tom has gone. Is his father very ill?"

These words brought the young surgeon back to the troubles of others in place of his own.

"No, dear; he is no worse. It was not that," he said hastily.

"What was it, then? Oh, Neil, dear, you hurt me. You are keeping something back."

"I am not going to keep anything back, little sis," he said tenderly. "Come in here."

He led her into the drawing room and closed the door, while she clung to him, searching his eyes with her own wistful gaze, as her lips trembled.

"Now, dear, pray tell me. Why did Tom come?"

"He had bad news, dear."

"About his ship?" cried the girl wildly.

"Yes."

"O Neil! It was about going back to sea!"

Neil nodded, and drew her more closely to him, but she resisted. His embrace seemed to stifle her; she could hardly breathe.

"You are cruel to me," she panted. "But I know," she cried half hysterically; "he has to go soon."

"He has to do his duty as a Queen's officer, Isabel, dear, and you must be firm."

"Yes, yes, dear, of course," she cried, struggling hard the while to master her emotion. "I will, indeed, try—to be calm—and patient. But tell me; he has had a message about rejoining his ship?"

"Yes, dear."

"And he is to go soon?"

Neil was silent.

"Neil, pray speak," she sobbed.

"Yes, my child. He brought a telegram."

"A despatch," she said, correcting him.

"No, dear—a telegram."

"Then—then—it means—something sudden—for them to telegraph. I can bear it, now, dear. How soon is he to go?"

"Isabel, my child, will you trust in me to help you to do what is best?" said Neil tenderly.

"Yes, Neil, dear; of course, I want to do what is right, and you will help me."

"I will, dear, with all my strength. You know that Tom has his duty to do, like the rest of us, and you have yours to our poor father."

"Yes, Neil, of course, and you know I try."

"My darling, yes," he cried, as he kissed the pale cheeks wet now with tears.

"Then tell me. I must know. When is Tom to go?"

"Isabel, your father forbade all engagement with him, and I have talked to Tom Beck as I thought was best for both of you. Come, you must act like a brave little woman and help me. We have both got our duty to do now at a very sad time. You will help me and try to be firm?"

"Yes—yes," she whispered hoarsely, "but—but—Neil—tell me—when is he to go?"

"Isabel, dear, it was his duty as an officer and as an honourable man."

"Yes," she whispered in a strangely low tone. "Tom would do his duty always, I know—now—you are keeping something back. I can see it," she cried, growing more excited and struggling in his arms. "I know now—and without bidding me good-bye. Neil, you have sent him away; he is gone!"

Neil bent his head sadly, and she literally snatched herself away.

"And you call yourself my brother!" she cried passionately. "You say you taught him his duty; and, after all he has said to me, to make him go without one word. Oh, it is cruel—it is cruel. What have I done that you should treat me so?"

"Isabel, dear, you promised me that you would be firm."

"How can a woman be firm at a time like this? But I know; you could not be so cruel. He is coming back just to see me and say good-bye."

"He has gone, Isabel."

"Without a single word or look?"

She gazed at him as if dazed, and unable to believe his words. Then uttering a low, piteous cry, she sank helpless across his arms, her eyes closed, and for hours she lay for the most part unconscious, only awakening from time to time to burst into a passion of hysterical weeping as her senses returned.

"Duty is hard—very hard," said Neil through his set teeth, as he divided his time between his father's and his sister's chambers, where Aunt Anne sat sobbing and bewailing their fate. Alison had returned at dusk, and partaken of the dinner alone, to go afterward to his little study, where he sat and scowled and smoked.

The carriage had been sent to the station in accordance with Sir Denton's request, and then forgotten by all in the house, and the night was going on apace.

Neil had just left his sister's room and gone back to his father's to find him hot and feverish to an extent which rather troubled him, and once more made him long for the friendly counsel and advice of a colleague.

But his sound common sense gave him the help he needed, and after administering medicine he became satisfied with the result and sat by the bedside thinking of the stern duty he had to fulfill.

"I judge Saxa too hardly," he said to himself. "I do not go the way to make her care for me, and it is no wonder that she should be piqued by my indifference. I'll try and alter it, for all that other is a foolish dream, and due to my low nervous state. I'll turn over a new leaf to-morrow, and see what can be done. It would help him in his recovery if he knew that his dearest wishes were bearing fruit; and if I satisfy him over that, he will yield to mine about poor little Isabel. She will not be so hard to-morrow when her sorrow is being softened down. For I did right, and I'll do right about Saxa, poor girl! I was quite rude to her to-day. I'll ride over to-morrow and fetch her to see him. He likes her as much as he does Isabel. There, I think I am getting things into train for the beginning of a new life, and— What is it?"

"The carriage back from the station, my dear," whispered Aunt Anne. "The new nurse is in the hall. Will you come down and speak to her at once?"

"Yes, Aunt. Thank Heaven, she has come."

He hurried out of the room and down the stairs to where, in the dim light, a tall cloaked figure stood by her humble-looking luggage. And as he went he had made up in his mind the words he would say to her about getting some refreshment at once and joining him in the sick chamber, where a bed had been made up in the dressing room for her use.

But Neil Elthorne did not speak the words he had meant to say, for, as the visitor turned at his step, he stopped short with the blood rushing to his brain, and a strange sensation of vertigo attacking him as he faltered out:

"Good Heavens! Nurse Elisia! Has he sent you?"

Chapter Nine.

Off to Hightoft.

"There, you are better now."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, indeed you are. This has nothing to do with the operation, I assure you."

"Then, pray, what is it?" This question very sharply, and the patient moved in her bed in a way that showed very little feebleness.

"Simply hysteria."

"What! Sterricks?"

"Yes, a form of hysterics."

"There!" cried the patient, with a triumphant tone in her voice. "I knew you didn't know nothing about it. I never had sterricks in my life."

"Because you have always been a woman in a vigorous state of health. Latterly you have been brought down rather low."

"Taint that," said the woman sharply, "it's what's done to me here, and the shameful neglect. It's horrid; I'm half killed, and then Mr Neil goes away and leaves me to that horrible old man, and as soon as Mr Neil's gone, the other leaves me to die."

"I am afraid you are a very foolish woman," said the nurse quietly. "I can assure you that you are getting well fast."

"Oh, yes, I know. And you are as bad as they are. It's shameful!"

"You have been working yourself up to think you are being neglected, but your troubles are imaginary."

"Oh, yes, I know," cried the woman angrily.

"Pray try and be reasonable," said the nurse, speaking in a voice full of patient resignation.

"Go on, pray, ma'am. You've all got me down here and are trampling on me. I'm unreasonable now, am I?"

"I am afraid you are a little," said the nurse, smiling as she rearranged the bedclothes. "Mr Elthorne went away because he was worn out with attending the poor people here, and Sir Denton was telegraphed for to attend some unfortunate gentleman who had met with an accident."

"Then he oughtn't to have gone," cried the woman loudly.

"Pray, hush," said the nurse. "You are hurting yourself and upsetting the other patients."

"And I say he'd no right to go. My life's as much consequence as anybody else's life, and it's a shameful piece of neglect. Oh, if I do live to get away from this 'ateful place, I'll let some of you know. I'm to be left to die because the doctors are too idle to come and see me. If I'd only known, you'd never caught me here."

"Hush, hush! Pray be quiet, dear. You are making yourself hot and feverish."

The nurse laid her cool white hand upon the patient's brow, but she resented it and thrust it away. "Let me be. I don't want holding down. It's shameful. It's cruel. Oh, why did I come to this dreadful place? As for that Sir Denton, or whatever his name is—"

"What about him? Do you want me?" said the gentleman in question, who had come into the ward and up to the bed unnoticed. "How are you this morning?—Ah, better."

"No, I'm not, I'm worse, and it's shameful."

"What is?" said the surgeon, smiling.

"For me to be neglected by the doctors and nurses as I am. It's too bad, it is; and I might have died—no doctor, no nurse."

"Ah, yes; it is very cruel," said Sir Denton. "I have shamefully neglected my patients here, and as for the conduct of Nurse Elisia to you, it is almost criminal. You will have to go back home to your own people and be properly treated. Dreadful places, these hospitals are."

Nurse Elisia looked up at the old surgeon with wondering eyes, as he took the woman's own tone, but he smiled at her sadly.

"Come with me, I want to talk to you. Poor thing," he said, as they walked away, "she is in the irritable, weary state of the convalescent. She is not answerable for what she says. Sorry I was obliged to go, but the case was urgent. Mr Elthorne's father. A terrible accident. The spine injured, and paralysis of the lower part of the body."

"Mr Elthorne's father!" cried the nurse, turning pale. "How shocking!"

"Terrible. Mr Elthorne telegraphed for me. It was not necessary, for he was doing everything possible, and now it is a case of careful nursing to save the poor fellow's life."

"Nursing?"

"Yes. I have promised Mr Elthorne to send him down the most helpful, trustworthy nurse I knew, at once."

"Sir Denton," faltered the nurse, with a faint colour rising in her cheeks.

"It is an exceptional ease, my child, one which calls for all a nurse's skill and tenderness with, perhaps, as much patience as I have seen you exercise toward that foolish woman. I am going to ask you to start at once for Hightoft, and take up this case."

"Sir Denton!" she cried. "Oh! it is impossible."

"Why?"

"My patients here."

"Your place can be filled, just as it would be necessary to fill it if you were taken ill."

"But I am not ill, Sir Denton, and I am needed here."

"But you are needed there—at this gentleman's house, where the services of a patient lady like yourself would be invaluable."

"I could not go, Sir Denton; I beg you will not send me."

"It is in a lovely part of the country. It is a charming place, and I can guarantee for you that the ladies will receive you as their equal—perhaps as their superior," he added with a meaning smile, which made her look slightly resentful.

"Really, Sir Denton," she began.

"Forgive me," he said. "It was a slip. I have no wish to pry into your private life, Nurse Elisia. I am only thankful to have the help and co-operation of a refined woman in my sad cases here."

"Thank you, Sir Denton, but you must excuse me from this."

"I cannot," he said firmly, "for I feel that it is your duty to go. I have no hesitation in saying that it is absolutely necessary for you to have a change, even if you do not have rest, but you will be able to combine both there."

"Pray send someone else, Sir Denton."

"I know nobody whom I could trust as I would you, Nurse Elisia," he replied quietly, "and I am quite sure that there is no one in whom Mr Elthorne would have so much confidence."

He noted the change in the nurse's mobile countenance as he went on speaking in his quiet way, for she was evidently agitated and trying hard to conceal it.

"You see it would be so advantageous," he continued. "After a few days you could set Mr Elthorne at liberty to come back here. Of course, as you know, the case is one which needs almost wholly a careful nurse's skill. How soon will you be free to go?"

Like lightning the thoughts flashed through her brain of the position she would occupy. It was like throwing her constantly in Neil Elthorne's society, and she shrank from the position almost with horror. For, of late there had been no disguising from herself the fact that the young surgeon had, in his quiet way, been more than courteous to her, and that his manner betokened a something, which on his side was fast ripening into admiration.

"It is impossible," she thought. "It would be cruelty to him, for he is sincere and manly. No, I cannot go. It would be a crime. Sir Denton," she said hastily, aloud. "You must excuse me from this duty. I cannot go."

"No," he said firmly, and he took her hand. "I cannot, I will not excuse you. Once more I tell you that you ought to go; it is your duty."

"But why?" she cried, rather excitedly.

"Because you—evidently a lady of gentle birth—have set yourself the task of toiling for your suffering fellow-creatures. Here is one who may die if you do not go to his help."

"But another would be as efficient."

"I do not know one at the present moment whom I would trust as I would you; and in addition, the call comes at a time when it is imperative that you should have rest and change."

"But," she said, with a smile full of perplexity, "that would not be rest and change."

"Can you not trust me to advise you for your good?" said Sir Denton gravely.

"Oh, yes, but—"

"That 'but' again. Come, nurse, I think you believe that I take great interest in you."

"Oh, yes, Sir Denton," she said eagerly.

"Then trust me in this. Take my advice. More—oblige me by going. I am surgeon here, and you are nurse, but it has seemed to me, for some time past, that we have had a closer intimacy—that of friends. Come, you will oblige me?"

"It is your wish then, that I should go?"

"Indeed, yes. When will you be ready to start?"

"At once."

"That is good. Then I will telegraph down, so that a carriage may be in waiting for you at the station. I am sure that Mr Elthorne will see that you have every comfort and attention. Good-morning. Thanks."

Nurse Elisia stood by the door of the ward, watching the retiring figure of the old surgeon as he passed down the corridor.

"Is it not weak to have given way?" she said to herself. "Perhaps not in such a case as this. Mr Elthorne will see that I have every comfort and attention," she said softly. "Mr Elthorne must be taught that I am the hospital nurse, sent down there for a special purpose. Mr Elthorne is weak, and given to follies such as I should not have suspected in so wise and able a man."

She stood hesitating for a few moments looking toward where Maria Bell lay, evidently watching her attentively, and her first impulse was to cross to the woman and to tell her that she would be handed over now to the charge of another nurse; but, reconsidering the matter, she decided merely to tell the next nurse in authority that she must take full charge of the ward, and going down to the matron, she stated that she would be absent for a time. That evening she was being hurried down by a fast train, to reach the station within a few minutes of the appointed time, and she had scarcely stepped on to the platform when a man's voice made her start with dread lest it should be Neil.

"The nurse for Hightoft?" said the voice; and as she turned she found that it was only a servant.

"Yes, I am the nurse," she replied.

"Well, here's a carriage for you. Any luggage?"

The man's voice was sharp, and wanting in respect, the ordering of the carriage for a long night drive having found little favour with coachman and footman.

"That little black bag, that is all," said the nurse quietly.

"Don't mean to stay long, then," said the man with a laugh, as he took the little travelling bag, and swung it up on to the foot-board, while the nurse stood patiently waiting, and without resenting the man's insolence and indifference as he entered into a conversation with the coachman before turning and, stepping back, stared hard at the calm, refined face dimly seen by the feeble station lamps.

"Will you have the goodness to open the carriage door?"

"Eh? Open the door? Of course. Just going to," said the footman cavalierly, as he snatched open the door and rattled down the steps.

He held out his hand, but she stepped in without his assistance, the door was banged sharply to, and the handle took some time to turn, as the man stared in at the visitor, who quietly drew up the window and sank back in her seat.

"Gives herself airs, does she!" said the footman to himself. "How fond people who have never been in a carriage before are of making believe they are used to one. Can't cheat me, my lady. Bet a shilling she has never been in anything better than a cab or a station-fly before in her life."

"What are you grumbling about?" said the coachman, as his fellow-servant climbed up to his side.

"Nothing, only thinking aloud about her ladyship inside. Got in with a reg'lar toss of her head. There, hit 'em up, Tom, and let's get back. I don't want to be on this job all night."

"Regular nurse, arn't she?" said the coachman. "Horspittle?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Dressed up like a nun out for a holiday. Why couldn't they have had a nurse out of the village, or your wife?"

"Ah! Why indeed?" said the coachman sourly. "'Fraid poor people should make a few shillings too much, I suppose. It's just the same if one of the horses is bad; we must have the vet to see him, when I could put him right in a week. It's having the name does it with some people. Horspittle nurse! A deal, I dare say, she knows."

The ill-usage to which he and his fellow-servants were called upon to submit claimed both their tongues during the long, dark drive to Hightoft, while Nurse Elisia sat back in the carriage, dreamy and thoughtful, watching the lights of the lamps thrown upon hedgerow and tree as the good pair of horses trotted swiftly back.

It seemed a strange contrast to the glaring, shop-filled streets of sooty London, this long winding lane with only a long, low whitewashed cottage seen at intervals. So quiet and calm was it all that there appeared to be no reason for the rapid action of the nurse's pulses as they sped onward. But the action was going on, and the occupant of the carriage felt a strange longing more than once to pull the check string, and bid the coachman stop and turn back. But she refrained and grew cooler as they progressed, forcing herself to keep on trying to make out the landscape, till, in due time, the lodge gates were passed, and the carriage drawn up at the entrance, where Nurse Elisia descended and stood beside her little bag till Neil descended and uttered the words expressing his astonishment at her presence there.

Chapter Ten.

Neil is Perplexed.

Neil Elthorne had hard work to control himself for, paradoxically, although Nurse Elisia was the most likely personage for Sir Denton to send down to attend his young friend's father, it had never once occurred to him that she would be chosen.

"I am glad you have come," he said quietly. "Ah, here is my aunt," he continued, as that lady appeared. "Aunt, dear, this is Nurse Elisia, from the hospital. Will you see that she is shown to her room and has some refreshment before she comes upstairs?"

Isabel, looking very white and careworn, joined them as he spoke, unable to withdraw his eyes from the countenance which filled so large a portion of his meditative hours, but the nurse met his eyes calmly and turned and bowed to Aunt Anne and Isabel in turn, the former lady seeming quite taken back by the attendant's appearance.

"I don't like the look of her at all, Isabel, my dear," she said, as soon as they were alone. "I expected she would look like a nurse, not be a tall body like that."

"She seemed very nice, Aunt, dear," said Isabel quietly, "and of course she will be a very skillful nurse. I thought she looked very tired, but her face seemed to me quite beautiful."

"Good-looking, not beautiful, my dear, and that's it. I always made a point of never having good-looking servants in the house, especially as there are young men about."

"Aunt!"

"Oh, yes, you may say 'Aunt,' my dear, but you do not understand these things. Good-looking servants always know it, and give themselves airs."

"But this lady is not a servant, Aunt."

"Don't talk nonsense, Isabel," said Aunt Anne tartly. "She is a servant, and she is not a lady. I can't help it, my dear; I don't like her at all, and I hope she will prove to be so dissatisfied, when she finds what she has to do, that she will want to go back to town at once. There's too much of the fine madam about her for me."

"Sir Denton would not have sent down a person who was not quite suitable, Aunt," said Isabel gravely. "If she nurses poor papa well that is all we want."

"Yes, my dear, but will she? There, I can't help it; I must speak plainly. I am the least suspicious woman in the world, but I do not like a surprise like this being sprung upon us."

"A surprise, Aunt?"

"Yes. Why did not Neil tell us what sort of a person this woman was going to be. He knows her, of course. You heard him call her by name."

"Aunt, dear, of what are you thinking?" cried Isabel wonderingly, and giving her aunt a strangely perplexed look.

"Oh, nothing, my dear. There, I suppose I must see to her having some tea when she comes down. She will have her meals with the servants of course."

"Has Nurse Elisia come down yet?" said Neil, entering quickly.

"No, my dear," said Aunt Anne, pinching her lips together.

"You have given orders for refreshments to be brought up to her?"

"Indeed no, my dear. I was just going to ring and tell them to get something ready in the servants' hall."

Neil's countenance changed.

"No, no," he said harshly.

"My dear Neil, she cannot have her meals with us."

"I cannot see why not," he replied sternly. "But she will not wish to leave her patient. Have one of the dressing rooms set apart entirely for her use, and all her meals can be taken to her upstairs."

Isabel looked at her brother in surprise, his manner seemed so changed.

"Oh, very well, my dear," said Aunt Anne in an ill-used tone as she rose to ring the bell, but was forestalled by her nephew. "I always thought when I came here that I was to take the entire management of this establishment, but your father always interfered, and now that he is helpless, I suppose you, as his eldest son—"

"Why, dear Aunt," said Neil, "pray do not think that I wish to interfere, but you do not understand Nurse Elisia's position. She is our principal lady nurse at the hospital, one in whom Sir Denton Hayle places every confidence, and

whom he treats almost as a friend."

"Oh, indeed!" said Aunt Anne. "I was not aware. Why did you not tell me before, my dear, who was coming down?"

"For the simple reason that I did not know, Aunt," said Neil quietly.

The footman, who had been waiting, signified his presence by a faint cough, received his orders, and left the room.

About this time Alison, who had been seated alone in the little study, smoking and trying to read, suddenly threw the book one way, the end of his cigar another, and rose with a yawn.

"Tired out and sleepy," he muttered. "Last night to make up for."

He seated himself on the table, and began swinging one leg about.

"Wonder how the gov'nor is," he said to himself, "and I wonder what he would say if he had seen us this afternoon. Those girls are giving themselves fine airs of their own. Miss Dana is siding with her sister, I suppose because Neil is so careless. I can't help it. No fault of mine, and if she thinks I am going to be snubbed and treated just as she pleases, she is mistaken. The money's all very well, but I'm not quite the easy-going fool she seems to think me. Hang me, if I go for a ride with them again till I'm treated better."

He gave his leg a sharp slap as a sudden thought struck him.

"That's it!" he cried. "I never thought of it before. It's Master Burwood's doing. That accounts for his being down home instead of in town. He wouldn't hang about so much on account of our Isabel. The governor's made all that too easy for him. And they knew it, and there's a sort of an idea that it would be nice to be my lady. Would it? Well, I'm not so stupid as they think me, and people get checkmated sometimes in a way they little expect."

He swung his leg about swiftly for a few moments, and then leaped off the table.

"I'm going to bed," he muttered. "Just see how the governor is as I go by, and—" he yawned—"oh, dear me! how sleepy I am."

He went out into the hall, and then, after pausing to listen to the murmur of voices in the drawing room, he shook one hand.

"Good-night, and bless you all," he said softly. "That's old Neil's voice. Look out, my lad, or you will lose the volatile Saxa. I suppose Aunt is with the old man."

He began to ascend the broad staircase very slowly, his steps being inaudible on the thick soft carpet, and he was about half way up when he became conscious of the soft rustle of a dress, and a faint glow of light passing along the gallery at the head of the stairs.

He stopped short on the landing, half startled as, in the centre of that glow, and gradually coming nearer, he saw, standing out plainly from the surrounding darkness, a clearly cut white face, that looked for the moment almost unearthly; but as it came nearer and approached the head of the stairs the half startled feeling gave way to wonder, and then to admiration.

"Who is she? What does it mean?" he thought as he noted the eyes glistening in the light shed by the candle, and the quaint white headdress, the only part of the costume seen, the black gown being as it were absorbed by the darkness of the great staircase and landing.

The figure came nearer and as she reached the top of the stairs began to descend, holding the candlestick so that it was between her and Alison, and hence she did not see him, where he stood on the landing half way down, till she was close upon him, when she stopped short and raised the light so that it fell upon his face, and they stood gazing at each other.

Nurse Elisia was the first to speak, just as she became conscious of Alison's admiring look.

"I beg pardon," she said, "would you kindly show me the way to the sick room."

"The nurse? You?" cried Alison eagerly.

"Yes; I have just come down from town," she said quietly.

"Yes, of course," said Alison eagerly. "And you must be tired and faint. Had any dinner? Here, come with me, and I'll show you the way to the dining room."

Nurse Elisia hesitated, and at that moment the drawing-room door opened, shedding a flood of light upon the portion of the staircase where they stood, and Neil Elthorne was conscious of a keen pang which for the moment he could not have explained.

"Oh, there you are," cried Alison sharply. "This lady does not know the way."

Aunt Anne's lips tightened again as she stepped forward majestically.

"Will you come this way, nurse, and I'll show you my brother's room," she said; and her dress rustled loudly, as if partaking of its owner's agitation, while she crossed the hall and began to ascend the stairs.

Nurse Elisia stood, candle in hand, waiting patiently and gazing at the plump elderly lady approaching her, in profound ignorance of the picturesque, striking aspect she presented as she held up the light whose rays illumined her features.

"I really don't like her at all," said Aunt Anne to herself, as her brow furrowed. "What a dreadful looking woman." And the memory of certain words she had spoken to her niece only a short time back came vividly before her. "I would a great deal rather it had been one of those old-fashioned stout nurses who did not wear white starched caps and black dresses, just as if they were playing at being nurses. This way, please," she continued aloud.

One minute the light shone strongly upon that white face; the next it seemed as if darkness had suddenly come over the scene and those in the hall were looking at two silhouettes moving up after a dull glow of light, to disappear through an archway; and then Neil Elthorne felt a pang of rage and misery shoot through him as, from the first landing of the broad staircase, he heard Alison exclaim aloud:

"By George!"

He descended then quickly to where Neil and Isabel were standing.

"I say," he cried banteringly, "so that's the modern style of nurse. Neil, old chap, is there any room for me to walk your hospital? I'm coming up to study medicine."

Isabel looked curiously from one to the other in the semi-gloom; and, as she saw her elder brother's face, a feeling of dislike to the newcomer which she could not have analysed arose within her, and she started as she heard the deep, hoarse tones in which Neil spoke.

"Is not this ribald style of talk out of place when our father is lying up yonder in so dangerous a state?"

"Oh, rubbish! He's getting better. But I like your taste, I must say. Capital judge of nurses. Neil's own selection, Bel."

Neil turned upon him sharply, as if about to speak, but he compressed his lips and went to the foot of the stairs.

"Going up?" said Alison laughingly. "Come along, Isabel; we'll go, too. I want another look at our new nurse."

Neil made an angry gesture. "Isabel," he said hoarsely, "take no notice of him. You had better not come up now."

As he spoke he began to ascend, and Alison was silent till Neil reached the top.

"Was that the doctor talking, or brother Neil?" he said sarcastically; but there was no reply, for the young surgeon had gone on slowly toward his father's chamber, with a strange, sickening feeling of misery and despair at his heart, as he felt that, in spite of all his resolutions, a bitter fight was commencing against fate, one which threatened to be complicated in a way that was horrible to contemplate. For his brother's countenance, as he saw it for one brief moment when he was watching the figure on the stairs, had impressed him in a way which was startling, and as he reached the door, he stopped on the mat listening to a faint murmur, while his brow became furrowed and he muttered.

"Am I so helpless? Have I no will, and do I really love this woman after all?"

He paused, gazing back along the passage to where he could see the dim reflection of the lamp in the hall, and as he stood there, the faintly heard voice of Nurse Elisia came once more to his ear. He drew a long, deep breath, and then, half aloud:

"I had not calculated on this," he thought. "I fled from the temptation, and it has followed me here. And she—she has never given me a second thought." He turned the handle quickly, and entered the room.

"Ah, that is right, Neil," said Aunt Anne. "Will you stay here while I take nurse to have some supper? She says she is not too tired to sit up to-night."

"Absurd!" said Neil, in a low, harsh voice. "After this long journey? Nurse, you will go with Mrs Barnett, and have some refreshment; then get to bed, and come and relieve me about seven."

"But, my dear Neil, you, too, want rest," said Aunt Anne.

"Aunt, be good enough not to interfere," replied Neil shortly. "Nurse Elisia, you heard my orders."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, very well, my dear," said Aunt Anne, in an ill-used tone. "I suppose you know best. This way, nurse."

Neil stood watching them as they left the room, and turned back toward the bed with a sigh of relief.

"I have not lost my strength of mind, then, after all," he muttered, as he drew himself up. "I will master it."

There was a faint glow in his pale cheeks as he spoke, but it died out at once, leaving him haggard-looking and careworn, and his face grew set and his eyes dark as he stood gazing straight before him, seeing neither the bed nor the wall beyond, but the scene upon the stairs of the pale, white face lit up by the caudle, while, a short distance below, stood Alison, gazing up from the darkness.

Neil shuddered, closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again they fell upon the sleeping figure before him. And as he looked down it was not with the eyes of man of science but of the son, thinking of his father's

plans. They had been children, and he had planned their education according to an eccentric whim of his own; youths, and he had principally chosen their career; they had reached manhood, and he had settled who were to be the companions of their lives. And as he thought, the faces of Saxa Lydon and her sister, followed by Sir Cheltnam Burwood, floated out of the mental mist, and complication after complication arose.

It was a dreary vigil, for Neil Elthorne was half worn out from broken nights and a long period of great anxiety, which had culminated in the arrival of the nurse; but not once through that long night did he feel the desire to sleep, and he could hardly realise the fact that it was morning, but stared and looked at her wildly when the door opened, and light shone in that was that of the morning sun, throwing up the pale, calm face of Nurse Elisia, who entered as if she were perfectly used to the place, and bearing for his special use a small tray, upon which were dry toast and tea.

Neil rose as she entered, with a whispered "Good-morning," and he felt that he was trembling, and that he was only man, with all his weaknesses, in spite of his stubborn resolves. But he was himself again directly, as she spoke.

"The patient, sir," she whispered; "has he passed a quiet night?"

"Yes, quite," said Neil.

"May I open one of the windows—that farthest from the bed, sir? The room is oppressive and faint."

"Yes, yes; of course;" he said hastily, and he hurried out of the room.

Chapter Eleven.

Awkward Encounters.

"Oh, really, Sir Cheltnam, I would a great deal rather you waited till my brother is better," said Aunt Anne, who seemed rather concerned about the sit of a couple of folds in her dress.

"Waited till he is better?" said the baronet, smiling.

"Well, you know what I mean. It is such an important thing that I really don't like to interfere."

"I would not ask you but I cannot ask Mr Elthorne. Wait? Oh, yes; I should be willing to wait, only, with all due respect to you, my dear Mrs Barnett, is it not rather indefinite?"

"Oh, dear me, I'm afraid so."

"And time is going on. You see, I do not want to be exacting, but I should like to find rather a warmer welcome when I come, and to be asked more frequently. It is Mr Elthorne's wishes."

"Yes, yes, of course; I know that. But Isabel is very young."

"It makes her the more attractive."

"Well, I suppose so. There, Sir Cheltnam, I'm a plain woman, and I'll speak out. I'm afraid she has been thinking a good deal about Mr Beck."

"Of course; but that is all over now. Mr Elthorne did not approve of it, and when I spoke to him, he told me that it was one of the great desires of his heart. Then came that terrible accident, and since then, you see, I have been quite left out in the cold. Come, now, Mrs Barnett, I do not wish to puff myself, but you must own that I can offer her everything that will insure her a happy future."

"Oh, yes; I know all that," said Aunt Anne. "Then play the part of friend to us both."

"What can I do?"

"A thousand things that a clever diplomatic woman, like yourself, can contrive admirably. Of course I know all about the Beck business, and what did I do? Show annoyance? Not a bit. I said, 'It is a young girl's first fancy, but one that she will soon forget. I'll wait;' and I have waited, but now it is time I was recognised a little by the young lady."

"But her time is so taken up with attending to her father."

"No, Mrs Barnett; I say little, but I see much. The nurse takes all that off her shoulders I believe."

"Oh, yes, very attentive, and that sort of thing; but I shall be very glad when she is gone."

"Naturally. But come, now—you will help me?"

"Well, well; I'll do all I can."

"I knew you would. Give me more of a *carte blanche* to come and go."

"But you are here a great deal now."

"Yes, as a formal visitor. Come, now, Mrs Barnett; if this were another establishment, and you a stranger and saw me here from time to time, would you ever imagine that dear Isabel and I were engaged?"

"Well—er—no."

"Of course you would not. There, I need not say any more; I am quite satisfied. Is she with her father now?"

"No; I think she is down the garden."

Sir Cheltnam smiled, bent forward, took and kissed the lady's hand.

"Thank you," he said, with a meaning smile; and he rose from the lounge in the drawing room where the above conversation had taken place, and turned toward the French window which opened out upon the lawn.

"No, no, really, Sir Cheltnam. I did not mean that."

"My dear Mrs Barnett—"

"Oh, very well; I suppose it's quite right. It was her father's wish."

"And yours, I am sure," he said, nodding meaningly as he reached the window and passed out.

"I hope I've done right," said Aunt Anne; "but Ralph is so strange, he may find fault. I'll go up and talk to him, and gradually introduce the subject."

Her countenance brightened, as she thought of this way out of a difficulty, and rising and smoothing her stiff silk dress, whose rustling she liked to hear, she went out into the hall, and began slowly to ascend the stairs.

"It is very trying to me," she said to herself. "Isabel does not seem to care for him a bit; and as to the two Lydon girls, really if any gentleman had behaved so cavalierly to me as Neil and Alison do to them, I certainly should not have put up with it." She paused for awhile rather breathlessly at the top of the stairs, and then went on to her brother's room and turned the handle, but the door was evidently bolted inside.

For the moment she seemed surprised, but she went on toward the next door, that of the dressing room attached, but, as she reached it, this door was opened, and the nurse appeared, to step out into the corridor, and close the door behind her.

"Did you try the other door, ma'am?" she said softly.

"Yes; it is bolted. Never mind; I'll go through here."

"Not now, ma'am," said the nurse quickly, and in a voice hardly above a whisper; but there was plenty of decision in her tones.

"Not now?" said Aunt Anne haughtily. "My good woman, what do you mean?"

"Mr Elthorne has dropped asleep, ma'am."

"Well, I'll go in and sit with him till he wakes."

"Excuse me, madam," said Nurse Elisia, barring the way; "he must not be disturbed."

"My good woman!" cried Aunt Anne again, ruffling up at anyone daring to interfere with her in that house, "I am not going to disturb him. Surely I know perfectly how to behave to a sick person."

"Of course, ma'am," said the nurse quietly, "and I am sorry to have to interfere."

"As you should be," said Aunt Anne tartly. "Have the goodness to stand on one side."

"I beg your pardon, madam," said the nurse gently, "you are placing me in a very awkward position, and I grieve to oppose you in your wishes, but I must obey my instruction from Mr Neil Elthorne. They were that I was to particularly guard against the patient's being disturbed when he was asleep."

"And very proper instructions too; but say Mr Elthorne, Nurse Elisia, and not 'the patient.' This is not a hospital."

The nurse bowed.

"I am sure my nephew did not intend that such instructions as these were to apply to me."

"To everybody, madam. Sleep is of such vital importance to the—Mr Elthorne in his present state, and he has so much difficulty in obtaining rest, especially at night, that even an hour's natural sleep is most desirable."

"Well, of course, I understand all that," said Aunt Anne, "and I shall take care that I do not make a sound."

She stepped forward, but the nurse did not stir.

"Will you have the goodness to move," said Aunt Anne, in the most frigid of tones.

"Pray forgive me, madam. I must carry out my orders."

"I have told you, my good woman, that they do not apply to me. Will you be good enough to stand aside?"

A faint colour appeared in the nurse's cheeks, but she did not move.

"Did you hear what I said?" cried Aunt Anne haughtily.

"Yes, madam, and again I ask your pardon," said the nurse gently. "Excuse me, pray, but you are placing me in a very painful position."

"Then stand aside," said Aunt Anne, who was growing very red in the face, consequent on being opposed. "Do you hear me, woman?"

"Yes, madam, but I must obey Mr Elthorne. A nurse dare not depart from the doctor's instructions. Even a slight lapse might mean a serious injury to the patient in her charge."

"I will take all the responsibility," said Aunt Anne haughtily. "Have the goodness to allow me to pass."

Nurse Elisia's eyes dropped, and there was a faint twitching at the corners of her eyes, but she did not stir.

"Are you aware that the mistress of this household is speaking to you?"

"Hush, madam, pray!"

"Oh, it is insufferable," cried Aunt Anne, whose anger was rising fast, when she saw a quick, eager look of satisfaction animate the pale set face before her, and at that moment a familiar voice said in a low tone:

"What is the matter, Aunt?"

"Ah, my dear," she cried; "you are there. I am glad. I declare it is insufferable. I was going in to sit by your father and talk to him."

"I told Mrs Barnett, sir, that Mr Elthorne was asleep."

"Yes, my good woman," said Aunt Anne, "and I told you I should go in and sit with him till he awoke. And, then, really it is insufferable for a hired servant to take so much upon herself."

"As what, Aunt?" said Neil, in a low, stern voice, "as to refuse to allow you to go in?"

"Yes, my dear. I can put up with a great deal, but I think it is quite time that the nurse knew that this is not a hospital ward, and that she is not mistress here."

"Nurse Elisia is quite aware of that," said Neil coldly; and his lips quivered slightly, as he saw that in spite of her apparent immobility, she was watching him curiously as if wondering what he would say; but he went on in the same cold, passionless way, "It is not a question of mistress or hired servant, but of care of my patient's progress toward recovery. I gave instructions that my father should never be in the slightest degree disturbed when he dropped into a natural sleep, and the nurse has done her duty and nothing more. Come away now, please, and you will see this in the proper light, if you will give it a moment's thought."

Aunt Anne gave her hands a kind of wave as if she were smoothing out a cloth over a table, and turning suddenly, walked with stately strides toward the head of the stairs, followed by her nephew, who did not even glance at Nurse Elisia, neither did he speak again till the drawing room was reached.

"The nurse was quite right, Aunt," he said quietly. "You must see that an attendant who did not carry out one's instructions to the letter would be untrustworthy."

"Pray say no more about it, Neil," she replied, with a great show of dignity. "I suppose I am growing old and useless. But there was a time when my opinion was of value in a sick chamber."

"Yes, of course, my dear Aunt, but this is a case where the patient must be kept perfectly quiet."

"Yes, that is it, Neil. You have become so absorbed in your studies as a surgeon that you seem to forget that my poor dear brother is your father."

"Nonsense, Aunt, dear."

"Oh, no, sir, it is the truth. I suppose I shall be looked upon as a patient next."

"Yes; as my dear loving patient Aunt," said Neil, smiling. "There, don't take any more notice of it. Good-bye. Come, come, don't look at me like that. It brings back one of your old scoldings when I was a boy."

He kissed her and went out of the room.

"But I don't like it," said Aunt Anne, "and I am not one to be deceived. I disliked that woman from the hour she entered the house. I had my forebodings then, and they grow firmer every day. He took her part directly. Why, Isabel, my dear, I thought you were down the garden," she cried, as her niece entered the room.

"I? No, Aunt. I just went to get a few flowers for papa, and I wanted to take them and arrange them in his room, but Nurse Elisia keeps watch there like a dragon, and would not let me go in."

"Why, she would not even let me go in," cried Aunt Anne with great emphasis on the first personal pronoun.

"Wouldn't she, Aunt?"

"No, my dear, and I shall bless the day when that woman goes. She is not what she appears."

"Isn't she, Aunt?"

"No, my dear."

"I've thought something of that kind," said Isabel dreamily. "She seems so much of the lady, and as if she quite looked down upon me, as being superior to us."

"Yes, my dear, and it makes my blood boil at times."

"Oh, I don't mean like that, Aunt, dear, for she is always gentle and kind and respectful too."

"No, my dear, no," cried Aunt Anne emphatically, "not to me. There, never mind that now, for I've something else to say. Did you see Sir Cheltnam down the garden?"

"Sir Cheltnam!" cried Isabel, changing colour. "Is he here?"

"Yes, my dear, and I told him you were down the garden."

"Aunt! Oh, you should not have told him that. Is he there now?"

"I presume that he is, and really my dear child, I see no reason why you should be so disturbed. Of course a little maidenly diffidence is nice and becoming and—good gracious! child, don't run away like that."

But Isabel had reached the door and darted out, for, through the window came the faint *crunch, crunch*, of manly steps upon the gravel.

For, naturally enough, Sir Cheltnam's quest had been in vain, as far as Isabel was concerned, but after looking about the lawn he had caught sight of someone seated beneath the drooping ash at one corner, and in the hope that it was she whom he sought, he had walked silently across the velvet grass to find that the heavy leafy screen was deceptive and that it was Alison leaning back in a garden-chair.

"Oh, it's you," he said, as he pulled aside the pendent boughs.

"Yes. Who did you think it was?" replied Alison surlily.

"Your sister. Is she always going to play hide-and-seek with me like this?"

"Like what? How should I know?"

"Look here, young fellow," cried Sir Cheltnam; "what's come to you these last three weeks?"

"Nothing."

"Bah! I'm not blind. There's something the matter. It isn't filial affection and grief, because the old man's getting better. It isn't love, because the fair Dana is pining for you on horseback somewhere. There is only one other grief can befall a hale, hearty young man; so it's money."

"Nonsense!"

"Must be, and if so, my dear boy, come in a brotherly way to me for help, and it is yours, either with a check of my own or somebody else's in the city."

"It isn't money," said Alison shortly. "I've as much as I want."

"My dear Alison Elthorne," cried Sir Cheltnam, grasping his hand, "that will do. You must stop now. You can go no farther. A young man of your years, appearance, and pursuits who can say that he has as much money as he wants, is a paragon, a *rara avis in terris*, a perfect model."

"Don't fool."

"I am not fooling, but speaking in sober earnest. My dear boy, you must be photographed, painted, modelled, sculptured, and, hang it all, my dear Alison, you will have to be put in Madame Tussaud's."

"Then it will be in the Chamber of Horrors for killing you," said Alison fiercely. "I'm not in a humour to be played with, so leave off."

"Then if it is not money, it's love," said Sir Cheltnam. "I've done, my dear boy; but tell me where your sister is."

"I don't know."

"Or won't know," said Sir Cheltnam. "Never mind. You will be better soon, and then apologetic." Alison made no answer, and Sir Cheltnam walked slowly away.

"Sulky cub!" he muttered. "What's the matter with him? Quarrelled with Dana perhaps, and she is leading him a life. Well, she is quite capable of doing it, and her sister will keep a pretty tight curb on Neil. I shall have a nice set of brothers and sisters-in-law when it comes off. Well, I don't know that it much matters. I am quite capable of keeping a watch over my own front door."

Chapter Twelve.

Maria is Venomous.

"Come in," said Aunt Anne, in response to a knock, and Maria Bell entered, to stand for a moment watching while a few entries were made diligently in the housekeeping book. Then Aunt Anne raised her head and coughed, a signal which Maria knew of old as premonitor of a scolding, and, to ward it off, struck first.

"Oh, much better, ma'am, thank you," she said hastily; "and it's very kind of you to ask. I'm getting as strong as I was before I went to the hospital, and I think the wine you gave me has done me a deal of good. I hope master's much better this morning, ma'am."

"Yes; your master is much better, Maria."

"I'm very glad, ma'am, for more reasons than one." Aunt Anne had made up and rehearsed a speech relative to the neglect of certain duties, now that Maria was back, and that though she had been ill, and allowances would be made and she would still be well cared for, she was not to expect that she was to lead a life of idleness, especially as there was now an invalid permanently in the house. But Maria's manner and that addition or qualifying of her joy at her master's improvement, quite drove the admonitory remarks out of her head by exciting curiosity.

"Eh?" she exclaimed, "for more reasons than one, Maria? What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing, ma'am," said the woman, tightening her lips, and taking up the hem of her apron to arrange in plaits.

"Maria, you know, and have known for years, how I hate and detest mystery. I desire that you tell me what you mean."

"Nothing at all, ma'am, indeed. I really—that is—I am very glad that master is better—that's all."

"That is not all, Maria. I despise hints, as you well know."

"Really, ma'am, there is nothing."

"Maria, you cannot deceive me. I can read you perfectly. You have some reason for that innuendo and after all I have done for you and that Mr Neil has done for you, I consider that you are acting very ungratefully by this reserve."

Maria began to cry.

"It—it—it wasn't from ungratefulness ma'am, I'm sure, for I'm bubbling over with gratitude to you and Mr Neil, and it was all on account of him that I spoke as I did."

"Now, Maria, what do you mean?" cried Aunt Anne, for the spark ignited upon her tinder-like nature was rapidly beginning to glow.

"Please, please, don't ask me, ma'am," said Maria, with sobs. "I would not make mischief in a house for worlds."

"Nobody asks you to make mischief, Maria; but if you have seen peculations, or matters connected with the housekeeping going wrong during your master's illness, it is your duty to speak."

"Yes, ma'am, but it wasn't anything of that sort."

"Then what was it?" said Aunt Anne judicially. "And I'd be the last to speak, ma'am, knowing how valuable a character is to a poor person; and well I know how easy it is to make mistakes and be deceived, especially about such matters as that."

"Maria, I insist. Why do you wish your master to be better?"

"Oh, of course, I want to see him quite well, ma'am, for though a bit 'arsh, a better master—"

"What other reason, Maria?"

"Well, ma'am, if I must speak, it is because I shall be glad when master's down again, and nurse is gone."

"Nurse? Stop a moment. She attended you at the hospital?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Maria, in a peculiar tone, which suggested neglect, ill-treatment, and all kinds of unfeminine behaviour; "she attended me. I was in her ward."

"Well?"

"Oh, that's all, ma'am."

"It is not all, Maria, and I desire that you speak."

"I don't like to see a woman like that attending master."

"It was the doctor's orders, Maria."

"So I s'pose, ma'am. I heard that Sir Denton sent her down. He thinks a deal of her. You see he's a very old gentleman, ma'am, and she flatters him, and makes believe to be very attentive, and she was always just the same to Mr Neil, ma'am. I was a-lying there in pain and suffering and affliction sore, but I couldn't help using my eyes, and I saw a great deal."

"Maria!"

"Oh, it's a fact, ma'am, and if I'd gone on as she did talking to the young doctors, I should never have expected to keep no place; but of course a head nurse is different to a hupper 'ousemaid."

"That will do, Maria," said Aunt Anne. "I cannot listen to such scandalous tattle. I have no doubt about its being all imagination on your part."

"I only wish it was, ma'am, I'm sure."

"It's only a temporary arrangement, of course; and now, I wanted to speak to you about several little pieces of neglect I have observed that must not occur again. I know you have been ill, but it is quite time that you were a little more attentive, especially as we are about to have company."

"Company, ma'am?"

"Yes; the Miss Lydons will be here to dinner on Friday, and they will stay the night, so I desire that their rooms are properly prepared before they come, and of course, as they will not bring their maid you will wait upon them."

"Yes, ma'am; I'll do my very best, and I hope—"

"That will do, Maria."

"But there was one thing I should like to tell you, ma'am."

Aunt Anne was burning with curiosity, but she raised her hand.

"Not another word, Maria. You know I never listen to the servants' tattle. Now go about your work."

"I 'ate her," muttered Maria, as soon as she was in the hall, which she crossed so as to get to the back stairs; "and if I haven't put a spoke in her wheel this time my name isn't what it is."

Maria tightened her lips as if to condense her spleen against the patient, long-suffering woman who had had the misfortune to incur her dislike.

"A thing like her!" she continued muttering. "A beggarly nurse, with not so much as a box of her own to bring down when she comes into a gentleman's house, and giving herself airs as if she was a lady. Oh, dear me, and indeed! Couldn't stoop to talk to a poor girl as if she was a fellow-creature, at the hospital; and down here, lor' bless us! anyone would think she was a duchess up in the skies instead of a common hospital nurse. Oh, I do 'ate pride, and if it wasn't that it do have a fall there'd be no living with such people."

Maria was not very strong yet, and she stopped short—as she expressed it to herself, with her heart in her mouth—and turned red and then pale on hearing a faint rustle behind her, and the nurse's low sympathetic voice accosting her.

"Ah, Maria, are you better this morning?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, ma'am, much better."

There was a tremendous emphasis on the "ma'am," suggestive of keen and subtle sarcasm, and the revolt of honest humility against assumption.

"I am very glad," said the nurse gently. "Mrs Barnett said that there were several little things you might do now in Mr Elthorne's room."

Maria's face turned scarlet, and she faced round viciously.

"Then it was you, was it, who complained to her that I didn't do my work properly?"

"I, my good girl?" said Nurse Elisia, smiling. "Oh, no."

"It must have been. Nobody else wouldn't have been so mean as to go telling tales."

"You are making a great mistake, Maria," said the nurse, with quiet dignity. "I certainly asked Mrs Barnett about a few things being done in your master's room, and she referred me to you."

"I don't want you to come here teaching me my work."

"Oh, no, I will not interfere, Maria," said the nurse coldly; "but it is necessary that the room should be seen to."

"Thank you, ma'am; as if I didn't know what a 'ousemaid's work is. Oh, I haven't patience with such mean, tale-bearing, stuck-up ways."

The nurse looked at her in a pained way, and for a few moments there was a slight flash of resentment in her face;

but it died out directly, and she spoke very gently:

"You are making a mistake, Maria."

"Don't 'Maria' me, please—ma'am," cried the housemaid; and that "ma'am" was tremendous.

"Stop," said the nurse, gently and firmly, and her eyes seemed to fascinate the woman, as a hand was laid upon her arm. "You have passed through a very trying ordeal lately, and it has affected your nervous system. You must not give way to an angry, hysterical fit like this. It is dangerous in your state."

"Oh, don't you begin to 'my lady' it over me." Nurse Elisia changed colour a little, and darted a penetrating look at the speaker, but her countenance resumed its old calm directly, and she went on firmly.

"Take my advice, Maria; now do as I tell you. Never mind about the work—I will do what is necessary myself. Go up to your bedroom and lie down for an hour, till you have grown calm and cool."

"I shan't," cried Maria, with the passionate utterance of an angry child; "and I won't stop in a house where—where,"—there was a hysterical outburst of sobbing here—"such goings on—and I'll take my month."

"Let me take you up to your room."

"No, no! I won't go. I—oh, oh, oh!"

But the strong will prevailed over the weak, and Maria suffered herself to be led along the corridor till, a figure approaching at the end, she cried spitefully through her sobs: "Of course, I know. To get me out of the way. Oh, I'm not blind."

Nurse Elisia's hand fell from the woman's arm as if it had been a gymnotus, and there was an indignant look in her eyes as they met Neil Elthorne's searchingly, in fear lest he had heard the malignant utterance.

"What is the matter?" he said. "Why, Maria, I thought you were so much better."

"It is a little hysterical attack," said the nurse quietly. "I was advising her to go and lie down, sir."

"Yes, of course," said Neil quickly, as he caught the woman's wrist. "Go and lie down at once. You must not give way to that sort of thing, Maria. You are not quite yourself yet."

"I—I'm better, now, sir," she said, as she struggled for the mastery over herself. "No, thank you! I can go by myself."

"Oh, yes," she muttered, as she glanced back on reaching the swing-door at the end of the corridor. "I'm not blind. A nice creature!—and him to go on like that. But I've not done yet."

Chapter Thirteen.

Aunt Anne's Resolutions.

Aunt Anne would not, she said, listen to Maria's tattle, but the woman's words went home.

"I suspected it," she said to herself, "and go she shall before matters are worse. It is always the way with these quiet, artful women."

So she took up her pen to write to Sir Denton Hayle, but she did not begin, for it occurred to her that if she did write and ask him to recall the nurse, he would immediately communicate with Neil to ask for an explanation, and whether Nurse Elisia had neglected her duties.

"And that's the worst of it," said Aunt Anne to herself, "she never has, but has done wonders for poor Ralph."

Then it occurred to her also that, though Neil was only her nephew, he was fast rising into the position of an eminent surgeon, and that in such a case as this she would not have dared to interfere if he had been someone else.

"Oh, dear me!" she said pettishly, "it's very dreadful. Women always were at the bottom of all the mischief in the world. I've suspected it; Neil has been so changed, and so has Alison. It seems monstrous, but as sure as I'm a living woman she has managed to attract them both, and it must be stopped or do one knows what mischief will happen. Why, those two might quarrel dreadfully, and then—Oh, dear me, I'm very glad Saxa and Dana are coming. They will be the real cure for the trouble after all."

She took up her pen again, but only to throw it back on to the silver tray.

"No; I mustn't write. Stop, I know; I'll go in and sit with Ralph this afternoon, and quietly work round to the point of the nurse leaving now. Isabel and I could do everything he requires."

"No," she cried, with her face full of perplexity, "he would only fly in a passion and abuse me for interfering, and insist upon keeping her twice as long, and if I told him what I thought about Neil and Alison it would enrage him so that he would have some terrible relapse. Oh, dear me! I don't know what Nature could have been about to make a nurse with a face and a soft, cooing voice like that woman's. Bless me!" she cried aloud. "Neil, you shouldn't make me jump like that."

"Didn't you hear me come in, Aunt?"

"No, my dear, and I am so nervous. It came on when your father had his accident."

"Oh, that will soon go off. I've just had a message from Sir Denton."

"To say that we need not keep the nurse any longer, and that he wants her back at the hospital?"

"No, Aunt, dear, in response to a letter of mine written days ago," said Neil, looking at her curiously.

"What about, then?"

"To say that he is on his way down here to see my father again, and give me his opinion about the progress made."

"But, Neil, my dear, you should not ask people like that. The Lydon girls are coming, and I cannot ask one of them to give up her room, and I'm sure Sir Denton wouldn't like mine, looking out toward the stables, though you can't see them."

"Don't trouble yourself, Aunt, dear. He will not stay. He will come down by one train, spend an hour here, and go back to town at once. I want his indorsement of my ideas respecting a change of treatment."

"Oh, if that is the case, then I need not worry."

"Not in the least, Aunt. Only see that the lunch is kept back."

"Of course, my dear. I am relieved. For it would have been awkward with those girls here."

"They are coming, then?" said Neil absently. "Why, you know they are coming, dear. Really, Neil, I shall be very glad when you are married—and Alison, too, if it comes to that."

Neil looked at her searchingly, but his aunt's face was perfectly calm—placid to a degree—though all the while she was congratulating herself upon the subtlety and depth of her nature in introducing the subject so cleverly.

"And why, pray?" he said coldly.

"Because you want something else to think about besides cutting off people's arms and legs. I declare you are quite growing into a dreamy, thoughtful old man. If I were Saxa Lydon I should take you to task finely about your carelessness and neglect. I declare I've felt quite ashamed of you."

He looked at her sadly.

"I'm afraid I am anything but a model young man, Auntie."

"Indeed you are, sir, and it's quite time you mended. I don't know what your father will say to you when he gets better. It is one of his pet projects, you know. Fortunately, Saxa is not like most girls."

"No," he said aloud, unintentionally. "Saxa is not like most girls."

"Then do, pray, make haste and get your father well and the nurse out of the house."

"Why are you in such a hurry to get the nurse out of the house, Aunt?"

"My dear! What a question! I declare, Neil, you revel in sick rooms, and in having nurses near you. This is not a hospital. Of course I want to see the nurse gone, and your father about again."

Neil frowned, and his aunt saw it. She added hastily:

"Not that I have a word to say against Nurse Elisia. I'm sure her attention to your poor father deserves all praise."

"God bless her! yes," said Neil, in a low, grave tone. "She has saved his life."

"Oh, no, my dear; I am not going so far as that," said Aunt Anne in alarm, so earnest was her nephew's utterance. "Nurses are not doctors."

"But they often do far more for the patients, Aunt."

"Do they, my dear? Oh, well, I dare say you are right."

"Yes, I am right," he said dreamily, and he turned and left the room, unaware of the fact that Aunt Anne was watching him intently.

"Oh, dear me! Oh, dear me!" she said to herself, "what a tone of voice! He is thinking about her. There is no doubt about it, but he is sorry and repentant. I can read him like a book. Yes; he is sorry. My words brought him back to a sense of duty, and he will be as nice as can be to Saxa in future. I'm sure I could not have spoken better. It is a great advantage—experience, and a good knowledge of human nature. Now that boy—well, he always was the dearest and best of boys, and if he had been my own I couldn't have thought more of him—that boy knows he has been doing wrong in letting himself be attracted by a pretty face, and my words have thoroughly brought him round. Maria was quite right, and I must talk to Alison too, and—yes, I will; I'll manage to have a chat with Sir Denton and beg him as a great favour to let me finish nursing my brother. I will not say a word about the nurse. Dear me! what am I thinking

about? I quite forgot to tell them we would lunch at half-past two.”

Aunt Anne got up and rang the bell.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Suspicious Patient.

There is plenty of food for the student in the dispositions of the sick, and the way they bear their pains.

Ralph Elthorne's was an exceptional case, and his moods were many. The principal feeling with him, in the intervals when he was free from pain, was one of irritation against fate for selecting him to bear all this trouble and discomfort. Illness had been so rare with him that at times he found it hard to realise the fact that he was lying there, utterly helpless and forced to depend upon those about him for everything, the result being that he was about as petulant and restless a patient as could be well imagined. In addition, he grew day by day more and more suspicious, lying and watching every look and act of those about him, ready to distort the most trifling things, and fancy that they were all part and parcel of some deeply laid scheme which was to interfere with his peace of mind and tend to his utter dethronement from the old position he had held so long.

On this particular morning he had been lying placidly enough, chatting with his son, while Nurse Elisia was in attendance, till Neil, feeling that the time had now come for his father to be prepared, let drop a few words about Sir Denton's visit.

The change was almost startling. There was a wildly eager, excited look in his eyes, and suspicion in the tone of his voice, as he exclaimed:

“Coming down? Sir Denton? For what reason? Quick! Tell me why?”

He caught his son's wrist, and his long thin fingers gripped it firmly as his troubled face, about which the grey hair was growing long since his illness, was turned searchingly to his son.

“Don't take it like that, my dear father,” said Neil, smiling. “It is not the first time we have had him to see you.”

“No, no! I know all that; but why, why is he coming?”

“I asked him to come down, sir, that is all.”

“Ah! you asked him to come down. Why, why was I not told?”

“For the reason you are showing,” replied Neil quietly. “I was afraid that if you knew you might agitate yourself, and fill your brain with fancies about your state.”

“So would any sick man,” cried Elthorne sharply. “And that is not all. You are keeping a great deal from me in your false wisdom. But you cannot hide it from one who knows intuitively what changes take place in him. I can see and feel it all. I am worse.”

“My dear sir, no,” said Neil, smiling.

“Don't contradict me, boy,” cried his father fiercely. “Surely I ought to know from my own sensations. I am far worse, and you have sent for Sir Denton because you have reached the end of your teachings, and feel helpless to do any more.”

“You do not give me much credit, father,” said Neil, smiling.

“Yes, yes, I do, boy, a great deal,” said the old man excitedly. “Then it has come to this at last.”

“My dear father, that is what I feared, or I should have spoken to you sooner. I assure you that you have no cause for alarm.”

“Words, words, words,” cried Mr Elthorne piteously. “The case is absolutely hopeless. You know it, and so you have sent for Sir Denton again.”

“My dear father,” began Neil, taking his hand. “Be silent sir,” cried the old man fiercely, “and let me speak.”

“Then, my dear patient,” said Neil, “I must insist upon your listening to me calmly and patiently;” but Mr Elthorne paid no heed and went on.

“I'm not going to blame you, boy, I suppose you have done your best, everything that you have been taught.”

Elisia glanced at Neil in spite of herself, and it was a commiserating look, but a feeling of elation ran through her as she saw his calm, patient, pitying look as she quitted the room.

“Indeed I have done everything possible, father,” he said quietly.

“Yes, yes; all you knew, boy; all you knew.”

“And I have been able to do more perhaps than a surgeon who visited you would have achieved, through always

being on the spot.”

“But your knowledge is limited, of course, boy.”

“Yes, I am afraid so,” replied Neil sadly.

“I’m not blaming you. Very patient with me, my boy. So has she been. Nurse!” he called. “Nurse!”

He turned his head a little so as to look over the back of the couch, for he had not seen that they were alone; and then, as he strained his neck a little to fix his eyes upon the door which communicated with the dressing room, it was painful to see the state of utter helplessness to which the strong man had been reduced. He could move his hands and arms, but the complete want of power elsewhere was so apparent to himself now that he uttered a groan of despair, and looked back imploringly at his son.

“What had I done?” he muttered. “What had I done?”

“My dear father,” whispered Neil; but the old man turned from him again impatiently.

“Nurse,” he cried, “nurse!” and he beat, with a stick that was ready to his hand, impatiently upon the floor.

“I will go for her,” said Neil eagerly; but there was no need. Nurse Elisia had faithfully devoted herself to the service of her patient; his call had been heard, and she came in quickly and silently, to glide toward the couch, her eyes the while scanning the sufferer questioningly, as if asking what had occurred to cause the summons.

“There is nothing wrong, nurse,” Neil felt moved to say, as he saw the questioning look.

“What?” cried Mr Elthorne, turning his eyes fiercely upon his son. “There is, nurse, and that is why I summoned you. Look here, Neil; my body may be half dead, but my head is clear. I am not imbecile yet, and I will not be treated like a child. It is hard, very hard, that even one’s own son sinks his relationship in the professional man, and forgets that he is dealing with his father, who has become to him only a patient.”

“My dear father!” cried Neil, smiling, “are you not a little hard on me?”

“No, no!” cried the old man irritably. “You are deceiving me, for my good as you call it, and as you owned a little while back.”

“Indeed, no,” said Neil quietly. “I only owned to keeping back the fact that Sir Denton was coming down till the morning of his visit, so as to save you from brooding over it and getting anxious.”

“Well, what is that but deceiving me as I say, and treating me as a child?”

“Surely not, my dear father.”

“I say it is, and it is cruel. I want to trust you, but you all, even to Isabel, join in cheating me, for my good as you are pleased to call it.”

Neil glanced at the nurse, who met his eyes, but, quick as lightning the sick man raised his hand, half menacingly, at his son.

“Hah!” he cried, “don’t try to corrupt her, and induce her to join your conspiracy; I can read your looks—‘Don’t contradict him.’ She is honest; I can trust her. You will tell me the simple truth, nurse, will you not?” he said, holding one hand over the back of the couch toward her.

She stepped nearer, and took the extended hand. “Indeed, I will, sir,” she said gently; and then, with a smile, “unless, sir, I were forbidden.”

“What?” he cried, withdrawing his hand.

“There might be a crisis in your illness when your medical adviser felt it was absolutely necessary, for your own sake, to keep back something of your state.”

“Hah!” he cried bitterly, “all alike—all alike. I thought I could trust you.”

“You can trust me, sir, to be your faithful servant, who is striving to help your recovery.”

He looked at her with the lines about the corners of his eyes very deep, but her frank, ingenuous look disarmed him, his face softened, and he said gently: “Yes, I can trust you, nurse. God bless you for a good, patient soul. And now, tell me—there cannot be such a crisis as that of which you speak—surely I should feel something of it if impending—”

He did not finish his sentence but looked piteously up at the nurse, whose smile of encouragement chased his dark thoughts away again, and he once more raised his hand.

“Yes,” he said gently. “You will tell me the truth. Sir Denton is coming down—to see me—to-day. It means that, though I do not suffer more, I am much worse?”

“Indeed, no, sir; and you are agitating yourself without cause.”

“Agitating myself without cause,” he muttered softly as he glanced at his son, and then quickly back at the candid face bent over him, while Neil’s heart beat more heavily, and there was a dreamy sensation of intense joy at his

heart as he saw how full of faith and trust his father seemed.

"You are steadily getting better, sir," continued Elisia, and her soft, low voice was full of a tender sympathy for the broken man who clung to her hand.

"Is that the truth?" he said, very slowly and impressively. "Don't you deceive me, it would be too cruel. You will tell me all?"

She bent down over him a little lower so that he could gaze full in her clear, frank eyes, and there was a curious sense of swelling in Neil's breast, and a jealous pang of despair as he clutched the arm of the chair tightly and thought of Alison, while the silence in the room seemed to be prolonged.

It was Ralph Elthorne who broke that silence, and Neil started back to the present, for his imagination had been going rapidly astray.

"Yes," he said quietly; "it is the truth."

He paused again for a few moments.

"You need not tell me," he continued, "but, answer this: and I shall quite recover—the use—of my limbs—and get about—again—as before?"

Nurse Elisia did not remove her eyes from those which gazed into hers with such fierce question; but her own grew cloudy and seemed to darken with sadness and pity for the suffering man.

"Answer me," he said imperiously.

She turned quickly to Neil.

"No," cried Mr Elthorne; "don't ask him what you are to say. Speak out—the truth."

She bent lower over him with her eyes brimming over now, a couple of drops falling upon the invalid's breast as he clung spasmodically to her hand.

"You cannot lie," he said hoarsely. "The truth—the truth?"

Again there was a painful silence, and Neil clasped his hands together as his arms rested upon his knees, and he closed his eyes and let his head sink down, listening intently for the sentence which Nurse Elisia had been called upon to deliver. And at last she spoke, her low, soft voice thrilling father and son: "God has spared your life," she almost whispered, but every word was painfully audible, "and you retain the greatest gift to man—the full possession of your mental powers."

"Yes, yes," he whispered. "Go on—go on."

"You will soon, now, be sufficiently strong to be out and about once more, but—"

"Go on," he panted—"go on."

"Forgive me, dear Mr Elthorne, for saying it. You force it from me."

"Yes, yes; go on," he panted—"the truth—the truth. I shall be out and about, but—"

"Never again as of old," she continued; and low as her words were, they rang out to the ears of the listeners; "never again as of old."

As she uttered this last word of what was almost as painful as a death sentence to such a man as Ralph Elthorne, a sob seemed to be torn from his breast, and Neil sprang up as if expectant of some fresh seizure. But his father made a sign which arrested him, and lay back gazing straight before him till many moments had elapsed. Then his lips parted, and they heard him say in a whisper:

"A helpless cripple—I? Yes, it is the truth—the truth."

Chapter Fifteen.

A Tempting Offer.

"Never again as of old."

The words seemed to quiver in the silence of the sick chamber as Nurse Elisia uttered what, to the sufferer, sounded like a sentence, the more terrible as coming from one so grave, calm, and unimpassioned as the beautiful woman who stood before him; and as he lay, gazing wildly at the speaker, Neil saw his father's eyelids tremble and then slowly drop over the dilated eyes, while his worn, thin, wrinkled face was contracted. But he opened his eyes again, and clung tightly to the nurse's hand.

"Yes," he said firmly, "that is the truth. Thank you, nurse, thank you. God bless you for what you have done for a poor helpless cripple."

He drew her down toward him as he spoke till he could kiss her brow, and then, as she rose, he released her hand.

"Thank you," he said quietly; "thank you. Yes, that is the truth. But I shall be out again, Neil, weak in body, but not imbecile. I shall still be the Squire, boy. I am the Squire. Now, tell me: why is Sir Denton coming down?"

"Simply for me to ask his opinion, father," said Neil, seating himself again, and resisting the temptation to offer the nurse a chair. But before he could continue it seemed as if his thoughts had been communicated to the patient, who turned toward her.

"Sit down, nurse," he said. "I am wearing you out with attending on me."

"Indeed no, Mr Elthorne—" she began.

"Sit down," he cried imperiously, and she quietly obeyed.

"Now go on, Neil."

"Of course I have studied your case very hard," said the son, "and I have certain ideas that I should like to test. I believe they would strengthen you, but I will not do anything without getting my opinions endorsed by a man of greater experience."

"Humph! That's sensible; eh, nurse?"

She bowed gravely.

"So I wrote to Sir Denton at length, telling him what I had arrived at, and asking him to come down the first free day he had, or, I should say, the first time he had a few hours, to see you, and give me his advice."

"Is that all?" said Mr Elthorne sharply.

"Everything, father."

"Humph! Well, that's right, my boy, quite right. Don't experiment upon me," he said, with a painful laugh. "After fighting through all this I can't afford to go backward. Keep the experiment for some poor hospital patient."

The words jarred on Neil, and he glanced quickly at the nurse, to see that there was a pained look in her eyes, but it passed off as she saw that she was observed.

"Well, when do you expect him?" said Mr Elthorne.

"Almost directly, sir."

"And why was I not told?"

"For fear of agitating you, and setting you brooding over it. Besides, I was not sure when he would come down."

"Humph! Well, don't treat me as if I were a child, boy. I can think if I can't walk. And I must be got out now. Has that chair come down?"

"Yes."

"That's right. I'll be carried down on Friday when my girls come. If they call before then they are to be brought up. No, no; I know what you are going to say—that they will talk too much. It will do me good to hear Saxa's chatter and Dana's prattle. When did you see them last?"

In spite of himself Neil glanced at the nurse as he answered:

"I hardly know. On Sunday, I think."

"You hardly know! On Sunday, you think! My dear boy, what a dreamer you have become! Lucky for you that Saxa is what she is."

It was hard work for Neil to keep his eyes averted from the nurse. "What will she think?" he said to himself.

The sound of wheels on the drive put an end to the conversation, Neil hurrying out to welcome the great surgeon, who declined all refreshment until after he had heard full particulars of the progress of the case and seen the patient.

"I could not have done differently," said Sir Denton at last. "You found Nurse Elisia invaluable, of course?"

"Invaluable."

"Then now let us go up and see him."

Neil led the way to where Ralph Elthorne lay helpless, but with his eyes gazing keenly at him as they entered.

"Ah, good-morning, Mr Elthorne," cried Sir Denton cheerily. "Good-morning, nurse. Now, sir, you know why I have come?"

"Yes, my son has told me," replied the injured man, watching his visitor's expression. "Well? Am I worse?"

"No, sir; much better. There is no doubt of that. There is a vigour in your manner and speech that is most satisfactory."

"But I am always to be a helpless cripple?" said Elthorne bitterly.

Sir Denton did not reply for a few moments, but sat gazing in the patient's eyes.

"You wish me to answer that question?" he said at last.

"Of course."

"Then I will. I can answer a man of your strength of intellect, Mr Elthorne. Yes, sir. No surgical skill could restore you."

He stopped short and watched the patient intently. "That's well," he went on. "You bear the announcement manfully. Quite right, for your life has been saved, Mr Elthorne; and with the palliatives that mechanical skill can supply you with, you ought to and can enjoy many years of useful life. Your son has thoroughly explained to me his intentions regarding your future treatment, and I fully endorse his ideas. They will benefit you, but do not expect too much."

"Condemned to a life of helplessness!" muttered Elthorne in a low voice.

"No, sir, you have your brain intact," said Sir Denton. "Thank God for that."

"Yes," said Elthorne, gripping the surgeon's hand, "thank God for that. I will not repine, Sir Denton, for I can think, and will, and be obeyed. Do you hear, Neil? and be obeyed. The head is right."

"Yes, and the heart, Mr Elthorne. So no despair, sir. Meet your trouble like a man. You can be a successful general yet in the battle of life."

"Thank you, sir."

"My dear Mr Elthorne, I wish I could hold out hopes of an ultimate recovery of the use of your limbs, but, with a man like you, a frank, open statement is best. You know the worst, and you can get over the difficulties. I can say no more, unless I deliver a eulogy upon your son's skill."

"Don't do that," said the invalid grimly; "he is conceited enough already."

"Then I will leave you now and ask for a little refreshment. I have had nothing but a cup of tea since my dinner last evening."

He rose, shook hands, and then turned to Nurse Elisia.

"I miss you sadly, nurse, but I suppose you cannot be spared for the present."

"Spared?" cried Elthorne quickly. "No, no; certainly not."

"But I want her in my ward, Mr Elthorne," said Sir Denton, smiling.

"Yes, after a time. But not yet. I am so helpless at present."

"Well, well, we shall see," said Sir Denton pleasantly. "It is mutually satisfactory. Nurse was suffering from our close London hospital air, and overworked. The change here has worked wonders. Good-bye, Mr Elthorne. I congratulate you upon the skill your son has shown."

He shook hands, and left patient and nurse together, descending with Neil to the drawing room, where Isabel, Alison, and Aunt Anne were waiting to hear his report.

"Oh, I am glad," cried Aunt Anne, wiping her eyes; and then: "You think he can do without the nurse now?"

Alison gave her a furious look, which did not escape Neil.

"Eh? Do without the nurse?" cried Sir Denton. "I did not say so. No, my dear madam, her attention is more necessary than ever, I am sorry to say."

Aunt Anne's plump countenance bespoke her disappointment.

"You are sorry to say?" she said.

"Yes, my dear madam, for I want her back in town."

Lunch was at an end, and the carriage at the door. Sir Denton shook hands and went out into the hall with Neil, took up his hat, set it down again, looked at his watch, and replaced it.

"About half an hour to spare, eh, Elthorne?"

"Yes, quite."

"Take me down the garden, then, where I can see flowers growing. God bless them! I wish I were a gardener. I want to speak to you."

Neil led the way down a sunny walk, beneath an ancient red brick wall, the old surgeon looking sharply about him till

they reached a sundial standing upon a moss-eaten stone. Here he paused and rested his elbow on the copper disk, like a modern figure of Time.

"Neil Elthorne," he said, "I like you."

Neil smiled.

"The feeling is mutual, Sir Denton."

"I know it, my dear boy. You are my favourite pupil, and I want to see you rise. Now, do not be startled. I have been requested to select an able man who promises to be eminent to send out to Black Port."

"On the west coast of Africa?"

"Yes. To establish a hospital there—a cosmopolitan hospital in which government is interested. It is a terrible place, but a medical man knows how to take care of himself. He would have to engage for five years; the pay is very high; and he would have to devote himself to his task, above all in trying to ameliorate—cure if he can, and I believe it possible—the local disease, which is increasing fast. I do not conceal from you that there will be risks; but the man who goes out there for a few years and works, will come back to be loaded with honours, and take a very high position in his profession. A knighthood will probably follow. If I were a young man I would go, but I must content myself at my age with my ward in London. Now, then, there is plenty of time for consideration, but I should like to go back with some idea. I have not spoken yet to a soul, and I need not tell you that it would be a wrench to part with you; but it is your opportunity, and, as I have your future success at heart, I want to see you rise. Will you go?"

"I, Sir Denton? It is the opening for a physician."

"As much for a surgeon, my dear boy. He must be both. You are as good a surgeon as I am."

"Oh, Sir Denton!"

"You need not exclaim. I am not blind. I have had vast experience, but I am getting old and weaker. You have all that my experience has taught you, and, in addition, youth and a thoughtful, originating brain. I tell you frankly, because you are not a weak fool who would be puffed up: long before you are my age you will stand far higher than I do. I don't want to send you out there because I am jealous of you," he added laughingly.

"But I should not be equal to the task from the medical point of view."

"Nonsense, my lad! If I wanted medical help, I would far rather come to you for it than to any man in our hospital. Now, don't decide rashly; take time to think it over. You would not have to go for two or three months. There, I need say no more save repeating this: it is a terrible place from a health point of view, but the man who goes will be able to do something to lessen the risks, and government will help him in his movements for sanitation. Now, I must be off. Pick me a few flowers. Aha! That is charming," he cried, as he saw Isabel waiting with a bunch she had hastily cut in one of the houses. "Thank you, my dear child. Those shall stand in water in my room in memory of a delightful visit. I envy you your life in this charming old place. Good-bye."

He shook hands with Isabel again, and walked back to the carriage with Neil, who looked very thoughtful.

"You can write and ask any questions," said Sir Denton, "and in a week you will give me your decision."

"I will give it you now, Sir Denton," said Neil gravely. "It is no."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"You will not alter your mind?"

"No; I shall stay in England—with you."

"I am very sorry, Neil Elthorne, for some things—very glad for others. The first is for you—the latter for myself. Good-bye. Tell him to go fast." The horses sprang off, and Neil stood thinking in the carriage drive.

"A lady in the case," said Sir Denton. "Well! it is human nature, and I am not sorry—for both their sakes. He loves her, and some day he will come and tell me."

At that moment Neil turned to re-enter the house, and his eyes lighted upon Nurse Elisia at the first-floor window watching the departing carriage. Their eyes met, and she drew back.

Neil sighed, and then felt a spasm of pain shoot through him, for he saw that his brother was close at hand, and that he must have seen the direction of his eyes, for there was a frown upon his brow which was there still as he said roughly:

"The old man's gone, then. I suppose he'll charge a pretty penny for coming down all this way?"

Neil looked at him in surprise for the moment, but directly after he felt that his brother had merely spoken to conceal his thoughts, and he was thinking this as he replied:

"Charge? No. I shall give him a check for the railway fare. He would look upon it as an insult if I offered him a fee."

Chapter Sixteen.

How Elisia became a Nurse.

The bedroom was bright with flowers and the many touches given by a thoughtful woman's hand, to which was due the sweet fragrance in the air.

"But you are better to-day, sir?"

"No, nurse, no. Perhaps better in body, but not in spirit. You cannot understand it. I seem to be a prisoner chained down. My body is here, and my mind is everywhere about the place with my old projects."

"Shall I read to you, sir?"

"Read? Yes; I like to hear you read. You are a strange nurse, to be able to read with so much feeling. Get a book. Something good."

"What would you like to-day?"

"Anything. Who's that? Go and see. So tiresome, disturbing me like this."

Nurse Elisia went to answer the light tap at the door, and as she opened it Aunt Anne appeared, and was sweeping by her, when her brother cried, "Stop!"

"But I have some business to transact with you, Ralph," said the lady pleadingly.

"I cannot help it. Go away now. I cannot be disturbed."

"Oh, very well, Ralph. I will come up again," said Aunt Anne in an ill-used tone.

"Wait till I send for you," said her brother sourly.

"It's all that woman's doing," said Aunt Anne to herself, as she swept down the corridor. "Oh, if I could find some means of sending her away."

"It seems as if it were my fate to make enemies here," said Nurse Elisia to herself, as she stood waiting with a book in her hand. "It is time I left, and yet life seems to have been growing sweeter in this quiet country home."

Her eyes were directed toward the window, by which a little bookcase had been placed; and, as she looked out on the beautiful garden, there was the faint dawn of a smile upon her lip, but it passed away directly, leaving the lips white and pinched, while a curiously haggard and strange look came into her face. She craned forward and gazed out intently; there was a cold dew upon her forehead, and the hand which took out her kerchief trembled violently.

She drew back from the window, but, as if compelled by some emotion she still gazed out. Ralph Elthorne did not notice the change in the nurse's aspect, but illness had made his hearing keen, and he said sharply:

"Who is that coming up to the front?"

"Miss Elthorne, sir."

"But I can hear two people."

"A gentleman is with her."

"What gentleman? what is he like?"

There was a strange singing in Nurse Elisia's ears, as, with her voice now perfectly calm, and her emotion nearly mastered, she described the appearance of the visitor so vividly that Elthorne said at once:

"Oh, it's Burwood."

She looked at him quickly, to see that he lay back with his eyes half closed, musing, with a satisfied expression upon his face, while her own grew wondering of aspect and strange.

For her life at Hightoft had been so much confined to the sick chamber, that she knew very little of the neighbours. The Lydons had often been mentioned in her presence, and, from a hint or two let fall, she had gathered that Isabel was engaged to some baronet in the neighbourhood; but she had not heard his name, which came to her now as a surprise, while the fact of his being in company with the daughter of the house, and the satisfied look upon the father's countenance, left no doubt in her mind that this was the suitor of his choice.

The current of her thoughts was broken by her patient, who seemed to wake up from a doze.

"Ah, you are there?" he said. "I must have dropped asleep, and was dreaming that you had gone out for your walk, and I could not make anybody hear. Have I been asleep long?"

"Very few minutes, sir. In fact, I did not know you were asleep."

"Ah, one dreams a great deal in a very short time. You were going to read to me, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I begin?"

"You may as well, though I would as soon think." There was a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in. No; see who that is, nurse. Why am I to be so worried! I'm not ill now," he cried peevishly.

She crossed to the door and opened it, to find Isabel standing there, flushed and evidently agitated.

"May I come in and sit with you a little while, papa?" she said.

Elthorne shook his head.

"No," he cried shortly, "and I will not be interrupted so. Your aunt was here just now. Pray do not be so tiresome, my dear child. I will send for you if I want you. Why have you left Burwood?"

A sob rose to Isabel's throat, and as she saw the nurse standing there, book in hand, a feeling of dislike began to grow within her breast.

For why should not this be her task? Why was this strange woman to be always preferred to her? It should have been her office to read to the sick man, and she would gladly have undertaken the duty.

"I am very sorry I came, papa, but I see you so seldom," she said softly. "Papa, dear, let me come and read to you."

"No, no," cried Elthorne peevishly. "Nurse is going to read. Besides, you have company downstairs. Burwood has not gone?"

"No, papa."

"And you come away and leave him? There, go down again, and do, pray, help your aunt to keep up some of the old traditions of the place. What will Burwood think?"

Isabel gave a kind of gasp, her forehead wrinkled up, and the tears rose to her eyes, but at that moment she saw those of the nurse fixed upon her inquiringly, and in an instant she flushed up and darted a look full of resentment at "this woman," who appeared to be gratifying a vulgar curiosity at her expense.

"Did you hear me, Isabel?" cried her father, querulously. "Pray, go down. You fidget me. Go down to Burwood, and if he asks, tell him I am very much better, and that I shall be glad to see him soon."

"Yes, papa," she said faintly; and turning back to the door, she had her hand upon it, when, moved by an affectionate impulse, she ran back quickly, bent down and kissed him.

"Good girl!" he said. "Good girl! Now make haste down."

She glanced quickly at the nurse, and the resentful flush once more suffused her cheeks, for those eyes were still watching her, and this time there was a smile upon the slightly parted lips.

The girl's eyelids dropped a little and she replied with a fixed stare before once more reaching the door and passing out.

"How dare she!" thought Isabel, trembling now with indignation. "She quite triumphs over one. Aunt is right; she is not nice. She seems to contrive to stand between me and papa. It is not prejudice, and I shall be very, very glad when she is gone." The door had hardly closed upon her, when, in a fretful way, Ralph Elthorne exclaimed:

"Now, go on; go on!"

The nurse began reading directly, an Old World poem of chivalry, honour, and self-denial; and as the soft, rich, deep tones of her voice floated through the room, Ralph Elthorne's head sank back, his eyes closed, and his breath came slowly and regularly.

But the reader had grown interested in the words she read. The story of the poem seemed to fit with her own life of patient long-suffering and self-denial, and she read on, throwing more and more feeling into the writer's lines. At last, in the culminating point of the story, her voice began to tremble, her eyes became dim, the book dropped into her lap, and a low faint sob escaped from her lips, as the pent up, long suppressed agony of her heart now broke its bounds, and, as her face went down into her hands, she had to fight hard to keep from bursting into a fit of hysterical weeping.

For, only a short hour before, the deep wound of the past had suddenly been torn open, and memory had come with a rush of incidents to torture her with the recollections of the bygone, of the rude awakening from the golden dream of her girlhood's first love to the fact that the man who had first made her heart increase its pulsations, the man she had believed in her bright, young imagination to be the soul of chivalrous honour, was a contemptible, low-minded *roué*. How she had refused to believe it at first, and insisted to herself that all she had heard was base calumny; and she had gone on defending him with indignation till the cruel facts were forced upon her, and in one short minute she had turned from a trustful, passionate, loving girl, to the disillusioned woman, with no hope but to find some occupation which would deaden the misery of her heart.

Since then her life had been one of patient self-denial, at first in toiling among the suffering in the sordid homes of misery in one of the worst parts of London. Here, while tending a woman dying of neglect and injuries inflicted by some inhuman brute, it had struck her that she might enlist the sympathies of the great surgeon whose name had

long been familiar, and ask him to come and try to save the woman's life.

To think with her was to act, and she waited on him humbly and patiently, all the time trembling for the consequence to the injured woman left almost alone. But at last her turn came, and she was ushered into Sir Denton's presence.

He heard her patiently, and shook his head.

"It is impossible, my dear young lady," he said sharply. "I can but battle with a few of the atoms of misery in the vast sands of troubled life. From your description of the case, I fear I can do no good, and my time for seeing patients here at home is over, while a score of poor creatures are lying in agony at my hospital waiting their turn."

She looked at him despairingly, and he spoke more gently.

"I admire and respect the grand self-denial of such ladies as yourself who devote themselves to these tasks, so do not think me unfeeling. It is that I can only attend a certain number of cases every day."

"But you would go to some wealthy patient," she cried imploringly, "and I will pay you whatever fee you ask."

"You wrong me, my dear young lady," he said gravely. "I would not go to-day to any wealthy or great patient for any sum that could be offered me. I take fees, but I hope my life is not so sordid as that."

"Forgive me," she said hastily. "I beg your pardon."

"Yes," he said, taking her hand to raise it reverently to his lips, "I forgive you, my child, and I will prove it by seeing the poor woman of whom you speak. Come."

He led her out to the carriage waiting to take him to the hospital, and a group of the wretched dwellers in the foul street soon after stood watching the great surgeon's carriage, while he was in the bare upstairs room of the crowded house. He stayed an hour, and came again and again, till the day came when another carriage stopped at that door, and a hushed crowd of neighbours stood around, to see Nurse Elisia's patient carried out, asleep.

"If I only had come to you sooner!" she said.

"I could have done no more," replied Sir Denton. "Believe me, it is the simple truth. We can both honestly say that we have done everything that human brain and hands could do."

They were walking slowly away from the house where the woman had died.

"And now I must speak to you about yourself."

"About myself?" she said wonderingly.

"Yes; I ask you no questions about your friends, or your reasons for taking up the life to which you have devoted yourself; but I am interested in you and your future. Do you intend to go on attending the sick and suffering?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"Good; but not like this. You are young and beautiful, and at all hours you are going about here alone."

"I have no fear," she said, smiling. "The poor people here respect me."

"Yes; and, to the honour of rough manhood, I believe, my child, that there are hundreds who would raise a hand for your protection; but the time will come when you will meet with insult from some drink-maddened brute. You must give it up. Your presence is so much light in these homes of darkness, but—you have interested me, as I tell you."

She looked at him searchingly.

He read her thoughts and smiled.

"I am speaking as your grandfather might. Let me advise you, my child. This must not go on."

"I thank you," she replied; "but I have devoted myself to this life, and I cannot turn back."

"I do not ask you to turn back," he said. "You have devoted yourself to the sick and suffering. The duties can be as well performed where you will be safe, and treated with respect."

She looked at him doubtingly.

"Let me counsel you," he said. "Come."

"Where?" she asked, and he held out his hand. "You can trust me," he said; and he led her to his carriage, and then through the ward of the hospital where he reigned supreme.

It was a few days after a terrible accident at one of the hives of industry, and among other sufferers, some ten or a dozen poor work-girls lay, burned, maimed, and in agony, longingly gazing at the door to see the face of the grey-haired man on whose words they hung for life and strength.

That day he came accompanied by his pale, sweet-faced young friend, in whose beautiful eyes the tears gathered as she went round with him from bed to bed, appalled by the amount of bodily and mental suffering gathered in that

one narrow space.

"Well?" he said, a couple of hours later. "Is it too dreadful, or will you help me here?"

"Can I?" she said simply. "I am so ignorant and young."

"You possess that," he said gravely, "which no education can impart. Your presence here will be sunshine through the clouds. I should shrink from asking you to come among these horrors, but you have, for some reasons of your own, taken up this self-denying life, and I tell you that you can do far more good to your suffering fellow-creatures here than by seeking out cases in those vile streets. You will be safe from insult and from imposition. We have no impostors here. What do you say?"

She gave him her hand, and the next day Nurse Elisia came from her home—somewhere west, the other nurses said—and returned at night unquestioned, and after a week or two of jealousy and avoidance, as one different to themselves, the attendants one and all were won to respect and deference by acts, not words.

Chapter Seventeen.

"You Insult Me!"

And now Nurse Elisia sat in Ralph Elthorne's chamber, her face buried in her hands, the memories of her past life rushing back and a sense of misery and despair increasing, so that she felt that the time had come when she must rise and flee from a place which had suddenly become insupportable to her.

Then a change came over her. There was a feeling of passionate resentment, and a desire to do battle against the one who had wrecked her life.

"Shall I stand by and see another's life destroyed as mine has been?"

But her own misery and despair drove these thoughts away, and her spirit was sinking lower and lower as the complications of her position seemed to increase.

"I cannot stay here," she said to herself. "It is impossible. I have no part or parcel with these people. I have done my duty, and I must go."

Suddenly she started as if she had been stung, for her hand had been taken, and Neil Elthorne was bending over her.

"For Heaven's sake," he whispered, "don't! I cannot bear to see you suffer. Tell me, why are you in such grief?"

"Mr Elthorne!" she cried in a low voice, as she glanced toward where the patient lay asleep.

"Yes; Neil Elthorne," he said huskily. "I cannot bear to see you in such distress. I have fought with it; I have struggled and suffered for months and months now. I felt that it was a kind of madness and that it was folly and presumption to think as I did of one who seemed never even to give me a thought. I came down here. It was to flee from you, and try to forget you, but fate brought you here, and I have had to go on from day to day fighting this bitter fight."

"Mr Elthorne—your father—are you mad?"

"Yes," he said excitedly. "Mad; and you have made me so. I know that I am not worthy of you, but listen; give me some hope. Elisia, have pity on me—I love you."

"No, no; hush, hush!" she whispered excitedly. "It is impossible; it is not true."

"It is not impossible, and it is true," he said. "You must have known this for long enough. You must have seen the cruel struggle I have had. Are you so cold and heartless that you turn from me like this?"

"Mr Elthorne!" she cried indignantly; "you take advantage of my helplessness here. I ought to look for your respect and protection as a gentleman, and you speak to me like this—here, with your poor father in this state."

"Don't reproach me," he pleaded. "Have I ever failed in respect and reverence for you from the day we met till now?—You are silent. You know I have not. You know how my love for you has grown day by day as we have worked together yonder—here. You know how I have fought against it till now, when I see you suffering, and I can bear no more."

"You insult me!" she said indignantly.

"It is no insult for a man to offer the woman he loves his name, and the devotion of his life," he said proudly. "Am I such a frivolous boy that you speak to me as you do, treating me as if it were some pitiful declaration from one who has uttered the same words to a dozen women? I am a student; my life has been devoted to my profession, and I swear to you that I never gave more than a passing thought to love until you awoke the passion in my breast—and for what? To tell me, when the truth will out, that I insult you! I—I who would die to save you pain—who would suffer anything for your sake—who would make it the one aim of my life to bring happiness to yours. And you tell me I insult you!"

"Yes; it is an insult to take advantage of my position here, sir, at such a time as this. You forget yourself. I am the hospital nurse attending your father. You are the surgeon whose duty is, not only to your patient, but also to me."

"It is no insult," he said warmly. "It is the honest outspoken word of the man who asks you to be his wife."

"Mr Elthorne," she said coldly, "it is impossible."

"Why? Can you not give me some hope? I will wait patiently, as Jacob waited for Rachel."

"I tell you, sir, it is impossible, and you force me to quit this house at once."

"No, no; for pity's sake don't say that," he cried, catching her hand, but she drew it away, and stood back with her eyes flashing.

"How dare you!" she cried angrily. "You force me to speak, sir. Once more I tell you it is an infamy—an insult."

"Infamy! Insult!" he said bitterly.

"Yes. Do you suppose I am ignorant of your position here? You ask me to be your wife when in a few more hours the lady to whom you are betrothed will be staying in the house."

He drew back, looking ghastly, just as there was a soft tap at the dressing room door, and Maria appeared, looking sharply from one to the other.

"I have brought up master's lunch," she said. "Shall I bring it in here?"

"No; I will come and see to it first," said the nurse quickly; and she went into the little room, while Neil walked across to his father's couch and stood looking down at the worn, thin face as the old man still slept on.

"An insult!" he thought—"the lady to whom I am betrothed!"

He looked round wildly, and a sense of despair that was almost insupportable attacked him as he fully realised his position and the justice of the words which had stung him to the heart.

"But there is something more," he said to himself, as, with nerves jarred and his feelings lacerated by disappointment, unworthy thoughts now crept in—"there is something more." And throwing himself into a chair, he sat gazing down at the carpet, recalling bit by bit every look and word of his brother, beginning with the scene upon the staircase on the night of Elisia's first arrival.

They were thoughts which grew more and more unworthy—thoughts which began to rankle in and venom his nature, as he formed mental pictures of his brother being received with smiles and kindly words.

"I would rather see her dead," he muttered fiercely; and at that moment the object of his thoughts entered from the dressing room, bearing the little tray with his father's lunch.

Their eyes met, and as he gazed in the pure, sweet face, the harsh unworthy thoughts passed away, to give place to a sense of misery, hopelessness, and despondency, which humbled him before her to the dust.

"And I dared to think all that!" he said to himself, as he rose and drew back from the couch to give place for her to approach.

At that moment the passion within him burned as strongly, but it was softened and subdued by the better feelings—the tender love which prevailed.

"Forgive me," he said deprecatingly. "I was nearly mad."

She made no reply, but stood by the couch half turned from him, and he could see that her lips were working.

"Can you not hear my words?" he continued humbly. "What more can I say? It was the truth."

She turned to him proudly.

"Mr Elthorne," she said, "I ask you, as a gentleman, to end this scene. If you have any respect for my position here, pray go."

He stood looking at her for a few moments, then turned and left the room without a word, giddy with emotion, crushed by a terrible feeling of despair which drove him to his own room.

Here the bitter thoughts came back.

Alison had been impressed from the first, and he was always seeking for opportunities to speak to her. That, then, was the reason, he told himself. She had twitted him with his engagement, but she would not have cast him off for that; and in this spirit a couple of hours went by, during which he paced the room.

Unable to bear the turmoil in his brain, toward the middle of the afternoon he went down and determined on trying to calm the irritation of his nerves by a long walk.

Crossing the garden, he reached the park, and was hesitating as to the direction he should take. Then, in a motiveless way, he went on to a plantation through which a path led toward a beautiful woodland hollow, which was his father's pride as being the loveliest bit of the park scenery.

Here, just as he reached the edge of the plantation, he caught sight of a figure walking rather quickly toward the

woodland, and in a moment he was all excitement again.

"It was the time," he said to himself. "I was mad to speak to her at such an inopportune moment. She will listen to me now. For she is all that is gentle and sympathetic at heart."

His steps grew faster, and he was just about to turn to his right, so as to cut off a good corner, and meet the object of his thoughts about a quarter of a mile beyond where she was walking, when he caught sight of his brother going in the same direction as himself, but from another point, and he stopped short with the old sinking sense of misery coming back, and with it the host of bitter fancies.

For there could be no doubt about it, he thought, and not a single loyal honest idea came to his help. She was going toward the woodland, perhaps by appointment, and if not, Alison had seen her, and was hurrying his steps so as to overtake her as soon as she was out of sight.

A curious kind of mental blindness came over Neil Elthorne, and he stopped short in the shelter of the trees, gazing straight before him, till the figure of his brother disappeared just at the spot which Nurse Elisia had passed a few minutes before.

He might have said to himself that there was nothing unusual in the nurse taking that part of the park for the daily walk upon which he had himself insisted, but upon which he had never intruded. And again it might have been accidental that his brother was going in that direction. But, no; the woman he had idolised so long in silence had rejected him coldly, and twitted him with his position. Alison loved her he was sure, and he had gone to meet her. At that hour he was sure of this being the case, and he stood thinking.

Alison was as much engaged as he. Would she listen to him, and would she pass over it in the younger, more manly looking brother?

Human nature is strangely full of weakness as well as strength; and as these thoughts crowded through Neil Elthorne's brain, it was of the woman he was thinking, not of Nurse Elisia, toward whom for the past two years he had looked up, almost with veneration as well as love. It was the weak woman, not the self-denying, unwearied, patient being who glided from bedside to bedside, assuaging pain and whispering hope and calming words.

Nurse Elisia with her saint-like face was no longer in his thoughts. They were filled by the beautiful woman who preferred his brother to him, and, with a hoarse cry of rage and despair, he strode away, his hands clenched, his brow rugged, and the veins in his temples swollen and throbbing.

For he was realising for the first time in his life the true meaning of the words "jealous hate"; but through it all there was a glimmering of satisfaction that he was not about to meet his brother on his way, and he shuddered as he thought that sooner or later they must encounter after all.

Chapter Eighteen.

A Sore Little Heart.

Neil Elthorne was in his father's room when Nurse Elisia returned from her walk, looking agitated and strange. He had found the old man fretful and impatient, full of complaints about the way in which he was neglected by those who ought, he said, to respect and love him all the more for his illness.

"You all have an idea that I am weak and helpless," he cried; "but it is a mistake. I am a little weak, but quite able to manage the affairs of my house."

"Of course you are, sir," said Neil.

Elthorne turned upon him fiercely.

"Don't speak to me again like that, sir," he cried. "Do you think I want to be humoured like a child?"

Neil made no reply, but let his father finish his complaint, knowing that he would drop asleep afterward, and awaken refreshed and forgetful of all he had said.

He was sleeping peacefully as a child when the nurse entered the room, to stop near the door as she saw that Neil was present.

"Has Mr Elthorne wanted me, sir?" she said, ignoring the scene which had taken place a short time before.

"No; and if he had," replied Neil bitterly, "He would have been quite willing to wait until you had kept your appointment."

The words seemed to come in spite of Neil's efforts to stay them; and as he finished the blood tingled in his cheeks, and he mentally writhed as he saw the look of calm, cold contempt directed at him.

"It was Mr Elthorne's wish, and your own, that I should go for a walk, sir," she said gravely.

"To meet my brother?"

She gazed at him half sorrowfully.

"I certainly did meet your brother, sir," she said; and then stopped short as if scorning to offer any explanation to him, while he stood with his teeth set, wishing that he could have bitten off his tongue before he had stooped to make himself so contemptible and petty in her eyes.

There was a pause for a few moments, and then the nurse spoke.

"Mr Elthorne," she said, "will you be good enough to set me free? Another nurse could do my duties, and I wish now to return to the hospital."

"Return? You know it is impossible," he said. "The consequences to my father would be most serious. You know that as well as I."

She turned to the patient, and looked at him sadly for a few moments.

"You need not be afraid," he said coldly. "I shall not address you again. It was a mad dream, and is at an end. I have been awakened at last."

He left the room, feeling as if he could hardly contain his anger as he asked himself whether other men could be as weak, and if this was all the strength of mind and dignity he had achieved by his years of patient study.

"I spoke to her like some spiteful schoolgirl," he muttered, as he reached the library, and then threw himself into a chair. "What must she have thought? How could I lower myself so in her eyes?"

He had hardly left his father's room when there was a quick, soft tap at the door, and as the nurse rose to open it, Isabel appeared.

Her eyes were red as if she had been weeping lately, and she made a few hurried steps toward the couch, and then turned angrily upon the nurse, as a hand was laid upon her arm.

"How dare you?" she cried. "I must and I will speak to papa."

"I dare," said Nurse Elisia, smiling, "because he must not be awakened suddenly."

"You always say that," cried Isabel; but she lowered her voice. "I must—I will speak to him now."

"Hush, my child!" whispered Nurse Elisia; "you are angry and hysterical from some trouble. Do not blame me, dear. You know it is my duty to watch over him and save him from every shock."

"But you try to keep us apart. You try to be mistress here in everything. You try to—"

"No, no, no," said Nurse Elisia gently, as she passed her arm about the excited girl's waist, and drew her toward the other door, while Isabel struggled to free herself, but only faintly, and as if a stronger will was mastering hers.

"Come with me to my room," was whispered in her ear, and then, sobbing weakly, she suffered herself to be led through the other door into the little place devoted to the nurse, where she sank into an easy-chair, covered her face with her hands, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Nurse Elisia stood gazing down at her pityingly for a few moments, and then sank upon her knees and drew the half-resisting little figure toward her, as it was evident that poor Isabel was fighting hard to keep from bursting out into a paroxysm of hysterical cries.

"My poor motherless child!" she whispered; "what have I done that you should insist upon treating me as your enemy?"

"Always—if I wish to go to papa—" panted Isabel with childish vehemence.

"No, no, no, my darling," whispered the nurse, as if she were trying to soothe some passionate child. "If you think a moment you will see that I only obey my orders. It is to give him perfect rest that nature may strengthen and restore him to you, his child. Come, come, tell me—what is the great trouble? You cannot understand, but I want to be your friend."

"You—you!" cried Isabel, looking up angrily, as she wrested herself away, and her eyes flashed; but as she gazed on the patient face so close to hers, and saw that the beautiful eyes which looked pityingly in hers were also clouded with tears, her mood changed, and she flung her arms about the nurse's neck, and buried her face in her breast.

"I am so wretched—so unhappy!" she cried.

"Yes, yes, as if I could not see and feel it," whispered Elisia. "There, there," she continued, as she drew the yielding form closer to her breast, and smoothed and caressed the soft, fair hair, till Isabel's sobs grew fewer, and she looked up half-wonderingly, and then clung to her more tightly as Elisia bent down and kissed her lovingly.

"There," she whispered, "was that the kiss of an enemy?"

"No, no, no," cried Isabel. "I did not mean it. I tried not to say it, but you seem to—seem to—oh, pray don't think of what I said!"

"I shall not. I did not mind, for I felt that some day you would know the truth. How could you think that I would be anyone's enemy! It is my misfortune that I am not liked. I have tried to satisfy your aunt, but she resents my presence here."

"Yes," said Isabel naïvely, as she clung more closely to her comforter. "She thinks you are taking her place, and that —"

She stopped short.

"Yes, dear," said her companion gently; "and—what?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Then I will tell you, dear," said Elisia sadly. "She thinks that I am a deceitful, scheming woman, who tries to lead your brothers astray from the path your father has mapped out for them."

"Yes," said Isabel faintly. "How did you know?"

Elisia smiled.

"Because I am a woman who has seen much of the world, though I am not so very much older than you. Isabel dear," she whispered, as she held the girl's cheek close to her own, which now burned, "I want you to trust me. I want you to believe me when I tell you that it is not true."

"I do believe you," cried Isabel ingenuously, as she turned and kissed her. "Indeed—indeed I do."

"I know it, and I feel as if you would always have liked me, only there has been this baseless misunderstanding. Now that is all past, dear, and you are going to trust me. Tell me what is the trouble." Isabel shook her head.

"There is no need. Forgive me if I trespass on delicate ground, dear, and say that it is because this little heart is very sore."

Isabel tried to escape, but very feebly, and the sore little heart began to throb as she was held firmly to another which beat more rapidly than was its wont.

"I cannot help understanding a good deal," was whispered to her gently. "I have not sought to know, but it has come to me. Come, dear, be frank, and let me help you as one who loves you. Yes," she continued, as she saw the wondering look directed at her; "the little heart is sore because of tender little passages with one who is now crossing the seas."

"Oh!" sighed Isabel, who fluttered a little as if to escape.

"Yes; that is so," whispered the nurse; "and now, with poor papa's wishes to back it up, there has come temptation in the way."

"Temptation?"

"Yes, dear, with a title and wealth; and is the heart sore because it is yielding to circumstances, and trying to forget the absent one who will not be forgotten?"

"Yes," sighed Isabel, "and it is so hard."

"Harder for him to return, and see the girl he loved my Lady Burwood."

"But he shall not," cried Isabel passionately. "I would sooner die!"

"Ah!"

A long drawn, catching sigh, but not of agony, for there was a restful satisfaction in its tone, and for a few minutes there was utter silence in the room.

"Then you do not care for Sir Cheltnam's tender words?" said Elisia at last.

"No, no! I hate him!" cried the girl. "He knows so well about poor Tom, and he laughs at it all, and says it was a boy and girl love, and that this is my father's wish."

"Yes?"

"And no matter what I say, or how I behave, he persecutes me with his addresses. It is dreadful. Poor papa has promised him that I shall be his wife, and he treats me as if I were his own—as if he were my master—till I feel as if I wish I were dead."

"So as to break the poor trusting sailor's heart?"

"No, no, no," cried Isabel piteously; "don't, don't say that."

"Then never say those foolish, wicked words again, dear."

"But I am so wretched," sighed Isabel. "I have wanted again and again to see and talk to papa—to beg him to speak to Sir Cheltnam, and tell him that I have tried so hard to do what he wishes, but that I cannot—indeed, I cannot—though he has set his mind upon it all just as he has upon my brothers marrying Saxa and Dana Lydon and—and," she cried passionately, "they don't care for them a bit." There was another long pause, during which Isabel wept bitterly.

"What shall I do?" she cried at last, gazing piteously in the other's face.

"Wait, dear."

"But Sir Cheltnam?"

"You must try and avoid him till your father has recovered his strength, and can bear to hear adverse matters."

"But if I saw him, and spoke to him gently, and appealed to him?"

"In his condition anything like opposition might bring on a serious attack, dear. Even trifles make him so angry that your brother fears he may sometime have a fit. He is in a very precarious state, Isabel, and a serious matter like this might—I hardly dare tell you what might happen. Come; you said you would trust me. I will help you."

"But Sir Cheltnam? My aunt thinks she is doing right, and encourages him to come and torture me. What shall I do?"

"Wait and trust to me?"

"But it so hard."

"Hush! There is someone in the next room." Elisia rose, and entered the bedchamber.

"Oh, you are there," said Aunt Anne shortly. "I am quite sure that my poor brother ought not to be left alone so long."

"I was in the next room, madam, and if he had spoken a word I should have heard him directly," said the nurse softly.

"It does not seem like it, for I have been here some time."

"Excuse me, Mrs Barnett, Mr Elthorne must not be awakened suddenly."

"What do you mean?"

"Speak lower, if you please, ma'am."

"Really!" cried Aunt Anne, "this is growing insufferable! My good woman, you quite forget your position here. Are you aware that I am your senior by many years, and have had great experience in a sick room?"

"Possibly, madam. I am not doubting what you say. I am only going by the instructions I received from Sir Denton Hayle. Mr Elthorne must be saved from everything likely to produce a nervous shock." Aunt Anne looked her up and down with indignant scorn, and then marched—it could hardly be called walking, the movement was so mechanical and studied—straight to the door, and went out without a word.

"Poor woman!" said Nurse Elisia, softly; "and yet she is a sweet, amiable lady at heart."

She went back to the dressing room to tell Isabel that her aunt had gone, but the room was empty.

Chapter Nineteen.

Maria Causes Trouble.

"For two pins I'd have our things packed up and go back at once, Dan; that I would," cried Saxa Lydon, as she stood before the long cheval glass in the best bedroom at the Elthornes'. "Here, you, give me that pin off the dressing table."

The first words were in a low tone to her sister, the latter to Maria Bell, who was playing the part of lady's maid to the two visitors dressing for dinner; but from a keen interest in the state of affairs, Maria's ears were preternaturally sharp, and she heard the first words as well.

A handsome diamond pin was fetched and handed to the speaker, who thrust it into the knot of abundant hair, where it glistened like so much dew.

"The place doesn't seem the same," said Dana, who had finished dressing and lay back in a chair, arranging and rearranging the folds of her dress.

"Hold your tongue," whispered her sister. "We don't want everyone to know."

She looked significantly at the maid, who, with a most discreet air, ignored everything and went on folding and hanging up dresses in the wardrobe.

"I don't care who hears!" said Dana. "I'm sick of it. I wouldn't have come if it hadn't been for the poor old man."

"Nor I," said Saxa, whose anger was getting the better of her discretion. "Anyone would think we were perfect strangers; why, Burwood is ten times as attentive."

"To you," said Dana spitefully.

"No, he is not; it is to you. If I were you, I'd give Master Alison such a lesson to-night! I'd flirt with Burwood till I made him half mad with jealousy."

"That's the advice I was thinking of giving you," said Dana with a sneer. "He is always at your heels, or wanting to help you mount or dismount."

"Oh, come, I like that," said Saxa, whose face was now scarlet, and she frowned as she gazed at her sister's reflection in the glass instead of at her own and the bracelets she was attaching to her well-shaped arms. "He was riding by your side all day yesterday."

"Look here," said Dana coldly, "if you want to quarrel send away the maid. I don't want Burwood. You can have him."

"Thank you. But you might tell the truth."

"Don't be a fool!" said Dana, and then, hurriedly, "Hush! don't let's quarrel here. But it's too bad; anyone would think we were nobody at all, and that the boys were not at home."

"Don't be a fool yourself," whispered Saxa, leaning forward and offering a cut glass bottle. Then, aloud, "Scent?" and again, in a low voice, "That minx's ears are like a fox's."

"Thanks," said Dana, taking the bottle and using it liberally. "Here, what's-your-name? Maria, have a drop of scent?"

"Oh, thank you, miss," cried the maid eagerly. "No; don't take it now," said Saxa, replacing the scent on the table. "You may empty the bottle when you pack up our things to-morrow."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Lydon."

"Got quite well and strong again?"

"Yes, miss, quite, thank you."

"It was this nurse who attended you, wasn't it—at the hospital?"

"Yes, miss," said Maria, tightening her lips and looking vicious.

"Hallo!" said Dana, laughing boisterously. "Look at her, Saxa. I say, used she to drink your port wine and eat your new laid eggs?"

"Oh, I don't know what she did, miss," said Maria, in a tone of voice which seemed to say, "Ask me a little more."

"There, I'm nearly ready," said Saxa, examining herself in the glass. "I suppose the dinner bell will go directly. Maria doesn't like nurse. She's too much of the fine madam—eh, 'Ria?"

"Yes, miss, a deal too much for me."

"Never mind; she made a better job of you than of the old man. He gets well very slowly."

"Perhaps nurse knows when she is in a comfortable place, and doesn't want to go back to London," said Maria tartly.

"Very likely," said Saxa coolly. "No love lost between you two, I see."

"No, Miss Lydon, indeed there is not."

"Pity," said Saxa laconically. "Servants ought to be very happy together."

"I don't look upon Nurse Elisia as a fellow-servant, miss, and I'm sure she doesn't as to me."

"Likely enough. Thinks she is too pretty. There, 'Ria, shall I do?" and Saxa spread out her dress, and swept across the room and back.

"Well done, female peacock!" cried Dana sneeringly.

"You look lovely, miss," cried Maria. "Pretty?" she continued. "Her pretty? P-f-f! Why, she's nothing to you two young ladies, only I suppose some people think differently."

"Eh?" said Dana sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing, miss; only I do say it's a pity some people think so much of white faced nurses."

"'Ria has a sweetheart, and he has been making eyes at the nurse and wishing he was an interesting invalid," said Saxa merrily.

"Oh, no indeed, miss," cried Maria viciously; "but if I had, it isn't me as would have such goings on."

"Ah, well, it isn't my business," said Saxa carelessly. "Somebody has been paying her attentions then, I suppose; and nurses like them as other people do."

Maria tightened her lips and said nothing, but Dana looked flushed and excited.

"Look here," she said sharply, as if she were speaking to one of her grooms, "what does all this mean?"

"Oh, nothing, miss; it isn't for me to say, only I don't like to see such goings on."

"What goes on?"

"Oh, nothing, miss."

"But—"

"Let her alone, Dana. What is it to you?"

"But I want to know," cried Dana sharply, for a faint suspicion had been in her brain for some weeks past consequent upon a sudden change she had noted in Alison; and this suspicion, increased by the maid's words, was rapidly growing into a certainty.

"Well, want to know," said her sister. "I say, why doesn't that dinner bell ring? I'm hungry."

"Look here, Maria; I've always been kind to you when I've come here," said Dana excitedly.

"Yes, miss, always," said Maria.

"And I always will be, and so will my sister."

"That means half a sovereign, 'Ria," said Saxa merrily. "Don't you let her put you off with a paltry half crown."

"Then tell me what you mean."

"Oh, I couldn't, miss; I couldn't, indeed."

"Then there is something," said Dana, "and—you shall tell me," she cried fiercely, as, in an Amazonlike fashion, she gripped the woman's arm. "Now then, you tell me. It's something about the nurse and—"

"Miss Dana, please don't. I'm so weak still," pleaded Maria.

"There, you as good as owned to it. What is it?"

"It's nothing, miss. I only sus— fancied something."

"Then speak out," cried Dana, sharply. "I will know before you go out of this room. Then it was them I saw across the park," she exclaimed excitedly.

Maria's eyes twinkled.

"You were thinking something about Mr Alison?"

"O Dan, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" cried Saxa.

"Ought I? Never mind. It was what I suspected, but I wouldn't let myself believe it. Now, Maria, you speak out. I will know now."

"I dursn't, miss."

"You tell me directly, or it will be the worse for you and for him."

"I'm sure I don't know nothing, miss," said Maria, whimpering, "and you are hurting my arm."

"And I'm sure you do," cried Dana, loosening her grip and tearing off her glove. "There," she said, taking off a ring set with good-sized pearls, "tell me everything and I'll give you that."

Maria turned pale with excitement, and her right hand opened and shut.

"I dursn't, miss," she whispered hoarsely. "It's more than my place is worth."

"If anything comes of what you tell you shall be maid to us, so speak out honestly. There, take the ring."

"Dana, I'm ashamed of you," whispered Saxa, as Maria's fingers closed upon the valuable jewel. "It's disgraceful."

"I don't care. He's playing fast and loose with me, and I'm not going to put up with it, so I tell you. Now then, I'll speak plainly, Maria, and you've got to speak plainly, too. Mr Alison has been making up to that nurse!"

"You won't tell on me, miss?" whispered Maria, in whose palm the ring seemed to burn as if the chaste, pale pearls were fiery rubies.

"No; I'll hold you safe."

"Then it is true, miss. He's always after her, and has been ever since she came."

"You lying hussy!" cried Saxa hotly. "If I were my sister I'd lash you with my riding whip—I mean shake you till you went down on your knees and owned it was out of spite."

"Lying hussy, am I?" cried Maria viciously, "when every word's true, and that isn't all, miss; Mr Neil's as bad or worse."

There was a sharp sound in the room, for Saxa had flashed up with rage and struck the woman sharply across the mouth with the back of her hand.

"A lie!" she cried. "Mr Neil Elthorne would not degrade himself by noticing such a woman."

"A lie, is it?" cried Maria, with her hand to her lips. "Then you shall have it now without paying me for it. It's a lie, I suppose, that he was going on with her all the time I was in hospital, and when he was down here and obliged to stay because of poor master's hurt—plotted and planned to get her down here, too? That's a lie, I suppose, miss? I'm not blind. I've seen a deal too much, and if that woman isn't soon turned out of the house I'm not going to stop."

"It—is—not—true," cried Saxa hoarsely.

"And poor dear master lying there all helpless, and being cheated by 'em both. It's shameful; and how you young ladies can put up with it—"

"It can't be true," said Saxa furiously.

"Very well, miss, you know best," said Maria; "but I'm not going to stay here to be knocked about by the best lady as was ever born."

"Stop!" cried Saxa fiercely; and she caught the malignant woman's arm as she was making for the door. "I—I beg your pardon. Tell me, is all this true?"

"Yes, miss, it's true enough," said Maria, beginning to sob; and then, as her arm was loosened, she made for the door, trembling and frightened at what she had said in her bitter dislike to the woman who had almost saved her life.

"You had better go," said Dana, who was startled at the change which had come over her sister's face.

Maria waited for no more, but, repentant in her alarm, hurried out of the room, leaving the sisters alone.

Just then the great bell in the turret over the hall began to clang out its summons for dinner.

Chapter Twenty.

"Very Bad News."

"Saxa! What is it? I say, don't stand looking in that stony way," cried Dana, seizing and shaking her sister by the shoulder.

"Don't, Dan," she said in a low, hoarse voice. "But you look so strange."

"Yes; I've come a cropper," said Saxa, with a hard, set look in her handsome face. "Is—is it all true?"

"Yes," said Dana fiercely. "I can think of a dozen things now which go to prove it. I've had a faint suspicion for some time."

"I hadn't," said Saxa in the same low tone. "I did not think he cared much for me, but I thought him too much of a gentleman, and too loyal."

"They have both neglected us shamefully."

"Yes, sis, they have," continued Saxa slowly, "but I didn't mind so very much. I never cared for him a deal. I never felt that it was what people called love, but one has gone on for years with the idea that one was to marry Neil Elthorne, and I feel now as if I had come down heavily all at once, horse and all."

"Yes; they've fooled us both," cried Dana, and there was a deep silence in the house now, for the dinner bell had ceased to clang. "What are you going to do? We can't go in to dinner now."

"Do?"

"Yes, we can't pass this over in silence."

"No," said Saxa slowly, and as if she were thinking out her words before she spoke them. "I'm going in to poor old daddy to tell him how we've been thrown off the scent."

"It will half kill him."

"No, it will rouse him, I say. He shall know everything we have heard, and then we shall have the truth from those boys. Oh, if I had only known before!"

She drew herself up—pale now—with wounded pride, and the agony of spirit which made her speak through her set teeth.

There was a sharp tapping at the door. "May I come in?" cried a familiar girlish voice.

"Yes," said Dana; and Isabel came quickly into the room.

"Come, you two," she cried. "We're waiting dinner. Oh, I see," she added merrily; "dress. Saxa! Dana! what is the matter? Have you had bad news?"

"Yes, baby dear," said Saxa solemnly; "very, very bad news."

"Oh!" cried the girl wildly, as she turned ghastly pale. "News! Tom's ship?"

She reeled and would have fallen, but Saxa caught her, and kissed her affectionately.

"No, no, little one," she cried hastily. "It isn't that."

"Ah!" gasped Isabel, "I thought— Then you two are in trouble."

"Yes, dear. Who is with daddy?"

"With papa? Only the nurse."

"Go and send her away, little one. We must go in and speak to him quite alone."

"Then it is some great trouble."

"Yes, dear. You will know quite soon enough. Now go."

Isabel, who had looked upon them both as elder sisters, whom she must obey, almost from a child, left the room without a word.

"Will it be best to go to him, Saxa?" said Dana hoarsely.

"Yes; we may be girls who have been laughed at through the country for our love of horses and the hunt," said Saxa firmly, "but we have always been ladies, and we will show these men that we are not to be treated as if we were already their wives and slaves."

"Papa is quite alone now, Saxa," said Isabel, reappearing at the door. "O Saxa, dear—Dana—can't I do anything for you?"

"No, dear," said the elder sister gravely, "it is not your fault."

"Nurse said you must please not say anything to agitate papa," said Isabel gently.

Saxa looked at her half pityingly, and then went slowly out, followed by her sister.

"Nurse!" she muttered in a contemptuous whisper, as she went along the corridor to Mr Elthorne's door. "O Dan, quick; let's take the leap, and have it over, for, after all, it can't be true."

She turned the handle of the door, and a cry of welcome arose from the couch.

"Ah, my bonnie Dianas," cried the old man; "this is good of you to come and see me before you go down. Why, how bright and handsome you both look."

Saxa went straight up to the couch, took the two hands extended to her, and bent down and kissed the sufferer; and for the first time now the hardness of her task became plain, and she began to shrink from hurting the poor weak invalid, lying so helpless there.

"Dana, my pet," he said, kissing the younger sister in turn; and then excitedly: "Why your hands are damp and cold. What is it? There is something wrong."

They looked at each other as if to say—"You tell him."

Ralph Elthorne saw it, and his facial muscles twitched, and an angry look came into his eyes, but he passed it off with a forced smile.

"Now, now," he cried; "none of that, my dears. It's nothing. We've had many a run together, and I've only had a fall. Don't you two begin any of that nonsense. I was a bit hurt, but I'm Ralph Elthorne still: daddy to you, my darlings, in name only yet, but it's going to be real before long, you know. I'm not ill, only a bit crippled for the present. I'm not an invalid, my dears, so out with it—what is it?"

There were words in his little speech which made their task more difficult still, and they glanced at each other again.

"Come, Saxa," he cried—"come, Dana, let's have it. You don't want to make me angry?"

"No, no," cried Saxa, and she sank upon her knees by him, and laid her head upon his shoulder.

"Then speak out. There's something serious on the way. Ah, I see! Isabel! She has not gone—absurd! She was here just now."

"No, no, sir; it is not that."

"Hah!" he ejaculated. "She would not dare. Well, then, what is it? You, Dana, speak, my child."

Dana was silent, and he turned angrily upon Saxa. "You are the elder girl. Tell me at once. I know: it is something

about one of the boys.”

“He must know, Dan; speak out,” said Saxa firmly.

“Why do you put it on my shoulders?” cried Dana angrily. “Very well, then, if I must. Daddy, it isn’t my fault, but that’s all over now.”

“What is, my girl?”

“All that with Alison; and we’ve come to say good-bye. We are going back home.”

“What?” he cried. “Nonsense! rubbish! Some silly lovers’ tiff. What has he said to you? Bah, my pretty one! Go down and box his ugly ears, and make him beg your pardon; you can do it, I know.”

“And is Saxa to do the same?” she said bitterly. “What! you are not in trouble, too, with Neil?” Saxa was silent.

Ralph Elthorne made an effort to raise himself, but his head fell back heavily, and he uttered a low moan at his helplessness and wiped his face.

“Look here,” he said in a low trembling voice; “I know you two girls love me, and always have, since you were little bits of things, and it all increased when your poor dying father and mother begged me to act as your guardian. Come, now; I’ve done my duty to you both.”

“Always, dear,” said Saxa tenderly.

“Then now, both of you do your duty by me. You, Saxa, my child, speak. You came here to stay for a day or two. I wished it so that you and the boys might see more of each other. I see; you have quarrelled.”

“Not yet,” said the girl firmly. “There is no need to quarrel; all that is at an end.”

“What?”

“Yes, at an end, guardian,” said Dana. “If Alison prefers another woman to me, he may have her.”

“Alison? Another woman? Has he dared to trifle with you? to oppose my wishes? No; it is a mistake. And you, Saxa, my girl—what is wrong with you?”

“I say the same as my sister, sir. If Neil Elthorne prefers to marry your nurse, let him; everything between us is at an end.”

Ralph Elthorne’s jaw dropped, and he looked helplessly, vacantly, from one to the other. Then, raising his hands wildly, he seemed to be fighting for his breath, his convulsed features horrifying the two girls, who were strong-minded in their way, and accustomed enough to scenes of human suffering to look on unmoved, as a rule. But the aspect of their guardian startled them; the callousness produced by their rough, outdoor education dropped away, and they were gentle women once again in the presence of the old man’s agony.

“I’ll ring for help,” panted Dana, and in her confusion she ran to the wrong end of the room to find the bell pull, while Saxa threw herself on her knees by the couch, and caught one of the fluttering hands.

“Oh, daddy! dear old daddy!” she cried, “what have we done?” Then excitedly, “Dan, we were selfish fools to speak. Dear, dear old guardy—we’ve killed you!”

Chapter Twenty One.

A Forced Confession.

“No, no!” panted Elthorne, in a low, husky voice. “Stop! Don’t ring! Better—soon.”

He held up one hand firmly now, and Dana turned uneasily toward the other side of the couch.

“Let her call for help, dear,” whispered Saxa. “No,” said the stricken man feebly, as he battled hard to recover his equanimity; and the sisters trembled, repentant, over their work. “Water, please.” Dana flew to the side table, and the hand trembled so that the carafe clattered against the glass she filled, and the water splashed over the side and on her rich dress as she bore it to the couch.

“Take it, Saxa,” she whispered, and the kneeling girl held the glass to the invalid’s lips.

“Hah!” he sighed, after drinking a little, and signing to his ward to take back the vessel. “I can speak now.”

“No, no, dear; not now. We ought not to have spoken to you,” said Saxa, pressing her lips to his brow. “It was very thoughtless, but we were so angry and could not keep it back.”

He nodded, looked at her proudly, and drew her hand to his lips.

“Good girl!” he said. “I’m not angry; only weak. Hush! Wait a little.”

“Yes,” said Dana quickly. “We’ll go now, and write in a few days.”

"No. Wait," said the old man in a low voice, but one full of decision. "I must clear all this up. You cannot go."

They waited for some minutes before he spoke again, thinking the while of the terrible helplessness of the man who had for so many years ruled like a king in their district, and who, even now, was fighting hard to sway his social sceptre still.

"Hah!" he ejaculated at last. "Absurd to be so weak. Better now. It was sudden."

"Daddy, dear," said Saxa tenderly, "don't revive it. Let it all wait."

"No; not a minute," he said with decision. "I'm strong again now."

He stretched out a hand to each, and smiled at them in turn.

"There," he said; "it's quite a triumph for you girls to see how weak a man can be. Now, then; let's clear all this up—this absurd nonsense about the boys."

"You can't bear it now, daddy," said Saxa, with tears in her eyes.

"I can bear it, little woman. Now, come, my darlings, what silly jealous nonsense is this you have got in your pretty heads? But I'm glad—very glad. You can both be very soft and gentle, I see, when the proper time comes. But fie! Saxa. Shame! Dana. It is madness. Neil? The nurse? Why, my darling, I did not think you could be so fond of my great, solemn, dreamy boy. But—jealous—and of my good, patient, gentle attendant! Oh, tush! Nonsense!"

He laughed feebly, looking from one to the other, as if seeking for a confession that their charge was only the result of a little pique due to inattention on the part of his sons.

But Saxa and Dana remained by his couch, stern and hard of countenance; and as he watched the frowns gathering on their brows the feeble laugh died away, and his right hand began to tremble again.

"Speak," he said at last, after a painful pause, and he fixed his eyes on the elder sister, whose voice sounded deep and sonorous as she said slowly:

"I'm sorry I spoke, dear," she said. "It was in my passion."

"And it is all folly," said Elthorne hastily.

"No, daddy," cried Saxa, with a flash of mortified pride in her eyes; "it is all too true."

"What!" cried Elthorne, turning his eyes on Dana. "Yes," said the latter, repeating her sister's words; "it is all too true."

"It has been going on for months past," continued Saxa.

"At the hospital in London, dear," added Dana, "as well as here."

Ralph Elthorne drew in his breath with a sharp, hissing sound, and lay back staring straight before him, but the sisters, in their returning anger, paid no heed to the change in his countenance, as a spasm passed over it, but left him calm and firm again.

"I wouldn't have believed it," cried Saxa, "but I must—I must. It is true."

"What? Neil? My boy Neil?" said Elthorne hoarsely. "My quiet, obedient, straightforward son, whose word every man trusts? And Nurse Elisia? I will not believe it."

"Very well, daddy," said Saxa gravely. "You will see."

"Bah! Nonsense, girl. Someone has been poisoning your ears against as true and good a woman as ever breathed."

Saxa rose slowly from her knees, and stood gazing frowningly down in his eyes, as the old man went on in stern tones of reproof.

"Shame on you, Saxa! My boy Neil is too noble and high-minded to even dream of such a thing. He—the great surgeon who is growing famous! Why, it would be a crime against you, and an insult to his father. My darling, you should not let such a degrading notion harbour in your brain."

The girl's stern look intensified.

"There, my child," he continued, "I'll speak gently to you. She is a dear good woman, this nurse, and of course poor Neil has been thrown with her a great deal—as doctor and nurse, of course. Come, my dear, let it go. I tell you, as his father, it is not true. And now you, Dana—have you caught the complaint? Has Al laughed and joked with one of the keepers' daughters?"

"No, sir, but he has made and kept assignations with Nurse Elisia in the woods."

"What? It is not true, girl. I could—no, no, I will not be angry. I must not; but I am angry with you, my dears, and yet I'm not, for I'm glad to see more depth in your affection for the boy than has been apparent on the surface. Tell me now: you have not accused them—made this silly, reckless charge?"

"It is of no use to beat about the bush, daddy," said Saxa sadly. "We have not seen the boys; and we will not see them, dear. We are going back home at once."

"You are not going back home at once," cried their guardian, "and you are going to see them. Dana, ring the bell."

"No, no, sir," said Saxa, "there is no need to get up a scene. We'll go away quietly at once."

"Ring that bell!"

"But, daddy—dear guardian—Mr Elthorne!" cried Saxa imploringly.

"Ring that bell, I say," cried Ralph Elthorne, with the veins starting in his temples and his face becoming purple. "Do you think I am going to lie here and let my two boys be maligned by that silly piece of scandal you hare-brained girls have got in your heads? My son Neil would not degrade himself like that. My boy Alison would not be such a scoundrel. Ring, I say, ring, and they shall confront you, both of them, and tell you it is a lie."

"Very well," cried Dana, and she gave the bell a sharp snatch.

"Who has told you this—one of the servants?" Before he could be answered the two doors of the room flew open, Nurse Elisia entering hurriedly by one, Neil by the other.

Neither spoke; they read the trouble at a glance.

"Where is Alison?" said Ralph Elthorne, speaking as if his son were a little boy about to be punished. "Fetch him here."

"My dear father," said Neil firmly, "you are exciting yourself. I must insist—"

"Fetch Alison."

The command was so fiercely given that, seeing it would be better to comply than oppose his father and, perhaps, bring on some terrible seizure, Neil frowned and withdrew, while his father turned to Nurse Elisia.

"Go to your room now," he said. "I will speak to you presently. My sons first."

"Mr Elthorne—for your own sake—pray be calm."

"To your room," he cried hoarsely. "Wait." The nurse looked wildly from one sister to the other, and a pang of jealousy shot through them as they saw it was no common woman who had stepped between them and the smooth, even course of their fate. Then, after another imploring glance at Elthorne, she slowly left the room.

There was a deep silence, only broken by the heavy, stertorous breathing of the invalid, till steps were heard, the door was opened, and the brothers entered, Neil closing the door behind them.

"Come here," said Elthorne, in an unnaturally calm voice, as if it were the father speaking to two erring boys.

The young men advanced, and, after a quick glance, Neil said firmly:

"As your medical attendant, sir, I must insist upon your being perfectly calm."

"As your father, sir, I insist upon your waiting till I have spoken. I know my strength better than you can tell me."

Neil made a deprecating sign, and moved to the other side of the couch, looking sorrowfully at Saxa, who met his eyes for a moment, and then scornfully averted her own.

"Now, Alison," said Elthorne slowly, and in a voice that sounded wonderfully composed.

"Yes, sir, what is it?" replied Alison quietly, and at that moment the brothers' eyes met and an angry look was directed at the elder.

"This, my son: you are engaged to marry Dana Lydon."

"Am I?" said the young man scornfully, and he gazed at her now defiantly, while Neil's heart sank in his breast with a terrible feeling of despair.

"Yes, sir, you are," said his father firmly. "At my wish. It is an old engagement, and I have just heard a charge against you of insulting this lady by attempting to carry on a contemptible flirtation with a woman serving as a menial in this house. Tell Dana it is not true."

There was no reply.

"Tell Dana Lydon, the lady to whom you are engaged, that it is not true."

Still there was no reply.

"Do you hear me, sir?" thundered Ralph Elthorne, and Neil took a step forward in alarm, as he saw the change in his father's countenance, but the old man fiercely motioned him back.

"I am not a boy," said Alison haughtily, "and I reserve to myself the right to marry whom I please."

"That is not an answer, sir," cried Elthorne sharply. "I say, is the charge true?"

"Ask me when we are alone, sir. I refuse to be cross-examined and treated like a school-boy before the Misses Lydon."

Ralph Elthorne's brow grew black with rage, and Neil again pressed forward till his father motioned him back.

"Father! for Heaven's sake, be calm," he whispered.

"Silence, sir!" roared Elthorne, whose aspect now was startling to those who watched him and trembled for the end. "I am fighting, weak as I am, for the honour of my house—for the honour of my two sons, to prove to these ladies that they have been tricked and cheated by a contemptible, false report. This obstinate fool refuses to clear himself, but you, my boy—my eldest son—you are a gentleman. You will not let any weak vanity prevent you from speaking out and proving to Saxa here—your betrothed—that a miserable, lying scandal has been set afoot. That you are not one—you, the student and man of reputation—to degrade yourself by stooping to a pitiful intrigue which would disgrace you and me in the eyes of your betrothed. Come, let us end this painful scene. Speak out, and then take my child Saxa's hand, and she shall humble herself to you and ask your pardon for doubting you, as I know she will."

"Yes," said Saxa, as he turned to her, and she fixed her eyes firmly upon Neil, "as I will directly, Neil Elthorne."

"There," said the father. "You hear, sir? Now, then, speak out and deny it."

"Deny what?" said Neil slowly.

"That for a long time past you have been carrying on a contemptible flirtation—bah! the wretched word!—that you have been behaving toward Nurse Elisia as the man does to the woman he means to make his wife. I have told Saxa that it is not true."

Neil remained motionless, forgetting his position on his intense dread regarding his father's state.

"Come!" said the old man; "this needs no hesitation. Speak out."

Still Neil remained silent, with something seeming to murmur in his ear: "Deny it. If you speak the truth you will kill him. He could not bear it. She does not love you—she cares for your brother. You must not own the truth and disgrace yourself forever in Saxa Lydon's eyes."

"Neil!"

He remained silent still, and the voice seemed to whisper again: "Deny it. The avowal will kill him. You know that in his state it would be his death. You must not—you cannot speak."

"Once more I ask you, boy, to clear yourself before your betrothed. Tell her it is a lie."

The change was so terrible in the old man's face that Saxa uttered a low cry.

"No, no!" she said. "Neil! Look at him. Look!"

"Silence, girl," cried the old man hoarsely, and with his face working.

"Father, for Heaven's sake," said Neil, bending over him; but the old man waved him back, and he shrank away, ignorant of the fact that Saxa's cry had brought Nurse Elisia to the door, where she stood appalled at the old man's aspect.

"Tell Saxa it is a lie."

"I cannot, sir," said Neil firmly. "You force from me the truth."

"What!" panted Elthorne.

"It would be deceiving Saxa Lydon, and lying against Elisia, the woman I love hopelessly, but with all my heart."

"You have killed him!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

"The Woman is a Witch."

It was Saxa Lydon who said those words, for the old man's face became suddenly convulsed; his head dropped back, and, as Neil sank on one knee and passed his arm beneath the neck, it turned sidewise, with the eyes seeming to gaze reproachfully into his, but there was neither sight nor understanding then.

The grey dawn was creeping into the room when Ralph Elthorne recovered consciousness, and looked up questioningly in his son's face.

But he did not speak for a time, only let his eyes wander about the room, and they saw that he appeared to be noting who were present, his gaze resting long on both his sons, his daughter, sister, and the nurse.

At last he spoke.

"Isabel."

She ran to his side, and sank upon her knees.

"The girls?" he said feebly. "Saxa—Dana?"

"They went home, papa, dear, about two," whispered Isabel; "but don't try to talk, now. Look at me, and I'll try to understand what you mean."

He took no notice of her prayer, but closed his eyes, and lay apparently thinking, his next words indicating that he recalled what had taken place.

"Yes," he said gently; "they could not stay here. Tell Alison and your aunt to go and then you go too."

Neil advanced just then to watch his father narrowly, but the old man made no sign of anger. He lay quite calm and still, as if utterly exhausted, but his son noted that he watched until Aunt Anne and Alison had gone, when he unclosed his eyes fully, and whispered to Isabel to leave.

"May I not stay, papa? I may be wanted."

"No. You have been here all night. Kiss me and go—"

Isabel bent down weeping, pressed her lips on her father's brow, and then left the room, with Nurse Elisia and Neil both watching patiently as the stricken man's eyes remained fast shut.

But he was quite conscious, for upon Neil approaching the couch after a time, his lips parted.

"I am not asleep," he said, gently, "only very weak. You need not both stay."

Neil looked at his father wonderingly, and with something of dread, the old man seemed so passionless and strange.

Just then the invalid opened his eyes and gazed full at his son.

"I know what I am saying," he said quietly. "I recollect all that has passed, but I am too weak and helpless to speak much. Nurse!"

She went to his side.

"Let him stay with me. You can go for an hour or two. I am not going to die—yet."

She looked at him keenly, and then at Neil, as if to question him, but she did not speak.

"The danger is past," he said quietly. "You can safely go for a time."

"Then set me free, sir," she cried, quickly, her woman's nature asserting itself now above the habit of the passionless trained nurse. "If there were danger, I would stay, but you say it is past; and it is impossible for me to stay here after what has happened."

"There is no reason now, madam," said Neil coldly. "I am doctor, and you are the nurse. You need not fear that I shall speak again. You cannot leave my father yet."

She looked at him wildly, and then, growing momentarily less self-controlled, she avoided his eyes and turned to the invalid, bending down over him gently.

"Mr Elthorne," she said; "you have heard your son's words as regards your state. I cannot stay here now. Give me your permission to go."

He looked at her sadly, and feebly shook his head.

"No, nurse," he whispered huskily. "You cannot go. Not yet—not yet."

She started, for he raised his hand, took hers and held it while he gazed half wonderingly in her face, as Neil, unable to conceal his feelings, hurried away to his own room.

"I am not fit to be left, nurse," said Ralph Elthorne gently. "You know how ill and weak I am."

A sob rose in her throat as she tried to be calm, while he gazed intently in her face, scanning each feature.

"So weak, so helpless," he muttered, as if to himself, but she heard every word; "and I never thought of this, I never thought of this. Yes, Anne. You wish to see me?"

"Yes, dear," said that lady, who had entered now unannounced even by a tap on the door. "Yes, Ralph. I want to speak to you very particularly." He turned to Nurse Elisia, and spoke in an apologetic manner, and very feebly.

"Leave us, please, nurse," he said. "I will talk to you later on."

"No, sir," she whispered. "Give me leave to go."

"Not yet, not yet," he replied. "I will lie here and think. It is all so sudden." Then, with a sudden flash of his old manner, "No; you are not to go until I give you leave."

She glanced at Aunt Anne, who had ignored her presence entirely, and then she went slowly to the room set apart for her use, asking herself how all this would end, and whether it would not be wiser to leave the house at once, and end the painful position in which she stood.

"Well, Anne, dear," said Mr Elthorne feebly. "You want to speak to me?"

"Yes, Ralph, I must speak to you now."

"Speak gently, then, dear; I am much weaker. Not so well to-day."

"And never will be well again, Ralph, with the house in this state," cried Aunt Anne, ruffling up, and speaking excitedly.

"What, what do you mean?" he faltered; and it was like the shadow of his former self speaking. "What do I mean, Ralph? I mean that the place has not been the same since that dreadful woman came."

"You are wrong, my dear, you are wrong," he said querulously. "So good and attentive to me. I should have been dead before now if it had not been for her."

"Oh, my dear brother, how can you be so blindly prejudiced! Can you not see the woman's cunning and artfulness?"

"No, Anne, no. She has been very good and kind."

"Yes; that is it, Ralph dear, playing a part. She has won those two foolish boys to think of her only, and insult poor Saxa and Dana; and now she has ended by winning over poor Isabel, who is in a state of rebellion. I have had a terrible scene with her. She actually takes this dreadful woman's part."

"Poor little Isabel!" sighed the sick man.

"And she's behaving shamefully to poor Sir Cheltnam."

"Ah!"

"Yes; shamefully, Ralph, shamefully."

"And you came to tell me that, my dear?" said Elthorne quietly.

"Yes, Ralph, and it has come to this."

She stopped short, and dabbed her face with her handkerchief.

"Yes, my dear, it has come to this? Tell me. I am tired. I must sleep again."

"That this woman, this nurse must leave the house at once."

"Leave? Nurse Elisia leave?" said Elthorne with a faint smile. "No, my dear, you do not wish to kill me."

"Heaven forbid, Ralph! I will nurse you now, and Isabel shall relieve me from time to time."

"No, my dear, no," he said gently. "You are very good and kind, but you do not understand."

"Not understand nursing?" she cried angrily. "Not such nursing as I require. No, my dear. She cannot go."

"Then I shall," cried Aunt Anne angrily.

Her brother laughed softly.

"No," he said; "you will not go. The house could not exist without you, sister."

"Am I to keep your house, then, or not, Ralph?"

"To keep it? of course, dear, as you always have done."

"I am mistress here, then?"

"Yes, my dear, yes."

"Then that woman goes at once," cried Aunt Anne emphatically.

"No," said Ralph Elthorne quietly.

"But I say yes, Ralph. I am mistress of this house, and it is my duty to send her away."

"And I am master, dear, feeble and broken as I am. She stays till I bid her go."

"Ralph, must I tell you everything I know?"

"There is no need, sister."

"But the woman's antecedents? Maria was at the hospital, and saw all her dreadful goings on with the students, and with poor deluded Neil."

"Maria? Pish!" said Elthorne with a contemptuous smile. "Nurse Elisia's face tells something different from that, my dear. I would sooner believe her candid eyes than Maria Bellow's oath."

"Ralph! Has this dreadful woman bewitched you too?"

"Enough!" he said feebly. "Go to your cupboards and your keys, Anne. You are a good, true woman, but you have always been as blind and prejudiced as your brother has been overbearing and harsh. This illness has brought me very low, dear, and taught me much. Go now, and remember: I owe Nurse Elisia my life. She is to be treated with respect, and I shall send her away when I think good."

"The woman is a witch," muttered Aunt Anne, as she left the room.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Discussing the Past.

A fortnight's watching, and the accompaniments of care and skill, had been needed to save Ralph Elthorne from sinking slowly into his grave. The shock of his seizure had wrought terrible havoc, but the worst was now over, and he was weak, but recovering fast.

There had been no further talk of the nurse leaving, and matters had remained in abeyance. Sir Denton had been down twice and given his instructions, and she had resigned herself to her position—knowing that the invalid depended upon her for everything, refusing even to take his food from other hands, and that if she persisted in her wish to go, the consequences might be terrible.

It must have been a terribly lonely life, for she seemed to be avoided by all in the house. She saw Neil, of course, frequently in the sick room, but few words passed, and those he uttered with formal respect, as he gave her some instructions. Alison she saw from time to time, evidently watching her window, and from him came flowers and fruit daily, Maria being the bearer, and setting them down with an insolent sneer, which would have roused one less dignified and patient to some retort. But Nurse Elisia had her consolations in the progress of the patient and the grateful looks he gave her, while, regularly now, stealing in hurriedly, and as if she were performing some guilty act, a little figure crept in, last thing, to pass its arm about her neck, kiss her, and say "Good-night."

It was then at the end of a fortnight, and Ralph Elthorne, terribly changed, but recovering now fast from the shock, lay near the window, while Nurse Elisia sat close at hand, working, and ready to attend to his lightest wish.

He had been lying there very silent since his son's last visit to the room, when he suddenly raised one thin white hand, and beckoned.

Elisia was at his side in a moment.

"What can I get you, sir?" she said gently.

"Nothing. Come and sit here. I want to talk to you."

"Do you feel strong enough, sir?"

"Yes."

She brought her work and sat near him, but he signed to her to put the work away.

"I want to talk to you seriously about the past."

She glanced at him quickly, and he went on.

"Yes—about the past. I have not said a word till now. I have been too weak, and it is only just within the last day or two that I have grasped it all thoroughly."

"Pray leave it still, sir," she said, with some show of agitation.

"No, I must get this all off my mind. Now, tell me—you heard what my son said on the day of my seizure—my son Neil?"

She bowed her head.

"Well, has he made further advances to you?"

"No, sir, we have only spoken in your presence." There was a pause, and then, gazing at her curiously, he continued.

"Did you—know—what he expressed—before you came down here—at the hospital?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly well."

"Ah! Then ought you to have come?"

"It was my duty sir," she said with animation; "it was Sir Denton's wish—almost his command; and, knowing what I did, I felt that I might come."

"Knowing what you did? What was that?"

"I could trust myself, sir, to let Mr Neil Elthorne see that what he wished was impossible."

"Ah, but he offered you his hand?"

"Yes, sir, and I refused."

Again there was a pause.

"You do not like my son Neil?"

"Like him, sir!" she cried, with her face flushing; "I think him the truest, noblest gentleman I ever met."

"Ah! And yet, feeling like that, you refused him?"

"Yes, sir, it is impossible."

Ralph Elthorne lay watching her, and she met his searching gaze without blanching, her soft grey eyes slightly clouded by the tears which rose and gathered till they brimmed over and one great drop slowly trickled down her cheek.

"And my son Alison?—he was attracted by you too. What of him?"

"Mr Alison Elthorne has followed me from the day I came, sir, and proffered his love."

"And you have turned a deaf ear to him as well?"

"Of course, sir," she said coldly.

"And he, too, has given up, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"It is no more than I expected from such a woman as you, nurse," said Elthorne, after another pause. "But there is a reason for all this. Forgive me: it is an old and broken man who speaks; there must be a reason."

"Yes, Mr Elthorne," she said, and her clear musical voice seemed to fill the room; "there is a reason—a good reason—for all this."

"May I know it?"

"Yes; why not? Some women love but once."

"Ah!" he said, and he took her hand. "Then you have loved—in the past?"

"Yes."

She paused in turn, while he waited patiently, expectant that she would continue.

"Ask me no more, Mr Elthorne. I gave my trusting, girlish heart to one I believed good and noble, but I was rudely awakened from my dream; and, after a long illness, I devoted myself to the task of trying to help those in sore need of a woman's hand, sometimes to nurse them back to life, sometimes—ah, too often!—to close their eyes in death. Ask me no more."

He raised her hand reverently to his lips, and then let it fall.

"I will ask you no more," he said gently; and they sat in silence for a time.

"*L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose,*" he said at last thoughtfully. "I have spent much of my time in planning, but too often my plans have been brought to naught. Nurse, I give up now; I will only try to do what is right while I stay. It will be a grief and will bring more suffering to me, but it is not just to you that I should keep you here."

"No, sir. I am waiting patiently, hoping that I may soon be set free to return to my work. You are well enough now to require only the assistance of your child and your sister. Give me leave now to go. I would gladly stay longer, but there is no need."

"No," he said after a time, "there is no real need. You must go."

She rose and stood before him, gazing down at him pityingly, as he lay there, aged by ten years since she came.

"Good-bye, sir," she said softly.

"What!" he cried, "going now?"

"Better that I should go at once, sir. You will soon become accustomed to another hand. Let me take yours once, and thank you for all your kindness. I think you understand me, though I have failed with your sister. Good-bye."

She held out her hand and he clutched it with both of his, clinging to it spasmodically as his face began to work.

"Mr Elthorne!" she cried, startled by the change. "Water," he whispered, and he loosened one hand only as she reached to the table and then held the glass to his lips.

"Thank you," he whispered; "thank you. I thought I was stronger. Hah!"

He lay back in silence for a time with his eyes closed, but still retaining one of Nurse Elisia's hands. At last he opened his eyes.

"Weak now as some poor fretful child," he whispered. "It came home then when you spoke. It cannot be for long, my child. I am only a poor broken man now, against whom his sons rebel, whose daughter is disobedient, and whose sister is ready to trample him down. Don't leave me," he pleaded. "Have pity on me, my child. I could not bear it. I—I should die."

Nurse Elisia looked at him wildly.

"No, no," she said hastily. "You feel low and weak to-day. In a short time you will have forgotten all this. I cannot—indeed I cannot stay."

But even as she spoke she saw that her patient believed the words he had uttered, and, trembling for the consequences to one in his weak, imaginative state, she hastily promised to give up all thought of going for the present.

"Thank you—thank you," he said, trembling as he clung to her hand. "You see how weak and childish I am. Only such a short time back and I was strong, and people hurried to obey my word or look. Now it seems as if everyone were falling away from me—even you."

"Oh, no," she said soothingly; "and, besides, what am I to you? Only the hired nurse."

"Yes," he said, gazing up at her piteously, "only the hired nurse; and yet you have tended me as if you were my child. But you will stay? You are not trifling with me?"

"No, no," she said. "There, it is time you had your sleep."

"Yes," he cried bitterly, and with a suspicious look in his eyes. "You are treating me as if I were a child. Go to sleep, so that I may awake by and by and find you gone."

She bent down and laid her hand on his, as she smiled sadly in his face.

"Have more confidence in me," she whispered. "Have I ever deceived you in the slightest thing? I tell you I will stay till you are more fit to leave." He uttered a low sigh and lay with his eyes half closed.

"It is so hard to have confidence when one is helpless as I am. People try to cheat me, and say to themselves, 'It is for his good.'"

"You may trust me, Mr Elthorne," she said gently, "trust me in everything. Sleep now—that is for your good. You shall find me here, or within call, when you awake."

He looked at her sharply once, and then closed his eyes, dropping off at once into a heavy sleep which lasted some hours, but to awaken with a sharp start, and a wildly suspicious look around.

The chair, where it seemed to him only a minute before he had seen Nurse Elisia seated, was empty, and he uttered a low, despairing cry.

"It is my punishment," he groaned, "for a life of arrogance and pride. It has been a kind of tyranny to them all, and now I am to lie here, helpless, deceived by everyone in turn. My punishment—my punishment! Better that I had never awakened to my wretched state."

At that moment there was the faint rustling made by a door being softly opened and passing over a thickly piled carpet, and directly after a faint shadow fell across his couch, then another, and there was a faintly heard sob.

"Hush, dearest; he sleeps more lightly now." Ralph Elthorne's head was turned away from the speaker, but he knew the gentle voice, and he repeated to himself the words wonderingly, "Hush, dearest; he sleeps more lightly now." To whom was Nurse Elisia speaking so tenderly?

The answer came at once.

"Oh, nurse, dear nurse, is he never to be well and strong again?"

The words came from the speaker's heart so full of love and sorrow that there was a stifling sensation in the listener's breast, and when, directly after, he felt warm breath upon his cheek, and a kiss, light almost as the breath itself, his arms clasped Isabel to his breast.

"Papa! papa!"

That was all; but as Nurse Elisia turned away to the window, it seemed to her that father and daughter were closer together in heart than they could have been for years.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Aunt Anne Harassed.

Many days had passed, and life went on at Hightoft in the same sad way.

It was the "master's" desire that the nurse should stay, but there was rebellion among the servants against "master's favourite," and poor Aunt Anne's breast swelled with anger against her niece, who had ventured to tell her that she was unjust.

"But I shall say nothing, Isabel, only that some day you will come to me repentant, asking my pardon. I always have been ready to ridicule all superstitious things, and have laughed at table turnings, and talkings, and hypnotisms, and mesmerisms, and all the rest of it, but that woman has something of the sort in her, a kind of power for influencing weak people, for she has literally bewitched you all. If she had lived a hundred years ago, she would have died."

"Why, of course, Aunt dear," said Isabel smiling. "It is nothing to make fun of, my dear. She would have either had her toes tied together, and been thrown into a pond, or been burned at the stake. That was the fate of all these witches then."

"Poor Nurse Elisia!" said Isabel smiling. "I'm glad she did not live then."

"Maria tells me," continued Aunt Anne, "that it was just the same at the hospital. That woman used to turn all the other nurses and the students round her little finger; and as for Sir Denton—well, they may call him a great surgeon, but if ever the carriage overturns, and I am badly hurt, no Sir Dentons for me. I call him a weak, silly, infatuated old goose. Maria only yesterday told me that once—"

"Aunt Anne," said Isabel quickly, "does it ever strike you that it is very undignified and degrading to listen to the wretched tattlings of an ignorant, spiteful woman, who returns all Nurse Elisia's kindness to her by telling falsities and distorting simple matters that happened in the past?"

"Isabel!" cried Aunt Anne, starting bolt upright in her chair, "you surprise me!"

"Do I, Aunt?"

"Yes, you do. You, assuming the tones and manners of your poor father, and speaking to me, the mistress of the house, like that!"

"But you are not the mistress of the house, Aunt."

"I beg your pardon, child. Your father has delegated all authority to me, and he renewed the charge only a few weeks back."

"Then you ought to do your duty, Aunt," said Isabel.

"Isabel, you do surprise me, you do indeed!" cried Aunt Anne, who looked quite aghast at what was, in her eyes, rank rebellion by a child against her authority.

"Do I, Aunt? I am very sorry," replied Isabel quietly. "I was only thinking that if I were mistress here, I should consider it my duty to send Maria away at once."

"And I do not," cried Aunt Anne. "My idea is that it would be my duty to discharge that dreadful nurse."

"But poor Auntie cannot," thought Isabel, "and consequently she is not sole mistress of the house."

"And now, as I have occasion to talk to you, Isabel," continued Aunt Anne, drawing herself up, and gazing very sternly at her niece, "I will not reprove you for your very flippant, disrespectful treatment of your poor father's sister."

"Oh, Auntie dear," cried the affectionate girl, jumping up from her place to go behind the elder lady's chair, and place her arms about her neck.

"Isabel, I beg you will not do that," said Aunt Anne. "It is not prompted by genuine affection."

"Oh, yes, Auntie, it's quite true," said Isabel.

"It cannot be, my dear; but, as I going to say, as I have found it necessary to reprove you, I must remind you that your conduct is not what it should be to your friends Saxa and Dana."

"But, Aunt dear, they went off to Lucerne without a word to me, and you know that I never felt that they were great friends of mine, in spite of all. They always looked down upon me because I did not care for horses, and dogs, and grooms."

"I am not going to say any more about those two poor girls who have been expatriated by your brothers' base conduct."

"Auntie! It was not base if the boys did not love them."

"They did love them, and they do love them, my dear," said Aunt Anne sternly. "All this is but a passing cloud, spread by that wicked woman, which blinds them. But it was not about that I wished to speak to you."

"What, then, Auntie?" said Isabel, looking at her suspiciously, and thinking of a visit she had paid a few days before to a certain invalid vicar who had lain back in his chair to proudly read aloud portions of a letter he had received by the last mail.

"Sir Cheltnam Burwood was here yesterday. Now, it is of no use for you to pretend that you did not know he was here, for I am certain that I saw you stealing off down the laurel walk, on the pretence of going to visit some of the poor, and I dare say, if the truth were known, you went to the vicarage."

"There was no pretence about it, Aunt dear."

"But indeed there was, Isabel, and I was obliged to entertain him, instead of you. Naturally enough, he complained very bitterly of your treatment, and I must say that for a young lady engaged to him it is most icy, almost paralysing."

"Papa will not persist," thought Isabel; "he has grown so kind and loving to me. He will not make me say yes, when he knows that it would break my heart."

"Now, it is of no use for you to turn sulky, my dear, and take refuge in silence. That is very childish and unbecoming in a girl like you. For you are no longer a child, and if you cannot do what is just and right, you must be taught. I have invited Sir Cheltnam to dinner on Tuesday."

"Aunt!"

"Yes, my dear, and I am sure your papa will highly approve of my plan. It is absurd to go on as you do, though your conduct is no worse than your brothers'. I declare, the house is quite wretched: Neil shut up always in the library, pretending to study bones, and Alison sulking about in the gunroom, and scowling at Neil whenever they meet. All I hope is that nothing worse will come of it."

"Oh, Aunt, what could come of it?" said Isabel uneasily.

"Ah, you speak like a child. When you have had my experience of the world and man's angry passions, you too will have fears."

"It is all very sad and a great pity," said Isabel. "Yes, and a greater pity that those two misguided young men's sister should go on as she does, making a devoted friend of the cause of all the mischief." Isabel winced.

"I'm sure we've quite trouble enough in the house without having a parricide."

"Auntie! A parricide?"

"Don't be absurd, Isabel. I said a fratricide."

"Aunt, what a dreadful idea! Oh, for shame!"

"Dreadful enough, my dear, and I'm sure I sincerely hope there never will be anything of the kind, but Cain never could have looked at Abel worse than Alison did at Neil only yesterday."

"Aunt!"

"Oh, it's true, my dear. It sent a cold chill all down my back; and ever since I've felt quite a presentiment of coming evil. I do hope they will not quarrel, and really I think it would be better if Neil went back to town."

"Aunt, dear, such ideas are too shocking. Just as if Neil would be likely to degrade himself by quarrelling with Alison. I am sure he has too much self-respect."

"Ah, young inexperience!" cried Aunt Anne pityingly. "Young men forget all their self-respect when they have been blinded by such a siren as that nurse."

"Oh, Aunt, you ought not to speak of nurse like that."

"You think so, my dear; I do not."

"But you will some day," cried Isabel passionately, and with the tears of vexation in her eyes. "She is all that is amiable, and good, and ladylike."

"Ladylike, child!"

"Yes, Aunt. If she were not, I'm sure poor dear Neil would not have cared for her as he does."

"Ah, well," said Aunt Anne, preening herself like a plump bird, "we shall see, I dare say. I will not call her an artful woman, but mark my words, Isabel, she will not rest till she has deluded one of your poor brothers into marrying her."

"Aunt! And she avoids them, and is as distant as possible to poor Neil."

"All feminine cunning, child. Oh, Isabel, I wish you would not be such a baby! Can you not see that it is to lead him on, while she is playing off one brother against the other?"

"I will not argue with you, Aunt," said the girl indignantly.

"No, my dear, I beg you will not. Wait and see, and then come to me humbly, and own how wrong you have been."

Isabel was silent, and Aunt Anne went leisurely on with some fancywork of a very useless type, till an idea occurred to her, and she looked up.

"Isabel, my dear, what wine was that Sir Cheltnam praised so, last time he dined here?"

"Really, Aunt, I do not know."

"No, child, you never know anything. It is very tiresome. I should like the dinner to go off well, and that wine has quite slipped my memory. Now, was it the hock, or the champagne? He would like the compliment if I had the forethought to have it served." Isabel shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"It is very tiresome," continued Aunt Anne. "He praised one of them, and made a face at the other; but perhaps I shall recollect by and by. I wonder that I remember anything, harassed as my poor brain is with worry and trouble, and you never trying in the least to help me, but rather setting yourself in antagonism."

"Oh, Aunt, you are too hard."

"Not a bit, child. And I am surprised at your giving so much as a passing thought to young Mr Beck. Tom! Gracious, what a name! Only fit for a groom, or one of the men about the farm."

"Really, Aunt," began Isabel.

"Now, pray do not interrupt me, Isabel. The name is common and absurd. Now, Cheltnam—Sir Cheltnam—Sir Cheltnam Burwood! It is old, aristocratic, and refined. A name to be proud of. But Beck—Tom Beck! Faugh!"

"It sounds honest, Auntie," said the girl with spirit, "and does not suggest drinking the Cheltenham waters, which I believe are very bitter."

"Now that's absurd and childish, Isabel, and you know it is. I did hope that now young Beck has gone, you would come to your senses. But I will be fair, and say that your brothers are worse than you. I suppose I shall have to beg and pray of them to come in to dinner, and behave like Christians, and not let Sir Cheltnam think he is going to be brother-in-law to a couple of young men with malice and hatred in their hearts. All your beautiful nurse's doing, my dear, all her fault. Well, really! To jump up and run out of the room like that!" cried Aunt Anne, staring in amazement at the last fold of her niece's dress, as the poor girl hurried away, unable to bear the long flow of annoying prattle, and to hide her chagrin in face of the ordeal to which she was to be submitted at the dinner projected by her aunt.

She hurried up to her room, to sink upon her knees by her bed and bury her face in her hands.

"Crying, Isabel? What is the matter, dear?"

She had not heard the door opened, and she started to her feet to throw herself upon Nurse Elisia's breast, sobbing out her trouble, and dread of the meeting on the following Tuesday, when she knew that in her mistaken notions of duty, Aunt Anne would contrive that she and Sir Cheltnam should be left alone.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Counterplot.

Neil Elthorne's absence from the hospital was rapidly extending to a term of months, broken only by a weekly visit, during the last of which Sir Denton, after hearing the report upon Ralph Elthorne's health, had said quietly:

"Never mind if you have to be away from here another month, my dear boy. You are not right yet yourself. You look careworn and anxious. I am managing very well, and I want you to be quite strong before you return. By the way, I have not filled up that post yet. I have had three men engaged one after the other, but they have all turned tail—backed out of it. You will not alter your mind? Fine opportunity for a brave man, Elthorne."

"No, I cannot leave England," replied Neil firmly. "There are reasons why I must stay."

"A lady, of course," said Sir Denton to himself. "I did once think—but never mind. He knows his own affairs best."

Neil was back at Hightoft after his last visit to town. His father was very slowly mending, and the nurse, as he could see, was indefatigable, her actions in the sick room disarming to some extent the young surgeon's resentment as he brooded over the fact that Alison was constantly watching, and obtained interviews with her, he felt convinced, from time to time.

He used to muse over these matters in the library, where he had surrounded himself with various works into which he plunged deeply, trying hard to forget his troubles in hard study of his profession, but too often in vain, for he was haunted by Nurse Elisia's calm, grave face in all his waking hours.

"She has a right to prefer him," he would say, "and I have none to complain; but it is hard, very hard."

He visited the sick room regularly four times a day, and his behaviour there was that of a surgeon who was a stranger. The nurse was always present, and she received his orders in the same spirit, a coldness having sprung up between them that was very nearly resentment on his part, but always on hers the respect of nurse to the doctor who had the patient in charge.

Several little things had made Neil satisfied that there was a quiet understanding between his brother and Elisia, trifles in themselves, the most important being Alison's manner when they met at meals. For there was always a quiet, self-satisfied look in the young man's eyes which indicated triumph, a look that roused a feeling of rage in his breast that he found it hard to control.

Neil felt that if they were together a quarrel must ensue, an encounter the very thought of which made him shudder, and after visiting his father he would hurry back to the library, and try to forget everything in his books.

It was with affairs in this condition that the day on which Sir Cheltnam was to dine there came. Neil had paid his customary morning visit, and paused at the door as he entered quietly, feeling almost lighthearted as he saw the look of returning vigour in his father's face.

The old man was talking eagerly to the nurse, whose back was toward Neil, and there was a glow of satisfaction in the young surgeon's heart as he owned to himself that it was almost entirely Elisia's work, her devotion to his father, which had wrought this change.

The group, too, at which he gazed pleased his eye: the invalid looking up, full of trust, in his graceful attendant's face; and the crushed-down love in Neil's breast began to revive again, as he thought that if he could win her his father would be ready to take her as a daughter to his heart.

Then all came over black. The scene before him was clouded, and a sense of despairing misery filled his breast.

They were talking about Alison, for his father mentioned the young man's name, and Elisia was evidently listening with attention to his words.

Neil drew back quickly to hide his emotion, for he felt that he could not face them then; but the door clicked as he closed it, and before he was at the head of the stairs it was reopened by Nurse Elisia, who said quickly:

"You need not go back, sir. Mr Elthorne is quite ready to see you."

He turned once more, and as he gazed sharply in the nurse's face, he detected a faint flush in her generally pale cheeks and a suffused look in her eyes which strengthened him now in his belief.

"Even my father is working against me," he thought to himself, as he passed on and took the chair by the side of the couch.

"Yes, boy, my yes," said his patient with some display of animation, "I certainly am better this morning. Helpless as ever, of course—I am getting resigned to that. I feel more myself, and I shall soon be asking for my invalid chair or a carriage ride."

"Have them as soon as you can bear them, sir," said Neil, laying his father's hand back upon the couch. "Yes, you are decidedly stronger this morning, and I think you can now begin to do without me."

"Without you, my boy? Yes, I think so, but not without nurse. I am very weak yet, my boy."

"But that will soon pass off," said Neil coldly. "You must keep your attendant, of course."

"Yes. Yes, of course, Neil, of course."

"Then to-morrow or next day I shall go back, and come again, say from Saturday to Monday, and then give you a fortnight's rest, so as to break off by degrees."

"You want to go back, then, Neil?"

"Yes, sir. The hospital has hardly known me lately. I ought to go now."

"True; yes, I ought not to keep you longer, my boy," said his father thoughtfully. "But you 've done a wonderful deal for me, Neil."

"The best I could, father; and, thank God, we have saved your life."

"Thank God, my life has been spared!" said the old man fervently; and he closed his eyes.

Neil left them soon after to return to the library, but not to resume his studies. His heart burned with anger against everyone in the place, and he paced the room thinking bitterly.

"Yes," he said to himself, "my work is done, and I may go. He said nothing, but his manner betrayed the whole wretched story. They have prevailed upon him. Dana is away and forgotten. Yes; of course. Alison was with him two hours yesterday. There: the dream is past, and I am fully awake again."

He stood with his teeth set, and his hands clenched for a few moments, and the muscles of his face worked painfully. Then, drawing a long, deep breath, he suddenly seemed to grow calm.

"Well, why should I repine? Only one can win the race. I ought to say, 'Heaven bless them!' She has won her way to

my father's heart, and yes, Heaven bless her! I will try and take her hand by and by, and kiss her, and say, 'Dearest sister, may you be very happy with the man of your choice!' Yes; we must be brothers once again. But I must go soon. I am too weak to bear it now."

There was a tap at the door.

"Yes. Come in."

The door opened, and Aunt Anne entered cautiously.

"Ah!" she cried, "not reading. I was so afraid of disturbing you, my dear. You have grown such a learned man I'm quite afraid of you."

"Nonsense, Aunt dear. A surgeon must keep himself *au courant* with what is going on in his profession abroad."

"Of course he must, my dear, but he must not starve himself to death."

"No fear, Aunt," said Neil pleasantly. "I have no intention of trying any such experiment."

"Oh, but you are always trying to live without food, my dear, and you look pale, and your hair is beginning to show grey. Why, you look fifteen years older than Alison, and you are only four."

Neil winced.

"He looks brown, and hearty, and handsome, while you—"

"Look like an old professional man, Aunt," he said, laughing, but with a touch of bitterness in his tone. "So much the better for me. The world goes by appearances. It does not like boyish looking surgeons."

"Ah! it's a very foolish world, my dear. But now, look here. I am going to have a little extra dinner to-day because Sir Cheltnam is coming, and I want you to promise to come and take your father's place."

"Ask Alison."

"No, my dear; you are the elder, and I ask you. Time after time I've had nice things got ready, and you have refused to dine with us. Now promise me you will come this evening."

"Oh, very well, Aunt, if it will please you."

"Thank you, my dear; that's very good of you. It will please me very much."

"That's right, then. And, by the way, Aunt, I shall be going back in a few days."

"Going back, my dear?"

"Yes; my father can be left now."

"Then the nurse will go with you?" she said, with a look of suspicion in her eyes.

"No, Aunt," he said coldly. "Nurse Elisia will stay here as long as my father desires to have her at his side."

"Oh, very well," said Aunt Anne, rustling her dress; "it is just as your father likes. You are a terribly headstrong race, you Elthornes."

"Including yourself, Aunt?"

"Oh, no, my dear. I take after my mother's family. But it is nothing to me. I am not going to interfere. All I say is that I hope everything is for the best."

"And I hope the same, Aunt," said Neil cheerfully. "It's all self-denial through life, eh?"

"Always, my dear. Then you will dress to-night, and come?"

"Oh, yes, Aunt; I'll come."

"Then we shall have a decent dinner," thought Aunt Anne, as she went back to the drawing room. "I'm sorry that woman is not going, but I'm glad she is not going up with Neil. Now suppose, after all, he is giving her up! Oh, if I could only get poor Alison to be as sensible, instead of growing more infatuated by that creature every day!"

Neil settled down to his books at once, seeking in study for the cure of his mental pains, but he had hardly begun to forget the events of the morning in an abstruse theory of muscular disease, when there was another tap on the panel, and in obedience to the cry, "Come in!" Isabel hurriedly entered and closed the door.

"Ah, my dear!" he said; and she looked at him wonderingly, his tone and manner were so different to their wont. This gave her encouragement, and begat her confidence, so that she ran to him, sank on her knees by his chair, and took his hands.

"Why, what's this?" he cried. "Anything the matter?"

"Yes, Neil, dear," she said. "I'm in trouble, and I want you to help me."

"Trouble? Help? Well, what is it, baby?"

"Don't laugh at me, Neil," she whispered in a broken voice. "Sir Cheltnam Burwood is coming to dinner."

"Yes. Aunt has just been to tell me. What of that?"

"What of that?" she cried piteously. "Oh, Neil, dear, you don't see all this as I do. It is so that he may see and talk to me. It is Aunt's doing, and she says it is only carrying out poor papa's wishes."

"Ah, yes," he said thoughtfully. "I had almost forgotten that."

"Forgotten it?" she cried reproachfully. "Oh, Neil!"

"I'm a selfish fellow, little one," he said, bending down to kiss her, when her arms were flung round his neck, and she buried her face in his breast and burst into tears.

"Come, come, come!" he whispered soothingly; "what is it, Bel darling? There, wipe your eyes and tell me all about it, and let's see if something cannot be done."

"Yes, Neil, dear. It's very weak and foolish of me, but Sir Cheltnam's coming, and he quite persecutes me with his addresses, and if I am angry he only laughs. He talks to me as if I quite belonged to him now."

"Does he? Well, we must stop that, Bel. You are not his wife yet."

"No, dear; and I've no one to come to but you and Nurse Elisia. She is so kind, but what can she do?" Neil frowned.

"Ah, yes," he said huskily, "what can she do?"

"I believe I should have broken my heart if she had not been so loving and kind to me."

"Loving and kind?"

"Yes; I used to hate her, Neil, but she is so good and dear."

Neil half turned away his head.

"Neil, darling, you can help me to-night. When papa is quite strong enough I am going to beg and pray of him to let me stay at home and be his nurse and attendant. I love Tom, but I won't ask to marry him if papa says no. But I can't marry anyone else. I don't want to, and it would kill me to have to say 'I will' to that dreadful man."

"Poor little darling!" he said tenderly. "Then you shall not. Father must listen to reason by and by. I can think about you now, and I will."

"Oh, Neil, you have made me so happy," she cried ecstatically. Then, changing her manner directly, "But he's coming to-night."

"Well, what of that? You must be cool to him."

"But he does not mind that, and Aunt is sure to arrange to leave us alone. I know she has planned it all with him."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I am sure of it; and if you would watch for me, and as soon as Aunt has left us alone come and put a stop to it by staying with me, I should be so grateful."

"What a duty for a surgeon, Bel!"

"It is to heal a sore heart, Neil," she said, smiling through her tears.

"Is it, pet? Well, then, I will try what I can do. Some people ought to be made happy in this weary world."

"But it isn't a weary world, Neil," she cried enthusiastically. "It's a lovely world, and I could be so happy in it, if—"

"Yes, Bel," he said sadly; "and I could be so happy in it too, if—"

"People did not make it a miserable world," cried Isabel.

They were silent for a few minutes, and then the girl continued:

"You will help me, Neil?"

"By not letting you be alone with our gallant, foxhunting baronet?"

"Yes, dear."

"I promise you," said Neil half sadly, half playfully. "I will watch over you while I stay down here like a lynx."

"Oh, my darling brother! But you are not going soon, Neil?" she cried, as she kissed him.

"Yes, very soon, dear. I must get back to my poor people and work. But I will work, too, to try and make my little

sister happy.”

“Thank you—thank you—thank you, dear Neil!” cried the girl. “You’ve made the world seem so bright and happy again; and—and I’m not afraid to meet Sir Cheltnam now—and—and—oh, Neil, Neil, I must go upstairs and have a good cry!”

She ran out of the room before he could stop her. “Poor little sis!” he said, as he looked at the door through which she had passed. “Well, I can make someone happy if happiness is not to come to me.” He looked sadly about him for a few moments, and then half aloud he whispered, as he formed a mental future:

“And I could be so happy, too—if—”

Chapter Twenty Six.

Neil Breaks his Promise.

“Just going down to dinner?” said Ralph Elthorne, as his son came into his room the same evening. “That’s right, Neil. It looks like old times. It does me good. Wait a bit, and I’ll join you—as of old. Not quite,” he added, and his lip quivered—“not quite, my boy. But I can be carried down, and I shall not be an invalid.”

“No, sir,” said Neil, “no invalid, and you will soon forget your lameness.”

“Yes, yes, Neil, I shall try hard to do that. There, I will not keep you. I’m getting independent, you see. Ask nurse to come and sit with me as you go out.”

There was no need, for as Neil rose to go down, the nurse entered, book in hand, but drew back till the young surgeon had left the room to go thoughtfully downstairs, for he was forcing himself to think out what it would be best to do respecting his sister. He shrank from disturbing his father’s mind, now that he was so much better and free from disturbing elements. A subject like that might bring on a fresh attack, or at least retard his progress, and by the time Neil had reached the drawing room he had planned that he would speak firmly to Burwood; but he paused at the door, for he foresaw that such a proceeding would very likely drive the baronet to speak to his father, when the agitation would only be coming from another source.

“Bel must fight her own battle,” he said to himself. “A woman ought to be able to cool a lover’s courage. There the matter must wait. Like many more of the kind, give it time and it will settle itself.”

He entered the room, to find the objects of his thoughts all there and waiting his coming. Aunt Anne was radiant, and Burwood, who was chatting with Alison upon the everlasting theme of the horse, came and shook hands in the warmest manner.

“I can’t quarrel with him,” thought Neil. “It must be done by diplomacy or scheming.”

The dinner was announced directly after, and as Neil took in his sister, she pressed his arm.

“Please, please, dear, don’t let me be out of your sight all the evening,” she whispered.

“Impossible to do that, little one,” he said quietly. “You ladies will leave the room, you see. Suppose I keep Burwood in sight all the evening, will not that do as well?”

“Oh, yes,” she whispered eagerly. “Of course.” The dinner passed off wonderfully well, everyone seeming to be on the *qui vive* to keep off anything likely to trench upon the past and the troubles in the house. Aunt Anne did scarcely anything but beam; Sir Cheltnam related anecdotes; and Alison entered into conversation with his brother.

In due time the ladies rose, and the three men were left together over their wine, when the conversation went on as easily as if there had been no undercurrent of thought in either breast.

“It will be easy enough to keep them apart,” thought Neil, as he sipped his coffee. “When we go into the drawing room Bel shall sing some of the old ballads.”

A calm feeling of restfulness had come over Neil Elthorne, and it was as if his efforts at self-mastery were already bearing fruit, when after a quick glance had passed between Burwood and Alison, the latter rose, went to the window, and looked out, taking the opportunity to glance at his watch.

“Very dark,” he said. “Nasty drive back for you, Burwood. Want your lamps.”

“Oh, the mare would find her way home if it were ten times as dark,” said Burwood laughingly. “I think I could get safely back without reins. She always turns aside if we meet anything.”

“Nothing like a good, well-broken horse,” said Alison, looking furtively at his watch. “What do you say to joining them in the drawing room?”

“By all means,” cried Burwood, rising.

At that moment the butler entered, and went straight to Neil’s chair.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he whispered. “You are wanted in master’s room.”

Neil started to his feet, and turned to their guest. "You'll excuse me for a few minutes?" he said hurriedly.

"Doctors need no excuse," replied the baronet, and Neil hurried out and upstairs to his father's room, expecting and dreading some fresh seizure, but, to his surprise, he found his senior lying back calmly on his couch, ready to salute him with a smile.

"I was afraid you were unwell," cried Neil.

"No, my boy, no; I've been lying very comfortably. In less pain than usual."

"But you are alone."

"Yes. Nurse has just gone. You might have met her on the stairs. A message came for her—from Isabel, I suppose. I don't mind. I told her not to hurry; I want to inure myself to being more alone."

"And you wanted me, sir?"

"Yes, my boy," said Elthorne. "Not particularly; but I knew that you had been seated over your wine for some time, and I thought you would not mind coming up to me for a little while. I get very dull sometimes, my dear boy. You do not mind?"

"No, sir, of course not."

"Well, don't look at me like that, Neil. It is the doctor examining me to see how I am. I want you to look like my son."

Neil smiled.

"Ah, that's better. Sit down close up here for a while. Burwood and Alison will have a cigar together, and not miss you."

"Oh, no," said Neil rather bitterly. "They do not care much for my society."

"Why not?" cried his father sharply. "You are an able, cultured man—a clever surgeon."

"But not a veterinary surgeon, father," said Neil, smiling.

Ralph Elthorne nodded and smiled.

"No," he said; "you are right. They do seem to think of nothing but horses. I was the same once, I'm afraid, my boy. Perhaps I shall think a good deal of horses still; but," he continued sadly, "from a very different point of view to that of the past."

"Never mind the past, father," said Neil quickly. "Think of the future."

"A poor future for me, Neil," said Elthorne, shaking his head.

"By no means, my dear father. There is nothing to prevent your living another fifteen or twenty years."

"Like this?" replied Elthorne despairingly, as he glanced down at his helpless limbs.

"Like this, sir. You are a wealthy man, and can soften the hardships of your state in a hundred ways."

"Ah, well, we shall see, my boy, we shall see."

"Have you been reading?" asked Neil, glancing at a book on the little table by the side of the couch.

"No. Nurse Elisia was reading to me when Maria brought her a message."

"Shall I go on reading where she left off?" said Neil, taking up the book and feeling a kind of pleasure in holding the little volume so lately in her hands.

"No, no, I am tired of poetry and history. What are you writing now?"

"Only some notes on a case that is taking up a good deal of attention just now."

"Ah!" said the elder man eagerly. "I should like to hear that."

"It is very dry and tedious, I'm afraid; only of interest to the professional man."

"But I take an interest in such things now. Will you read it to me, Neil?"

"Of course, sir. I'll fetch it," said Neil, smiling at his father's eagerness about matters that he would be unable to comprehend.

"That's right, my boy. But you are sure that you will not think it a trouble?"

"My dear father," cried Neil, taking his hand, "I wish you would try to understand me better. I'm afraid you do not."

"Yes, yes, my boy. I do understand you, indeed I do. Don't think because I have lain here, querulous and complaining, that I have been blind as well as helpless. God bless you, my boy, for all you have done!"

"Only my duty, sir," said Neil gravely, "and I only wish that—"

He stopped short.

"Yes—yes—what?" said his father eagerly.

"That I could have followed out your wishes in another way."

He rose and went out of the room, leaving the helpless man gazing sadly after him.

"The tyrant's reign is over," he said sadly, "and I must be resigned to all that comes."

Neil went hurriedly down to the library, to stop short as he reached the door, for there was the low murmur of a man's voice within, speaking in appealing tones.

"Poor Bel!" muttered Neil, as the recollection of all that had passed that day came back, and his promise—entirely forgotten—to keep Burwood with him, came like a flash.

It was only a dozen steps to the dining room, and he hurried there to throw open the door, and, as he feared, find it empty.

Angry with himself for his carelessness, though hardly at the moment seeing how he could have acted differently, he hurried back to the library, entered suddenly, and then stopped, as if paralysed by the pang which shot through him.

For he had entered angrily, feeling ready to interrupt a *tête-à-tête*, which Burwood must have contrived to obtain with his sister; and he found himself in presence of Alison, who was tightly holding Nurse Elisia's hands, which she now seemed to wrest away, as she turned suddenly, looked wildly in Neil's face, rushed by him, and hurried out of the room.

"Well?" said Alison, as soon as he could recover from the startling effect of his brother's interruption. "You might have knocked."

Neil made no reply, but stood there pressing his nails into the palms of his hands, as he fought hard to keep down the sensation of mad, jealous hatred gathering in his breast. Then, turning upon his heel, he staggered more than walked out of the room, across the hall and upstairs to his father's chamber, but only to pause at the door.

"I have no right—I have no right," he said; and going down once more, forgetful of everything but his own agony of spirit, he took his hat from the stand, passed out through the hall door, and walked swiftly away into the black darkness of the night—onward at a rapidly increasing pace—onward—anywhere so that he might find rest. For the feeling was strong upon him that he and his brother must not meet while this mad sensation of passion was surging in his breast.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Maria's Deceptive Message.

"Don't read any more, my dear," said Ralph Elthorne gently.

Nurse Elisia looked up from her book and found that the patient was gazing at her.

"Ah," he said, with a faint smile on his pinched lips, "I said 'my dear.' Yes; not the way to address one's nurse. It was to the sweet, gentle woman who has tended me with all the patient affection of a daughter."

"Oh, Mr Elthorne!" she cried, her eyes brimming with tears, "I have only tried to do my duty as your attendant."

"And you have done much more," he said, as he still gazed at her thoughtfully. "You have set me thinking a great deal, my child—a great deal, and—no, you must not talk of leaving here again for a long time—a very long time."

She shook her head.

"I have duties in London, sir, which call me away."

"And a duty here which keeps you," he said, smiling. "You would not be so hard-hearted as to leave such a broken old fellow as I am—helpless."

"But you will not be so helpless soon, sir."

"Ah, well," he replied, "there is time enough for that. We shall see—we shall see. Yes. Come in!" he cried querulously, for there was a tap at the door. "No, do; don't come in. See who it is, my child. If it is Isabel, she may come. If it is my sister, tell her I cannot see her to-night, and that she must stay with her visitor."

"And it will make her more bitter against me," thought Elisia, as she crossed the room, to find that it was Maria Bell.

"Miss Isabel wants you in the lib'ry, nurse, in a quarter of an hour," said the woman shortly; and she turned her back and went down.

"What is it? what is it?" said Elthorne sharply.

She told him.

“Now what can she want that she could not have come and said to you herself? In a quarter of an hour, eh?” he continued, turning his eyes to the little carriage clock standing on the table. “Yes: they will be out of the dining room then, and the gentlemen will be sitting over their claret—as I used to be over my glass of port—as I used to be over my glass of port.”

“Shall I read to you again for a while, sir?” said the nurse, to divert his thoughts from the past.

“No, not now,” he said shortly. “Hah! How little we know of what is in store for us. Such a hale, strong man as I was, nurse. And now, a helpless baby—nothing more.”

“Nothing more, sir? With mental powers such as yours?”

“Hah! yes. A good reproof, but it is impossible not to lie here and repine. Mental powers such as mine! That was not meant as flattery, eh?”

“I think you know I would not be so contemptible, sir,” she said.

“Yes, I do know. Thank you. Another reproof. Why, nurse, my accident must have done me good. I should have resented reproofs once upon a time. But I’ve paid dearly for my lesson—very dearly indeed, and there is so much more to pay—all my life. Yes, all my life.”

He closed his eyes and lay thinking for some time, not opening them till the quarter of an hour had nearly sped, when he looked sharply at the little clock.

“Time you went down,” he said sharply. “Tell Isabel to come and see me a little sooner to-night, to sit a quarter of an hour before she goes to bed.”

Elisia placed a glass close to her patient’s head; saw that the cord was within reach, in case he should want to ring; and then, conscious that he was attentively watching her every act with a satisfied look in his eyes, she passed out into the corridor, and then drew back slightly, for Aunt Anne had just passed the door, and was going on to her own chamber with her dress rustling loudly as it swung from side to side, and threatened to sweep some of the valuable ornaments from the side tables and brackets arranged here and here. Then, turning into her room, the door was closed and Elisia went on down.

As she reached the hall, voices could be heard plainly in the dining room, where she judged that the gentlemen would still be sitting over their wine. She half stopped as one voice rose louder and sounded deep and hoarse, and for the moment it seemed as if, in dread lest the door should be opened and the occupants of the room appear, she was about to retreat upstairs; but, recovering her confidence, she passed on toward the library, the softly subdued notes of a piano reaching her ear from the drawing room, so that she was in no wise surprised, on turning the handle, to find that the library was lit up but vacant.

The door swung to as she entered and glanced around the massively furnished room with its heavy bronze figures on the mantelpiece, each bearing a globe lamp which threw a subdued light around, while a broad, green shade spread a circle of light on the book covered table.

Elisia took a few steps forward into the room, rested her hand upon the back of one of the heavy leather-covered chairs, and sighed as she stood thinking. For the place, with its calm silence and softened light, evoked thought, and the disposition to recall the days when life seemed opening out before her in one long vista of joy. At that time it was as if there were no such element in existence as sorrow; and yet of late hers had been permeated by incessant grief, and a despondency so great that there were hours when she lay sleepless, thinking that death when it came would be no trouble, only a great and welcome rest.

She sighed again as she stood there crossing one hand over the other, and half resting on the great chair back. And now a smile faintly dawned upon her lip, as she began to think of her mission there, and of how long it would be before Isabel came. For it was pleasant to think of the fresh, innocent, young face, which had now grown to light up when they met, as its owner became more trusting and affectionate day by day.

Then, as she thought that the girl would come as soon as the piece she played was finished, the tears rose to her eyes. For the melody she heard, like every air that has once made its way to the heart, evoked old memories of scenes years before, when she had played that old air. It had been a favourite of hers, and used to sound bright and joyous, but now it was full of sadness.

“Why is it,” she thought, “that as time glides on, all these old airs grow more mournful in their tones?”

The answer to this has never come, but the fact remains the same; and why should they not sound more sad to us who heard them in our youth, and love them better in our riper years when they are blended with memories, and softened by time, even if the hearing of the strain does produce a mistiness of vision and a disposition to sigh?

Even as Elisia stood and listened, the tones of the piano seemed to float to her, and it was not until there was the faint sound of a closing door that she awoke to the fact that there was no other sound vibrating in the air, and that all was very still where she waited. But her heart beat more quickly, and her hand was raised to her breast in the fancy that she might stay its throbbing, for the step she heard was familiar—that hasty, decided pace, crossing the marble floor, as if bound on some important mission.

Her lips parted and there was a hunted look in her eyes as she looked sharply round for a way of retreat.

"He is coming here," she said in a hurried whisper, and she glided toward a folding screen between her and one of the great book cases; but before she reached it the plainly heard steps ceased, and she knew that they were hushed on the thickly carpeted stairs.

"Gone to his father's room," she said with a sigh of relief, and walking back to the chair, she rested one elbow upon it and let her face drop down upon her hand, her tears welling forth, and one glistening between her white fingers in the soft light.

"No—no—no," she said quietly. "It cannot be now. It is all a painful dream. All that is dead."

She tried to picture in her mind Isabel in the drawing room playing the last chords of the familiar old air, and then leaving the music stool to join her there, but another figure forced itself to the front, and she saw the dark form of Neil Elthorne as vividly as if she were watching him from close at hand. She could picture him passing along the corridor, then opening the chamber door, to see him more plainly as the soft light from the room shone out like a golden glow, and lit up his pale, thoughtful face. Then she seemed to see him close the door, cross the room, and go to his old seat beside the couch. And how familiar that attitude had become, as he bent forward to take and hold his father's hand.

She was mentally gazing on father and son when the scene changed, and once more there was the old man's flushed and distorted face, with the veins starting and eyes wild with anger as he realised that his long cherished plans had been so rudely overset.

The scene was very plain to her imagination. There, too, were the handsome, masculine looking sisters, whose eyes flashed at her scornfully, as she saw herself standing there, pale and shrinking, in her plain black dress, and then meeting Ralph Elthorne's searching gaze. She remembered her effort to be firm and yet how she had trembled in dread of the man's fierce anger. And without cause, for from that moment he had spoken differently to her, he had grown more kind and gentle; in fact, there had been times when she had fancied in her dread and shrinking that his words even sounded fatherly.

It might be imagination, she knew, but his manner had ended in evoking thoughts which had grown stronger than ever that night, and over which she brooded now.

Minute after minute passed unnoticed as she stood in the old library, and she gave quite a start, and her hand fell to her side, as a door opened again, and this time she heard voices.

"Has Isabel forgotten me?" she said to herself, as steps crossed the marble floor again, another door was opened and closed, and she stood listening and expectant.

Then there was a quick, light step, the library door was thrust open, and she turned eagerly to greet Isabel, but started back in alarm on finding herself face to face with Alison, who quickly shut the door and advanced toward her with a meaning smile upon his countenance, which she could see was slightly flushed by the wine of which he had partaken freely.

A minute later Neil entered the room and seemed blinded by the passion which surged up in his labouring breast.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Sir Cheltnam Exposed.

"What will he do? what will he say?" panted Elisia, as she hurried across the hall to reach the stairs. Her customary calmness was gone, and one moment she was wild with excitement, the next her heart was sinking in despair.

"I'll run back," she thought, as she stopped short. "It was cowardly to go and leave him."

She took a couple of steps back, for a great dread had assailed her; those two brothers were face to face! What might not happen! and she the cause. She was half way back to the library, when a hand was laid upon the door, and in her dread she stopped short, turned, and was making for the stairs, but, feeling that she would be in full view of whoever left the room, she ran swiftly over the marble floor to the large *portière* at the end of the hall, and entered the great conservatory which ran all along that side of the house, library and drawing room opening into it as well.

With her heart beating heavily, she had hardly found refuge among the broad leaves of the great exotics when she heard a quick step crossing the hall, and she shrank farther away.

"Neil," she said to herself; "and he is coming to drag me back to face his brother."

But even as she thought thus the sound ceased, and she knew that he had once more ascended the stairs. She stood there in the semi-darkness, hardly daring to breathe, till she felt that Neil must have reached his room; and then, with a feeling of utter desolation oppressing her,—a misery greater than she could bear,—she turned toward the hall, dimly conscious that someone was speaking in the drawing room, for the voice came through the open window at the far end of the conservatory.

But it was nothing to her; only someone to avoid. Neil had surprised her with his brother—that was all her brain would bear; and, trying to think what she should do next, she had nearly reached the hall when she stopped short, with her cheeks flushing, and a sensation of anger which mastered everything else rising in her breast.

There was no hesitation now in her movements. She walked sharply along the tiled floor, with the great-leaved plants

brushing her arm, straight for the open doorway through which a subdued light showed the form of leaf and spray, and stepped at once into the dimly lighted drawing room, where a similar scene was being enacted to that in which she had so lately taken part.

Here seemed to her to be the reason why Isabel had not kept her appointment, for, as she entered, Sir Cheltnam was standing half way down the room, his back toward her, and holding Isabel's hands tightly in his, as, half bantering, he put aside as folly every appeal and protest uttered by the now frightened girl.

Isabel was striving vainly to release herself when she caught sight of the dark figure of the nurse, framed, as it were, in the conservatory doorway, and, uttering a cry of joy, she now wrenched her hands away from their visitor's grasp, and before Burwood could check her she ran to Elisia's side, clung to her, and panted excitedly:

"Nurse—nurse—don't leave me—pray, pray stay here!"

"My poor child!" whispered Elisia, as she bent over the hysterical girl, and drew her tightly to her breast. "Hush! hush! for everyone's sake try and master it. You are quite safe now."

"Yes—yes; quite safe now," sobbed Isabel. "Don't—don't leave me here."

Sir Cheltnam, meanwhile, had stood in the middle of the room speechless with fury, for the interruption had been completely unforeseen. It was understood with Aunt Anne and Alison that he was to win from Isabel her consent to an early marriage that very night, and those who had promised their help had carefully arranged that the *tête-à-tête* should have no one to mar its course.

But the little bit of grit had, as is often the case, made its way into the mechanism, and the wheels had so suddenly come to a stoppage that the baronet was for the moment utterly confounded.

It was only a few minutes before that, in the dining room, Alison had for about the fifth time consulted his watch, and then said quickly:

"There, old chap, it's all right now. She will be alone in the drawing room, so off with you, and say all you like."

"You think the old man will not make any objection—on account of his illness, you know?"

"Not an objection. Never fear. There, quick; be off."

"What a hurry you are in!"

"Well, you wished me to be," said Alison sharply, and hardly able to keep from referring again to his watch.

"Humph! Yes," said the baronet; and they parted, each to follow out his plans, which seemed too well made to fail.

"Take me to my room now," whispered Isabel, as she clung tightly to her protectress, whose face was bent down so that her lips rested upon the girl's wavy hair. "I will not stay here to be insulted," she cried, as indignation was beginning fast to take the place of fear. "It is shameful. It is too cruel of Aunt Anne. She left me on purpose."

"Hush! hush, my child! be calm," whispered Elisia, in whom a strange sense of elation was growing fast, as she felt the ever tightening clutch of the agitated girl. "There is no need to let others know. You are quite safe now."

"Yes, I know," cried Isabel hysterically; "but where is Neil? where is my brother? He promised so faithfully to stay—to keep by me—to—oh, nurse, nurse," she sobbed, as she gave way now to a fit of weeping that was almost childlike in its intensity, "pray, pray go with me to my room."

"Directly, dear; but try and be calm first. Think of the servants. For your father's sake."

"Yes; I'm better now," sighed Isabel with childlike simplicity, as she turned to dart a defiant look at Sir Cheltnam, who had been fuming with rage and surprise at the interruption, and who had made several attempts to gain a hearing, but had been till now completely ignored.

As he saw Isabel's eyes directed toward him at last, he took a step or two forward.

"You foolish girl," he said, with a forced laugh; "how can you be so absurd? Here," he continued; "you are the nurse, I suppose—Mr Elthorne's attendant?"

A thrill ran through Elisia's frame, and she started slightly, but she did not change her position—keeping her lips pressed on the girl's soft hair, as she held her tightly to her breast.

"Do you hear, woman?" cried Sir Cheltnam. "I am speaking to you. How dare you force your way into the drawing room like this?"

She made no answer, but drew a long, deep breath, while Isabel clung more tightly.

"Don't—don't take any notice," she whispered. "How dare he! He has no right to speak to you. Don't—don't leave me."

A gentle pressure of the arm about her made Isabel utter a sigh of relief.

"Isabel!" cried Sir Cheltnam. "How can you be so foolish, dear? Send this woman away. It is too absurd."

"Come," said Elisia in a low voice; and then, as if to herself, "I cannot speak to him. Come, my dear; I will take you to your room."

"Ridiculous!" cried Sir Cheltnam angrily, for he caught her last words. "Isabel, my child, how can you be so silly? For Heaven's sake, have some self-respect—some for me, your affianced husband."

He spoke in a low, earnest tone, now, and tried to take one of her hands.

"Do you hear me?" he continued, with a touch of anger in his tones. "Can you not see that this woman is bound to go and repeat all she has seen? You are behaving like a little schoolgirl. This will be the talk of the servants' hall. For your father's sake, do try and be sensible. There, my good woman, you see that you are not wanted here; have the goodness to go."

To his rage and astonishment, Elisia averted her face more from him, and, utterly ignoring his presence, led Isabel toward the door; but, before they could reach it, he interposed, and placed his back against the panel.

"Stop!" he cried angrily. "Isabel, my child, this wretched scene must come to an end. You are making us both too ridiculous. Leave this woman, and order her to go. Tell her it was all a wretched mistake, and that she had no business to intrude."

"No, no," said Isabel huskily. "It is not a mistake." Then, in a whisper to Elisia, "Pray, pray don't listen to what he says. Why is not Neil here?"

"Am I to ring for the servants, and have you turned out of the room?" cried Sir Cheltnam furiously. "Do you hear me? Miss Elthorne does not require your presence, and I order you to go."

No answer, but the face kept resolutely averted.

"You are a stranger here, and I suppose Miss Elthorne's cry startled you. I now tell you that your interference was uncalled for. I am Sir Cheltnam Burwood, and this lady is to be my wife."

"No, no!" cried Isabel excitedly. "Never, never! This way, nurse. Come through the conservatory." She was full of eagerness now, and seemed to have cast off her girlish timidity as she tried to drag her protectress toward the open door. But Sir Cheltnam was too quick for her.

"You foolish girl!" he cried, as he caught her by the wrist, and, by a quick, sharp movement, literally plucked her away from Elisia, and stood between them, pointing to the door.

"There has been enough of this," he cried angrily. "Now, my good woman, go!"

Up to this moment Elisia had not looked him full in the face, but had kept her eyes bent down as at first, and turned away from where the shaded lamps shed their subdued light.

Sir Cheltnam had attributed this to fear, and, blaming himself for want of decision, he now stood in a commanding attitude, expecting that he would be obeyed; but to his astonishment, he saw the nurse slowly raise her head, draw herself up proudly, and step toward him. As her face came now into the light, and he met a pair of flashing, indignant eyes fixed on his, he started violently and loosed his grasp on Isabel's wrists, leaving her free to take refuge once more half behind Elisia, as she clung to her arm. "You!" he said hoarsely, as he took a step back. "You order *me* to go, Cheltnam Burwood!" said Elisia sternly. "You, whose presence in this room is an outrage—an insult to an English lady."

"You—here?" he faltered.

"Yes—I—here," she said coldly, as she passed her arm round Isabel and drew her close—"here to protect this poor motherless girl from such a man as you. Mr Elthorne must have been ignorant of your true character when he admitted you to his house, doubly ignorant when he allowed you to address his child."

There was a look of tenderness that was almost maternal in her eye as she looked down at Isabel, whose eyes sought hers wonderingly.

Sir Cheltnam made a desperate effort to recover himself, but it was so feeble that Elisia laughed contemptuously.

"Who is this woman, Isabel, that she dares—"

But he did not finish his sentence. The mocking laugh froze the words on his lips, and he gave an impatient stamp upon the floor as Elisia went on, with every word she uttered stinging him by its contemptuous tone.

"Mr Elthorne lies upstairs perfectly helpless, but at a word from me he has those who will obey his wishes, and Sir Cheltnam Burwood will be thrust from the door with the disgrace that is his due. Go, sir, before I am compelled to speak and tell Mr Elthorne the full story of your life—of your conduct toward the trusting girl who was to have been your wife. You have no doubt as to Mr Elthorne's judgment, and what his decision will be."

Burwood stood glaring at her, with teeth and hands clenched, as if utterly cowed by the eyes which gazed firmly into his. He tried to speak again and again, and his lips parted, but no words came. There were moments when the whole scene appeared to him like a nightmare which, after a time, he would shake off, for it was impossible, he told himself, that he could be awake, face to face with her. Her presence was a myth; she could not, he said to himself, be present there in Ralph Elthorne's house, and in the guise of a hospital nurse. It was all a dream. In his excitement since dinner, as he sat with Alison, waiting for the time when he should find Isabel alone, he must have unknowingly drunk

too much wine, and this was the result—this waking dream—this strange mental aberration which would soon pass away.

And as these thoughts crowded through his disordered brain, he threw back and shook his head, as if expecting that this act would clear away the mist which troubled him. But no: there she stood—that woman whom he had sworn to love—fixing his eyes, so that he could not tear them away; and, after vainly and silently fighting for the mastery, striving to beat down that firm, accusing gaze, he muttered an imprecation, turned hastily, and seized the handle of the door. But he snatched his hand away instantly and strove to make another effort as he swung sharply round.

“Isabel,” he cried, “I swear to you—pray listen to me—I vow and declare, dear—this woman—this—”

He faltered in his speech, his words trailed off, becoming more and more disconnected, and he stopped short, for the stern, fixed gaze never left him, the beautiful eyes literally mastered him, and after trying to coin some excuse, utter some words which should bring Isabel to his side, he ground his teeth savagely, turned, and literally rushed from the room.

For a time no sound was heard in the drawing room where Elisia stood, clasping Isabel more tightly than ever to her breast; and, as they listened, they heard the hurried steps of Sir Cheltnam crossing the hall, then the great door closed heavily, and the hurried steps were heard again upon the gravel of the drive, growing more and more faint, till finally they died away, and Isabel uttered a low, catching sigh of relief.

“Oh, nurse—Nurse Elisia!” cried the girl at last, as she looked wonderingly in the proud, stern face whose gaze was still directed at the closed door, “what can I do to thank you?”

“Thank me with your love.”

“Oh, I will, I will; but,” she continued timidly, as if hardly daring to ask—“but you knew him—you knew this man—before—you came here?”

“Yes, dear, when I was a girl like you, as trusting and as loving. Before I became old and hard and stern as I am now. I met him at a famous party; we were introduced, and, in my girlish folly, I thought him all that was chivalrous and noble. He told me he loved me as time went on, and I believed him. We became engaged. The time drew near when he was to have been my husband.”

“To have been your husband?” said Isabel, looking at the speaker wonderingly.

“Yes; to have been my husband, dear, and the wedding gifts came fast. Life seemed so joyous to me then; and in another week I should have been his wife, but I was stayed from that—in time.”

“From that? In time?”

“Yes. I say in my blindness I thought him everything that was noble and good, and when the truth was brought home to me I would not believe it then. I defended him against all who attacked him, for I said, ‘It is impossible—he loves me too well, and I love him. No man could be so base.’”

“And you found out—was it true—true?”

“You saw him leave us, my child. He wrecked my life. Would he have gone like that if my words had not been just?”

“Nurse Elisia!”

“No; don’t call me that again.”

“Not call you that? What does it all mean?”

“I cannot tell you now, dear. Think of me always as a very dear friend. I am worthy to be called so, and some day I will tell you all my past.”

“But—”

“No, no; not now. Let us go up to your room.”

“Yes, before Aunt comes. I cannot meet her now.”

“No; and to-morrow, if your father can bear it, go to him and tell him what took place to-night—all that I have said. He can easily find out the truth, and he will not allow Sir Cheltnam Burwood to speak to you again.”

“You think so?” cried the girl excitedly.

“I know it, dear. Your father has been hard and obstinate of will, but he loves his children as an English gentleman should; and, as a man of honour, when he knows all, he will never sanction that man’s presence here.”

“And—when I tell him, you will speak? It is so terrible. He will want to know all the past.”

“No: I cannot be Sir Cheltnam Burwood’s accuser, even now.”

“You will not speak?”

“My mission is at an end, dear. It is impossible for me to stay. I shall not be here.”

Isabel looked up wonderingly, and then raised her face to kiss Elisia's lips as she slowly clasped her neck.

The next moment she was passionately clasped to the nurse's heart.

"God bless you, darling! Good-bye!" was sobbed in Isabel's ear, and the next minute she was alone.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Jumping at Conclusions.

About half an hour after Isabel and Elisia had parted, Aunt Anne came down from her room. She had tapped gently at her brother's door, which was opened by the nurse, who was as calm and self-possessed as ever.

"Mr Elthorne is asleep, madam," she said.

"Ho!" ejaculated Aunt Anne, turning sharply round and continuing her way. "Ralph always is asleep when I want to see him. I wonder how the lovers have got on," she added, as she reached the drawing-room door, and stood smiling on the mat before she entered and looked round.

"In the conservatory, I suppose," she said playfully. "Oh, dear; it seems only yesterday when—"

She went straight to the open French window, and peeped in among the exotics; then went to one end, then to the other, where the door stood wide open leading out on to the terrace and the lawn.

"Now that's carrying matters too far," she said to herself. "It is not etiquette. Isabel ought to have known better, and Sir Cheltnam should not have taken her. Ah, well, I suppose I must not be too strict at a time like this."

She rang the bell for the tea urn, and the butler entered, red hot from an exciting conversation with his fellow-servants, who were in full debate.

"You had better tell the gentlemen tea is ready when you leave the room."

"I beg pardon, ma'am?" said the butler, as he set down the hissing urn.

"I said tell the gentlemen that tea is ready."

"The gentlemen, ma'am? They are both out."

"Both out?"

"Yes, ma'am. Smith, the keeper, just looked in, and said he was on his rounds, and he met Mr Alison, ma'am, going toward Buckley village, and soon after he saw one of the watchers, and he had seen Mr Neil, ma'am, walking as fast as he could toward Pinkley Pound."

"Dear me, how strange!" said Aunt Anne. "No, no, don't shut the window: Sir Cheltnam and Miss Elthorne are just outside. I may as well let him see that I know it, and stop the servants' talking," thought Aunt Anne.

The butler stared.

"Well, what is it?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am. Sir Cheltnam went round to the stables, had his horse put to in the dogcart, and drove away more than half an hour ago."

"What?"

"And Maria says that Miss Isabel's locked up in her bedroom, and has been there ever so long."

"That will do," said Aunt Anne with asperity; and the butler left the room. "Oh, dear me!" she cried; "the foolish girl! There must have been quite a scene. She's thinking still of that wretched sailor, and poor Ralph will be so angry when he knows. I suppose I must go and ask her to come down."

She went to the bedroom door, but there was no response whatever for some time, and then only a brief intimation that her niece was not coming down that night.

"Well, I shall certainly give her a very severe talking to in the morning," said Aunt Anne, as she sat over her solitary tea. "As self-willed as her father, every bit. Oh, dear me! how children are changed since I was young."

Aunt Anne retired early. The butler did not, for it was his duty to sit up and admit the gentlemen.

Alison returned about half-past eleven, and went at once to his room, while the butler once more settled himself down in an easy-chair to wait, and went to sleep, awaking in the morning stiff and unrefreshed to find that his waiting up had been in vain.

A couple of hours later, when he took in the breakfast, he had two announcements to make; but he hesitated, as Isabel had just entered the room.

"You can speak out. What is it?" said Aunt Anne.

"Mr Neil hasn't been back all night, ma'am."

"What?"

"And—"

The butler stopped.

"Well, speak, man; there is nothing wrong?" cried Aunt Anne.

"No, ma'am, I hope not," said the butler; "but the nurse was down quite early, ma'am, dressed, and Smithers put the horse to in the light cart, and drove her over to the station to catch the early morning train."

"Oh!" ejaculated Aunt Anne; and then, excitedly, "Was she alone?"

"I believe so, ma'am. Shall I ask?"

"No: there is no need. I thought it all along. Eloped. I knew it would be so."

Isabel rose from her seat with flaming cheeks. "Shame!" she cried passionately. "This, before the servants! Neil is my brother. Nurse Elisia is my dear friend. It is not true!"

Chapter Thirty.

Sir Denton Astonished.

Neil Elthorne could hardly recall the events of the next twenty-four hours. He had some dim recollection of walking blindly on and on, with his head throbbing from the mental fever within; of the wind beating against him, and the rain feeling cool to his heated brow; and at last seeing lights, entering a station, and listening to the dull, heavy rush of a coming train—sounds which seemed in accordance with the beating in his temples, and the dull, low roar in his brain.

Then he had faint memories of passing swiftly through the dark night, with the windows of the compartment in which he sat blurred by the rain, and, finally, of gliding into the great, blank, gloomy terminus, an hour before day-break, and staggering through it to where cabs were standing beneath the great glass arch. The rattle of the streets sounded faintly in his ears, and all appeared strange and terrible, as if he were in some fevered dream, from which he awoke at last on the couch in his own chambers in Farrow's Inn, to find that it was night again, and that he must, like some wounded beast, have mechanically crept back to his lair, there to wait until strength returned or the end should come.

He rose mechanically, went out, and made his way to his club, where he was faintly conscious that the waiters who brought up his dinner exchanged glances, and gazed at him furtively. Someone came to him, too, and asked him if he were unwell, and then, still as if in a dream, he rode back to his chambers, and lay down again to sleep.

The long rest brought calm to his confused brain, and he rose late the next morning from what more resembled a stupor than a natural sleep.

But he could think and act now. The madness of his night at home came back to him clearly, and he sent a telegraphic message to his father, begging him not to be uneasy at his sudden departure, and another far longer to his sister asking her forgiveness; that he had been obliged to hurry away, and bidding her appeal to her father for help, as being the proper course.

"What will she think of me, poor child?" he said to himself, after he had dispatched his messages. "I must write to her. It was cruel, but I could not stay. I should have gone mad. Ah, well," he muttered, after a time, "it is all over. Now for work."

There was a peculiar set expression in his countenance as he dressed himself carefully—a very necessary preparation after many hours of neglect—and, taking a cab, had himself driven to Sir Denton Hayle's, where he was obliged to wait for some time before he could obtain an interview, and then only for a few minutes.

Those were sufficient, though.

"Ah, Elthorne, back again? How is the father?"

"Much better."

"That's right. Then you have come back to work."

Neil did not answer for a few moments.

"You asked me to take that post, Sir Denton," he said at last.

"Yes, my dear boy, I did; but don't say you have repented now it is too late."

"Is it too late?" said Neil sadly.

"Yes: another appointment has been made, and the man sails in a week."

"I am sorry," said Neil slowly. "I have thought better of the offer now, and I was prepared to go."

They parted, and he went back to his chambers to think, and form some plans for his future.

Two hours later he was surprised by the coming of Sir Denton, the old man looking flushed and excited as he entered the room.

"You, sir!"

"Yes, my boy. I have been and seen the man appointed, and he jumps at the chance of getting out of it. He says that he has the offer of a better thing, which is all nonsense. The fact is that he is afraid of the venture. Now there must be no trifling, Elthorne: it must be a frank, manly yes, or no. Stop; let me tell you again what it really means. Then you can say whether you will go. First, there is a great deal of risk."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"The coast is a deadly one for Europeans; the society is not all that could be desired; and the man who goes must be a bit of a hero in the strife."

"Then you want a better man."

"No: I want you. You are the man, but I cannot let you definitely say *yes* without letting you see all your risk."

"Bah, Sir Denton!" cried Neil. "What has a doctor or a surgeon to do with risk? You would not say to a man, 'Don't go to that house to attend the husband or wife: it is a horribly infectious fever.'"

"No; certainly not."

"Or, 'That man who has been crushed by a fall of rock will bleed to death, if a surgeon does not risk his own life by going to his help: don't go.'"

"No," replied Sir Denton quietly; "the world treats us very coolly, and gives us very little credit for what we do."

"The world saves all its honours for its soldiers," said Neil, smiling.

"In uniform," said Sir Denton, "and does not recognise the fact that we, too, are soldiers, fighting the invisible enemy, Death."

"There, say no more, my dear old tutor," cried Neil eagerly. "I have made up my mind to go, accepting all risks, and I hope I shall fulfill your wishes and prove worthy of your trust."

"I have no fear of that, Elthorne, my dear boy. I know you too well. You will go, and your going will be the saving of thousands of lives in the future, while as to yourself, disease generally passes by the busy, active, and careful. You will go, then?"

"There is my hand."

Sir Denton grasped the young surgeon's hand warmly.

"God bless you, my boy, and your work!" he said, with his voice slightly husky. "But now tell me of yourself. This sudden change of front? The lady—she has refused you?"

Neil nodded and remained silent for a few moments. Then, turning, with a sad smile on his face:

"It was only a vain dream, my dear old friend. I loved, and forgot, in my blindness, that I was not a frank, handsome man of the world; that I was only a dull, thoughtful student, with few of the qualities that please women. She would have none of me, and perhaps she was wise."

"No," said Sir Denton sharply; "there was no wisdom in the woman who would refuse you. Some giddy, dress-loving, shallow creature, who—"

Neil held up his hand.

"No," he said fervently. "The wisest, sweetest, and most refined lady that ever breathed."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Denton. "I was glad a few minutes ago, for I thought you had had an escape; that, like so many more able men, you had been dazzled by the outside of some bright, fashionable butterfly. Now I can condole with you. Then there must have been a reason—another was in the way?" Neil was silent.

"Ah, that is bad. Well, out of the bad good often comes, my dear boy. You see how fatherly I have grown toward you, Elthorne; and some day I may, after all, be able to congratulate you on a happy union."

"Never, sir."

"Who knows?" said the old surgeon, smiling. "Well, I am no matchmaker, only your old friend and master, and I speak very plainly to you. Do you know, Elthorne, that there is one woman in the world whom I have often thought should be your wife?"

Neil looked at him wildly.

“A refined, graceful lady, with a heart of gold, if you could win her. I have seen little things, too, at times, which have made me think that my hopes would bear fruit.”

Neil half turned away, and the old man sat tapping the top of his hat with the tips of his thin, white fingers, as he went on dreamily.

“I ought not to have given my mind to such matters, but the thoughts came unbidden, and I said to myself, it would be the perfection of a union; and, old bachelor as I am, I would have given her away as if she had been my own child.”

Neil’s head began to droop, but the old man’s mind was so deeply immersed in the subject nearest his heart that he did not see the change in his pupil’s face.

“Like the meddling old idiot I was, I snatched at the opportunity of bringing you together, and insisted upon her coming down to your father’s place to tend him.”

A low sigh escaped from Neil’s breast.

“For I said to myself: the old man will see her and learn her value, and the sweetness of her nature. He will be ready to open his arms to her, and call her daughter when the son has spoken to her; and I thought I was doing right to you both. Neil, my lad, you ought to have had more confidential moments with me, and told me that you already loved. I had no right to know, my dear boy, but it would have saved much pain. I love Lady Cicely very dearly—as much as if she were my own flesh and blood.”

Neil looked up at the old man wonderingly, but he was gazing down at his hat.

“Yes, bless her!” he continued, repeating his words, “as if she were my own flesh and blood; and this misfortune—I can call it nothing else—hurts me very much, and I am certain it will grieve her terribly, for she loves you, my boy, I am sure.”

“My dear Sir Denton—Lady Cicely?” cried Neil, looking at him as if doubting his sanity. “Whom do you mean?”

“Oh! I had forgotten. Of course you do not know—Lady Cicely, the late Duke of Atheldene’s daughter—Nurse Elisia—my dear young friend, who gave up her life of luxury and ease to devote herself as you have seen.”

“Sir Denton!”

“Yes, my dear boy, it is so. Don’t look at me as if you thought I were wandering. That was my castle in the air, Neil Elthorne, and I am deeply grieved for both your sakes. Ah, how easily we clever men, as we think ourselves, are deceived. But, as your old friend, my boy, may I ask—some lady—in your neighbourhood—an attachment, perhaps, of many years?”

Neil looked at him wildly and his lips were quivering with the agony still so new.

“I beg your pardon, my dear boy,” said Sir Denton softly. “I ought not to have laid my hand so roughly on the wound. Forgive me.”

Neil remained silent for a few minutes, and Sir Denton rose to go.

“There, then, my dear boy,” he said in a different tone, “I consider, then, that the appointment is settled and you will go?”

“Yes, Sir Denton. My preparations will be very few. I shall be ready to go by this vessel if the authorities are willing.”

“And God speed you in your work!”

“And God speed me in my work!” said Neil solemnly.

Sir Denton grasped the young surgeon’s hand, holding it firmly.

“Come and dine with me to-night, and we’ll have a long chat over it. I dare say I can give you a few useful hints. I must go to the hospital now. Good-bye for the present.”

But Neil held his hand firmly still.

“Wait a moment,” he said hoarsely. “You accuse me of want of confidence in you. I am not the kind of man who babbles about the strongest feeling of his nature.”

“No, no, my dear boy; forgive me. And I ought not to have torn open your wound again by my thoughtless question.”

“I will confide in you now, Sir Denton.”

“No, no, my dear boy. Leave it all unsaid.”

“No; there is no time like the present. You ought to know, and I can never revive the subject again. Possibly, in the future, the opportunity may never come.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not blind to the risk of going to such a place. I don’t suppose I shall return.”

“My dear boy, if you are going to take that morbid view of the task,” cried Sir Denton, “you shall not go. But pish! you are low-spirited now from the refusal you have had. Work, man, work. *Au revoir.*”

“Sir Denton,” said Neil gravely, “you must know the truth now. In ignorance of her early life, I loved Nurse Elisia very dearly.”

“Then, my dear boy—” cried the old man excitedly.

“Stop, sir; you were mistaken. I asked her to be my wife.”

“Mistaken? She refused you? Impossible!”

“No, sir; it is the simple fact.”

“But—you hinted, or I said—dear me, how confused I am—that the lady you proposed to, refused you—a prior attachment—another gentleman?”

“Yes; my own brother.”

Sir Denton stood gazing in Neil’s face for some moments before he spoke again, and then in a weary, helpless way he said sadly:

“And I have been studying human nature all through my long life, to find myself an ignorant pretender after all. Let me go and think. Refused you?—your brother? Ah, well—till to-night, my dear boy—and after all I thought— There, there, it is only the body I have been studying, not the soul. Bless my heart!” he muttered, as he went down to his carriage: “and I felt so sure. Ah, dear me—dear me! it takes a cleverer man than I to read a woman through and through.”

Chapter Thirty One.

The Clouds Dispelled.

Neil Elthorne was more himself as a cab set him down at Sir Denton Hayle’s that evening, where the quiet, old-fashioned butler received him in a solemn, old-fashioned way, and ushered him at once into his master’s study, for, though there was a fire and lights in the great first-floor drawing room, they were only for form’s sake, when the old surgeon had company; and upon occasions like the present it was almost certain not to be used.

Sir Denton received his pupil as warmly as if he had been his son, and they were soon after seated face to face in the gloomy dining room, where the table was reduced to the smallest proportions to which it could be screwed.

It was a thoroughly good, old-fashioned dinner, at which the butler handed very old East India sherry, which was hardly touched; and, after clearing the cloth, left on the nearly black, highly polished table, three massive silver decanter stands, in which glowed, like liquid gems, port, claret, and burgundy.

These shared the fate of the sherry, and stood untouched, while, now that they were alone, the important subject of the appointment was discussed, and Sir Denton gave his views concerning the mission.

“Yes; it makes me wish I were thirty years younger, Neil,” said the old surgeon. “People talk about it as a forlorn hope, but I maintain that there is victory to be won, and I am sure that you will win it. People are dying off as we read of their dropping away during the plague. There must be a reason for this, and you are going to discover it, and put a stop to this terrible bill of mortality. Ah, I wish I were going with you to work hand in hand, advising and asking advice.”

“I wish you were going, sir,” said Neil quietly. “Too old—too old, my dear boy—much too old. Now tell me, where shall you attack the demon first?”

“Clean out his den,” said Neil, smiling.

“Good; of course. Sanitation. An Augean task, my young Hercules, but that is it. People will not believe it, but dirt is the nursery bed for most of the germs of disease; and the wonder to me is, not that so many people in our more crowded parts are smitten down, but how they manage to live. Now where you are going, that deadly fever runs riot. I do not believe it could ever exist if everything possible were done to cleanse the place.”

“I suppose not,” said Neil thoughtfully.

“It could not. I’ve been thinking it all over, my dear boy, and I have no fear whatever for you. Work will keep you healthy; and now I suppose you would like me to give you a couple of valuable recipes in which I have enormous faith.”

“By all means,” said Neil eagerly. “Will you write them down?”

“No: you can remember them. As to quantities, give them *à discretion*—extravagantly. Here they are: pure water and whitewash. They are death destroyers, my dear boy, and—bless me, I did not want to be disturbed this evening.”

The butler entered the room and went up behind his master's chair.

"I am too much engaged to see anyone," said the old man testily.

The butler said a few words in a low tone.

"Bless me! Oh, yes; of course. I'll come directly. Will you excuse me for a few minutes, Elthorne? Pray help yourself to wine."

"Certainly," replied Neil, and the old man went hurriedly out of the room, leaving his guest to his thoughts, and he sat there with rugged brow thinking over the past and his future, and asking himself whether he, a surgeon, had done right in accepting the post.

His musings were long, for the few minutes extended into an hour, but; he did not notice the lapse of time. There was so much to think about. His father? Well, he could have done no more if he had stayed. His sister? That difficulty would settle itself, for, girl as she was, Isabel had plenty of their father's will and determination; and he felt sure that she would never marry one man while she loved another.

His brother?

He drew his breath hard, and the struggle within him was long, but he mastered his feelings at last, and calmly and dispassionately reviewed the matter.

There was nothing unfair. His brother had not taken any mean advantage of him. He had been struck by the woman he loved at their first encounter, and what wonder? No: there had been nothing unfair. It had been a race between them, and his brother had won the prize.

His duty stood out plainly enough before him, but he was weak, and it was hard to do that duty. Some day—it would be years first in this case—he would look her in the face, and take her hand as his sister, and grasp his brother's hand with all due warmth. But not yet—not yet. He must have time, and he felt that he would act wisely in going right away.

There was a sad pleasure in reviewing these events of the past, and there was a kind of solace in being alone there in that gloomy room, so shut in that the rattle of wheels in the square outside sounded subdued and calming to his weary spirit. He began thinking then once more of the future, of the great battle he had to fight.

"And I will fight manfully," he said softly, as he sat gazing at the fire, "against self as well as against disease. And if I fall—well, better men die daily. I shall have done some good first, and I will fight to the last."

His chin sank down upon his breast, and he sat there picturing in imagination the place to which he was going. How long he had been thinking thus he did not know, and he felt half resentful as Sir Denton's hand was laid lightly on his shoulder.

"Asleep?"

"Oh, no: only thinking deeply."

"Of—of—" said the old man nervously.

"Of my work, sir? The great work to come? Yes."

"That's right—that's right, my dear boy; but you have had no wine. I'm so sorry I was called away, but you will forgive me, I know."

"Don't name it, Sir Denton," said Neil quietly. "I have had so much to think about that the time has not seemed long."

"Indeed? It has to me. But fill your glass, my dear boy—a glass of port."

Neil shook his head.

"Then I think," said Sir Denton in a hurried, nervous way, "we will go up to the drawing room. It is getting late—the—er—the butler was waiting at the door as I came down—er—to clear away."

"And your patient?" said Neil, making an effort to take an interest in his host's affairs. "Better?"

"Eh? My patient? Yes, yes, I think so. Along interview, though."

He led the way to the door, and then up the broad staircase of the great sombre old house, but only to halt on the landing.

"Go in," he said. "I will join you soon."

Neil entered slowly, and the door was closed behind him, as he went on across the wide, dim room to where a fire glowed. His eyes were cast down, and the place was so feebly lit by the shaded lamps and a pair of wax candles that he had reached the middle before he became aware that a figure in black had risen from a chair by the fire and was standing supporting itself by one hand resting upon the great marble mantelpiece.

Neil stopped short, with his heart beating violently. Then, after taking a couple of steps forward with outstretched

hands, he checked himself again.

"You here?" he cried hoarsely; and he crossed to the other side of the fireplace. "Sir Denton did not tell me. I did not know."

"I have been here more than an hour," was said in a low voice which trembled slightly.

There was a pause, during which Neil fought hard with the feeling—half indignation that he should have been forced into such a situation—half despair.

"You have left my father, then," he said at last, in an unnaturally calm voice.

"Yes: my work was ended. There was no need for me to stay."

Again there was a pause which neither seemed to possess the power to break, and the indignant feeling rose hotter in Neil's breast. For a moment he felt that he must turn and quit the room, but the anger passed off, and he stood firm, grasping the edge of the mantelpiece, and mentally calling himself coward and utterly wanting in nerve.

"My brother's betrothed," he muttered; "my brother's betrothed!" and he tried to picture her before him as something holy—as the woman who was soon to occupy the position of sister, with all that had passed between them forgotten—dead forever.

And that terrible silence continued till there was the sound of a carriage approaching, reaching the house, and causing a faint rattling of one of the windows, after which it passed on with a strange, hollow, metallic sound, which died away gradually, when the silence seemed to have grown ten times more painful, and the failing fire fell together with a musical tinkle. Then a few glowing cinders dropped through the grating, and as Neil watched them where they lay on the grey hearth, he saw them gradually turn black, and compared them to the passion in his breast.

"Like the glowing ashes of my poor love," he thought, as the painful silence continued, for still neither felt that it was possible to speak.

"If Sir Denton would only come and end this madness!" thought Elisia. "If this agony would only end, I could go back to my poor sufferers—and oblivion."

The clock on the mantel suddenly gave one stroke to indicate the half hour, and the clear, sharp ring of its silvery toned bell vibrated through the room, its tones seeming as if they would never cease. Then all was silence once again, till, making an effort, the trembling woman spoke in a low, pained voice, which she strove hard to render firm: "Sir Denton tells me, Mr Elthorne—"

She stopped, for a deep breath escaped from Neil's breast, sounding like a faint groan of relief.

"I beg your pardon," he said coldly.

"Sir Denton tells me," she said again, but more firmly, for his tone irritated her over-strung nerves, "that you have accepted an appointment to go out to one of the most unhealthy places on the West Coast."

The spell was broken, and he could speak out now firmly and well.

"Yes," he said, with a feeling of eager joy that they were off dangerous ground. "I suppose the place is unhealthy, for the suffering there is terrible. It has been full of horrors, but I hope to change all that."

"And the risk—to your life?"

He laughed—harshly, it sounded to her—and she shrank away at his next words, but still clutched the marble mantelpiece.

"This from you?" he said; and she thought it was meant as a reproach, but his next words gave her confidence. "Why, you would go into any plague-stricken place without shrinking, or realising the danger."

"Yes," she said softly, "if it were necessary. I hope so."

"Well, then, why should I hesitate? I hope I shall not suffer. It would be a pity," he continued, quite calmly now, and his words seemed unimpassioned and dreamy in their simplicity. "If I died, I suppose it would be a loss to the poor people out there, whom I hope to save. They might have a difficulty in getting another man."

"Yes," she said, with a shudder. "Sir Denton tells me that he has had great trouble in filling the appointment."

"I suppose so. Yes: he told me."

There was another pause.

"Ought you to go?" she said at last, and her voice was not so firm.

"Certainly," he replied rather bitterly. "I have nothing to lose except my life."

"You have those at home who love you—sister, father."

"Poor little Isabel! Yes, but she has one who loves her. My father is sure to yield to circumstances there. It is of him I think most. I shall ask you to be kind to him, as you always have been. He will grow more exacting, I fear, as the

years roll on; but you will see him occasionally. He likes you; his liking will grow into love, and he will take your advice. Will you do this for me?"

She made no reply, and as silence was gathering round them again, he hastened to break it and fight back the thoughts that would arise.

"I shall be grateful for anything you in your experience can do for him to make life pass more easily; and you will help and counsel my little sister, too. She must not marry a fox hunting squire."

Still no answer, and he went on hurriedly.

"I shall not go down again. I start so very soon. It would only be painful to them; and I shall be very busy making preparations till the ship sails."

She stood there, clinging to the cold stone, and he went on in the same hurried way.

"It is a grand work, and Heaven knows I wish I were more capable. There will be so much to do. I shall have to start a hospital, even in the humblest way at first, and let it grow by degrees. There will be a great deal of prejudice, too, to overcome, but it will be satisfactory to master all these difficulties one by one. And I will!" he cried with energy. "Yes: Sir Denton is right," he added enthusiastically; "it will be a grand work, and I long to get there and begin."

"And you will go without fear," she said, as if she were speaking a solemn truth.

"I hope so," he said humbly; "but man is very weak. There, I am going, weak or strong, and I think you know me enough to believe that I shall do my best."

"Yes, I know that," she said gravely, and her voice was very low and sweet.

"Thank you. It encourages me," he said cheerfully. "You will give me your prayers for my success, I know."

"Indeed, yes," she said, as she looked up at him, and he saw her eyes were wet with tears.

"Don't—don't do that," he said huskily. "It is nothing to grieve for. I only say, forgive me for all the mistaken past, and—"

His emotion choked him for the moment, but he struggled bravely to go on:

"And I pray God to bless you in your future, and make you very happy, dear. It is your brother speaking to his sister, and my words now are an honest and self-denying as ever man spoke."

"I know it," she said, with quivering lips, and her sweet voice thrilled him and made him falter; but he fought on. "I have known for long that you could speak nothing but the honest truth."

"Thank you," he said quickly; "thank you. You and I have worked together long now, and have had some triumphs of which we might boast. Where *is* Sir Denton? He ought to come, and we could chat over all of my projects. I shall write to you, of course, and tell you all I am doing, and you can give me a word or two of advice, perhaps. Why, nurse—I beg your pardon—Lady Cicely—your name sounds strange to me, I have so lately heard it from Sir Denton—how grateful we all ought to be for your devotion to our good cause. Forgive me for speaking so."

She seemed plunged in thought, and not to hear his words, and he started, as she spoke now in a low, soft, dreamy way, as if uttering the thoughts that had occupied her for the past few minutes.

"You are going out possibly to your death, Neil Elthorne," she said.

"That is the worst that can happen."

"No," she said softly, "not the worst. You are going yonder to fight with disease, forsaking all who love you, offering up your own life as a sacrifice, that yonder poor stricken creatures may live."

"Heaven only knows," he said solemnly.

"You are going alone, to face the horrors of a pestilence without the help such as you find here."

"Yes, but I shall soon get assistance, and till then I must do my best."

She looked across at him where he stood, and again that dim room was silent, so that the slightest sound would have been a relief.

"Are you fixed upon going?" she said at last; and then she started, for his voice rang out now strongly. "Yes," he cried, "I must."

"Alone, with no hand to help you to fight this good fight? No: you must not go alone. Take me with you. I will go."

He started from the chimney-piece, for a wildly delirious thought made his brain reel; but she stood there before him, pale and calm, as if the words she had uttered were of the simplest kind.

He made almost a superhuman effort over self as he felt that the mad thought within him must be crushed.

"No," he said coldly; "your love for the profession you embraced leads you astray. I shall find nurses there. What,

you?" he cried almost fiercely. "Woman, your place is here."

She took a step toward him, and held out her hands, and her voice was very low.

"I thought all that was dead for me," she almost whispered, "that the past had burned my heart to ashes, and I have fought long and hard to do my duty in the path that I had marked out for my own through life. I did not know. Neil, how could you misjudge me so!"

He seemed to stagger at her words; his lips moved, but no sound came, and when at last he spoke, his voice sounded hoarse and strange.

"But Alison—my brother?" he cried.

"Alison—your brother!" she said softly, and with a trace of scorn in her tones. "How could you be so blind!"

Neil started violently, and gazed at the pained face before him.

"Am I mad?" he muttered; and then aloud: "Be so blind—I blind? What do you mean? In Heaven's name, speak!"

She looked at him fixedly, with her eyes contracting, but she spoke no word.

"Do you hear me?" he cried fiercely. "You do not answer, Elisia—my brother? No, no, I am not blind. I knew—I saw—he loved you from the first hour he saw you. You cannot deny it. Is that false? Am I blind?"

"In that, no," she said coldly. "Well, what is that to me? Could I help the insane folly of the man who persecuted me, as you say, from the hour of my arrival at your house?"

"But," he cried in a low, hoarse whisper, "I have seen and believed—believed, but not without seeing. Elisia, for pity's sake, tell me—have I been so blind?"

"In reading me, yes. Neil, how could you think that I could ever love your brother? You ought to have known it was impossible."

"Hush! What are you saying?" he cried, as he eagerly caught her hands.

"The simple truth," she said gently. "I have crushed it down, but I have loved you long and well."

"No, no," he cried, "for Heaven's sake! You will drive me mad."

"No," she whispered; "it cannot be unwomanly at a time like this."

"Too late—too late!" and he drew back, covered his face with his hands, and let his head fall upon the cold marble at his side.

"No," she whispered, as she clasped her hands, and laid them on his shoulder, "it is not too late. Mine was but a girlish love for one unworthy of a thought, and in my youthful weakness I thought that all the world was base. I did not know. Take me, Neil, husband, as your faithful wife. It is not too late. We will go there hand in hand, side by side, to fight this pestilence."

"What? Take you there—you?" he cried, as he raised his head, and caught her hands—"take you to face that awful scourge?"

"Yes," she cried, raising her head proudly, "side by side with you in the awful strife. God with us, Neil—our faith in his protecting shield, as I place mine in you, my brave, true hero—my love—my life."

"Till death do us part," cried Neil, as he clasped her to his breast.

"Amen!" said a solemn voice, and Sir Denton came forward out of the darkness, and stopped by their side. "I thought I was going to the grave a childless man," he continued in a broken voice—"my son—my daughter. You have given me afresh lease of life—to live till I see you once again. I say it, children, I, the old prophet: I shall see you before I die."

Chapter Thirty Two.

Peace at Hightoft.

Neil Elthorne had not been a month at the West Coast settlement before he began to find that the funds placed at his disposal by the home authorities would be utterly inadequate for the great work on hand. He was already crippled, and upon taking the sharer of his enterprise into his confidence he fully realised for the first time that he had married a wealthy wife, and that the accumulations of years of her large income were waiting to be utilised as he thought best.

This gave the necessary impulse to his task, and for the next five years the warfare was carried on. With wonderful success? Yes. To achieve all that he and Lady Cicely desired? No. But they fought on, unscathed by disease, which swept away its hundreds, leading, as it were, a charmed life, till reason forced it upon his busy brain that the time had come when he must return.

He had done far more than the most sanguine had expected, and thousands lived to bless his name, and that of the brave, true woman ever working at his side.

His departure was sudden. Weakness and a strange languor had attacked his wife. She had hidden her sufferings from him lest she should hinder him in his work, but his practiced eye detected her state; and as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made, the low, miasmatic tropical shore was left behind, and in a vessel rapidly making its way north, the change was almost magical.

"So well, dear," said Lady Cicely one bright morning, as the vessel rushed onward into purer air, and beneath brighter skies, "that I feel as if we ought to return."

"No," he said, taking her hand; "we have done our work there. We have laid the foundation of a new *régime* of comparative health for our colonies, and the inhabitants of that dreadful place; other hands must carry on the work. I shudder now as I think of all that we have gone through, and wonder that we are still alive to begin some other task at home."

There had been plenty of changes since they had left England, but Sir Denton Hayle, apparently not a day older, still paid his visits to the ward which bore his name; while Ralph Elthorne, vigorous in health, though helpless as a child, was at the station to welcome back his children, as he called them, to the old home, where Aunt Anne, grown more grey and placid, still kept house, and ignored all the past as she took her niece in her arms.

Alison was no longer there. He had consoled himself a year after his brother's departure by marrying Saxa Lydon, instead of Dana, and residing at the Grange. For the younger sister preferred her outdoor life, spending half the year at her old home, the other half in travelling in so strong-minded a manner that Aunt Anne declared she was quite shocked. As for Saxa, when she decided to be Alison's wife, she endowed him with her masculine habits as well as her fortune, for a couple of sturdy little *facsimiles* of her husband brought her to the way of thinking that an English wife should be motherly and wise, so that on Neil's return a wonderfully warm intimacy sprang up between the brothers' wives.

There was another couple at the old home to welcome the sun-burned travellers, for Sir Cheltnam Burwood never entered Ralph Elthorne's doors again, but passed out of sight entirely, living, it was said, in Paris and Baden. So that when the vicar's son came to Hightoft as Captain Beck, his welcome was warm as he could wish, and his patience met with its reward.

"That's the worst of it, my dear," said Ralph Elthorne, wrinkling up his brow, as he wheeled himself along the drive in the bright sunshine. "I don't want nursing, only helping about, and yet, now you are here, I feel sometimes as if I should like to be ill again, to wake up and see your dear face watching by my side. And so Sir Denton resigns his post at the hospital to Neil, eh?"

"Yes; and we must go up at once."

"Tut, tut, tut! you seem only just to have come. Here is Neil. I say, my dear boy: about this hospital. You don't want money?"

"No, father; certainly not."

"Then throw it up. Come and settle down here. I can't spare Cicely. I can't, indeed."

"I'm afraid you must, sir," said Neil, laughing, "unless she says I am to go to work alone. Not a habit of hers, eh, my dear?"

"Bah! You two are children. Anyone would think you had been married five days ago, instead of five years. Then look here: I shall give up the old place and come and live in town."

"No," said Neil; "only to visit us now and then. You could not exist healthily away from your gardens and your farm. Besides, Isabel and Saxa."

"And your grandchildren," said Lady Cicely. "There again," the old man cried testily, "that's the worst of you two: you are always right. Is a man never to have his own way here?"

"Never, father," said Neil, taking his wife's hand. "Nature says it is not to be done."

"And somehow, my boy, in spite of all our planning, and vexation at being thwarted," said the old man, almost in a deprecating way, "things do happen for the best."

"That has long been my faith, father, which means my dear wife's too."

"Yes, my boy, and mine too, now at last. Here, hi! Ralph, you young rascal, come and push grandpa's chair."

Alison's curly-headed little fellow came scampering up, to begin batting hard behind the light wheeled chair in which the old man sat; and as Neil and his wife saw the old man's glee, there was a faint touch of sorrow in the husband's heart, as he thought that it might have been his son who was sturdily pushing along the old man's chair.

He turned and looked half shrinkingly at his wife, as he saw that her deep eyes were fixed on his, and the next moment he knew that she could read the very secrets of his heart.

For she laid her hand on his, and said softly:

“Our children are waiting yonder, Neil, under the black clouds of the great city—our children, love—the poor, the suffering, and the weak, waiting, waiting for the healing touch of my dear husband’s hand.”

“And for their pillows to be smoothed by their tender nurse—true woman—dearest wife.”

The End.

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