

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Lettice, by Mrs. Molesworth

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Title: Lettice

Author: Mrs. Molesworth

Illustrator: Frank Dadd

Release date: July 8, 2013 [EBook #43130]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LETTICE ***

Mrs Molesworth

"Lettice"

Chapter One.

"It Has Come."

"... The Faith

...

Which winged quick seeds of hope beyond the
boundary walls of death."

Dr Walter Smith, *Hilda*.

Lettice moved to the window. She choked down a little sob which was beginning to rise in her throat, and by dint of resolutely gazing out at what was before her, tried to imagine not only that she was not crying, but that she had not, never had had, the slightest inclination to cry.

A clumsy cart laden with wood, drawn by two bullocks, came stumbling down the hilly street. The stupid patient creatures, having managed to wedge their burden against some stones at the side of the road, stood blinking sleepily, while their driver, not altogether displeased at the momentary cessation of his labours, kept up a great appearance of energy by the series of strange guttural sounds he emitted, in the intervals of strenuous endeavours to light his pipe. Two or three Spanish labourers, looking, with their fine presence and picturesque costume, like princes in disguise, came slowly and gravely up the hill, the brilliant sunshine lighting up the green or scarlet sashes knotted round their waists and hiding the shabbiness of their velveteen breeches. One, a youth of not more than sixteen or seventeen, happened to look up as he passed by the window where the fair-faced, brown-haired girl was standing, and a gleam of gentle, half-comprehending pity, such as one sees sometimes in the expression of a great Newfoundland dog, came into his large, soft, innocent-looking dark eyes. Lettice started indignantly.

"What does that boy stare at me for?" she said to herself. "Does he think I am crying?"

But the quick movement had played her false. Two or three unmistakable tears dropped on to her dress. More indignantly still, the girl brushed them away.

"Absurd!" she half murmured to herself. "I am too silly to take things to heart so. Mamma not quite herself to-day. She is nervous and fanciful, no doubt, like all invalids, and less clearheaded than usual. One should not always pay attention to what an invalid says. She is weak, and that makes her give way to feelings she would not encourage generally."

But just then the sound of her mother's voice—low and faint certainly, but in no way nervous or querulous, with even a little undertone of cheerfulness in the calm tones—reached her where she stood. Even Lettice, with all her power of self-deception, could not feel that it seemed like the voice of a person who did not very well know what she was talking about; and, with another little jerk of impatience, she drew out her watch.

"I wish it were time to go out," she half muttered to herself. "Nina is so childish; I can't understand how mamma doesn't see it." For the snatches of talk going on about her mother's sofa had to do with nothing more important than the grouping and placing of some lovely ferns and wild-flowers, which eighteen-year-old Nina and Lotty, the baby of the family, had brought in from their morning ramble.

"Yes," said the mother, with real pleasure, almost eagerness, in her voice, "that is beautiful, Nina; I shall have the refreshment of those ferns before me all day, without having to turn my head. I shall be able, *almost*, to fancy myself

in the woods again.”

“Why can’t you come, mamma?” said Lotty’s high-pitched, childish voice. “It really isn’t far, and you could have one of those nice low little carriages *nearly* all the way. I don’t think it *could* tire you.”

For an instant there was no reply. Lettice felt, though she could not see her mother, that she was striving to regain the self-control which Lotty’s innocent speeches now and then almost upset. And tears, sadder but less bitter than those which had preceded them, welled slowly up to the elder sister’s eyes. Then came Nina’s caressing tones, in half-whispers, as she stooped over her mother.

“Darling?” Lettice heard her murmur; and then, turning to Lotty, “Run away and take off your things; mamma is going to sleep a little.”

And Lettice still stood by the window, though the bullock-cart had jerked and slid down the street and was now lost to view, and the young Spaniard with the gentle lustrous eyes had long since passed out of sight. She was crying now—softly but unrestrainedly; her mood had changed. It would have mattered little to her present feelings though all the world had seen her tears.

“Oh! it is so sad, so unutterably sad, for her and for us,” she was whispering to herself. “There are times when I could almost find it in my heart to wish it were already over. I cannot *bear* to think of her suffering more.”

Just then an arm was passed round her waist, and the same caressing voice whispered, this time in *her* ear, the same word—

“Darling!”

Lettice did not speak, but she leant for a moment against her sister in a more clinging way than was usual with her.

“Nina,” she said wearily.

“Yes, dear,” said Nina. She was always very proud, poor girl, when Lettice seemed to turn to her for support or sympathy.

“It’s so miserable, isn’t it?”

“Yes, dear,” said Nina again. She would dearly have liked to add some words of comfort, but she did not know what to say. It was true. It *was* very miserable!

“Why should *we* be so unhappy?” Lettice went on. “Why should such troubles come to us; other people go on living happy peaceful lives, without these dreadful earthquakes of trouble? And we have only her.”

“I know,” said Nina softly.

“And, as things are, we can’t *even* wish it to go on, can we?” said Lettice, unconsciously raising her voice a little, as she spoke more energetically. “She suffers more and more, and—do you know, Nina?” She hesitated.

Nina looked round anxiously.

“Come into the other room,” she said. “Bertha is in the ante-room; she hears the slightest movement. But I don’t think mamma is very soundly asleep, and our talking may disturb her.”

“We may as well go into the garden a little,” said Lettice indifferently.

“And what was it you were going to say when I interrupted you?” asked Nina, half timidly, when they found themselves pacing up and down a little raised terrace walk which overlooked the street.

Lettice reflected for a moment.

“Oh, I remember,” she said. “It was about mamma. Don’t you think sometimes, Nina, that all this suffering is weakening her mind a little? She doesn’t seem so clear about things, and it worries me. For of course, though I would like, after—after mamma is gone, to do exactly as she would have wished, yet one must discriminate between what her real wishes and advice are, or were, and the sort of weak—yielding to feeling—I—I don’t quite know what to call it—I don’t mean to be disrespectful, of course—that must have come with her long illness and the suffering and all that. And it makes it difficult for me, still more difficult, to discriminate, you know. For it is such a responsibility on me—such a heavy responsibility!” and Lettice gave a little sigh.

But something in the sigh seemed to say that the heavy responsibility was not *altogether* disagreeable to her.

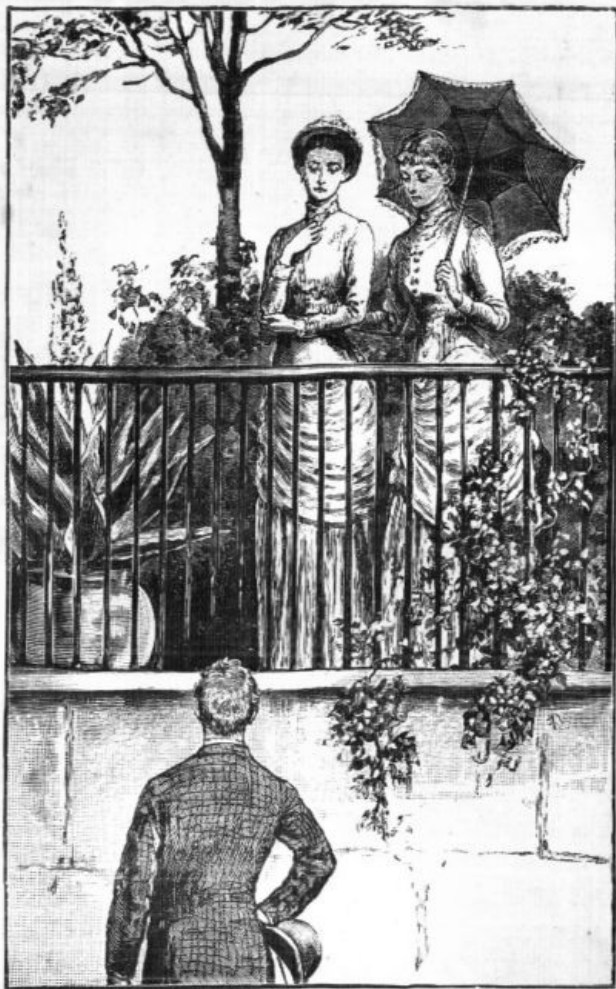
Nina walked on, her blue eyes fixed on the ground, her fair face contracted into an expression of unusual perplexity. She could not bear to disagree with or contradict Lettice—Lettice so clever, so unselfish, so devoted—the heroine of all her girlish romance! And yet—

“I don’t think quite as you do about mamma,” she said at last. “I can’t say that I see any sign of—of her mind failing. On the contrary, as she grows bodily weaker it seems to me that her mind—her *soul*, I would almost rather say—grows wiser and stronger, and sees the real right and best of all things more and more clearly.”

She had forgotten her fear of Lettice in the last few words, but she soon had cause to remember it again.

“Her mind failing,” repeated Lettice contemptuously. “How coarsely you express things, Nina! Whoever would say

such a thing? As if mamma were an old woman in her dotage! What's the matter? Surely you are not going to cry—for nothing!"



THE YOUNG MAN CAME TO A HALT JUST BELOW WHERE THEY WERE
STANDING.

Frontispiece.

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For Nina's face had grown very red, and she fumbled about with her parasol in an uneasy manner. But she was *not* crying, and Lettice, watching her, saw another cause for the blush and the discomfort, in the person of a young man, who just then crossing the street raised his hat with a shy yet eager deference, which the most scrupulous of chaperones could not have objected to.

"That boy!" said Lettice under her breath. "And just now when I wanted to make Nina thoroughly sympathise with me! It is really detestable—one has no privacy here. We had better go back into the house," she said aloud.

"Hush, Lettice; he will hear you!" exclaimed Nina, some stronger feeling overcoming even her awe of her sister. "He is going to speak to us."

And before Lettice had time to reply, the young man came to a halt just below where they were standing.

"Is—I hope—excuse my interrupting you," he began, for Lettice's expression was not encouraging, to say the least. "I was so anxious to know if Mrs Morison is better to-day."

"Thank you," said Lettice, civilly but coldly. "Yes, on the whole I think she *is* rather better to-day."

Nina, from under her parasol, darted on her sister a look half of reproach, half of surprise. "Better!" Mamma any better! How could Lettice say so? To her eyes it was very evident that she was daily growing worse. And she felt sure that Lettice saw it too. "She won't allow it to herself," she thought. "But I think it is better to own the truth. I would like Philip Dexter to know—I like him to be sorry for us."

And there was a depth of sadness in her eyes that found its way straight to the young man's heart, as, without having spoken a word, she bent her head in farewell when Mr Dexter turned to go.

"Stupid boy!" said Lettice impatiently. "Could he not have seen we did not want to speak to any one? But he is kind-hearted," she went on, relenting, as she often did, after a too hasty speech; "I dare say he means well."

"And are you not a little—just a little—prejudiced?" said Nina.

"Perhaps I am," Lettice replied calmly; "and so, it seems to me, I and you and all of us *should* be. It is just that that I am thinking of, Nina. You know how strongly papa felt about his relations, and till now mamma has always seemed to feel the same."

"No," interrupted Nina; "mamma has often said to me that though she loved papa for feeling it so, for it was for *her*

sake, she herself could not resent it all so much."

"But that is not to say *we* should not," exclaimed Lettice hotly. "Mamma is an angel, and now especially,"—here, in spite of herself, the girl's voice broke—"she has none but gentle feelings to all. But for *us*—that is what is troubling me so. Mamma has actually said to me that after she is gone she hopes we may make friends—with *them*, that if they show any kindly disposition she hopes we will meet them half-way. How *could* we do so? Nina, it would not be right. You don't think it would be right?"

Nina hesitated.

"Besides," pursued Lettice, "we shall have no need of kindness or help from them or any one. We shall have enough to live on, with care and management, and I understand all about that. I have been training myself all this time to replace mamma, and it is her greatest comfort to know this. I am not afraid of anything, except interference."

"But about money—you *must* have some one to help you," said Nina. "About investments, and interest, and dividends,—a girl *can't* manage all that."

"Oh, as for *that*," said Lettice airily, as if such trifling matters were quite beneath her consideration, "of course the lawyers and trustees can see to all that. Our cousin Godfrey Auriol is responsible for all that, and he must be very nice. I don't mind him at all, for of course he would never think of interfering; he is much too young."

"Too young!" said Nina; "why, he is not far off thirty! Philip Dexter told me so the other day. He is quite five years older than—"

"Philip Dexter has no business to talk of any of our relations at all," said Lettice loftily.

"Not even about how old they are?" said Nina.

"No, not even that," replied Lettice, though, in spite of herself, a little smile crept round her mouth.

Then the two girls stood still for a moment, and from the highest point of the terrace gazed out in silence on the lovely view before them. The fertile valley at their feet, the gently rising ground beyond, and far in the distance the lofty mountains, with their everlasting crown of snow; and over all the intensity of blue sky—the blue sky of the south, glowing and gleaming like a turquoise furnace.

"How beautiful it is!" said Nina.

"Yes," replied Lettice, "I suppose it is. But I shall never care for that kind of sunshine and blue sky again, Nina. I would rather have it grey and cloudy. It is such a mockery. It seems as if nature were so heartless to smile and shine like that when we are, oh, so miserable!"

"I like clouds, too, *some* clouds, better than that all blue," agreed Nina. "There is no mystery, no *behind*, in that sky. It doesn't make me feel nearer heaven."

And then they turned and went in again, for it was but seldom they both together left their mother for even so short a time.

Mrs Morison was dying, and she knew it. She had been ill for more than a year, but only since coming to spend a winter in the south had her malady assumed a hopeless form. It was not consumption, for which she was more than thankful for her children's sake. Indeed, it had been the result of over-exerting herself in attendance on her husband, whose death was the consequence of an accident on horseback some years previously. There had been a hope that the change of climate and the peculiarly soothing effect on the nervous system of the air of Esparto might have at least arrested the progress of her disease; but this hope had been of short continuance. For herself she was resigned, and more than resigned, to die; but, for long, the thought of leaving her children had caused a terrible struggle. But with decrease of physical strength had come increase of moral force, and above all, spiritual faith. She could trust God for herself, why not as fully for those far dearer to her than herself? And slowly but surely she had learnt to do so, thankful for such mitigation of the sorrow as had come by its gradual approach, which gave her time to prepare her elder daughters for what would be before them when they should have to face life without her. To endeavour, too, to undo certain prejudices which they had, not unnaturally, imbibed from their father, and even at one time from herself—prejudices which she now saw to have been exaggerated, which she had always in her heart felt to be unchristian.

But, alas! prejudice and dislike are seeds more easily sown than uprooted, for they grow apace, and, with a sigh, Mrs Morison realised that, as regarded Lettice, above all, she must leave this trouble, with many others, in wiser hands.

"I have said and done all I can for the present," she said to herself; "I must leave it now. I would not have our last days together disturbed by what, after all, is not a vital matter. Lettice is too good and true to stand out should circumstances show her she is wrong."

For Lettice *was* good and true, unselfish and devoted, eager to do right, but with the eagerness and self-confidence of an untried warrior, knowing nought of the battle and thinking she knew all, satisfied as to the temper and perfection of the untested weapons in her possession, full of prejudice and one-sidedness while she prided herself on her fairness and width of judgment.

But self and its opinions were kept much in the background during the few days that followed the morning I have been telling you of. Very calm and peaceful days they were, very sweet and blessed to look back upon in afterlife; for their calm was undisturbed by any misgiving that they might be the *last*—nay, to the sisters it was even brightened by a faint return of hope, when they had thought all hope was past.

"If mamma keeps as well as she has been the last few days, it will be almost impossible not to begin hoping again," said Lettice one evening, after their mother had been comfortably settled for the night.

Nina's less impulsive nature was slower to receive impressions, yet there was a gleam of real brightness in the smile with which she replied to her sister.

"Yes, really," she said; "and doctors are *sometimes* mistaken. We must do all we can to keep her from having the *least* backcast now, just so near Arthur's coming. How happy—oh, how wonderfully happy—we should be if she were to get even a little better, *really* better. Oh, Lettice, just think of it!"

"And how she will enjoy having us all together again next week. For Auriol's holidays begin then too, you know, Nina; and with Arthur here to keep him quiet, poor little boy, it will be much easier than it was at Christmas."

And with these happy thoughts the poor girls went to bed.

They had slept the sound peaceful sleep of youth, for three or four hours perhaps, when, with a start, they were both aroused by a soft knocking at the door. Half thinking it was fancy, they waited an instant, each unwilling to disturb the other. But again it came, and this time more distinctly. Trembling already so that she could scarcely stand, Lettice opened the door. Ah! there was no need for words. There stood old Bertha, her mother's maid, with white though composed face, and eyes resolutely refusing to weep *as yet*.

"My dears," she whispered, "there is—there is a change. You must come. Miss Lotty, poor thing, too. And I have sent for Master Auriol."

Lettice's face worked convulsively. She caught hold of Nina, and for an instant they clung together.

"*It has come*," whispered Nina. "Let us be good for her sake, Lettice darling."

"Yes," said Bertha, "she wants you all."

"All," repeated Nina; "but, oh, Bertha, think of poor Arthur!"

Chapter Two.

A New-Comer.

"Who was this gentleman-friend, and whence?"
Lavender Lady.

About ten days later, a sad little group was assembled in the pretty drawing-room of the Villa Martine. It was a lovely evening, but the sunshine outside was not reflected on the young faces of Lettice Morison and her brother and sister. Lotty and Auriol, the children of the family, were amusing themselves quietly enough on the balcony, though now and then a little laugh made itself heard from their direction, causing Lettice to look up with a slight frown of disapproval on her pale face.

"How *can* they?" she said in a low voice, and she was moving to check them, when Nina held her back.

"Don't be vexed with them," she said deprecatingly, "they are only children. *She* would not be vexed—indeed, I think she would be glad for them not to be too crushed down." Lettice's eyes filled with tears—they were never far to seek in these days—and she sank down again in her seat with a sigh. The boy beside her, a slight, dark-haired fellow, with soft eyes like Nina's, put his arm caressingly round her waist.

"Dear Lettice," he said, "I can't bear to see you looking so *very* unhappy."

Lettice submitted to the caress, but scarcely responded to it. "I can't help it, Arthur," she replied. "I do not give way to grief wrongly, for I do not allow it to make me neglect any duty. I have been very busy to-day, getting in all the bills and so on that we owe here, writing to the landlord, and all kinds of things. You don't know all there is upon me."

A slight glance, which Lettice did not see, passed between Nina and Arthur. It seemed to encourage the boy to say more.

"I know," he said. "I have seen how busy you have been. But are you sure that it was necessary? You know none of us have any legal authority—we are all minors—and our trustees *must* settle these things. And it would be so much less painful for you not to force yourself to do it all yourself. Godfrey Auriol will be here to-morrow; he is coming on purpose to get all settled."

"Godfrey Auriol!" repeated Lettice with a slight tone of contempt. "What can *he* know about such things? His trusteeship is merely nominal. Of course it was natural and right to name him, our only relative, though not a very near one. But I have *never* thought of him as really to be considered."

"You will find yourself mistaken, then, I suspect," said Arthur, a touch of boyish love of teasing breaking through even his present subdued mood.

Lettice drew herself away from his arm.

"How *can* you?" she exclaimed, her tears flowing still more freely. "Nina, speak to him. How *can* he? And—and—Arthur, you can't know what we have gone through, or you wouldn't speak so. You weren't here; you—"

"Oh, Lettice, don't say that to him," interrupted Nina. "It is the not having been here that has been the cruellest of all to him, and he has not been selfish about it. Still, Arthur, you shouldn't say *anything* to hurt Lettice;" for Nina was always assailed at her weakest point, by any approach to "appeal" on the part of her elder sister.

"I am very sorry. I didn't mean it. That's a stupid thing to say, but it's true," said Arthur penitently.

"And I'm sorry too. I didn't mean what it sounded like," said Lettice. "I know it has been worse for you than for any of us," she went on, looking up in Arthur's face with her tearful eyes.

Lettice was one of the few people in the world who seldom show to greater advantage than when in tears. Her eyes were not so fine as Nina's and Arthur's soft brown ones; they were grey—good, sensible, "well-opened" eyes, but in a general way with a want of depth and tenderness in them. And this want the tears supplied. Her recent sorrow, too, had, as it were, etherealised and softened her whole face and its expression, whose real beauty was often marred by a certain hardness which seemed to render square and angular the outlines intended by nature to be curved and graceful. The thought struck Nina as her glance fell upon her.

"How very sweet and lovely Lettice looks just at this moment."

And the thought, though not in quite the same form, struck another person who just at that moment entered the room.

He had never seen her before.

"What a lovely girl! Can that be Lettice? I have always heard that Nina was the beauty, but this girl is too dark to be Nina," were the reflections that rushed through his mind in far less time than it takes to tell them. And in a moment his ideas were confirmed, for another girl, whose face had been completely hidden, turned at the slight sound of his approach, and by her exceedingly fair hair and complexion he recognised the Nina who had been described to him. But his eyes turned quickly from her to her sister.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times," he said, his own face colouring a little as he spoke.

"I rang, but as no one answered, and as the front door was open, I ventured to come in. You know who I am,"—for all the three young people had started to their feet, too surprised as yet to find their voices. "I am Godfrey—Godfrey Auriol, your cousin, I hope I may call myself."

By this time Lettice and the others had recovered their wits. Lettice came a step or two forward and held out her hand.

"Our cousin," she repeated; "yes, certainly, Mr Auriol, we should be very sorry not to count you our cousin—you who are, I may say, our only relation;" and at these words an expression crossed her face which Godfrey saw but did not understand. But it was gone before it had time to settle there, or to spoil the first pleasing impression which he had received.

"I was so grieved," he went on, while he shook hands with them all, "so very grieved that I could not be in time; that it was utterly impossible for me to come over in time for—" He stopped short, but they all knew what he meant.

Lettice's lips quivered.

"I wish you could have come," she said softly, and again the expression that so embellished it stole over her face. "Indeed, that was really the only reason for your coming so far at all; you will not find much to see to, I think," and she smiled a little, so that Mr Auriol felt puzzled. Her tone was too gentle for him to suspect any assertion of independence to be intended. "But we all knew you could not help it," she added.

"You are always very busy, are you not?" said Nina, speaking for the first time.

"Pretty well," said Godfrey, smiling. "I lost no time on the journey, and I was very glad to get off a day sooner than I had expected. I came straight here from the station, trusting to you to tell me what hotel I had better go to."

"You came straight from the station? Then you've had nothing to eat. How thoughtless of us!" exclaimed Lettice, and, looking round, she saw that Nina had already disappeared.

"There is an hotel close by," said Arthur. "I'll go round with you if you like, as soon as you've had some dinner."

"Thank you," said Mr Auriol. "I'm very sorry to give you so much trouble, but I wanted to look you up at once. I can only stay so very short a time: I must be back in England within the week."

"How can you talk of giving us trouble?" said Arthur; "it is you who are giving yourself a great deal for us;" and he glanced at Lettice as if to hint to her that she should endorse his speech. But she said nothing; only later in the evening, when their visitor was just about leaving, she said to him in a quiet but somewhat studied voice—

"I hope you will be able to see something of the neighbourhood while you are here. There are so many pretty excursions, and in a week one can do a good deal. Arthur himself has not seen much; he has only been three weeks with us all the months we have been here. And he would enjoy going about with you."

Godfrey Auriol was not deficient in perception, still less in quick resolution when he saw occasion for it. He hesitated, but for half a second only, before he replied.

"Yes," he said calmly, "it would be very pleasant were it feasible. But you know, Miss Morison, it is not for *pleasure* I

have come all this way. There is a great deal of business to be seen to, and for some of it I must have your attention, though I would gladly spare you all trouble if I could. At what hour to-morrow may I come? It is no use putting off what has to be done, however painful."

Lettice's colour rose high—all over her face; she felt the mortification doubly, since it was in the presence of her younger sister and brother. But she did her best not to show what she felt, and to any one not knowing her well, her emotion might have passed for what was only natural and almost seemly under the circumstances. And even in the tone of her voice as she answered, it required a nice and skilled observer to detect the latent armour of resistance in which she was determined to clothe herself. Unfortunately for her, her three companions, the two younger ones thanks to their intimate knowledge of her peculiarities, the third by dint of unusual and cultivated power of discrimination, which she herself had raised to suspicion, were not deceived by her words, in themselves perfectly unexceptionable.

"At any hour you like," she said. "Of course it is best that we should know all about our money, though I really do know already all that is practically necessary. But these kind of formalities must be gone through, I suppose. So I can be ready at any hour you like. Will ten o'clock do?"

"Perfectly, if it will suit you *all*?" said Mr Auriol, glancing inquiringly at Nina and Arthur. "I shall want you all three. The two little ones, of course, it would be absurd to talk to on such matters; but you three are much in the same position. You are all minors. Besides, it is not *only* about money matters I want to speak to you."

These last two or three sentences were bitter pills for Lettice to swallow. Arthur and Nina had the consideration not to look at her. Once she opened her lips as if about to speak, but thought better of it and said nothing.

"I can put all that right at the proper time," she reflected. "No use beginning about it now. But it is really too absurd, Nina and Arthur counted on a par with *me*!"

And it did seem so very absurd that she felt she could afford to smile at it, and with this consideration her calm returned. So that her brother and sister, and even Mr Auriol himself, were surprised, and somewhat impressed, by the perfectly unruffled tone in which she said pleasantly—

"Very well, then; to-morrow morning at ten o'clock we shall *all* be ready."

"She must be extremely sweet-tempered," thought Godfrey, when Arthur, having shown him to his hotel, had left him alone for the night.

"I am afraid I was rather rough to her. Her little assumption of independence was really only touching, poor child," he went on to reflect, little dreaming, deluded man, of what was before him! "And Nina is very pretty and very attractive—I don't wonder at Dexter—though she is not to be compared with Lettice for real beauty of feature and expression."

Few words passed between the sisters after their guest had left them. When Arthur came in he found Lettice sitting alone. Nina had gone to bed, and she too was tired and meant to follow her at once.

"And don't you like him?" Arthur could not help saying, as he kissed his sister for good night.

"Like him—whom?" said Lettice, as if awaking from a brown study. "Mr Auriol? Oh yes, I like him very well. He is much what I expected;" and Arthur said no more.

Notwithstanding his long journey of the preceding days, Mr Auriol was awake and up betimes the following morning. It was several years since he had been out of his own country, and the sights and sounds about him struck him almost as freshly as if he saw and heard them for the first time. The early morning sunshine was softer and less monotonous than the midday effulgence which Lettice had complained of, and seemed to add vividness without glare to every detail of the picturesque scene on which his windows looked out. For it was market-day at Esparto, and the border-land town was a meeting-place for the denizens of many widely varying districts.

There were the country people from the near neighbourhood. The women, plain-looking save for their brilliant eyes, weather-beaten and prematurely aged through hard work and exposure, their brown leather-like skin showing harder and browner from the contrast with the light-coloured silk kerchiefs skilfully knotted round their heads, yet as a rule seemingly contented and cheerful enough as they chattered and chaffered round the great ancient fountain, the centre of the "Place." The men, far less numerous and far less energetic, handsome fellows many of them, though less so than the gaudily attired Spanish mountaineers lured to Esparto by the work sometimes to be had there in plenty, while yet looking as if labour or exertion of any kind was completely beneath their lordly selves. And here and there, recognisable at once by those acquainted with their peculiar type, Basques, descendants of that mysterious race whose origin and language have so long puzzled the learned in such subjects. Nor were there wanting specimens of still more remote nationalities. Two or three negro servants were bargaining and purchasing for their masters; and some little fair-haired English children, who had coaxed their maids to get up extra early before it was hot, to see the fun and bustle in the market-place; while a Russian nurse, gorgeous in scarlet and gold embroidery, indolently surveyed the scene from a balcony opposite.

It was picturesque in the extreme, and amusing. But after a while, staring out of the window being a diversion he most rarely indulged in, Mr Auriol tired of it, and after his modest breakfast of coffee and a roll, finding it was barely nine o'clock, he strolled out for a walk, though his ideas were of the vaguest as to what direction he should take.

"I have nearly an hour before they will expect me at the Villa Martine," he said to himself. "I have no wish to rub Mistress Lettice the wrong way by turning up too soon. It strikes me she would look upon that as almost worse than being too late. Where shall I go?"

He was turning the corner of the street, or Place, rather, as he asked himself this question, and before he had time to answer it he almost knocked against a young man who was hurrying in his direction.

"Pardon," was on the lips of both, when both exchanged it for a more friendly greeting.

"Dexter!"—"Auriol!" they respectively exclaimed, and then the new-comer added—

"I was just going to the hotel to ask if you had come, or were coming. Arthur Morison told me some days ago that you were expected. I met him accidentally."

"They did not expect me till to-day, and I came yesterday, so there has not been time for them to tell you. You see them sometimes, do you not?"

"You mean, do I visit them? Scarcely. I used to go there sometimes before Mrs Morison got so very ill. *She* was always kindness and cordiality itself to me. You know I had got to know the second Miss Morison very well a year ago in England, when she was staying with some neighbours of ours."

"Yes, I remember," said Mr Auriol. But he spoke absently.

"And it is all that horrid family feud. When they—at least I don't know why I should say 'they;' I believe it is only Lettice—found out my connections, the difference was most marked, though before then they had been quite friendly, and I had hoped to introduce them and my sister to each other. Those sorts of things are really too bad, carrying them down to the younger generation."

Godfrey bent his head in acquiescence, but did not speak.

"Do you," Philip went on again after a moment's pause, and with some little embarrassment—"do you think her as pretty as you had been told?"

"*Far* more so. 'Pretty!'—pretty is not at all the word for her. I think her distinctly beautiful," Mr Auriol replied, with a sort of burst of enthusiasm which somehow seemed rather to disconcert Philip.

"I thought you would. That fair hair with such dark eyes is so very uncommon," he replied quietly. And instantly it flashed upon Mr Auriol that they were speaking at cross purposes. He smiled to himself, but for reasons of his own, and being perfectly unaware of the impression his words had made upon his companion, he decided not to explain his mistake.

"Your sister, Mrs Leyland, is much better, I was glad to hear?" he said courteously, thinking it just as well to change the subject.

"Oh, much better, thank you; quite well, indeed. We shall be leaving immediately. In fact, we should have left already, but, to tell you the truth, when it became evident that Mrs Morison was sinking I persuaded Anna to stay on a little, just to see if perhaps we could be of some service to those poor children. They seemed so lonely."

"It was very good of you," said Godfrey warmly.

"I—I thought my uncle and aunt would have wished it, and Anna thought so too," said Philip.

"But it was no use. I believe Lettice would rather have applied to any utter stranger than to us."

"Really," said Godfrey, surprised, and even a little shocked. "I had no idea they still felt so strongly. Perhaps it's just as well you told me, for I see I shall have some rather ticklish business to manage. But forewarned is forearmed. I may call on Mrs Leyland some evening, I hope? I shall have very few here."

"Oh, certainly," said Philip. "She will be delighted to see you."

Then the conversation drifted into general matters. Philip escorted Mr Auriol to one or two points of interest in the little town, and at ten o'clock precisely the latter found himself at the gate of the Villa Martine.

Chapter Three.

The Tug of War.

"Your courage much more than your prudence you showed."
Burns.

Lettice received her cousin in the drawing-room. She was, of course, expecting him, but there was not a touch of nervousness in her manner as she quietly shook hands with him, and in a friendly, perhaps slightly patronising tone, as if to put him quite at his ease, hoped that he found the hotel comfortable, that he had slept well, was not too tired with his journey, and so on, to all of which Mr Auriol replied with equal composure. But he was eyeing the young lady all the time, taking measure of her much more closely than she had any idea of. He observed her, too, with a certain curiosity as to her appearance. The night before he had seen her in a subdued light—almost, indeed, in shadow, as the consciousness of her recent tears had made her avoid coming forward conspicuously, and he wondered if he should find her as lovely as she had then appeared.

"She is, and she is not," he decided. "Her features are all that I pictured them, but the soft sweet expression is gone. Yes, this morning I can believe her to be both prejudiced and self-willed."

And his glance rested with pleasure on the somewhat anxious but thoroughly womanly and gentle expression of Nina's fair face, as she just then entered the room, followed by Arthur.

Mr Auriol looked round him inquiringly.

"Have you any other room at liberty," he said, "where there is perhaps a large table? There are a number of papers I wish to show you;" and he touched a packet which he held under his arm.

"We can go into the dining-room," said Lettice, opening a door which led into it as she spoke; "though, really, Mr Auriol, you need not give yourself so much trouble. We are perfectly satisfied that our money is in good hands. Mamma often told me that my father had given himself immense trouble to place it safely, so that at his death there should be no trouble; in short, that our trustees would have nothing to do but leave it as it was."

Mr Auriol made no reply. But when the four were seated round the dining-table, he deliberately undid his important-looking packet, and drew from it paper after paper, all neatly labelled and arranged, which he placed beside him.

"These," he said, touching two mysterious-looking documents, "are the statements of your capital and of your income. I have had copies made, so that I can leave these with you, in case you ever wish to refer to them, as you are all three of an age to understand such matters to a certain extent. You said just now, Miss Morison, that everything to do with your money matters had been thoroughly seen to before your father's death. I *must* explain to you that all was not as satisfactory as you imagine. Your father, as he constantly said himself, was not a good man of business. I am not afraid of your misunderstanding me when I say this. You cannot but know how deeply attached to him I was, and how much gratitude I shall always feel to him for much past kindness. I simply state the fact, with no disparagement to him. When he died his affairs were exceedingly confused and involved, and I, as one of his executors—the only one—for, you remember, Colonel Brown died suddenly just when your father did—hardly knew what to do. And I tell you honestly that I never could have got things into the satisfactory state they are now in, but for help which I cannot exaggerate, and from a quarter where, all things considered, one could little have expected it."

Mr Auriol paused and looked round him. All the three young faces expressed strong feeling. On Lettice's there was a look of tension painful to see. Her lips moved as if she would have asked her cousin to go on, but no sound came. He understood her, however, and pitying her heartily, he continued, his eyes fixed on the paper before him.

"That help came from your father's stepbrother, the only son of his father by his second marriage—the merchant, Mr Ingram Morison."

There was a dead silence. The tears were in Nina's eyes, and Arthur's face was quivering, but Lettice's was deadly pale and stony. And when she spoke her voice was so unlike itself that all started.

"Did my mother know this?" she said in a tone which matched the look on her face.

"Not at first," said Mr Auriol, still avoiding to turn his eyes in her direction; "not till things were all in order would Mr Morison allow her to be told anything. He risked very large sums—of course, not so large to him as to a less wealthy man, but still actually large—to save your fortune. And, thanks to his great acuteness and experience, he succeeded most wonderfully, so that at the present time you do not actually owe him *money*."

"Thank Heaven for that," murmured Lettice.

Mr Auriol turned upon her with a sharp movement of indignation. But when he went on speaking it was as if continuing his words, and not as if addressing himself to her in particular.

"But you do owe him, what to a generous mind is never a painful burden, an *immense* debt of gratitude."

"Then I recall my words," burst out Lettice. "I wish to Heaven it *were* money, that I could work for it—work my fingers to the bone, till I could repay every farthing. To owe gratitude, that can *not* be counted in money, to *that* man! Oh, it is too much! How dared you do it?" she flashed out to Godfrey. "How dared you let *him* interfere?"

"You would rather have had your mother reduced to beggary—you would rather have had her last days tortured by anxiety for all of you? *She* did not resent it; she, who had far more right than any of you to be influenced by the old quarrel, with which Ingram Morison, remember, had no more to do than I had. *She* was not ashamed to be grateful and to show her trust and confidence in him, as you will see, when at last she knew a great part, though not the whole, of the truth."

"And why did she not tell me, then? Oh, mamma, mamma," wailed Lettice, forgetful of or indifferent to her cousin's presence, "why did you not tell me? I thought I had your whole confidence, and to find this out *now!*"

She shook with sobs, and Godfrey's face softened.

"Lettice," he said, calling her for the first time by her name—though none of them, himself included, noticed that he did so—"my poor child, try to be reasonable. Your mother did not intentionally deceive you. It was only very lately she knew about it. Ingram Morison acted with the greatest delicacy—exaggerated delicacy, he wanted no one to know what he had done, and even at the last I could only persuade him to let me tell her part of it. She meant to tell it to you—gradually, knowing your strong feelings about it. She wrote so to me. I have the letter. But evidently she had not time to do so, or she may have found it more difficult than she expected." And, as he again paused, there rose before Lettice the remembrance of the morning when her gentle, almost timid mother, had tried to lead to the subject of the Morison relations, of her softened feelings towards them, and how she, Lettice, had repulsed the attempt with decision almost approaching violence, and had afterwards said to Nina that she thought bodily

weakness must be affecting her mother's judgment. And then, at the last, it had been, or had *seemed*, as it so often does, so sudden. There had been no time or strength for more than a whispered blessing before the smile of perfect peace with which she closed her eyes on this world, had lighted up the loved, worn features, and she had breathed her gentle soul away.

Lettice sobbed still, but more softly now; and Mr Auriol went on.

"Had she lived, she would, I know, have wished to know the whole, and wished you all to know it too. And I too confess to some personal feeling in the matter. I too have some family pride. Your mother was my cousin—of the same blood. I could not bear that so great a service should be unrecognised. And, before coming here, I told Mr Morison that, unless he would consent to my stating the facts to you, and having no mystery or concealment about it, I would try to throw up the whole."

"And then?" said Arthur.

"Then," said Mr Auriol slowly, "if you all—though, no, I will not insult you by supposing such a thing—but *if* you all retained this terrible prejudice against an innocent man, things would be still worse, for he would be your only guardian."

Another blow for Lettice.

"Our guardian!" exclaimed Nina in surprise.

"Yes. By your father's will your mother and I were your guardians, and while she lived *that* part of it was merely nominal for me. But she had the power to appoint another in case of her death. And she did so. She appointed—"

"*Him?*" exclaimed Nina.

"Yes. Your uncle, or step-uncle, if you prefer to be quite exact—Mr Ingram Morison," Godfrey replied simply.

Then, without waiting for further remarks, he went on to explain, as clearly as was possible to such inexperienced ears, a number of business details—summing up by giving them a clear idea of what money they were sure of; of some which still remained uncertain, and by making them most distinctly recognise that, but for their uncle's "interference," the post of trustee of their possessions would indeed, long before this, have been a sinecure.

"And now," he said, "there remains only one more duty before we talk about less painful and overwhelming subjects. I have here your mother's last letter to me, sending me her will, which she wished me to look over, as I did, and going on to express her last wishes. Shall I read it to you, or shall I leave it for you to read alone?"

"Read it now," said Lettice, rather to her brother's and sister's surprise. For they did not hear the words which she whispered to herself: "Better drink the cup of bitterness to the dregs, and have it over."

So Mr Auriol read the letter aloud.

It was a simply expressed but thoughtfully considered letter, with no word or allusion to distress or wound any of her children. She spoke of her intention to explain to them these facts which had so recently come to her knowledge, but that before doing so she would wish to know more—the whole, in fact—that her words might have the more weight in overcoming the prejudice which, to a certain extent, she blamed herself for having, if not encouraged, at least not opposed. "My husband," she said, "resented his family's behaviour for *my* sake. I have a right to do anything I choose towards breaking down the barrier, of which I fear I was in great measure the unwilling cause. And he, had he lived to know his brother as I now know him, would have felt with me in this. For, though he was hasty and impulsive, he was, when he would allow himself to see things clearly, essentially just. And how can any one blame Ingram Morison for events which took place when he was a mere child?" Then she went on to beg Godfrey to convey to her brother-in-law her deep sense of gratitude for what she already knew, and her hope that he would accept the guardianship, which no one else would be so fitted for. She spoke of her children altogether—of the old prejudice as shared by them all—in no way singling out Lettice as the least reasonable or persuadable, so that, as she listened, Lettice could not but feel in her heart that it was thanks to herself alone if she *had* come to appear so in Mr Auriol's eyes, though it is to be feared that but small self-blame was the result of this consciousness. And then, with some general expression of confidence in Godfrey, and in his good judgment and good feeling, mingled with hopes that she might live long enough to understand all quite clearly and to make some arrangements for her children's future, the letter closed.

"I was going to answer this letter," said Mr Auriol—"I could not do so till I had Mr Morison's permission to tell the whole, which caused some delay—but I was just going to answer it when I got Arthur's telegram, telling me of her death. You see, the date is very recent;" and he held out the letter to Nina, who leant eagerly forward, while Lettice held herself stiffly aloof. "I managed to see Mr Morison before I came away—had I not done so, my coming would not have been of much use—and got his answers to all I had to ask him. And this is what he says. He accepts the trusteeship of your money unconditionally, for which you cannot be too thankful. The guardianship which he *might* legally decline—for he is not forced to accept what he had not first been asked about—he accepts, too, but only to a certain extent. He will not interfere with you in any way disagreeable to you, unless positively obliged to do so. He leaves details to me: if I am satisfied, he will be so. At the same time he earnestly *wishes* to be to you all not only a guardian but an uncle. I am empowered to invite you all, as soon as you can leave here, to go to his country house, and remain there as long as you like—in any case till some definite arrangement can be made for you."

"*Never!*" exclaimed Lettice, interrupting Mr Auriol. "Nina, Arthur, you will support me in this?"

Godfrey waited till she was silent, but then, without giving the others time to reply, he went on. "It is premature for you to give any answer as yet. Allow me to go on with what I have to say, without interrupting me, till I have fulfilled

my commission. Mr Morison also wished me to say that, if Arthur has any taste for business, he will give him a position in his firm such as he would to a son of his own, if he had one."

Arthur's colour rose, and he seemed as if about to say something, but he checked himself. Not so Lettice.

"Arthur is going into the army, like papa. He is going up for Woolwich next Christmas. That has been decided long ago."

Again with ceremonious politeness Mr Auriol waited till she left off speaking. Then, without taking the slightest notice of what she had said, he proceeded, "Or, if Arthur chooses any other career, he will do his best to help him. I think that is the substance of what I have to say to you from your uncle. You will give me an answer before I leave—some days before, indeed—the day after to-morrow, suppose we say. It will be the greatest possible satisfaction to me if you accept your uncle's invitation. If not, there is no time to be lost in arranging something else."

"We are quite ready to tell you what we intend doing—now at once, if you choose," said Lettice.

"Not now. I wish you to think it over, and consult together," he replied. "And I must tell you frankly that what you *intend* doing is not the question. You may tell me what you *wish*, with all freedom; and if I can, I will help you to carry out your wishes. But if I do *not* approve of them, I am bound by every consideration to tell you so, and to forbid them. If this sounds very ungracious, I am sorry for it, but I cannot help it. Having undertaken a very,"—here he hesitated, and evidently substituted a milder word for the one that had been on his lips—"onerous task, I will carry it out to the best of my power. But it rests with you three to make it a painful or pleasant one."

He rose as he spoke. Nina rose, too, and held out her hand.

"Thank you, Cousin Godfrey," she said simply, "for all your kindness."

Mr Auriol turned to Lettice.

"Will you, too, not shake hands with me, Lettice?" he said, with a tone in his voice which touched her a little.

"Of course," she said, rousing herself as it were by an effort. "I can have no possible reason for *not* shaking hands with you. I am only bitterly, most bitterly grieved that we should be, and have been, the cause of such trouble to you."

"Do not be bitterly grieved, then," he said, smiling. "Give me the satisfaction of feeling I have been, and may be, of service to you. I am your kinsman; it is only natural. Be reasonable, and try to trust those who wish to be true friends to you."

But at these last words he felt the hand, which he had held for a moment or two, struggle in his grasp, and with an almost inaudible sigh he released it.

"Will you give me the names, so far as you know them, of the tradespeople here, and your landlord, and so on?" he said gently. "I must make up as accurate a statement as I can. There is a great deal more to do at such times than you have any idea of;" and then he went on to explain some details—of which till now she had had no idea whatever—to the rather bewildered girl.

She replied meekly enough; and when he had got the required information, he went out with Arthur as his guide.

Chapter Four.

An Old Story and a New Secret.

"Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human; to forgive, divine."

Pope.

It was the last evening of the young Morisons being all together at the Villa Martine, for Arthur was returning to England the following day. And a fortnight or so later, the sisters and little Auriol, under the convoy of old Bertha, were to follow him there. Lettice had gone early to her room. She was worn out, though she would not allow it, with all she had gone through during the last week or two. And since Mr Auriol had left, she had put less constraint on herself; she no longer felt the necessity of calling pride to her aid.

"I am so dreadfully sorry for Lettice," said Nina, as she and Arthur were sitting together unwilling, though it was already late, to lose any of their few remaining hours.

"So am I," said Arthur. "But I am sorry for ourselves too, Nina. There is no doubt that all our troubles are very much aggravated by Lettice."

"Arthur!" exclaimed Nina. "What do you mean? How could we ever get on without her?"

"Oh, I know all that," said the boy—for boy he still was, though nearly seventeen—weariedly.

"I know she is very good, and devoted, and clever, too; but, Nina, if she were but less obstinate and self-willed, how much happier—at least, how much less unhappy—we should be! If she had taken the advice of Godfrey Auriol, and

made friends with our uncle—knowing, too, that mother wished it! Of course, I won't allow to Godfrey that I disagree with her; at all costs, as you and I determined, we must keep together. But it is a terrible pity."

"I don't, however, see that for the present it makes very much difference, and in time Lettice may change."

"Too late, perhaps," said Arthur moodily. "It *is* just now that I think it *does* make such a miserable difference;" and as Nina looked up, with surprise and some alarm, and was just going to ask him to explain himself, he added hastily, as if eager to change the subject, "Do you know the whole story, Nina—the story of the old quarrel between my father and his family? I have heard it, I suppose; but I have got confused about it, though I didn't like to let Godfrey see that I was so. Lettice has always been so violent about it, so determined that there was only the one way of looking at it, that it was no use asking her. And just these last days it has dawned upon me that I know very little about it. I have accepted it as a sort of legend that was not to be questioned."

"I don't know that there is very much to tell—not of actual facts," said Nina. "Of course, it was all complicated by personal feeling, as such things always are. Mamma told me all; and lately, as you know, she regretted very much having not tried more to bring papa and his brother together. He, our uncle, was perfectly blameless, he was fifteen years younger than papa. Papa, you know, was grandpapa's only son by his first marriage. His mother died young, and he, as he often said himself, was dreadfully spoiled. His father married again when he was about twelve; and though his stepmother was very good and nice, he was determined never to like her, and set himself against whatever she said, and fancied she influenced grandpapa very often, when very likely she did not. Grandpapa was in business, as, of course, you know, and very much respected, and very successful. He was of very respectable ancestry. His people had been farmers, but not at all *grand*. And he was the sort of man to be proud of having made his own way, and to despise those who tried to be above their real position. He had always determined that papa should follow him in his business; but, as might have been expected from a spoiled boy, papa *wouldn't*; nothing would please him but going into the army."

"Yes, I know that part of it," said Arthur.

"There must have been stormy scenes and most miserable discussions. Any way, it ended in papa's running away and enlisting, which by people of grandpapa's class was thought a terrible disgrace. Then grandpapa vowed he would disinherit him, and he made a will, putting his little son Ingram entirely in papa's place, and giving papa only a very small fortune. And *always* papa persisted in believing that this was his stepmother's doing, though mamma has often told me they had no sort of proof, not even *probability*, that it was so. And the way she acted afterwards certainly did not seem as if she were selfish or scheming."

"But," interrupted Arthur, "all this has nothing to do with *mamma*, and she always said it was about her."

"Well, listen," said Nina. "Time went on. Papa behaved splendidly, and as soon as it was *possible* he got a commission. And a year or two after that, he became engaged to mamma, who was the daughter of a very poor and very proud captain in the regiment. Captain Auriol, our other grandfather, liked *papa*, but could not bear his being connected with any one in trade; and when he gave his consent to the marriage, he said, I believe, that he would not have done so had papa been in his father's business, and that he liked him all the better for being no longer his father's heir. Somehow papa's stepmother got to hear of this engagement, and, knowing how poor mamma was, and thinking papa would be feeling softened and anxious about his future, she tried to bring about a reconciliation. Mamma, before she died, had come to feel sure the poor woman did her best. She got grandpapa—Grandpapa Morison—to write to papa, recognising his bravery as a soldier, and speaking of his engagement, and offering to reinstate him in his old position if he would now allow that he had had enough of soldiering, and would enter the business. He even said that, if he would *not* do so, he would still receive him again—him and his wife when he should be married—and make better provision for him if he would express sorrow for the grief and disappointment he had caused him in the past. This part of the letter must have been injudiciously worded. *Something* was said of mamma's poverty, which her father and she herself took offence at, when papa showed it them, and consulted them about it—not that he for a moment dreamt of giving up his profession; but he *was* softened, and would have been glad to be friends again. Only, unfortunately, they took it the other way, and he wrote back a letter, under Grandpapa Auriol's direction, which offended his father so deeply that things were far worse than before. And it was for this that poor mamma always blamed herself, and this was why she said it was for her sake papa had quarrelled with his family. It came to be true, to some extent; for Grandpapa Morison after that always put all the blame on her, and spoke of her very unkindly, which came to papa's ears, and made him furious. And when his father died, a few years afterwards, he was surprised to find that even a small portion had still been left to him; and I don't believe he would ever have taken it, poor as he was, but for a message that was sent him with the news of his father's death, that poor grandpapa had left him his blessing before he died. I believe that he had to thank his stepmother for this, though she did not appear in it. She must have been frightened, poor thing, and no wonder. So the only communication was through the lawyer. And that, I think," said Nina, with a sigh, "is about all there is to tell."

"Thank you," said Arthur. "Nina," he went on, after a moment's consideration, "do you think Lettice knows it all as clearly as you do?"

"It is her own fault if she doesn't," said Nina, which for her was an unusually bitter speech.

"She has had just as much opportunity as I have had for hearing the whole, except that, perhaps,"—and she hesitated a moment—"perhaps that from Philip Dexter I have heard more than she about how good Uncle Ingram is, through Uncle Ingram's having married his aunt, you know. But, Arthur, if people *will* see things only one way—and Lettice can turn it so, when she talks about it she almost makes me feel as if it would be wrong and *mean* to look at it any other way."

"I know," said Arthur, with a still deeper sigh than Nina's had been. And, indeed, poor boy, he *did* know. His next remark surprised his sister. "I wonder," he said, "I wonder papa disliked the idea of business."

"Arthur!" she exclaimed.

"I do. I'm in earnest. There is nothing I should like so much. Nina, promise, swear you won't tell any one," he went on boyishly but earnestly, "if I tell you the truth. I would have given *anything* to accept that offer. I have no wish to go into the army. I don't think I'm a coward, but the life has no attraction for me. I've seen so much of the other side of it. I used to think, when papa was alive, I should like it. But now—I'm not clever, Nina. I'm awfully behind-hand in several of the subjects I shall have to be examined in; and oh, Nina, the very thought of an examination makes my blood run cold. I *know* I shall fail, and—"

"But why—oh, why, Arthur, did you not say all this before?" cried Nina, pale with distress.

"I *dared* not, that's the truth. I'm a moral coward, if you like. I did not realise it so strongly till Godfrey told me of Uncle Ingram's offer, and then I felt how I should like business. I think I have a *sort* of cleverness that would suit it. I am what is called practical and methodical, and I should like the intercourse with different countries, and the *interest* of it. I suppose Grandfather Morison's tastes have come out in me. And I should like making money for all of you and for Auriol, who is sure to be a soldier. But, Nina, I *dare* not tell Lettice. Think of all she would say—that I was false to papa, that I was throwing away the expensive education that has been so difficult to manage; all sorts of bitter things. No, I *dare* not. I have tried, and even at the least hint of misgiving, that I was not fit for the army—oh, Nina, I saw what it would be. No, I must go through with it till the day that I go up for the examination, and am—"

"What?" said Nina.

"Spun, hopelessly."

"But you will have other chances?"

"I can't face them. I *feel* that I could never face it again. Even now I dream of it with a sort of horror," said the poor boy, raising his delicate, haggard face. "And *if* I fail. Oh, Nina, sometimes I think I shall drown myself."

"Arthur, Arthur, don't speak like that," said Nina imploringly. "Shall I tell Lettice? I will if you like—if you are sure, quite sure of what you say."

Arthur laid his hand on her arm. "No, no, Nina. You must promise to tell no one. I must see. Perhaps I may get on better. Mr Downe thinks I should pass if only I were less nervous. Any way, we must wait a while. If it gets *too* bad I will tell you first of all, and ask you to tell Lettice."

"And we shall see you again soon. It is April now. You will be with us all the summer. Oh, Arthur, I do hope things will go on quietly, and that Lettice will not oppose Godfrey any more. They are both so determined."

"But he has right on his side."

"Yes, I know. But you know, Arthur, she will be of age in less than a year, and then if she chooses to defy our guardians it may come to our being all separated. For think how many years it will be before the little ones are of age."

"Lettice would never do that," said Arthur. "In the bottom of her heart she knows she must give in. And she loves us all too much to go too far."

"Of course I know how she loves us. Only too much," said Nina. "I wonder if it would not have been better if we had had no guardians? We should have got on very well, I dare say."

"Nina," said Arthur solemnly, "mark my words. If there had been no one to keep her in check, Lettice would have grown more and more self-willed, and I don't know what would have become of us. Better far have all the discomfort of the last week or two than have risked anything like that."

"If I thought it were over!" said Nina. "But you don't know how I dread our life at Faxleham, and still worse that lady. I don't know what to call her, for she can't be called our governess."

"Chaperone," suggested Arthur.

"I suppose so. But isn't it awful to think of her?"

Arthur could scarcely keep from laughing.

"I think that part of it would be rather fun," he said. "I hope—though I'm by no means sure of it, mind you—but I hope she'll still be there when I come, that I may see the skirmishing between her and Lettice."

"If it isn't she, it'll be some one else," said Nina in a depressed tone. "Godfrey Auriol said it would be impossible—absolutely unheard of—for us to live alone as Lettice wanted. Oh, Arthur, I wish you weren't going away;" and poor Nina, allowing herself for once the indulgence of giving way to her own feelings regardless of those of others, threw her arms round her boy-brother's neck and burst into tears. And though Arthur did his best to console her, it was, though not precisely from the same cause, with sad enough hearts that the brother and sister lay down to sleep that night.

There had been much to try them since the day that Godfrey Auriol, with nothing but good will in his heart to his young relatives, had left his smoke-dried chambers in Lincoln's Inn, where frost and fog were still having it their own way, and came "over the sea" to the sunny brilliant south, intent on advising and assisting the sad little group. He had found things very different from what he expected, and he had gone back again depressed and dispirited,

doubtful, though he had manfully stood out for victory, if he had gone the right way about it, more perplexed and disgusted with himself than he ever remembered to have been before. For he was in every sense of the word a very successful man. Starting in life with little but a good old name and a clear and well-stocked head, he was already far on the way to competency. He was made much of in whatever society he entered; he was used to being looked up to and having his opinion and advice asked. He had not married, had scarcely ever been in love—never to a fatal extent—and had acquired a habit of thinking that women were not to be too seriously considered one way or the other. “Take them the right way,” and there was never any trouble to be feared. And now when it came to the test he had ignominiously failed. For though Lettice had been obliged to give in, it had been, as she took care to tell him, only to the extent to which she *was* obliged to do so—not a jot further. And he had an uncomfortable, an exaggerated idea that he had been rough—what the French call “brutal”—to her.

“To her, my own cousin, and an orphan, too, whom I was prepared to care for like a sister—yes, like a sister, that first night when she seemed so sweet and gentle. And to think of the things we have said to each other since!” thought poor Godfrey, during his long solitary journey back again to whence he had come.

If Lettice could have seen into his heart I think she would have been moved to regret. And she had been very unreasonable. The “intentions” of which she had spoken no relation or guardian in the world could have approved of.

“We do not wish to return to England,” she told Godfrey calmly. “I want to spend the summer, while it is too hot here, in travelling about, and next winter we shall come back here again.”

“And under whose care?” Mr Auriol asked quietly.

“*Mine*,” said Lettice, rearing her head. “Of course we have old Bertha, who will never leave us. But I am quite old enough to take care of my brothers and sisters.”

“*You* may think so. *I* don’t,” he replied drily. “Besides, it is not altogether a question of age. If you were married—”

“I shall never marry.”

“Indeed!” Mr Auriol observed with the utmost politeness. “But that, excuse me, is a matter for your private consideration, in no way interfering with what I was saying. If, for supposition’s sake, you, or let us say Nina, who is still younger,”—and he turned to Nina with a smile which somehow made the colour rise in her cheeks—“if *Nina* were married to a reliable sort of man, there would be nothing against your all living together if you chose.”

“Provided the brother-in-law approved, which, in his place, *I* wouldn’t,” observed Arthur, in an aside.

“But as things are, why, five, ten years hence even, you could not keep house without a chaperone,” said Mr Auriol in conclusion, as if the matter were not open to a question.

A very short time before he left, Godfrey told them what he proposed as to their future home.

“I have a letter I should like to read to you,” he said to Lettice. His tone and manner seemed to her exceedingly cold; the truth was that he was most uncomfortably constrained.

“Certainly,” she replied. “Do you wish me to call Nina?”

“Perhaps it would be as well,” said Mr Auriol.

And when Nina came he read to them the description that had been sent to him of a small house a few hours’ distance from town, which seemed to him just what was wanted.

“The neighbourhood is very pretty, and there is an excellent school for Auriol, in the small town of Garford, at half-an-hour’s distance. And there are some nice families in the neighbourhood to whom I—to whom introductions could easily be got.”

“In our deep mourning,” said Lettice icily, “nothing of that kind need be taken into consideration. Besides,” she added, “if you think us so exceedingly childish and unreasonable, I should say the fewer acquaintances we make the better.”

“Lettice, oh, please don’t,” said Nina imploringly.

But Lettice had “hardened her heart.”

“We *must go* to that place,” she said afterwards to Nina; “we cannot help ourselves. For my part I feel perfectly indifferent as to where we live. It is like a choice of prisons—simple endurance for the time being. It is like taking medicine. I will take it because I *must*; but I’m not going to have it dressed up with sugar-plums and pretend it’s nice.”

“But what do you mean by ‘for the time being’?” asked Nina timidly.

To this Lettice would not reply; perhaps, though she would not own it, her ideas were really vague on the subject.

Arthur had to be up early the morning he left; and, thanks to their late talk the night before, Nina overslept herself, and Lettice, seeing her looking so tired and pale, had not the heart to wake her. She looked pale and heavy-eyed herself when Arthur found her waiting to give him his breakfast, and he felt sorry for her, and perhaps a little conscience-smitten for some of the things he had said of her.

"We shall see you again before *very* long," she said; "for surely no difficulty will be put in the way of your spending your holidays with us."

"Of course not. Who would dream of such a thing?" he said.

"I don't know," replied Lettice wearily; "everything has gone so strangely. I ask myself what next?"

"Lettice," said Arthur simply, "don't exaggerate; but, to make sure, I will speak of it to Godfrey."

"Better you than I, certainly."

"He likes Nina very much," went on Arthur innocently, almost as if thinking aloud. "And he thinks her so very pretty."

"Does he? Did he say so?" said Lettice quickly; and a curious expression, which Arthur did not observe, passed over her face.

"Oh, ever so many times. He thinks her almost an angel, I believe;" and Lettice would have liked to hear more, but there was no time.

"Arthur, you will do your best, will you not?" were her last whispered words to her brother. "Remember, if you don't succeed, it will break my heart; and I believe," in a still lower voice, "it would have broken papa's and mamma's."

A look of intense pain came into the poor boy's eyes, and he did not speak. Then with sudden resolution he turned to his sister.

"Yes," he said, though his voice was unlike itself, "I will do *my best*."

Chapter Five.

A Change in the Barometer.

"Give her a word, good or bad, and she'd spin such a web from the hint,
And colour a meaningless phrase with so vivid a lint."

Hilda.

It was a lovely evening when the little party arrived at their destination. Many people had noticed them during their long journey, the two pretty sisters and the children, with no one but their old servant to take care of them; for their deep mourning told its own story. Many a kindly heart thought pityingly of them, and sent silent good wishes with them on their way.

There had been some talk of their staying a day or two in London, in which case Mr Auriol would have met them. But this Lettice, the ruling spirit, vetoed.

"Let us get straight to that place," she said, "and have it over."

What she meant Nina did not very well understand. She supposed her to refer to the meeting with Miss Branksome, the lady-companion, or "chaperone," whom Mr Auriol had engaged, and who was to await them at Faxleham Cottage. Nina herself was not without some anticipatory awe of this person, but it was tempered by a strong feeling of pity. And once, when she alluded to her in speaking to Lettice, she was almost amazed to find that her sister shared the latter.

"Poor woman!" said Lettice gravely, "she has undertaken a hard task. I could almost find it in my heart to be sorry for her."

Nina could not help smiling as she replied, "But it need not be a hard task, Lettice; not—not unless *we* make it so for her."

"False positions are always hard," said Lettice oracularly. "She is coming to take care of us, and we don't want or need to be taken care of."

Then, a moment after, she surprised Nina by asking her to write to Mr Auriol to tell him when they were starting, and when they expected to reach Faxleham, as she had promised to let him know.

"I am so tired," she said, which was an unusual confession, "and I should be so glad if you would do it for me. Besides, he likes you so much better than me; he will be pleased to get a letter from you."

"I don't think he really likes me better," said Nina innocently. "I am not clever enough for him. If he had met you—differently—I am sure he would have liked you best."

Lettice did not answer. But a moment or two later, as she was leaving the room, she spoke again on the same subject.

"You'll let me see your letter before you send it, won't you?" she said. "Don't be afraid that I shall be vexed if you write cordially. I don't want him to think us ungrateful. It isn't *his* fault."

Nina could scarcely believe her ears. What could be coming ever Lettice? She wished Arthur were at hand to talk over

this wonderful change, which she felt completely unable to explain. But it was not Nina's "way" to trouble or perplex herself about problems which, as she said to herself, would probably sooner or later solve themselves. In this, as in most other characteristics, she was a complete contrast to her sister.

She wrote the letter—a pretty, girlish, almost affectionate little letter it was—and brought it to Lettice for approval. The elder sister read it, smiling once or twice in a manner that would have puzzled Nina had she been given to puzzling.

"Yes," said Lettice, "it will do very well;" and she was turning away, when Nina stopped her.

"Lettice," she began.

"Well?"

"I wanted to tell you—yesterday, when I was out with Bertha, we—I—met Mr Dexter. It is the first time I have seen him since our—our mourning."

"I think it was very inconsiderate of him to speak to you in the street," said Lettice. "Here, too, where everything one does is observed."

"It was only for one instant," said Nina, appealingly. "He asked me to tell you—they are leaving to-morrow morning—to tell you that he will call this evening to say good-bye, and he hopes he may see us."

Lettice's face had grown harder.

"I thought they were already gone," she said, as if speaking to herself. Then second thoughts intervened. "I suppose we must see him. I don't want to be rude. Besides, he is a friend of Godfrey's. Yes; perhaps you had better tell Marianne that if he calls she can let him in."

The permission was not too gracious, but it was more than Nina had hoped for.

"It is evidently for Godfrey's sake," she reflected. "And yet, when he was here, Lettice was so seldom the least pleasant to him."

Philip did call. He was nervous, and yet with a certain determination about him that impressed Lettice in spite of herself, and she felt exceedingly glad to hear him repeat that he and his sister were leaving the next morning.

"I shall look forward to seeing you again, before very long, in England," he said manfully, as he got up to go.

"I don't know much about our plans," said Lettice, and her tone was not encouraging. "We have only taken a house for the summer. I don't know what we shall do then."

"Faxleham is not so very far from my part of the country," said Philip.

"Is it not?" said Lettice suspiciously; and she looked at Mr Dexter in a way that made the young man's face flush slightly. He was one of those fair-complexioned men who change colour almost as quickly as a girl, and whose good looks are to themselves entirely destroyed by their persistent boyishness. At five and twenty he looked little more than nineteen.

"But I am not likely to be there for the next twelve months," he continued coldly, and with a certain dignity. "My place has been let for some years, and the lease will not expire till the spring. No; if I see you at Faxleham or elsewhere I must come expressly."

He looked at Lettice and she at him. It was a tacit throwing down of the gauntlet on his part, and angry as she felt, it yet made her respect the young man whom hitherto she had spoken of so contemptuously as a boy. She bade him good-bye with courtesy, not to say friendliness, much to Nina's relief, and even carried her attention so far as to accompany him to the door, talking busily all the time of the details of his journey, so that, as she flattered herself, there was no opportunity for any last words between him and her sister. And as she went upstairs, where Bertha was already beginning the packing—such a sad packing! the hundred and one little possessions of their mother to cry over and wonder what to do with—all the bright-coloured belongings with which, full of the hopefulness of inexperienced youth, they had left England in the autumn, to consign to the bottom of the trunks and wish they could be put out of sight for ever—she said to herself, not without self-congratulation at her perspicacity, that it was evidently time for *that* to be put a stop to. And she would have been strengthened in her opinion had she known that at that very moment Nina, leaning sadly on the balcony—*she* had not gone to the door with Philip—was cheered by the sight of his face, as, passing up the street instead of down, certainly not the nearest way to his home, he stood still for a moment on the chance of seeing her again, and, lifting his hat, called out softly, not "goodbye" but "au revoir."

Lettice wondered at Nina's good spirits that evening.

"Evidently she does not, as yet, care much about him. She was so very young when she first met him—how unfortunate it was!—and was, no doubt, flattered by his attention. But she *cannot* but see how superior Godfrey Auriol is—how much more of a *man*—and then by-and-by it will be easy to suggest how mother would have liked it. One of her own name, and altogether so closely connected with her!"

And the imaginary castle in the air which Lettice had constructed for her sister's happiness assumed more and more imposing and attractive proportions. Lettice had such faith in herself as an architect; she knew so much better than people themselves the sort of castle they *should* live and be happy in.

So that, on *her* side, Nina wondered at Lettice's improved spirits during the last few days at Esparto, and even through the journey. For, besides the other recommendations of the project she had built upon such slender foundations, Lettice felt that there was a good deal of magnanimity in herself for approving of and encouraging such an idea.

"It shows I am *not* prejudiced," she said to herself with satisfaction. "And if dear mamma could but know it, she would see how ready I am to sacrifice any personal feelings of mine when *hers* would have been concerned. For, of course, though Godfrey is not actually connected with the Morisons, he has entirely ranged himself on their side."

We have wandered a long way from the evening of the arrival at Faxleham, but perhaps it was necessary to explain how it came to pass that the outer sunshine was matched by greater inward serenity than might, all things considered, have been expected.

It was, as I said, a most lovely evening. The drive from the station at Garford was through pretty country lanes, where the hedges were at their freshest, untouched as yet by summer dust, and the wild roses and honeysuckle were already in bud, giving promise of their later beauty. And to the young travellers, after their several months' absence in different scenery, the sweet, homely beauty of their own country was very attractive.

"Is it not pretty? So peaceful and yet bright! Just think how mamma would have liked it!" exclaimed Nina; and, though Lettice did not speak, she pressed her sister's hand sympathisingly.

The children, of course, were in ecstasies, though once or twice they glanced up at Lettice, half ashamed of their own delight; but she smiled back at them so kindly that they were quickly reassured; and a whisper which she overheard of Lotty's gave her greater pleasure than she could have expressed.

"Lettice is getting like mamma," the child said. "When she is so kind, she always makes me think of mamma."

And Lettice always was kind when she felt thoroughly pleased with herself, as she did just now. If only her foundation had been the rock of real principle, and not the sands of passing moods and impulses!

"Don't you think, Lettice," said Nina, in a low voice, venturing a little further—"don't you think we are going to be happy—at least, peaceful—here?"

Lettice had not the heart to repulse her.

"I shall be very glad, dear, if you feel so," she said, "and I am sure I want to make the best of things. If—if there were not that unhappy Miss Branksome looming in the distance—in the nearness, rather! I know exactly what she will be like. I know those decayed gentlewomen so well. Tall and lank and starved-looking, always having headaches and nerves, and tears in her eyes for nothing, and yet everlastingly interfering. Of course, she must interfere. It's her business; it's what she's there for."

But before Nina had time to reply, the carriage stopped. They had reached their destination.

Faxleham Cottage was what its name implied—a real cottage. It had no drive or "approach," save the simple, old-fashioned little footpath, leading from the garden-gate to the wide, low porch entrance. But unpretending as it was, an exclamation of pleasure broke involuntarily from the lips of its new tenants, as they stepped out of the carriage and entered the sweet, trim, and yet luxuriant little garden, gay with early flowers, not a weed to be seen, bright and smiling in the soft evening sunlight.

Lettice, too, felt the pleasant influence.

"How I wish mamma could see it!" was her unspoken thought. "If it were *she* who was to welcome us instead of—" And as she went forward she glanced before her apprehensively, half expecting to see realised the unattractive personage she had ingeniously constructed in her imagination.

A lady was standing in the porch, and, as the new-comers came forward, she stepped out to meet them.

"I am so glad to see you all safe," she said in a bright, pleasant voice. "I must introduce myself, but you know who I am?"

"Miss Branksome," said Nina, always the ready one on such occasions, probably because her mind was never over occupied with herself or her own concerns. But, with her usual tact, she stepped back a very little, leaving Lettice, as the eldest, to shake hands first with the lady-companion.

And Lettice, to her own surprise as she did so, found herself thinking, "How pretty she is! She is certainly *not* like a decayed gentlewoman."

Miss Branksome was very pretty; some people might think it better to say "had been," for she was more than middle-aged; she was almost elderly. Her hair was perfectly white, and her soft face had the faint delicate pink flush that comes to fair complexions with age, so different from the brilliant roses of youth. Her eyes were bright, but very gentle in expression, and her figure was daintily small.

"She looks like an old fairy," Nina said afterwards, and the description was not a bad one.

Everything that genuine kindness, based on thorough good principle, and aided by great natural tact, could do to make the orphans feel as happy in their new home as was possible for them, was done by Miss Branksome that first evening. Even Lettice succumbed to the pleasant influence. It was new for her to be taken care of, even, as it were, petted, and it came so naturally to the bright, kind-hearted, active little woman to make everybody about her happy,

or at least comfortable, that she could not help trying her hand on even the redoubtable Miss Morison, as to whom Mr Auriol had given her some salutary warning.

"You must be so tired, my dears," she said, with the smiles and tears struggling together at the same time, "I thought you would like tea better than anything; and perhaps—this first evening—would you like me to pour it out?"

It was perfectly impossible to stand on one's dignity or to keep up any prejudice with one so genuine and single-minded; and Nina's heart was relieved of an immense weight when they all went to bed that night.

For some time everything went better than could have been hoped. By dint of her simple goodness, by dint, perhaps, of in no way planning or scheming to get it, Miss Branksome unconsciously gained Lettice's confidence; and when Mr Auriol came down to see his young charges two or three weeks after their arrival, he was most agreeably surprised by the happy state of things. Not being above human weakness, he could not help congratulating himself on the skill which he had displayed in an undoubtedly awkward situation, though, at the same time, he was only too ready to give credit to all concerned.

"You have done marvels," he said to Miss Branksome, who had been a friend of his from his childhood. "They all seem as fond of you as possible. Not that I had any fear for Nina or the little ones; only for—Lettice."

"And yet of all, she, I think, has most gained my heart," said the little lady. "She is so thorough; there is nothing small or ungenerous about her. Nina is very sweet; but if there is any triumph for me, or satisfaction rather, it is certainly with regard to Lettice. I feel so sure of her. I cannot quite understand your having found her what you described. Are you sure—forgive me now, Godfrey—are you sure there was no sort of prejudice on *your* side?" Godfrey's face flushed.

"None whatever," he exclaimed. "I met her as free from prejudice, from any preconceived idea even, as was possible. And the first time I saw her I thought her as charming and gentle as she is personally attractive. It all came out when the question of the Morison feud was raised. It seemed to change her very nature. You have not come upon that as yet, I suppose?"

"Not in the least. Of course I have no right to do so, unless she does; but she knows that I do not know her uncle and aunt, and that they do not know me. I think that has given me an advantage with her. At first I fancied she suspected, or was ready to suspect, that Mr and Mrs Morison had had to do with my being chosen, and I was glad to be able, indirectly, to let her see they had not."

Mr Auriol seemed lost in reflection.

"I wonder when I should speak to her—to them all—about their uncle again," he said at last. "He is so very anxious for some happier state of things, and he trusts to me to bring it about. Lettice could not be pleasanter than she is now, just like what she was at the very first. I wonder if I dare risk it?"

"Not yet," said Miss Branksome. "At least, that is my impression. Let her not think that you came down this time with any purpose except to see how they all are. Leave it all a little longer to her own good sense. She might commit herself to some decision she would afterwards be ashamed to withdraw from, if you spoke of it all again before she has had time thoroughly to consider it."

Mr Auriol shrugged his shoulders.

"She has had time enough, it seems to me," he said. "However, I know you are wiser than I."

Just at that moment Lettice and Nina joined them in the garden.

"We are going to fetch Auriol home from school," said Lettice. "Would you come with us?" she added, looking up at her cousin.

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure," he said; and the three set off.

But they had not gone far when Lettice stopped and hesitated.

"If you won't think me rude for changing my mind," she said, "I think I would rather not go to-day. I want to write to Arthur."

Nina looked at her in surprise, and a slight look of annoyance crossed Mr Auriol's face. But Lettice did not see it.

"Of course it doesn't matter," said Nina good-naturedly. "But I don't think you need be in such a very great hurry about writing to Arthur."

"I want to write to-night," Lettice repeated, "and I know Mr Auriol won't mind;" and she smiled so pleasantly that the annoyance left his face.

"She is an odd girl," he thought to himself. "However, it is as well perhaps that my walk is to be *tête-à-tête* with Nina and not with her. I might have been tempted to try the ground again in spite of Miss Branksome's advice, and might have done more harm than good. With Nina I am quite safe."

And, so far as Nina was concerned, the result of their talk was perfectly satisfactory. It was with a more hopeful feeling than he had yet had on the subject that Mr Auriol re-entered the cottage on their return from the walk to Gardon. He and Nina stood for a moment in the porch—they did not notice that Lettice was at an open window above, whence she could clearly see them, and for a moment or two Godfrey stood with Nina's hand in his, her fair

face, in which was more colour than usual, raised towards him.

"You may depend on me," she said softly, "to do all I can. There is nothing—really nothing almost, that I wish so earnestly."

"I am sure of it," said Godfrey. "Perhaps, indeed," he added with a little hesitation, "I understand more about what you feel than you think. Not that I think you are selfish, dear Nina. I think you one of the most unselfish people I ever knew, and,"—he hesitated still more this time—"he will be a happy man who wins you."

Nina's face was crimson by now. But she stood by her cousin a moment longer. He was leaving the next morning, and it might be her last chance of seeing him alone.

"Then I am to do what I can, and, in a sort of way, to report progress. You will come down again in two or three weeks?"

"Yes, and in the meantime I shall see Arthur;" and then he released her hand and she ran upstairs to take off her hat.

"Have you had a nice walk, dear?" said Lettice, who was waiting in their room.

"*Very*," said Nina heartily.

"I think you and Godfrey are getting to understand each other wonderfully," Lettice remarked.

"Yes?" said Nina, with a happy little laugh.

"I almost think so too;" and Lettice, observing the flush on her face, congratulated herself on her generalship.

"She is evidently forgetting all about Philip Dexter," she thought. "How pretty she looks! How nice it must be to be so sweet and attractive; not hard, and cold, and repellent, like me. But it is *forced* on me."

And though she told herself things were going just as she wished, there was a little sigh in her heart as she kissed her sister on their way downstairs.

Chapter Six.

A Cavalier Reception.

"Fell his warm wishes chilled by wintry fear,
And resolution sicken at the view:
As near the moment of decision drew."

Trans. of Dante.

But things seldom turn out as even the most reasonable people expect. Much more than two or three weeks elapsed before Godfrey Auriol came down to Faxleham again. This was owing to a complication of circumstances—unusual pressure of business on him, for one thing, Lotty Morison's catching the measles for another; and the difficulties in the way were yielded to more easily than might have been the case had the same urgency existed for bringing matters to a decision. But Mr Ingram Morison and his wife were early in the summer obliged to go for several months to an out-of-the-way part of Ireland, where some of Mrs Morison's family lived, on account of sudden and serious trouble among them. So the question he, and, indeed, she, too, had so much at heart, was left dormant for the time, and Nina heard no more, except a few words of explanation which Godfrey enclosed to her in a letter to Miss Branksome.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Perhaps, had he known it, Godfrey did not lose in the good graces of his cousins during these rather dull and monotonous weeks. Nina, for more reasons than one, longed to see him, and would have made him most heartily welcome had he appeared. And even Lettice, though she had sturdily refused all offers of introductions to any families in the neighbourhood, would in her heart have been glad of some break in the tranquil round of their daily life.

She was disappointed, too, that Godfrey did not seem more eager to see Nina again, and there were times when Nina's rather troubled and anxious expression made her tremble for the success of her scheme.

"If that Philip Dexter were to appear just now, there is no saying what influence he might again acquire over her," she said to herself. "It is very stupid of Godfrey."

But he came at last, though not till Arthur's holidays were more than half over, and the lanes were no longer without their summer coating of dust, for it was an unusually dry season. The rain could not be far off, however, for the law of average required that the drought should be compensated for.

"There must be a break in the weather soon," said Mr Auriol, the evening of his arrival, "and I suppose rain will be welcome when it comes. But, if it is not *too* selfish, I hope it will hold off for two days. I have *never* felt so tired of London in my life as during the last three weeks; and I do want to enjoy my breath of country air."

"I am afraid you won't get much air even here," remarked Arthur cheerfully. "It has been stifling these two or three days."

Something in the tone of his voice struck his cousin, and he glanced up at him.

"You don't look very bright yourself, my boy," he said. "You've not been working too hard, I hope?"

"He *has* been working rather hard even during the holidays," said Lettice, though not without a certain complacency in her tone. "You know, Arthur is not merely to *get through*, cousin Godfrey, he is to come off with flying colours."

"But in the meantime the colour is all flying out of his face," said Godfrey kindly, and with concern. "That won't do;" and Nina, whose own face had grown paler during this conversation, was startled on looking at her brother to see how white, almost ghastly he had grown. She was helping Lettice with afternoon tea, which in these fine days they were fond of having under a big tree on the little lawn, and she made some excuse for sending Arthur to the house on an errand.

"They will all think there is something the matter," she whispered to him, "if you look like that;" though in her heart she would scarcely have regretted anything which would have brought to an end the unhappiness which she felt convinced Arthur was enduring, though she had not succeeded in getting him again to confide in her as he had done that last evening at Esparto.

"Arthur is really looking ill," Godfrey went on. "And he seems so dull and quiet. Of course I have seen too little of him to judge, and the last time there was every reason for his looking very depressed—but even then he had not the same dull, hopeless look. He must either be ill, or— But that is impossible!"

"What?" said Lettice coldly.

"I was going to say he looks as if he had something on his mind."

Lettice smiled with a sort of contemptuous superiority. "He *has* something on his mind," she said, "as every one might understand. He is exceedingly anxious to do more than well at his examination, and he is perhaps working a *little* too hard."

Mr Auriol was silent for a moment. When he spoke again he did not seem to be addressing any one in particular.

"I don't feel satisfied about him," he said shortly.

Lettice's face flushed.

"I do not see, Mr Auriol, that you need feel uneasy about him if *we* do not," she said. "It is impossible to judge of any one you know so little. Of course, naturally, Arthur is unusually anxious to do well. He knows it would half break *my* heart if he failed. He knows, what matters far more, that it would have been a most bitter disappointment to my father and mother. It is enough to make him serious."

Mr Auriol glanced up quickly.

"Were they—were your father and mother so very desirous that he should go into the army?" he said. "I should rather have thought—"

But here he stopped.

"I wish you would say all you mean," said Lettice curtly.

"I have no objection whatever to doing so, except the fear of annoying *you*," he replied. "I was going to say that, remembering his own experience I should have thought your father the very last man to force, or even advise a profession unless the lad himself thoroughly liked it."

"Force it?" exclaimed Lettice, really surprised, and Nina added hastily—

"Oh no, while papa was alive there was no question but that Arthur wished it."

"While papa was alive, Nina," repeated Lettice. "What do you mean? You speak as if Arthur did not wish it *now*."

Nina blushed painfully, and seemed at a loss for an answer.

"I did not mean to say that," she said at last. And Lettice, too prepossessed by her own wishes and beliefs to take in the possibility of any others, thought no more of Nina's agitation. But Mr Auriol did not forget it.

He was, however, painfully anxious to come to an understanding with his cousins as to their relations with their uncle. Mr Morison was now at home again, and eager to receive his nephews and nieces and to discuss with them the best arrangements for a permanent home, which he and his wife earnestly hoped would be, if not with, at least near them.

But though he had plenty of opportunities for talks with Nina, he tried in vain to have any uninterrupted conversation with Lettice. She almost seemed to avoid it purposely, and he disliked to ask for it in any formal and ceremonious way.

"Though I shall be forced to do so," he said to Nina one day, when, as usual, he found himself alone with her, Lettice having made some excuse at the last minute for not going out with them. "Do you think she avoids me on purpose, Nina?" he asked, with some irritation.

"I really do not know," said Nina. "Sometimes I do not understand Lettice at all."

"I fear I rubbed her the wrong way that first day by the way I spoke of Arthur," said Godfrey reflectively. "And Arthur, too, baffles me. I have tried to talk to him and to lead him on to confide in me if he has anything on his mind, but it is no use. So I must just leave him for the present. But about this other matter I must do and say something. It is not my own concern. I have promised to see about it."

Nina listened with great sympathy and great anxiety.

"I wish I could do anything," she said. "But I, too, have tried in vain. Lettice seems to avoid the subject."

"Well, then there is nothing for it but to meet it formally. I must ask Lettice to give me half an hour, and I will read her your uncle's last letter. There she is," he added hurriedly, pointing to a figure which suddenly appeared in the lane a short way before them. "So she has been out, after all."

"Where have you been, Lettice?" asked Nina, as they came up with her, for she was walking slowly. "I thought you were not coming out."

"I changed my mind," said Lettice. "I have been some little way on the Garford road."

The words were slightly defiant, but the tone was subdued, and Nina, looking at her sister, was struck by the curious expression of her face. It had a distressed, almost a frightened look. What could it be?

Mr Auriol, intent on his own ideas, did not notice it.

"Lettice," he began, "I never seem to see you at leisure, and I must leave the day after to-morrow. When can you give me half an hour?"

"Any time you like—any time to-morrow, I mean," said Lettice. "It is too late this evening."

"Very well," he said; "just as you like."

Lettice was longing to get away—to be alone in her own room to think over what had happened, and what she had done that afternoon.

She had not meant to go out after refusing to walk with Nina and her cousin. But Lotty had come to ask her advice about a little garden she was making; and, after this important business was settled, Lettice, feeling at a loss what to do with herself, strolled a short way down the road. It was too soon to meet Nina and Mr Auriol; they would not be back for an hour at least, and Arthur was as usual shut up in his own room with his books. Who, then, could the figure be whom she saw, when about a quarter of a mile from the house, coming quickly up the road? It was not Godfrey, nor Arthur, and yet it was but seldom that any one not making for the cottage came along this road, which for half a mile or so was almost like a private one. And then, too—yes, it did seem to Lettice that there was something familiar about the walk and carriage of the gentleman she now clearly perceived to be such, though he was still too far off for her to distinguish his features. Another moment or two and she no longer hesitated. It was—there could be no doubt about it—it was the person whom of all others she most dreaded to see—Philip Dexter!

And yet there was nothing very alarming in the young man's appearance as, on catching sight of her, he hastened his steps and came on hurriedly, his features lit up with eagerness, while Lettice walked more and more slowly, at every step growing more dignified and icy. The smile faded from Philip's face as he distinguished her clearly.

"Miss Morison!" he exclaimed. "I saw you some way off, but I was not sure—I thought—"

"You thought I was my sister, probably," said Lettice calmly, as she held out her hand. "I, too, saw you some way off, Mr Dexter, and at first I could scarcely believe my eyes. Are you staying anywhere near here?"

"No," said Philip, braced by her coldness to an equal composure; "I have no acquaintances close to this. I came by rail to Garford, and left my portmanteau at the hotel there, and walked on here. I have come, Miss Morison, on purpose to see—you."

"Not me, personally?" said Lettice, raising her eyebrows.

"Yes, you, personally, though not *only* you. I am, I think, glad to have met you alone. If that is your house,"—for they were approaching the cottage—"will you turn and walk back a little? I would rather talk to you a little first, before any one knows I am here."

With the greatest readiness, though she strove to conceal it, Lettice agreed. They retraced their steps down the road, and then she led him along a lane to the left, also in the Garford direction, though she knew that by it Mr Auriol and Nina could *not* return.

"I will not beat about the bush, Miss Morison," said Philip. "I have come to see Nina—to ask her to marry me. I would have done so already—last winter at Esparto—but your mother's illness, the difficulty of seeing any of you the latter part of the time, interfered, and I thought it, for other reasons too, better to wait. Nina has no father and mother—you are not much older, but you *are* the eldest, and I know you have immense influence over her. Before seeing her, I should like to know my ground with you. Do you wish me well?"

In face of this straightforward address Lettice felt, for a moment, off her guard.

"You have never consulted me hitherto," she said evasively.

"That is not the question now," said Philip. "Tell me, do you wish me well, and, still more, do you—do you think I am

likely to succeed?" At this Lettice looked up at him.

"I don't know," she said, and she spoke honestly. "Almost the only thing I am sure of is that I wish you had not thought of it—not come here."

Philip's bright, handsome face fell; he looked in a moment years older.

"You think there is something in the way, I see," he said. "Ah! well, there is nothing for it but to make sure. I must see Nina herself. Where is she?"

"She is out," said Lettice, and her face flushed. "She is out walking with Godfrey Auriol." Something in her tone and expression made Philip stop short and look at her sharply. She bore his look unflinchingly, and that perhaps impressed him more than her words. She was able to do so, for she was not conscious of deceiving him. She deceived herself; her determined prejudice and self-will blinded her to all but their own tendencies and conclusions. Mr Dexter's eyes dropped. At this same moment there flashed before his memory the strangely enthusiastic tone with which Godfrey had spoken of—as Philip thought—*Nina*, that first morning at Esparto. His face was very pale when he looked up again.

"Miss Morison—Lettice," he said, "you do not like me, but you are incapable of misleading me. You think there is something between Nina and Mr Auriol?"

"He is very fond of her," said Lettice. "I do not know exactly, but I think—"

"You think she returns it?"

Lettice bowed her head in agreement. "Then I will go—as I came—and no one need know anything about my having been," said Philip. "You will tell no one?"

"Not if you wish me not to do so; certainly not," she replied, only too delighted to be, as she said to herself, *obliged* to conceal his visit. "I very earnestly beg you not to tell of it," he said; "it could serve no purpose, things being as you say they are."

Lettice made a little movement as if she would have interrupted him. Then she hesitated. At last—

"I did not—exactly—" was all she got out.

"No, you did not exactly in so many words say, 'Nina is engaged, or just going to be, to Godfrey Auriol.' But you have said all you *could*, and I thank you for your honesty. It must have been difficult for you, disliking me, and knowing that I *know* you dislike me, to have been honest." Philip spoke slowly, as if weighing every word. Something in his manner, in his white, almost ghastly face, appalled Lettice.

"Mr Dexter," she exclaimed, involuntarily laying her hand on his arm, "I don't think I do dislike you, *personally*;" and she felt that never before had she been so near liking, and certainly respecting, the young man. "But you know all the feelings involved. I am very, very sorry it should have gone so far with you. Yet I could not have warned you sooner last winter; it would have been impossible. I had no reason to think there was anything so serious."

"Last winter," repeated Philip. "I don't understand you. There was no *reason* to warn me off then. Before she had ever seen him? I had all the field to myself. You don't suppose I am giving it up now out of deference to that shameful, wicked nonsense of prejudice and dig like to the best man in the world—your uncle, and mine, as I am proud to call him?" And Philip gave a bitter and contemptuous laugh. "I am going away because I see I have no chance. I esteem and admire Godfrey Auriol too much to enter into useless rivalry with him. He is not likely to care for any woman in vain. But if I had not been so afraid of hurting you last winter, if I had thrown all the prejudice to the winds, I believe I might have won her. Godfrey would *never* have come between us had he had any idea of how it was with me. So, after all, it *is* that wicked, unchristian nonsense that has done it all. You may think it is right; you cannot expect *me* to agree with you. At the same time, I repeat that I thank you for your honesty. Good-bye. Can I reach Garford by this way?" and Philip, in a white fever of indignation and most bitter disappointment, turned to go.

Lettice had never perhaps in all her life felt more discomposed.

"Mr Dexter," she said, "don't leave me like this; don't be so angry with me. I have tried to do rightly—by you, too."

"I have not denied it; but I cannot stand and discuss it as if it were anything else. I am only human. I must go. I am afraid of—of meeting *them*. Tell me, is this the right way?"

"Yes," replied Lettice mechanically; "straight on brings you out on the road again. It is a short cut."

Philip raised his hat; and before Lettice had time for another word, had she indeed known what to say, he was gone. She stood and looked after him for some moments with a blank, half-scared expression; and then, retracing her steps, she walked slowly back, and thus came to be observed by her sister and Godfrey returning in the other direction.

It was not a happy moment for Mr Auriol to choose for his renewed attempt. Lettice slept badly, and woke in the morning feverish and excited; but, by way perhaps of shifting the misgiving and self-reproach which *would* insinuate themselves, more blindly determined than ever to stand to her colours. She listened to her uncle's letter and to all Mr Auriol had to say, and then quietly announced her decision. Nothing could induce her to regard as a relation the man who had supplanted her father, the representative of the unnatural family who had treated him all his life long as a pariah and an outcast, and had been the cause of sorrows and trials without end to him and her mother.

"I am the eldest," she said. "I can remember more distinctly than the others the privations and trials they went through—at the very time when my father's father and brother were rolling in riches, some part of which *surely*, by every natural law, should have been his."

"And some part of which *was* his," said Godfrey. "Everything he had came from his father. And why it was not more was his own fault. He would not take it."

"Neither will I," said Lettice, crimsoning. "What my father accepted and left to us I considers ours; but I will take no more in any shape, directly or indirectly."

"Then," said Godfrey, also losing his self-control, "you had better give up all you have. For, is surely as I stand here, you would not, as I have already explained to you, have had one farthing left but for what Ingram Morison did and risked. You owe *all* to him."

Lettice turned upon him, very pale now.

"You may some day repent taunting me so cruelly with what I am in no way responsible for," she said.

Godfrey, recognising the truth of this, tried to make her better understand him; but it was useless.

"I must bear it for the present," was all she would say; and Nina heard her mutter something to herself about "once I am of age," which made her still more uneasy.

"I have done more harm than good," said Godfrey at last. "There is no more to be said."

He glanced at Nina and Arthur, but neither spoke. Lettice saw the glance.

"We are all of one mind," she said proudly. "Are we not, Nina? Are we not, Arthur?"

Nina's eyes filled with tears; Arthur was very pale.

"You know, Lettice," said Nina, "at all costs we must cling together;" and Lettice preferred not to press her more closely.

And Godfrey Auriol returned to town the next morning.

Chapter Seven.

A Tramp in the Snow.

"There is no dearth of kindness
In this world of ours,
Only in our blindness
We gather thorns for flowers!"

Gerald Massey.

A very cold winter morning, colder than is often the case before Christmas, and Christmas was still some days off. Snow had fallen in the night; and while some weather optimists were maintaining that on this account it would feel warmer now, others, more experienced, if less hopeful, were prophesying a much heavier fall before night—what lay on the ground was but the precursor of much more.

The family party round the breakfast table in the pretty Rectory of Thorncroft were discussing the question from various points of view.

"If it would stop snowing now, and go on freezing *hard* till the end of the holidays, so that we could have skating all the time, then I don't care what it does after," said Tom, a typical youth of fourteen, to be met with, it seems to me, in at least six of every seven English country families.

"No," said Ralph, his younger brother, "I'd rather it'd go on snowing for about a week, so that we could have lots of snow-balling. I like that better than skating."

"There wouldn't be much of you or Tom left to skate or snowball either, if it went on snowing for a week. We'd be snowed up bodily," remarked their father. "Have you forgotten grandpapa's stories?" For Thorncroft was in an out-of-the-way part of the country, all hills and valleys, where snowings-up were not altogether legend. "But, independently of that, I don't like you to talk quite so thoughtlessly. Either heavy snow or hard frost long prolonged brings terrible suffering." And the kind-hearted clergyman sighed, as he rose from the table and walked over to the window, where he stood looking out for a few moments without speaking.

"I must tell cook to begin the winter soup at once," said the mother, speaking to her eldest daughter. For in this family there was a sort of private soup kitchen in severe weather—independently of charity to their own parishioners—for the benefit of poor, storm-driven waifs and strays, many of whom passed this way on their tramp to the northern towns, which they were too poor to attain by the railway. It was an old custom, and had never been found productive of abuse.

"Yes," replied the young girl; "for I am sure the weather is going to be dreadful. Shall I go and speak about it,

mamma?"

"Do, dear; your father may want me for a few minutes."

Daisy left the room, but only to reappear again very shortly with a troubled face.

"Papa, mamma," she said, "there is a tramp at the door now. He seems nearly fainting, and cook says he must have been out in the snow all night. There is no soup ready; might I have a cup of tea for him?"

"Certainly," said her mother. "Run, one of you boys, for a kitchen cup; it will taste just as good, and I don't like to risk one of my dear old china ones."

"Mamma," said Daisy, in a low voice—she was always a little afraid of the boys laughing at her—"I don't think it would have mattered about the cup. Do you know, he looks quite like a gentleman?"

Her father, who was standing near, overheard the last words. He had been reading a letter, which he threw aside.

"There is nothing from Ingram," he remarked to his wife. "I had hoped for a letter. I am so sorry for him, just at Christmas time again the old disappointment. But what is Daisy saying?" The young girl repeated what she had told her mother, and Ralph just then appearing with a substantial cup and saucer, Mrs Winthrop poured out the tea, and Daisy, carrying it, went off with her father to the kitchen door.

"A *gentleman*, you say, Daisy?" he repeated.

"Yes, papa, and quite young. Cook says she is sure he is a gentleman."

"And *begging*?" added her father.

"Oh no—at least, I don't think so. He just knocked at the door and asked if he might warm himself at the fire. And she said he looks so ill. I did not quite see him. I just peeped in."



AND DAISY, HURRYING IN, SAW HER FATHER HALF LIFTING ON TO A CHAIR
A TALL THIN FIGURE. Page 114.

"Well, wait a moment, I'll speak to him first," said her father; for by this time they had traversed the long passage which led to the kitchen and offices—the Rectory at Thorncroft was a large roomy old house, and the Winthrops were rich—and so saying the clergyman went in to have a look at the stranger.

Almost immediately, Daisy, waiting at the door, heard herself called.

"Quick, my child—the hot tea. He is nearly fainting, poor fellow!"

And Daisy, hurrying in, saw her father half lifting on to a chair a tall thin figure with white face and closed eyes; while cook stood by looking very frightened, and perhaps not altogether pleased at this desecration of her spotless kitchen. For the snow, melted by the heat, was running off the stranger in little rivulets.

He was only half-fainting, however. They made him swallow the tea, and sent for another cup, into which Mrs Winthrop put a spoonful of brandy. Then the young man sat up and looked about him confusedly. Recognising that he was among strangers, he thanked them earnestly for their kindness, and struggling to his feet said that he must be going on.

“Going on, my good fellow!” said Mr Winthrop. “You are not fit for it. You must stay here an hour or two at least, and get dried and have something to eat. Have you far to go to-day?”

The young man coloured.

“I wanted to get to Clough,” he said. “It is ten days since I started. I got on well enough, though it has been horribly cold,” and he shivered as he thought of it, “till last night.”

“Were you out in the snow?” asked the rector compassionately.

“Not all night. Oh no; I sheltered in a barn till early this morning. Then it looked as if it were clearing, and I set off again. I was anxious to get on as far as I could before it came on again; but I lost my way, I think; there was moonlight at first, but since daylight I have been wandering about, not able to find the road. Am I far from the high-road to Clough?”

“Not very; you must have taken the wrong turn a couple of miles off. We are accustomed to—people,”—“tramps,” he was going to have said, but he changed the word in time—“making that mistake. Now you had better take off your wet things and get them dried, and have something to eat; and, if you must go on, we will set you on your way. And,”—here the good rector hesitated—“you seem very young,” he went on; “if I can give you any counsel, remember, it is my business to do so.”

The young fellow coloured up again painfully. “You are very kind, sir,” he said.

“Think it over. I will see you again. Peters,” he called, and a man-servant, brimful of curiosity appeared, “this,”—again an instant’s almost imperceptible hesitation—“this young gentleman has lost his way. Take him to Master Tom’s old room and help him to change his things. We must find you a change while they are drying,” he went on. But the young fellow held up a small bag he had been carrying. “I have other things, thank you,” he said. “But I should be most thankful to have these dried.”

Mr Winthrop rejoined Daisy and her mother.

“He is a gentleman, is he not, papa?” said the former eagerly.

“He strikes me as more of a schoolboy than anything else. I hope he has not run away in any sort of disgrace. Still, whatever it is, one must be kind to him, poor boy. He is evidently not accustomed to roughing it, and as far as one could see through the plight he was in, he seemed well dressed. I hope he will tell me something about himself.”

The worst of the weather-prophets’ predictions were realised. Before noon the snow came down again, this time in most sober earnest, and long before dark Mr Winthrop, becoming convinced that they “were in for it,” began to take some necessary precautions. It was out of the question for the young stranger to pursue his foot-journey. His kind host insisted on his remaining where he was for the night, though somewhat embarrassed as to how to treat him.

“I cannot bring a complete stranger in among our own children,” he said to his wife, “and yet it seems impossible to tell him to sit with the servants.”

But the difficulty was solved by the young man’s unfitness to leave his room. He had caught a chill, and was, besides, suffering from exhaustion, both nervous and physical.

“Seems to me to have had a shock of some kind, and evidently very little food for some days past,” said the doctor whom Mr Winthrop was obliged to send for the next morning. “It may go on to rheumatic fever, or he may—being young and healthy enough—fight it off. But any way, you’ve got him on your hands for two or three days, unless you like to get a vehicle of some kind and send him to the hospital at Clough,” said the doctor, pitying the inconvenience to Mrs Winthrop.

“It would be a great risk, would it not?” said the rector.

“Yes, certainly it would be a risk. Still you are not obliged to give house-room to every benighted wanderer,” said the doctor, smiling.

But Mr Winthrop felt certain this was no common case, and his kindness was rewarded. Thanks to the care and nursing he received, the dreaded illness was warded off, and by the fourth day the young stranger was well enough to pursue his journey.

“I can never thank you enough for your goodness to me, an utter stranger,” he said to his host, with the tears in his eyes. “And I feel so ashamed, so—” But here he broke down altogether.

“My poor boy,” said the rector, “can you not give me your confidence? Why are you wandering about the world alone like this? I cannot believe you have done anything wrong—at least, seriously wrong. If you have left your friends hastily for some half-considered reason, it may not be too late to return. Can I do anything to help you? Can I write to

your father so as to put things straight again?"

"I have no father and no mother," said the lad.

"No, I have done nothing wrong; nothing disgraceful, in the usual sense, I mean. But I have done wrong in another way. I have disappointed every hope and effort that had been made for me, and I cannot face the result I cannot tell you all, for if I did, you would probably think it your duty to interfere—it is all so complicated and confused. All I can tell you is that I am going off like Whittington," he added with a faint smile, "to seek my fortune. And if I find it, it will not be mine. I owe it to others, that is the worst of it."

"And where do you think of going in the first place?" asked Mr Winthrop.

"To Hexton," said the young man, naming the town he had been making for, before his misadventure, "and from there to Liverpool. I thought I would try in Liverpool to get something to do, and if I did not succeed, I thought perhaps I would go to America."

"And how would you get there? Have you money?"

"I have a little that I left behind me in the charge of a friend to send after me with my clothes when I get to Liverpool. I thought it better not to carry it with me; I might have been robbed, or,"—and here he smiled again the same wintry little smile that seemed so pathetic on his thin young face—"tempted to spend it, perhaps."

"And have you any one to go to at Liverpool—any introductions of any kind?"

"No one—none, whatever," answered the poor boy sadly.

Mr Winthrop reflected a moment.

"I may be able to be of a little use to you in that way; at least, I might be if I knew even a little more about you. You cannot tell me your name?"

The young man coloured and looked down.

"I cannot," he said. "I thought it all over, and I determined that my only chance was to tell nothing. No, sir, you cannot help me; but I thank you as much as if you had."

And thus Mr Winthrop was forced to let him go. At the last moment an idea struck him. He gave the boy a few words of introduction to an old friend of his in Liverpool—a friend, though in a different rank of life—the son of a farmer in the neighbourhood, now holding a respectable position in a business house there, telling him all, or rather the exceedingly little, he knew of the stranger who had been three days his guest, and asking him if under the circumstances he could do anything to help, to do it.

"At the same time," he said to the young man, "I really do not know that this will be of any service. I cannot ask Mr Simcox to take any responsibility in the matter. You have not even told me your name."

"I know that," replied the youth dejectedly, "but I cannot help it. I cannot expect others to take me on trust as generously as you have done." And so saying he set off on his lonely journey, with kindly words from Daisy and her mother, the two boys accompanying him to the high-road.

The snow still lay on the ground, and Tom's wish for a prolonged frost seemed likely to be fulfilled.

"We shall have splendid skating in a day or two," he remarked to "the gentleman tramp," as he and Ralph had dubbed the stranger. "Our pond isn't very big, but it's very good ice generally. You should see the lake at Uncle Ingram's; *that's* the best place, I know, for skating in England."

The young man started at the name Tom mentioned.

"*Where* did you say?" he asked.

"At my uncle Ingram's—Mr Morison's," said Tom. "It's a long way from here."

"But your name isn't Morison. How can he be your uncle?"

"Why, his wife is our aunt. He married mamma's sister. Uncles are often uncles that way," said Tom with an air of superior wisdom.

"Of course," said the young man; "how stupid of me."

"Well, don't be stupid about losing your way again," said the boy patronisingly. "Look here now, here's the high-road; you've nothing to do but go straight on for some hours—two or three—and when you come to a place where four roads meet, you'll see 'Clough' marked on a finger-post. You can easily get there to-night."

"Thank you; thank you *very* much," said the stranger; and, as the boys turned from him, "Please thank your father and mother again for me," he called out after them.

"He must be a gentleman," said Ralph. "He speaks quite like one."

"Of course he is," said Tom. "But he's rather queer. He was so stupid about Uncle Ingram. I wonder what he's left his friends for."

"P'raps," said Ralph sagely, "he'd got a cruel stepmother that starved and beat him, like Hop-o'-my-Thumb, you know."

"Nonsense," reproved Tom. "That's all fairy story rubbish; and you know papa says it's very wrong to talk about cruel stepmothers, and that you're not to read any more fairy stories if you mix them up with real."

"Or," pursued Ralph, sublimely indifferent to this elder-brotherly reproof, "it might have been a cruel uncle, like the babes in the wood's uncle. And *that's* not a fairy story—*there*," he threw at Tom triumphantly.

Many a true word is spoken in jest!

Little thought the two light-hearted boys as they made their way back over the crisp, glittering snow to the happy, cheerful Rectory, how the words "uncle," "my uncle Ingram," kept ringing in the ears of the solitary traveller, but little older than they, as he pursued his weary journey. For in a sense it was truly from an uncle, or the distorted image of one, that he was fleeing.

"Uncle Ingram to be *their* uncle. How extraordinary!" he kept saying to himself. "And how near I was more than once to telling my name. If I had—supposing I had got very ill and delirious and had told it—it would all have come out. It would not have been my fault *then*. Lettice could not have reproached me, or written me any more of those dreadful letters;" and a sigh, almost a shiver, of suffering went through him as he thought of them. "If I had died, they would have had to hunt among my things, and they would have found my name. I think it would have been better. Perhaps Lettice would have been sorry; any way, it would have come to an end, and poor Nina would have been happier. Lettice could not speak to her as she has done to me. But I must not begin thinking. I must go on with it now."

He had no misadventures that day, and reached the town he was bound for by the evening. There he looked about till he saw a modest little inn, where he put up for the night, remembering Mr Winthrop's advice to play no tricks with himself in such severe weather, and when still not fully recovered from his exposure to the snowstorm.

It was the day but one before Christmas. Poor Arthur's eyes filled with tears as he sat trying to warm himself on a bench at some little distance from the fire in the rough room of the inn, where a motley enough company of passers-by—small farmers from the neighbourhood, some of the inferior grades of commercial travellers, one or two nondescript figures, looking like wandering showmen, and a few others, were assembled, some talking, some silent, mostly smoking, and all getting as near the fire as they could, for it was again bitterly cold. What a contrast from last Christmas! Then, ill though their mother was, she had not seemed much worse than she had been for long, and had done her utmost to be cheerful for her children's sake. Arthur recalled the pleasant little drawing-room at the Villa Martine, the bright sunshine and lovely blue sky—for the short, though often even in those climates sharp, winter had not set in till January—which almost seemed to laugh at the usual associations of Christmas. His brighter hopes, too, for he had not yet realised his distaste and unfitness for his chosen profession, and even if misgiving had now and then crossed his mind, there was his mother to confide in, should it ever take form.

"I *can't* believe mamma would have been so hard on me," he said to himself. "She might have been disappointed, but she wouldn't have thought me disgraced for life. Oh, why did she not live till this was past? She would have been sorry for me; she would not have blamed me so—but then, she did not know all about the money. To think, as Lettice says, that all my education, *everything*, has in reality been paid for by the man we can't—or won't—be even commonly civil to! It is the most miserable complication. Not that it matters now to *me*. He wouldn't be so ready to treat me as his son now that I've turned out such a fool, and worse than a fool. Lots of fools get on well enough, and nobody finds out they are fools; but *I* must needs go and make an exhibition of myself and my folly;" and he positively writhed at the remembrance. "However, that part of it is at an end. I'll use no more of his money, and, if I live to make any of my own, the first thing I'll do will be to repay what I have used, though without the least idea of all this."

Then his thoughts wandered off again to the happy family he had just left. How kind they had been to him! How gladly, had they had the slightest notion of who he was, would they have made him welcome to pass his Christmas among them! Mrs Winthrop especially, whom, as his aunt's sister, he thought of with a peculiar interest. How gentle and motherly she was, and, doubtless, his aunt was just the same.

"Ah!" sighed Arthur again, "if Lettice could but have seen things differently, I would not have been where I am today. I might have given up the attempt in time, before I had disgraced myself. I might—"

But his further reflections were cut short by a voice beside him. It came from a burly personage who had, without Arthur's noticing, so absorbed had he been in his reflections, installed himself on the bench at his side, puffing away busily and contentedly at a clay pipe. He had not hitherto spoken, but had sat still, looking about him with a pair of shrewd but not unkindly eyes.

"And whur,"—with a broad accent—"may you be boun', young man?" he inquired good-naturedly. "Better bide at home, say I, by such weather, if so be as one's not forced to be on the roads."

Chapter Eight.

A Friend in Need.

"I'm sure it's winter fairly."
Burns.

Arthur started. He brushed hastily away the tears that lingered in his eyes, hoping that the new-comer had not

observed them.

"I—I—" he began, then hesitated a little, "I'm on my way to Liverpool. I want to go to America."

"Ameriky," said the old man; "that's a long way. Have ye friends there?"

Arthur shook his head. He did not care about this cross-questioning, and, had he reflected a little, he would not perhaps have answered so openly. But he was inexperienced, and unaccustomed to be on his guard. He tried to think of some observation to make which would turn the conversation, but nothing came into his head except the subject which never fails—the weather.

"Do you think it is going to snow again?" he said timidly, glancing up at his companion. He looked something like a farmer of the humbler class—farmers were always interested in the weather.

The man raised his head quickly, as if to look up, forgetting seemingly that he was not in the open air. Then he smiled a little.

"Can't say," he replied. "But I rather think we've had the worst of it for a while. And so ye're off to Ameriky, young man? You don't look so fit for it nayther."

"I'm going to Liverpool first," said Arthur. "Perhaps I'll stay there. I have—" "an introduction there," he was going on to say, but the words stopped on his lips. They sounded far too important under the circumstances. Besides, and for the first time this new difficulty struck him, he dare not avail himself of Mr Winthrop's letter, which he had been so glad of! The person to whom it was addressed was pretty sure to be in some way connected, directly or indirectly, with his uncle's business, and, even if not so, when Mr Winthrop came to hear of his, Arthur's, disappearance, he might identify him with the traveller they had so kindly received, and trace him through this very introduction. And as all this went through his mind, his face fell. His companion, who was watching him, saw the change of expression.

"You have, you were saying, you have friends at Liverpool?" he said.

Arthur began to feel irritated at his pertinacity; he had not had much experience of the curiosity of many whose quiet uneventful lives force them into gossip as their only attainable excitement; but, looking up at the good-humoured face beside him, his annoyance disappeared, and in its place came a sudden impulse of confidence.

"No," he said bluntly; "I have no friends there, nor indeed anywhere, whom I can ask for help. I have neither father nor mother. I want to earn my living, and in time, if I can, to do more than that. And I'm not proud. I'd do anything, and I'd be more grateful than I can say to any one who'd put me in the way of something."

The farmer sat silent. He puffed away at his pipe, and between the puffs he took a good look now and again at his companion. The rather thin young face was flushed now; the beautiful brown eyes sparkled with excitement. It was a very attractive face.

"Very genteel-looking; no doubt of that. And James and Eliza think a deal o' that," he murmured to himself.

But Arthur did not catch the words. He sat without speaking. He had no idea of help coming from his present companion; he had no notion of what was passing in his mind. His thoughts were wandering far away, and he started when the farmer, with a preliminary cough to attract his attention, again spoke to him.

"You're set on Liverpool, I'm thinking?" he began.

Arthur did not at once understand his meaning.

"I'm going to Liverpool. I intend to go there," he said.

"And you're *set* on it?" the farmer repeated. "No other place'd be to your fancy, I suppose?"

"Oh," said Arthur, taking in his meaning.

"No; I don't particularly care about Liverpool. Indeed, I rather think I should like anywhere else better." For he realised that through the information which might not improbably be got sooner or later from Mr Winthrop, Liverpool would be the first place in which he would be sought.

"*Indeed*," said the farmer.

"I had no reason for choosing Liverpool," Arthur went on. "It was on the way to America; I suppose that was why I thought of it," he added innocently.

"Just so," ejaculated his companion. Then, after a few more puffs at his pipe and a few more scrutinising glances at Arthur between times, he proceeded with what he had to say. He had a daughter, it appeared, married to a draper, *the* draper of the little town of Greenwell, not many miles off. She, or her husband, or both of them, were in search of a young man to help in the shop, and they had confided their anxieties to their father, knowing that he had a journey of some days to make, and there was no saying but what he might come across the person they were looking for.

"Eliza, she won't have none of the lads thereabouts," he explained. "They're roughish-like, and Eliza she thinks a deal o' genteelness, does Eliza. It strikes me, young man, you'd please her for that. And it'd be a good home, if you were honest and industrious." Here he stopped and looked at his companion.

Arthur's face was still redder than before.

"A shop-boy," he said to himself—"a shop-boy!" But aloud he only said quietly—

"I don't know anything whatever of the sort of work it would be. Does not your son-in-law need some one who knows something about it?" The farmer scratched his head.

"You can write a good hand, I'm thinking," he said; "and you can soon learn how to make out the accounts. It's not that; it's who's to speak for you;" and he looked up again more scrutinisingly than heretofore in Arthur's face. It did not grow the less red on that account. "I have no one to speak for me," he replied haughtily; "so there's no use thinking about it. All the same," he went on, recollecting himself, I thank you very much, very much indeed. I'm very tired, and I think I'll go to bed and, rising, he held out his hand, with the gentle courtesy innate in him, to the farmer, who grasped it heartily in his horny palm, with a friendly "Good night."

"I'll see ye in the mornin', mebbe," he said.

"It's not the weather, nor yet the time o' year, for too early a start."

"It's something to have any one to say: 'Good night' to," thought Arthur, as he mounted the narrow staircase to the stuffy little bedroom he had with some difficulty secured to himself for the night, and the tears again welled up, though he tried hard to ignore them.

He slept soundly for some hours, for he was thoroughly tired; but he woke early, and lay anxiously turning over things in his mind. Should he try for the situation the farmer had spoken of? True, there was the difficulty of "no references;" but Arthur's practical sense had thought of a way out of that. He had some money—very little with him—but a few pounds he had left with his clothes and other small possessions in the safe keeping of a young man, whom he knew he could depend upon to keep secret. This was a former servant in the family of Arthur's tutor; and when obliged through an accident to leave his place, some kindness young Morison had shown him had completely gained his heart.

"I could write to Dawson to send my box on to Greenwell, or whatever's the name of the place," he said to himself. "Then I could give the genteel Eliza some money to keep as a sort of guaranty, to be given back to me when they were satisfied I was not a thief;" and Arthur laughed, perhaps because it was better than crying. "I believe that would do away with all difficulties. And once I am settled, it would be something to be able to write to Lettice, and tell her that, disgraced as I am, I have still found something to do, and that I *am* earning my own livelihood already."

His face flushed, though with honest pride this time.

"I should have preferred her to think me in America," his thoughts went on; "but it would be wrong to leave them in anxiety so long. At least, if they still think me worth being anxious about! Any way, they will be glad to know I am alive and well."

He had already since his flight written twice to his sisters, twice since the terrible day when, morally convinced of his failure, he had altogether lost heart and fainted in his place among the candidates, though the examination was but half over. He had written, confessing the whole—his nervous terror of the ordeal, his utter incapacity to face more, his thorough unfitness for the profession he had no wish to enter, and announcing, at the same time, his determination henceforth to depend on himself alone, and to work till he could repay the obligation to their uncle, of which Lettice, in her mistaken idea of keeping up his spirit, had so often reminded him.

"I am not a coward," he had said in one of these letters, "though Lettice may say I am. I have only been a coward in one thing—in my fear of telling the truth, which I thought would so horribly distress her. I dreaded her reproaches, and I still dread them; but I shall no longer deserve them. I, at least, will make my own way, and some day I may be able to do something for all of you, and, in the meantime, you will all be better and happier without the brother who has disappointed you so sadly."

And these letters he had sent through the same agency, that of poor Dawson, so that there was no post-mark or mark of any kind to betray his present quarters.

And so his thoughts went on that dreary morning in the little stuffy bedroom. If he did not accept the chance so unexpectedly thrown in his way, what was he to do? He dared not make use of his letter to Mr Winthrop's friend; he dared hardly go to Liverpool. For he was beginning to gain experience. He saw that without references of any kind he might get into awkward predicaments, might be suspected of having run away in disgrace of some very different kind from the failure which he himself judged so severely.

"And that would be *too* horrible," thought the poor boy; "to be taken up as a suspicious character, and a scandal about it, and to have to go home and go on living on Uncle Ingram's money after all, and feel that every one connected with me was ashamed of me! No; I must see what that old fellow has to say, if he hasn't thought better of it. He's a good old chap, I'm sure."

His resolution had not time to cool, for the farmer had "slept upon it" to some purpose. He greeted Arthur with friendly good nature, and, without his needing to broach the subject, started it himself again. He was on his way home, and had promised to "stop with Eliza and James over Christmas," as Greenwell was only a few hours from his own village, and he proposed to Arthur to accompany him, "to take a look at the place like, so being as he had naught better to do with hisself."

"And to let them take a look at me," added Arthur, smiling. "It's very good of you indeed. It's more than good of you," he added, "to trust a perfect stranger, and one that can't tell you all about himself either. It was family troubles that have made me leave my home, but that's all I can say."

"There's no lack o' troubles nowheer," said the farmer; "and there's no need o' telling what's no one's business but one's own."

"But," continued Arthur, "if your son-in-law, Mr—I don't think you told me his name?"

"Lamb, James Lamb," replied the old man.

"If Mr Lamb engages me, I can give him a sort of a pledge for my honesty, any way. I have a little money I can send for, and I could give it into his keeping for a while."

The farmer's face cleared.

"That's not a bad idea," he said. "Not but what I knows an honest face when I sees one, but James—he might think me soft-like. I had a lad o' my own onst," he went on, with an unusual gentleness in his voice, "and I lost him many years ago now—Eliza she were the daughter o' my wife that is—just about thy age, my lad," relapsing into the second person singular as he grew more at ease, "seems to me he favoured thee a bit. But Eliza and James they'd mebbe laugh at me for an old fool, so I'm mighty glad about the money."

"I won't write for it yet," said Arthur. "I'd better wait till we get to Greenwell, and see how things turn out I left it with my clothes and other things with a friend to send after me."

"Just so," said the farmer. "Oh, as for that, it'll be time enough."

An hour or two later saw Arthur, in company with his new friend, mounted in the light box-cart of the latter, and driving, though at a sober pace, for the roads were very slippery, in the direction of the little town of Greenwell. It was a long drive. They stopped towards midday at a little roadside inn for some refreshment in the shape of bread-and-cheese and beer, and then jogged on again. It was not a luxurious mode of travelling; still, it was much better than tramping through the snow, and Arthur's days of roughing it had taught him the useful lesson of being thankful for small boons. But as the early winter dusk fell it grew colder and colder, and Arthur shivered, though he had a good thick coat, and the farmer had given him a plentiful share of the rough horse-cloth, which did duty for a carriage rug.

"Christmas Eve," he said, after a long silence, hardly aware that he was speaking aloud.

"Ay so," said his companion, "the years they comes, and the years they goes. 'Tis many a Christmas Eve and Christmas Day as I mind. 'Peace on earth, goodwill to men,' parson tells us. They've been a-tellin' it a sight o' Christmases, seems to me, but we're a long way off it still, I'm afeard."

"I'm afraid so," said Arthur with a sigh.

And then his thoughts wandered off again to his home. Lettice would hear those same words to-morrow morning. How would they strike her? Was she not wrong, *quite* wrong? was the question that came over and over again for the thousandth time in his mind. Could it be showing true honour to their dead parents to persist in the course she was doing—a course setting at defiance the Divine injunction? Nay, even allowing they, or their father rather, had been injured, unfairly treated, was there not Divine command for such cases, too? "Forgive, as ye would be forgiven," "unto seventy times seven," were the words that floated about before the boy's eyes, illuminated, as it were, on the ever-darkening sky in front of him. And who was it they were refusing to forgive? One who had never injured them, one who had generously taken upon him responsibilities and risks he was in no way called upon to trouble himself with.

"Ah, yes," thought Arthur sadly, "that has been his crime in her eyes—his very goodness." And somehow he felt less unhappy and perplexed when he allowed himself to recognise this than when he strove, as he had thought himself bound to do, against his better judgment, to think Lettice right, to accept the arguments she had so plausibly brought to bear upon him.

"She must be wrong," he thought. "And if I had been older and wiser, or, at least, more courageous, I might have made her care to see it. But what right have I to speak, miserable failure that I am? I can only do what I am doing—be faithful and loyal to her, even if she is mistaken, and do my utmost to lessen the burden;" and, with another sigh, Arthur shook himself out of his reverie.

How cold it was growing!

"Are we near there?" he inquired.

"Not so far now," said the old man cheerily. "'Twill be good seeing a bright fire and a bite of supper. The old woman—that's my wife, none so very old nayther—will be lookin' out for us. She were to come to Eliza's to-day like, so as we might have our Christmas together. The plum-pudding will have been ready this three weeks, I make no doubt. She's a rare housekeeper, is my Eliza, though I says it as shouldn't."

And Arthur was boy enough to feel considerable satisfaction in the prospect of plum-pudding, even though served in homely guise. It was a long way better than Christmas Day on the road, or in some poor lodging in loneliness and dreariness!

In a few minutes more the farmer turned off the road they had for some time been following, and shortly after this, twinkling lights began to be visible in the distance. There were not many travellers of any kind about; it was too cold for all not forced to do so to expose themselves to the open air; and when at last, after rattling over the stones of an old-fashioned street, the farmer drew up at a door, evidently the private entrance to a shuttered shop next it, Arthur really felt that he could hardly have endured a quarter of an hour more of it. The mere thought of a fire was felicity,

and he did not need twice bidding to jump down and knock lustily at the door. But before it was opened a misgiving seized him.

"Had I not better go somewhere else for the night?" he asked his old friend. "They're not expecting me. I dare say I can get a bed somewhere near; and then, by the morning you will have told them about me."

The farmer ejaculated something, which was evidently meant as an equivalent to "nonsense."

"D'ye think now, James or Eliza'd turn a dog to the door such a night as this, much less a Christian?" he replied reassuringly. "Seein', too, that it's *me* as brings you," he added, just as the door opened.

For the next minute or two there was a chatter of rather noisy welcome, questions made and asked, women's voices, and men's laughter. Then Arthur, feeling himself confused and dazed, conscious of almost nothing but the numbing cold—for he was not yet as strong as usual—found himself in a large, comfortable, though plainly furnished room, with a great old-fashioned fireplace at one end, in which a great old-fashioned fire was burning. He still heard the voices going on about him, though at a little distance, and he had an instinctive feeling that they were talking about him. He stood irresolute, uncertain whether to turn back or go forward, when a kindly voice caught his ear.

"Come near the fire. I'm sure you're freezing cold. Eliza's that pleased to see her father again, she sees no one else. James, you've not shook hands with—but, to be sure, my old man's not told us your name yet."

Arthur smiled. It would not have been easy for the farmer to tell his name when he had never heard it himself. He tried to collect his thoughts, but he still felt very light-headed and strange.

"My name," he began, "is John—John Morris," which, so far as it went, was true. "I wish you would call me John."

"Surely," replied "James," as in response to his mother-in-law's hint he shook hands, so heartily as to make him wince, with the young stranger. "You're kindly welcome, and, if so be as it suits you to stay on with us, I don't doubt but as we'll pull together."

But he confided to his Eliza afterwards that, though there was no doubt as to his having a very "genteel" appearance, he was by no means sure that this young fellow whom her father had picked up would be strong enough for the place.

"Nevertheless, we'll give him a good Christmas dinner, and cheer him up a bit. He looks sadly pulled down like, poor fellow!"

Chapter Nine.

A Cab and a Carriage.

"Life, believe, is not a dream
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day."

Charlotte Brontë.

About a week before the cold evening of Arthur's drive with the old farmer in his cart to Greenwell, late one afternoon, a young lady in deep mourning might have been seen getting out of the train at a certain station in London. She was alone, and she had no luggage, except a little bag which she carried; and yet, as the train was an express one, not stopping at stations near at hand, it was clear that she had come from some distance. A porter, on the alert for embarrassed lady travellers, quickly called a cab for her, looking disappointed at no trunks being forthcoming, but needlessly so, as he received a liberal amount of coppers for the small service he had rendered. This rather unusual generosity made him give more attention than he generally had time to bestow on travellers, to the tall, slight, black-shrouded figure. The thick veil which she wore blew aside for an instant as she got into the cab, and he saw that she was very young, very pretty, and evidently in trouble, for her eyes showed traces of recent tears.

"Poor thing!" said the porter to himself. "A suddint summins, no doubt—wired for—started at onst—no luggage—no time to think of nothink;" and being a rather tender-hearted porter, he could hardly refrain, as he stood with his hand on the cab door waiting for the address, from adding paternally, "Hope you won't find things so bad as you anticerpate, miss;" but before he had time to make up his mind whether he should or should not express these kindly feelings, he was startled by her saying rapidly, though in a low voice—

"Ask him to drive quickly, please, as quickly as possible;" and then she gave the address, which, rather to the porter's surprise, was in that part of London where no one but lawyers, and lawyers in their official capacity solely, are to be heard of, which circumstance gave the porter matter for reflection for fully one minute and a half, till the next train came in or went out, and he relapsed into his normal condition.

Whether the cabman drove quickly or not, it did not appear so to the unhappy girl seated in his cab. It seemed hours to her, till he at last drew up, in a dingy, smoke-dried, but respectable locality, where she had never been before in her life. She jumped out of the cab, hardly replying to the driver's inquiry as to whether he was to wait—which, however, as she had not paid him, he naturally decided to do—and only stopping to read the lists of names inscribed at each side of the open doorway, leading to the staircase common to all the tenants of the house, she hurried in,

and was lost to sight in its solemnly gloomy recesses. Five minutes later she was back again, extreme dejection visible in her whole bearing to any one observing her with attention, even without the sight of the pale, agitated face which her veil concealed. But the cabman was not observing her; he was tired, and inclined to be drowsy, in spite of the cold weather, and Lettice stood still for a moment or two before getting into the cab again.

"Godfrey away, for a fortnight, at least. What *shall* I do?—oh, what *shall* I do?" she said to herself, pressing her hands together in agony. "If I only knew where he was!" But at his chambers they had refused, though quite civilly, to give her his address, contenting themselves with assuring her that any letters would be forwarded to him at once. "He may be abroad; he may be ever so far away. He *might* have let us know he was going;" but here her conscience reproached her. How could she expect him to have done anything of the sort when she remembered how they had last parted the cold contempt with which she had received his kind and reasonable remonstrances, till at last, stung into indignation, he had declared that henceforth he would leave her to herself, merely interfering with advice and direction when he saw it absolutely necessary to do so? And that was now three or four months ago. Since then he had only written on strictly business matters—about having taken on Faxleham Cottage for six months longer, directions about Auriol's schooling, and so on. And these three or four months had been among the dreariest and most anxious Lettice had ever known. Nina was pale and drooping; Arthur's letters were rare and unsatisfactory; the autumn had been an unusually rainy and depressing season, and they had absolutely no friends. But for Miss Branksome's unflinching cheerfulness, Nina and the younger ones would, indeed, have been to be pitied, though less than Lettice herself.

For, far as she was from owning herself to be the cause of all this unhappiness, her conscience was not at rest, and misgivings from time to time made themselves felt, though she stifled them by exaggerating to herself the soundness of her motives. And this very exaggeration made her write to poor Arthur the letters which, in his overstrained state, had had so disastrous a result.

Towards Nina, too, she knew, at the bottom of her heart, that she had not acted fairly, though the reserve that had gradually grown up between them, had prevented her thoroughly understanding her younger sister. For what—for whom, rather—was poor Nina pining?

"Does she care for Godfrey?" Lettice asked herself, feeling that if Nina had learnt to do so it was thanks to *her* influence, and no other. And as time went on, and Lettice began to own to herself that it did *not* seem as if Godfrey were in love with Nina—"had it been so," she reflected, "he is far too resolute to have been kept back by his quarrel with *me*,"—she almost came to hope that on both sides the dream had been the creation of her own fancy—her own self-will she would not call it.

Though even in this hope she found small rest for her troubled spirit. If it were not about Godfrey that Nina was fretting away, though patiently and uncomplainingly, the brightness from her pretty eyes, the roses from her young cheeks, about whom and what was it? And a certain afternoon last August, and a certain conversation with a fair-faced, honest young gentleman, who had come to plead his cause with manly straightforwardness; who had gone away looking ten years older, though with courteous and grateful words to herself on his lips, rose up before Lettice's remembrance with reproachful eyes.

And all these memories—as in the so often quoted case of a drowning person—rushed through Lettice's mind in the half-minute during which she stood there in her distress and desolation, while her lips repeated the same murmur—"What shall—oh, what *shall* I do? Every moment of time that I am losing here may be of the most vital importance."

Once she turned and made a step or two towards the door again, in a half-formed resolution to inquire if Mr Auriol's clerk could give her the address of Philip Dexter. But from this she shrank with the strongest feelings of her nature.

"To go to *him*—to appeal to *him* to help me," she reflected. "It would be like begging him on again for Nina. It would be owning that it was all nonsense about Godfrey's caring for her—and for Arthur's sake, too. Why should I publish his humiliation to any but those who *must* know it?"

And again she stood irresolute and altogether wretched. And cabby, beginning to wake up and giving signs of being about to begin wondering what queer sort of a "fare, as didn't know its own mind, he had got hold of," doubled and trebled the girl's embarrassment.

"I must go to some hotel for the night, I suppose," she said to herself. "And oh! the horror of sitting there all the evening doing nothing, and lying there all night doing nothing—and Arthur, my darling brother, setting sail for America, before we can stop him; or perhaps—worse and worse—tossing in some miserable place among strangers, in a brain fever, where he may die—*die*, without having forgiven me!"

Nearly driven frantic by her own imaginings, she looked round her with a vague, altogether unreasonable appeal for help or guidance.

"What *shall* I do?" she ejaculated for the twentieth time, when just at that moment a carriage drew up—cabby rousing himself to move on so as to make room for it, for it was an unmistakable carriage, a small but thoroughly well-appointed brougham, quite capable of commanding his respectful deference—before the door where Lettice was standing, and a gentleman got out and came slowly over the pavement towards the house. The pavement, or the space between the houses and the real pavement, was wide there. It looked as if in far-off times there might have been a grass-plot or a flowerbed or two in front; and as the new-comer approached, Lettice had time to see him clearly. She looked at him—at the first glance a wild idea had struck her that possibly he might be Godfrey Auriol returned unexpectedly—with a sort of half-bewildered curiosity, but gradually a vague feeling came over her that he was not altogether unknown to her, that somewhere she had seen him before, or else that he resembled some one she had once known. But as he passed by, she recollected herself and turned sharply away. What was it to her what or who this stranger was? What was she made of to be standing there losing the precious moments in idle

conjecture? And again the whole force of her mind became concentrated on the absorbing question—what *was* she to do?

She was turning at last to the cab, in a desperate resolution to go *somewhere*, when a quick step behind her made her look round. To her surprise there stood facing her the gentleman who a moment before had passed her to enter the house. He raised his hat, and she, looking at him, was again struck by his strange indefinite likeness to *some one*. He was slightly above the middle height, his dark hair already a very little hazed with grey. He looked a man of about forty, though in reality he was some years younger; his expression was gentle but rather piercing. There was great power, moral and intellectual, in his well-shaped forehead.

“Excuse me for addressing you,” he said. “But you seemed to me to be at a loss. Perhaps you are inquiring for some one you cannot find? I know this neighbourhood well. Can I help you?”

Lettice looked at him again. The gentleman’s tone was so respectful as well as kind, that the most timorous of maidens could scarcely have failed to feel confidence in him. And Lettice was the reverse of timorous; she was fearless to a fault, and her inexperience suggested no misgiving.

“Do you perhaps,” she began, “do you happen to know any one here—in this house? I am so disappointed at finding the friend, the gentleman I came to see, on *most* urgent business, away from home. And they won’t even give me his address?” she added girlishly, the tears welling up again as she spoke.

A curious look came into the kindly eyes that were regarding her, and the stranger made a very slight involuntary movement, almost as if he were going to lay his hand on her arm to console her as one would do to a troubled child. But he checked himself.

“I know Mr Auriol, Mr Godfrey Auriol, whose office is in this house,” he said.

“That is he,” exclaimed Lettice with delighted eagerness. “Oh, how fortunate that I should have met you! If you could, oh, if you could but get them to give me his address, I might telegraph to him. It would save ever so much time. Perhaps, I should tell you,” she went on, “I have a right to ask for his address; he is my—our guardian. My name is Morison.”

There was no visible change of expression in the stranger’s face, but one knowing him well would have seen a light in his eyes that was not there before. And his lips moved, though no sound was heard. “Thank God for this,” were the inaudible words.

“I can easily get you his address,” he said. “I was just going in to ask if they had any definite news of his return. I want to see him as soon as he comes back. Will you wait here a moment? It is very cold,” he added, looking round. “Is that your cab waiting?”

“Yes,” said Lettice.

The gentleman glanced at the cab, with its ill-fitting doors and windows, and the inevitable damp and chilly straw on the floor.

“I doubt if you would be much warmer there,” he said with a smile. “Would you—will you do me the favour to get into my brougham while I go upstairs? There is a hot-water footstool—and rugs—for I have just taken my wife home. You don’t think me very presuming?” he added. “Remember, I am a friend of Godfrey’s.”

There was something reassuring in the simple way in which he spoke of Mr Auriol by his Christian name, even had Lettice wanted reassuring, which she did not. She looked up again in the stranger’s face and said, with an abruptness that sometimes characterised her—

“Are you a doctor?”

He smiled. “No, I am not. I am sorry for it if it would have given you more confidence in me. Though I hope,” he added with real anxiety, “that it is not to hear of a doctor that you are here. None of you are ill? *That* isn’t the urgent business, I trust?”

“No,” replied Lettice, surprised at his way of speaking. “He must have heard about us from Godfrey,” she decided. “At least, I hope not,” she added, as her terrible picture of Arthur in a brain fever came before her eyes. “I *hope* not. But I don’t know what I think or fear. You won’t be long?” she said appealingly, for by this time her new friend had handed her into the snug little carriage.

“Two minutes at most,” he replied.

And Lettice sat there, grateful in a sort of childish way for the cushioned warmth and comfort, though till then she had thought nothing about how cold she was, gazing before her in a vague, half-dazed way, feeling almost as if she would fall asleep if she were left there long, but in some indefinite way undoubtedly many degrees less miserable and desolate than before the apparition of the brougham.

Its owner was as good as his word. Two minutes had barely elapsed before he was back again.

“I have his present address,” he said. “But he is a long way off. He is in Scotland, and is not expected back for a fortnight. He is away on professional business, but he had hoped not to have to go so far. He had hoped to be back to spend Christmas with us down in the country. Now,” he continued, “what is to be done? You can telegraph to him, but I doubt if it would be *possible* for him to come back, and it is an out-of-the-way place where he is. You said there was no time to be lost? Have you no one else, no other friend or—or relative?” Here his voice faltered as he looked

anxiously into the girl's face, so pale and drawn and careworn as it had again become.

She roused herself with a sort of effort.

"I don't know what to do," she repeated.

"Can you not, though I am a stranger, can you not make up your mind—we have been brought together so strangely—can you not tell me what is the matter?" he said, beseechingly almost.

All this time he was standing with his hand on the carriage door.

"If you would let me take you home—to my wife," he continued, "you would see how kind and sympathising she is. Could you tell *her*, better?"

"Oh no, thank you," said Lettice. "I could tell you just as well. The trouble is about—my brother."

"Your brother—Arthur? God forbid!" he exclaimed. "Is it anything very serious?"

"I fear so, but I don't know," she replied, shaking her head. And at the moment it did not strike her, so impressed was she with the magnitude of her overwhelming anxiety, how curious it was that a complete stranger should be so affected by her troubles! Yet his naming her brother by name caught her attention. "You know about us. I suppose from Mr Auriol?" she said.

"Yes," he replied, but in an absent way.

And still Lettice sat gazing before her, as if she were half-stunned. Then suddenly, raising her eyes—

"Arthur has run away," she said. "At least, he has *gone* away. He wrote that he would try to go to America, but we were afraid, Nina and I—we got his letter last night, and I came off by the first train this morning. Nina and Miss Branksome wanted me to wait and to telegraph first, so I came away without telling them. I could not bear waiting—we were afraid that he might have fallen ill somewhere. He has not been well lately, and the shock of his disgrace—"

"Disgrace! What disgrace?" exclaimed the gentleman.

"He has failed—at least, he saw that he was going to fail—in his examination, and he would not face the rest of it," said Lettice, the crimson rising to her face.

The stranger could hardly repress a smile.

"But why use such terribly strong words about it? Failing in his examination a disgrace! You startled me," he said with evident and immense relief.

"*He* took it so," said Lettice, a little nettled.

"And I—I used to think I would feel it so too, but I don't seem to mind now. I would mind nothing if we could find him."

"Have you any trace? Can you tell me all the particulars?"

"Yes," said Lettice, feeling in her pocket for Arthur's letter. But the stranger interrupted her.

"Now that you have told me so much, you will not refuse to let me tell you something—make some explanations to you. You will let me send away your cab, and take you home to my wife? I think I can promise to help you, but you must give me all particulars, and in a circumstantial manner. That will take time. But first, Lettice, it is not fair to you not to tell you who I am. I am not only Godfrey Auriol's friend; I am—do not be startled, my child—I am your uncle, Ingram Morison."

He turned away after saying these words. He would not look at her face, half out of pity for her, half out of an almost childish terror of the deep disappointment to himself, should he see its expression turn into hard resentment. He walked up and down in the cold for a moment or two, then hearing, or fancying he heard, a low, half-stifled call—to his ears it took the sound of the words he had so often longed to hear, "Uncle Ingram"—he turned back again. She was looking out of the brougham window, the glass was down, her face was paler than one could almost believe it possible for a young, healthy face to be, her lips were quivering, there was a look of suffering and humiliation almost, but there was no hardness or resentment.

"Lettice," he said gently. "*May* I send away your cab?"

There was great tact in the tone and manner of the simple question. Lettice's eyes filled with tears. She did not speak, but she bent her head in assent.

Chapter Ten.

New-Found Relations.

"Speak of me as I am: nothing extemporate."
Shakespeare.

The drowsy cabman was aroused from his slumbers to be, rather to his surprise, paid and dismissed, but paid so

handsomely that he went off thinking himself for once in the way of good luck. Then Mr Morison said a few words to his coachman and, getting into the brougham, took his seat beside his niece.

"Lettice," he said quietly, speaking at once to relieve her embarrassment, "I have told the coachman to drive round a quiet way before we go home, to give you time to tell me all you can, every detail, about Arthur, so that we may not lose an hour. Will you now give me the whole particulars?"

Calmed by his quiet, almost matter-of-fact manner, Lettice did so, though the recital led her into much painful to relate. For now that, thanks to the terrible anxiety through which she was passing, the scales had fallen from her eyes, she saw in its true light, even perhaps with exaggerated harshness—for Lettice was never one to do things by halves—her own wilful blindness, her own prejudice, unreason, and self-will. And when she came to tell her uncle how she had written to Arthur, she altogether broke down.

"I had better show you his letter," she said, amidst her tears; "it will make you understand him. He *has* exaggerated, has he not?" she said, looking up wistfully. "If he had not been overstrained and morbid, he would not have taken it up so, would he?"

She sat quietly waiting till Mr Morison had read the letter. His face was very grave as he handed it back to Lettice. But it was grave with anxiety not with indignation.

"He was certainly in a very excited and morbid state when he wrote this," he said. "He has been overworking himself probably. No one in possession of their senses would do anything but laugh at his imagining himself disgraced for life by having failed in his first attempt at passing for Woolwich;" and Mr Morison could not help smiling.

"I am afraid I helped him to think so," said Lettice; "you see, he refers to what I wrote. I could not understand his seeming so much less in earnest than he used to be, and so spiritless, and I wrote meaning to rouse him. I did *not* know, that is my only excuse—indeed, I did *not* know till now, what explains it all—the dislike he had taken to his intended profession," she added earnestly.

"My dear child," said her uncle, kindly patting the hand she had involuntarily laid on his arm, "do not plead so piteously as if I were constituting myself a judge over you. What you say seems to me to have been the principal point—the only point—on which Arthur is really to blame. Why did he not tell you that he no longer felt any liking for the service?"

"Ah," said Lettice, "I fear that was my influence again. I think he was afraid of telling it, afraid of how I should take it."

"But that was cowardice, *moral* cowardice," for he felt that Lettice winced at the strong, expression. "I am very plain-spoken, Lettice," he added, though looking at her so kindly that the words had no harshness in them. "When I see Arthur, I shall try to make him understand where he was wrong, and I think he will agree with me. But he has got false notions on other points, I see. What is all this about independence, repaying what he would never have used had he understood the whole, working in the hopes of some day doing so, etcetera?"

"It was what Godfrey told us," said Lettice in a low voice, "about—about all you had done and risked to save our money."

For the first time Mr Morison's face darkened, and Lettice realised that, though gentle, he could also make his anger felt.

"Auriol!" he exclaimed. "How could he have so represented, or misrepresented, things? There was no need for anything to be said about it. I, very reluctantly, gave him leave to tell you, or your mother rather, that I had done what I could at a critical time. But it was *solely* to show her how ready, how *eager* I was to be of use. But as to its calling forth any other feeling—"

"Gratitude, at least," said Lettice timidly.

"No, not gratitude even. It was nothing but natural, purely and thoroughly natural. And to think of Auriol's having stated it so as to give you any painful sense of obligation—how can he have done so?"

Lettice hesitated. Her cup of self-abasement was to be drunk to the dregs, it seemed. She turned round, with a look of determination on her face.

"Uncle Ingram," she began, and in the pleasure of hearing himself so addressed by her, Mr Morison's face relaxed, "I will try to explain all; I will not spare myself. It was not Mr Auriol's fault. He did tell it us just as you would have wished. He wanted to soften me, to make me reasonable. But I repelled him. I made him angry. I lost my temper, and made him, a little, I think, lose his, too,"—and Lettice was too absorbed by her own recital to see what perhaps it was as well she did not observe, a slight smile of amusement which here crossed her uncle's face—"and then he said what was true—that we owed you gratitude we could never repay. It *is* true, Uncle Ingram, and *now* I don't mind it. But, don't you see, that while we—I—was resisting you, refusing to count you our uncle, it *was* a painful obligation?"

"And if fate, or something better than fate," said Mr Morison, "had not brought us together to-day, it would—would it, Lettice—have remained so?"

"I don't know," said Lettice in a low voice; "I can't think so *now*. But—"

"But what?"

"I had no idea you would be like what you are. I could not have imagined any one being so generous."

Mr Morison turned his face away for a moment. When he spoke again, it was with a little effort.

"Lettice," he said, "I am always considered a very practical and prosaic person. Even my wife thinks I was born with very little romance in me. But, do you know, I have had one romance, one dream in my life, and that has been to do something to make up to my brother's children for my having been put in his place." Here Lettice seemed as if she was going to speak, but he made a little sign for her to wait. "I know you are going to say it was not my fault, but I want you to understand the *feeling*, the sentiment I have always associated with it. I hardly remember my brother—that is to say, in reality I scarcely knew him. But the few times I saw him as a child made the most vivid impression on me. He was to me a perfect hero of romance. His appearance, his bright manly beauty, his charm of manners—all left a picture on my mind that I shall never forget, and the bitterest tears I ever shed as a boy were when, after glorying in the honours he had won, and dreaming of his return to us, I was told one day by my father that I was never to mention his name again. I resented it bitterly. I thought my father cruel and unjust, and later I told him so, not once, but often; first with a boy's impetuosity, afterwards, as a man, more deliberately, though more respectfully. But it was no use. It was the only disagreement we ever had, my poor father and I. Only, as you know, on his deathbed he left his blessing for your father, and it was to me he confided it. But," he went on in a different tone, "we must come back to the present. About Arthur—I will be quite frank with you—my great fear is that he may have fallen ill from the reaction, from the overstrained state he has evidently been in. I think the first thing to do is for me to see his tutor. It is only an hour from town. I know the place. I will go down there at once."

"May I go with you?" said Lettice eagerly.

"I see no use in your doing so," replied her uncle. "He is not *there*, that is about all we are sure of. I cannot understand Mr Downe's not having written or telegraphed to you already."

"He would not send to *us*," said Lettice; "he would naturally send to Mr Auriol, and he, you know, is away."

"To be sure," said Mr Morison. "That must be it. Well, any way, the first thing to do is to see Mr Downe, and get all additional particulars from him. And, in the meantime, you must keep up your spirits and rest yourself. Your aunt will do her best to cheer you."

"My aunt?" repeated Lettice.

"Yes, of course. Your aunt Gertrude, my wife," he said, with a smile.

"I have never had an aunt before," said Lettice apologetically.

"Well, you will have one now worthy of the name, though I shouldn't praise my own belongings," he said brightly.

In another minute or two the carriage stopped before the door of a handsome house. Mr Morison turned to Lettice.

"Will you wait here, while I go in to explain to your aunt?" he said.

And Lettice, her heart beating more quickly than usual at the thought of this unknown relation, gladly consented.

The explanation must have been quickly made. Before Lettice could have thought it possible, her uncle was back again. There was an orange coloured envelope in his hand.

"This is from Auriol," he said, taking out its pink paper enclosure, which was as follows: "Bad news of Arthur. Impossible to get away. Beg you to see Downe at once, and decide what to do." "So, you see," continued Mr Morison, "my credentials are now *quite* complete, are they not? Come in, my dear child. There is Gertrude at the door; she is so eager to see you."

Lettice had no time to feel embarrassed before she felt herself warmly kissed by the lady in mourning, who was waiting to receive her in the hall.

"My dear Lettice," she said simply, but with a ring of true cordiality, "I am *so* happy to see you. How cold you must be! Tea is waiting. Ingram," as she led her newly found niece into the pretty drawing-room, "you have time for a cup of tea before you go?"

"Hardly," he said; "I would rather not risk it. Now Lettice is in good hands, I would rather be off at once. If I am not back by eight or nine o'clock, don't expect me to-night. But in that case I shall telegraph."

"Uncle Ingram," said Lettice, as he was hurrying off, "will you do one thing more? Will you telegraph to poor Nina that—that I am all right, and with you, and that you are doing all possible about Arthur?"

"Certainly, I will. I know the address," he added, smiling. "And, Lettice, will you do one thing for me?"

"Of course. What is it?" she said eagerly.

She was standing close beside him at the moment.

"Give me a kiss, as a sign of—" He hesitated.

"Of gratitude to you for forgiving me," she half whispered.

"Of better than that: of your accepting me from now as your uncle—your uncle who has always loved you, as your dear father's brother, who longs to supply his place to you as well as he can."

"Uncle Ingram," said Lettice as she kissed him, "you are like papa. I understand now what made me look at you so

when I first caught sight of you.”

A pleased expression came into Mr Morison’s face, though he said nothing. But when he had left them Mrs Morison turned to Lettice with a smile.

“You could not have said anything to please him as much;” and Lettice answered simply as she felt—

“I am so glad.”

It was like a dream to her. The finding herself in the comfortable house, where everything was in perfect taste, though nothing overdone, tended and caressed by the pretty aunt, of whose existence almost she had twelve hours before been in ignorance. And her uncle! Nothing had ever touched Lettice as much as his way of talking of her father. To think that he, of all men, should have cherished such tender admiration of him, went to her very heart. And her cheeks burned with wholesome shame when she recalled the way in which she had spoken of him—the absurd as well as unworthy prejudice in which she had indulged. No wonder that Godfrey Auriol had lost patience with her; no wonder he had resolved on leaving her henceforth to herself. She only felt now that she would be ashamed ever to look him in the face again.

But if that were all—if her own humiliation and punishment were all, Lettice felt she could have borne it. But alas! how much more was involved! Arthur, poor Arthur, of whom she had hardly courage to think, and Nina. And as she thought of Nina again, that afternoon’s conversation with Philip Dexter returned to her mind. She had meant to do right; why had she always done wrong? She had honestly thought that Godfrey would be a much more desirable husband for Nina than Philip, and she had acted accordingly, forgetting, or trying to ignore, that in such matters somebody else’s “thinking” has very little to do with it, and that interference, save where urgently called for on the part of parent or guardian, is wholly unjustifiable. She had, she confessed to herself, possibly, probably even, ruined the happiness of two lives through her own prejudice and self-will. And when she came to this part of her reflections she sighed so deeply that her aunt looked at her with real anxiety.

“My dear Lettice,” she said, “you *must* try to be hopeful. Your uncle or a telegram is sure to be here within an hour. Do try, dear.”

Lettice looked up dejectedly.

“It isn’t only that; it isn’t only Arthur I’m thinking of, Aunt Gertrude,” she said. “It is everything. I have done so many wrong things. I have made such dreadful mistakes, and I don’t see—though I would do anything—*anything*—how they can ever be put right again.”

Mrs Morison sat down beside her and took her hand in hers.

“Who knows, dear?” she said gently. “After a while, when your mind is less disturbed, and you feel more at rest, perhaps you may tell me some of these troubles, and perhaps—you may be sure I shall do my best—perhaps I may be able to help you.”

And just then it flashed into Lettice’s mind, what in the confusion and disturbance of the day she had forgotten, her aunt Gertrude was Philip Dexter’s aunt too. And with this remembrance came a little ray of light and hope.

She had need of it, for when a few minutes later, her uncle returned, he had no very good news to give. He had seen Mr Downe, Arthur’s tutor, and heard all particulars. Arthur’s state of health had not seemed satisfactory for some time; he was nervous and feverishly excitable, and his tutor had suggested his deferring going up for his examination for six months, but the young man would not hear of it. But even before the end of the first day he had been forced to give in, having fainted in his place among the candidates. Mr Downe had sent him home at once, but on his return later in the evening, had been much alarmed at finding him gone, and had telegraphed to Mr Auriol. That had, in fact, been all he knew, and till Mr Morison’s visit he had been in hopes that the young man had gone to his own home.

“He is, of course, very sorry and anxious,” continued Mr Morison, “but only for fear of Arthur’s having fallen ill. As for his doing anything wrong, or even reckless, he is sure we need not be uneasy. He speaks of him in the very highest terms, and he says, too, that he has plenty of good sense. But he had begun to guess the truth—that Arthur had no liking or inclination for a military life, and that, hard as he has been working, it has been altogether against the grain.”

Here a deep sigh from Lettice interrupted him. “And what is to be done?” asked Mrs Morison.

“We have already set on foot in a quiet way fill the inquiries possible. But Mr Downe, and I agree with him, is much against employing detectives, or anything of that sort.”

“Oh yes,” said Lettice. “Arthur would *never* get over it.”

“Besides,” said Mr Morison, “he promises in his letter to Lettice to write again in a day or two. I think we must wait for another letter before resorting to extreme measures. Unless, of course, no letter comes. Downe does not much believe in the America idea; he thinks Arthur will cool down before that. But we have taken measures that he need never know of to prevent his leaving Liverpool for America. That *was* necessary. And now, my child, you must go to bed and try to sleep. To-morrow I have to ask your advice on a number of things.”

“My advice?” said Lettice humbly. “Uncle, you are too good to me.”

Home-Sick.

“Slight withal may be the things which bring
Back on the heart the weight which it would fling
Aside for ever: it may be a sound,
A tone of music—summer’s eve, or spring—
A flower—the wind—the ocean.”

Byron.

And so things went on for a day or two. As regards Arthur, that is to say. As regarded the anxious little party at Faxleham Cottage, Mr Morison took immediate steps. He went down there the following day to give them news of Lettice, and to arrange for their all coming to spend Christmas with him and his wife. Lettice would gladly have accompanied him, but the morning had found her completely knocked up, and in her now thoroughly awakened fear of her own self-will, she gave in without a murmur to her uncle and aunt’s decision that she must stay where she was. Nor was she the only one to exercise self-denial. Mr and Mrs Morison, quite against their custom, determined to stay in London for Christmas, so that they should be nearer at hand for any news of Arthur, or to take further steps, should such be necessary.

Lettice was overwhelmed with gratitude. She was satisfied, too, that all that could be done was being done. She was gentle to a fault. But her punishment was of the severest.

“If they—if you—reproached me,” she said to Nina, weeping in her arms, the evening of their arrival, “I could, I think, better bear it. But to have nothing but kindness, nothing but constant proofs of affection that I don’t deserve. Oh, Nina, it humiliates me.”

“But it *should* not,” said Nina. “For one thing, Lettice, do you not owe it to our uncle and aunt to try to seem a little less wretched? Is it not selfish to think of nothing but our anxiety? Are you not in danger, perhaps, of exaggerating things now the other way—blaming yourself *too* much, and making those about you unhappy from your very sorrow for having done so in the past?”

A very short time ago Nina would not have dared to speak thus to her sister, and even now she felt that Lettice shrank back a little from her, as she listened.

“It may be so,” she said wearily, and with a shade of bitterness in her tone. “No doubt I am bad and wrong every way. I can’t think what God lets me live for.”

“Oh, Lettice!” said Nina with deep reproach. And the fit of petulance was over in a moment. “I know I shouldn’t speak so. Forgive me again, Nina. I will try.”

“And you know we have some reason for cheerfulness. Think how glad we should be of that other letter of Arthur’s, showing at least that he is well, and certainly not off to America as yet.”

For the second letter, which has been referred to, had been received from Arthur. It told them of his well-being, but gave no trace of his whereabouts—the faithful Dawson, through ways and means best known to himself, managing to post each letter sent him to forward, in a different part of London. So that for the moment, beyond putting advertisements in some of the leading papers, there seemed nothing else to do. For Arthur’s sake, when he *should* return, his uncle was determined to avoid all possible hue and cry, and so long as they knew that he was safe and well, his sisters thoroughly joined in this feeling. Still, it was weary work waiting.

“I feel sure we shall have another letter this week,” continued Nina. “He is certain to write to us at or about Christmas.”

“Yes, I think he will,” agreed Lettice. “I have no doubt he will keep on writing regularly. But what good does that do? It relieves, so far, our anxiety, but so long as we cannot communicate with him, what hope have we of his returning? How can we make him understand how we long for him? That he would be in no way reproached, and would be as free as air to choose the future he best likes.”

“I don’t know how it will come,” said Nina, “but I feel sure some way will offer itself. For one thing, I think after a while he will long for news of us, and will propose some way for us to write to him. Uncle Ingram has written it all to Aunt Gertrude’s brother, Mr Winthrop. He lives somewhere in the north, not so very far from Liverpool, and Uncle Ingram is sure he would go there if we like, and look about—where the docks are, you know. Arthur may be in Liverpool, and may sometimes go about them, if he has any idea of America still.”

“But he, Mr Winthrop, he does not even know Arthur by sight,” objected Lettice.

“No, but—Aunt Gertrude has an idea, she was speaking of it this evening—Philip Dexter is at the Winthrops’ for Christmas. Aunt Gertrude was saying if *he* went with Mr Winthrop.”

It was a good idea, though very distasteful to Lettice. She would have done anything to prevent Philip’s hearing of their trouble about Arthur, for she had a fear that he would in some way blame her for it. But she checked herself.

“I must bear what I have brought on myself,” she reflected. “I would give anything never to see Philip again, for he can never either like or respect me. He will not believe I even meant to speak the truth. But if he cares for Nina, and she for him, I have less right than ever to interfere. There is only one comfort—Godfrey Auriol never can know anything about *that*, and I’m certainly not bound to confess to *hint*. Indeed, it would be indelicate to Nina to do so.”

It was a relief to her that he was still in Scotland, and not to be back for Christmas. Her pride rose rampant at the thought of seeing him again, and at the triumph over her which she imagined he would feel. But she comforted herself somewhat with the reflection that for the future she need see very little of him, much less than heretofore, as her uncle, now really in his right position as their guardian, would be the one they would naturally consult.

And thus they spent Christmas Day. Some among them so thankful for the unexpected lifting of the clouds that they could not but be hopeful for the future—poor Lettice, though grateful and humble, yet feeling that it was the saddest Christmas she had ever spent.

Though Christmas Eve had brought some unexpected news, which seemed to throw a little light on the matter of which all their hearts were full. This was a letter from Mr Winthrop, in answer to the one telling him of Arthur Morison's disappearance, and asking his advice or help if he saw any way of giving either. He had at once caught up the idea that "the gentleman tramp" and Arthur were one and the same, and wrote giving all details of the two or three days during which he took refuge at the rectory, of his personal appearance, what he had said and refused to say, and everything there was to tell.

"When Philip comes—we expect him to-morrow," he wrote—"I will get him to go with me to Liverpool. There I shall at once see Simcox, for whom I gave Arthur, if it was he, a letter, and I have very little doubt but that we shall there hear of him. He was so *completely* ignorant of my being in any way connected with his family, that he will have had no fear as to availing himself of my introduction."

For the good rector had no knowledge of the conversation between the boys and Arthur when they accompanied him "a bit of the way" on his road. And Tom and Ralph were far too careless and unobservant to have noticed the start with which the young man had heard them speak of their "Uncle Ingram," or the questions he had put to them.

And Arthur himself, for whom so many hearts were aching and anxious, how did he spend this strange Christmas far from all he cared for, in such an entirely different atmosphere from any he had ever known?

Nothing could have been kinder, considering the circumstances in which he had come among them, than the way he was received and treated by the old farmer's family. Till Christmas was over he was to be a guest and nothing more.

"There's a time for all things," said James, who was jovially inclined—rather too much so sometimes for his Eliza's tastes. "Let business lay by till Christmas is over, any way, and then we'll see about it;" and he was profoundly distressed that no persuasions would make "John" drink a glass of wine, or even taste the bowl of punch with which they wound up, though in no unseemly fashion, the yearly festivities; while Eliza, on the other hand, was inclined to look upon it as a sign of his gentility.

The Christmas dinner was a dinner and no mistake. It began as soon as they had all got home from church in the morning; for James was a churchwarden, and would have been greatly scandalised had any one of the family played truant. So Eliza and her mother had to smother their anxieties as to the goose and the roast beef, the plum-pudding and mince-pies, in their housewifely bosoms, and their self-control was rewarded by finding all had prospered under the care of the little maid-of-all-work, in their absence.

On Christmas evening, when all the good cheer had been done justice to, and the draper and his family, with a few friends who had come in to taste the punch, were comfortably ensconced round the fire, Arthur managed to steal up to his room, to sit there quietly for a few minutes' thought. It was a small room, with a sloping roof and a dormer window, through which he could see the twinkling lights of the little town below, and the purer radiance of the innumerable stars above. For it was a most beautiful winter night. Not a cloud obscured the sky, but it was bitterly cold. Arthur got down his great-coat from the peg where it was hanging, and wrapped it round him, for he felt still colder from the contrast with the warmth of the room downstairs. And then he sat gazing out of the little window, feeling as absolutely cut off from all he had known and cared for, as if the sea already rolled between them! Some of the excitement which had led to the step he had taken had worn off. He no longer felt quite so sure that it had been the best and most unselfish thing to do, and there were times even, when he began to fancy that perhaps he, as well as Lettice, had exaggerated the consequences of his failure. But with this reflection, in his calmer state of mind, came another. Was not the present state of things, had not all his troubles been brought about by his want of moral courage? It was all very well to call it his consideration for Lettice's feelings; he was far too right-judging not to know that consideration of that kind carried too far, becomes insincerity, and foolish, wrong self-sacrifice. He knew, too, at the bottom of his heart, that for all the stress Lettice had laid on his dead father's and mother's wishes, they would have been the last to have urged upon him a profession which he had no taste for.

"They might have been *disappointed*," he said to himself, "but I can't think that they would have been angry. Not at least, if I had been frank with them." And words of his father's, which he had been too young at the time fully to understand, came back to his mind. "Don't be in too great a hurry, my boy. I have suffered too much from other people deciding my course in life for me before I was old enough to know my own mind. I *hope* you will be a soldier, but don't be in a hurry."

Why had this never come back to his memory before? He remembered it now so clearly. They were standing, his father and he, by a window—where was it?—somewhere from whence a wide expanse of sky was visible, and it must have been at night. "Yes, the stars were sparkling brightly, it was cold and clear." It must have been the association of these outward circumstances as well as the direction of his thoughts, that had revived the remembrance. But Arthur sighed deeply as he went on to reflect that it was now too late, the die was cast, he must go on with what he had begun, desolate and dreary though it now looked to him. The best he could hope for was by working hard and faithfully in this situation which had so unexpectedly offered itself, to earn enough money, joined to what he had, to take him to America, where, with a good recommendation, he might, it seemed to him, have a chance of something better. But even then, how many years must pass before he could hope to do more than maintain himself? He might, probably would, be a middle-aged man before he could begin to do anything towards repaying what his uncle had

done. And all these years, to have no tidings of his sisters and brother!—for he had recognised that only by cutting himself thus adrift, could he go on with what he had begun. It was too terrible to think of. And he set to work, as Nina had foreseen, to plan how he could manage to hear of them without revealing where he was.

“I don’t want them to write to me, for Nina and the little ones would be entreating me to come back, and I could not bear it. And, Lettice, even though it is in a sense her doing, is sure not to see it as I do. *She* would want me to try again to pass;” and Arthur shivered at the thought. “No, I dare not ask them to write to me. What can I do? How can I hear of them?”

He had not let Christmas Day pass without writing to them. It was strange to think that in a day or two they would have his letter, and know that he was safe and well, while he could hear nothing of them. The idea began to haunt him, so that at last he got up, took off his coat, and went downstairs again to the chatter and warmth of the draper’s best parlour.

How different to the Christmases he could remember! How different from last Christmas at Esparto! How different to the Christmas evening they would, so he imagined, be spending at Faxleham Cottage! Instead of the simple refinement, the low voices of his sisters, here were Eliza and her friends decked out in brilliant colours, laughing loudly at the jokes of their husbands and brothers, and little able to understand the new-comer’s not joining in the fun. He was very “genteel,” no doubt, the young ladies of the company agreed, but rather “stuck-up,” they should say, “for a young man as had his way to make in the world.” And Arthur, overhearing some of these remarks, wished that the fates had thrown him into the household of the old farmer and his wife rather than into that of their daughter. For, in their perfect simplicity and unpretentiousness, there was nothing to grate on him, and, as they sat rather apart from the rest, dutifully admiring all that was said and done, though perhaps wishing themselves back in their own quiet farmhouse, he felt that when they went away the next day things would seem still more uncongenial.

“I wish I knew anything about farming,” he said to his old friend, when he was sitting quietly by him; “I’d have asked you to take me on your farm.”

“And I’d have been glad to do it, my lad,” said the old man, whose liking for the young stranger had steadily increased, and whose thoughts this Christmas evening were softened by the remembrance of the son whom he fancied he “favoured;” “but thou’rt not made for farming. It takes a tougher sort than thee. And, what’s more, as it’s making money thou’st got in thy head, don’t go for to fancy as people make fortunes nowadays by farming. Better stick to James. He’s a bit short-like at first; but if you get into one another’s ways, you’ll find him a good master.”

The next day the draper had a long talk with his guest. He explained to him some part of the work, and told him he would by degrees teach him the whole.

“But, first,” he said, “I must tell you that before I show you the whole of my business, or even as much of it as you should know, which would take some time, and give me a good deal of trouble, as, of course, it’s all perfectly new to you, I should like to have some sort of security.”

Here Arthur interrupted him. “I can get some money,” he said. “Did Mr Felshaw,”—Mr Felshaw was the old farmer—“did he not tell you? I have some money I can give you as surety for my honesty;” and his face got red as he said it.

“No, no,” James replied. “It’s not security of that kind I mean. I’m not afraid of your honesty, somehow. I’d rather risk it. I think I know an honest face when I see one. What I was going to say was that I’d like some security that you’d stay, not be throwing it up at the end of a three months or so, and saying as how you were tired of it, or maybe,”—and here the draper hesitated a little—“it’s not likely now, is it, that any of your fine friends might be coming after you, and saying as you weren’t to stay? You’re not of age yet by a long way, I should say.”

“No,” said Arthur; “I’m not quite eighteen.”

“That’s three years off still, then,” said James. “But,” continued Arthur, “my friends are not likely to interfere, as they don’t know where I am.”

James raised his eyebrows.

“Are they likely to try to find out?” he said. “It’s not difficult to track any one nowadays. But you’ve no father and mother living Mr Felshaw told me.”

“No,” said Arthur; and then he hesitated. “My friends have not tried to find me yet,” he said.

“But,” continued James, “before you engage yourself to me, for a year say, mightn’t it be best to have it all clear and straightforward, and see as no one who has any right to interfere is likely to do so? Couldn’t you write and ask?” Arthur shook his head.

“I don’t want to give them any trouble about me,” he said. “I’ve done nothing wrong; but I’ve had a great deal of trouble and difficulty, and I want to show that I can manage for myself.”

“Well, well,” said James, “think it over, my lad. You can just go on for a while quietly, doing what you can. And then, when you have tried it a bit, and we see how we suit each other, if so be as you feel disposed to engage yourself for a year, I’ll put you in the way of things. You can employ yourself this morning in measuring off these bales of merino and alpaca, and marking the lengths of each. I’ll be in the front shop, and, if I want you, I’ll call you, just for you to begin to get used to it like.”

“Thank you very much indeed,” said Arthur. “I’ll think it over, and give you an answer as soon as I can.”

For even to his inexperience it was clear that he was being treated with unusual kindness and consideration. He did not overhear what James said to his wife that evening.

"You take my word for it, he'll not be with us long," he said. "He's not in his place, and he'll never take to it. He blushed up scarlet every time I called him, even though it was only old mother Green wanting grey flannel for a best jacket, or Miss Snippers' apprentice for some hooks and needles. If it had been any of the quality, I believe he'd have turned tail altogether. You'll see his friends'll be fetching him away. But if he likes to stay for a bit, he's welcome. I like a lad with a spirit of his own."

"And there's no doubt he has a very genteel appearance," observed Eliza complacently.

Chapter Twelve.

Ending Well.

"Wondrous it is to see in diverse mindes
How diversely Love doth his pageant play,
And shows his power in variable kindes."

Spenser.

The days went on. It was nearly a fortnight past the New Year, and nothing of moment had happened. Arthur's letter, written on Christmas Day, had been duly received, but it, any more than its predecessors, gave no clue to his present quarters. But to his sisters—to Nina especially—there was a softer tone in it; it was less bitter and yet less morbid. He wrote of his intense wish to see them, of his *hope* that he had acted rightly, of his earnest trust that some day they would, Lettice above all, learn to think of him as no longer one to be ashamed of, as a poor miserable failure. In all this there was comfort to Nina, but not to Lettice.

"I am sure, I can see he is getting into a healthier state of mind," said the younger sister eagerly. "If we could but write to him and tell him all we feel, I am sure he would come back, and we should all be happy again."

But Lettice shook her head.

"It is I," she said. "It is always I. Don't you see, Nina? It is I that he is afraid of. But for me I dare say he would come back; but for me he would never have gone away."

Godfrey Auriol had not yet returned. All this time Mr Morison was looking forward to his coming back as to a sort of goal.

"He is so quick-witted and alert," he said to Nina, for to Lettice he seldom spoke of his fellow-guardian—it was easy to see that the mention of his name always was met by her with shrinking and reluctance. "He is so energetic and clever, and he knows Arthur personally. I cannot help thinking that when he returns he will suggest something. Hitherto certainly everything has lamentably failed!"

For Mr Winthrop and Philip had been to Liverpool, had seen Mr Simcox, who could only assure them that no one in the least answering to the description of Arthur, or "the gentleman tramp," had applied to him, and that he had never received the letter of introduction; they had inquired, so far as they dared without transgressing Mr Morison's injunctions of privacy, in every part of the town, but without any result. There was even, after all, some amount of uncertainty as to whether the young man who had been so kindly received at the rectory *had* been Arthur Morison; though whether he were, or were not, Mr Winthrop was equally at a loss to explain his never having made use of the introduction he had so thankfully received.

"I wonder Philip has not come back to town, when he knows we are all here together," said Mrs Morison one evening. "I never knew him stay so long at the Winthrops' before."

"There may be some attraction," said Mr Morison. "You forget, my dear Gertrude, that your niece Daisy is seventeen now, and she bade fair to be a very pretty girl."

Nina was sitting at the piano. She had been playing, and had turned half carelessly on the stool, to join in the conversation going on. Suddenly she wheeled round and began playing again, more loudly and energetically than was her wont. Lettice, on her side, who was helping her aunt to pour out the tea, grew so pale that Mrs Morison was on the point of asking her what was the matter, when a slight warning touch of the girl's hand on her arm restrained her.

"I must warn Ingram," thought Mrs Morison, some vague remembrance returning to her of having heard or been told by some one of her nephew Philip's having greatly admired one of her husband's nieces. Lettice or Nina, which was it? Oh, Nina it must have been, that time she was staying with the Curries near Philip's home. And she stole a glance of sympathy at the girl at the piano, who continued to play, more softly now and with an undertone of sadness in her touch which seemed to appeal to her aunt's kind heart.

"Poor little thing," she thought. "But if there *is* anything in it, it will not be difficult to put it right."

She turned to look for Lettice, with some vague idea of seeking her confidence on the subject. Lettice was sitting quietly at a little distance, with a book open before her. Mrs Morison was crossing the room to sit down beside her, when a ring at the bell made them all start. Not that rings at the bell are so uncommon an occurrence in a London house, but it was getting late, no visitor was expected, and the ring had a decided and slightly authoritative sound.

"It is like Auriol's ring," said Mr Morison; and the words were scarcely out of his mouth when the door was thrown open, and Mr Auriol was announced.

Every one jumped up. For a few minutes there was a bustle of surprise and welcome, questions asked and answered, so that Lettice's quiet greeting passed among the rest, without any one specially remarking it. She was inexpressibly thankful when it was over, and in her heart grateful to Godfrey for making this first meeting under the so strangely altered circumstances pass so easily.

"I have only just got back," he said when the hubbub had subsided, and Mrs Morrison had rung for fresh tea. "I came on here as soon as I had changed my clothes. I have been travelling all day. That last place where I was at is so frightfully out of the way, but I stayed a night at the Winthrops'."

He spoke faster than usual, and it was not difficult for any one used to him to detect some underlying excitement. Lettice, at least, did so, and sympathised in it, as for the first time it struck her that this meeting was for him, too, difficult and trying. She said nothing, but when her aunt exclaimed, "Travelling all to-day? Dear me! You must be tired," she murmured gently, "Yes, indeed;" and Godfrey caught her words, faint as they were, and looked pleased.

"I was so anxious to hear if—if you had heard anything more," he said; and though he did not name Arthur, every one knew that was what he meant.

"Nothing more," said Mr Morison, for the last letter, bearing date now nearly a fortnight ago, had been communicated to Mr Auriol. "I must have a long talk with you about it all, Auriol. I think it is about time to be doing something more energetic, and yet we have all agreed in feeling very reluctant to making any 'to-do' that could possibly be avoided."

"Oh yes," said Nina fervently, clasping her hands.

Mr Auriol sat silent for a moment or two. Then he looked up and said—

"You have no idea, I suppose, who it is that posts his letters for him?"

Mr Morison looked a little bewildered.

"They are all posted in London, I think you told me?" added Mr Auriol.

"To be sure," said Mr Morison. "Yes. I have once or twice wondered who does it, unless it is himself? No, by-the-by, he has distinctly said he is not in London. I *have* thought of it, but not very much. I fancied it so hopeless to get any clue in that way."

"But it must be some one in his confidence, some one, I should almost say, whom he had a claim on," said Godfrey. "For there is a certain amount of risk in doing it; the person might be blamed for having taken any part in it. Is there no one any of you have ever heard of who would be likely to agree to do Arthur a service of the kind?" He looked round, but his glance seemed to rest on Lettice. No one spoke.

"You must all think it over," he said. "It's only a suggestion, but something may come of it." And soon after, allowing that he *was* very tired, he said "Good night," and went away.

Lettice, in the quiet of her own room, realised how kindly and considerately he had behaved. His matter-of-fact manner had been the greatest relief, and nothing that he could have said could have been so full of tact and delicacy as his saying nothing.

"I do believe," thought the girl, her impulsive nature aglow again, "I do believe he hurried out here to-night as much for my sake as on account of his anxiety. He knew his coming in that sudden unlooked-for way would carry off the awkwardness. It is very generous of him." Then her thoughts reverted to what he had suggested. *Did* she know any one standing in such a position to Arthur? She sat long thinking, asking herself the question, when suddenly, by that curious process by which it sometimes seems as if the machinery of our brain obeyed our orders unconsciously to ourselves—there dashed into her memory a name, a sentence she had heard Arthur utter. The name was "Dawson," and as she repeated it to herself, she seemed to hear her brother's voice saying thoughtfully—

"Yes, I do believe there's one person in the world who'd do anything for me. It's that fellow Dawson. I've told you about him, Lettice?" Yes, he had told her about him, though he probably had forgotten doing so, just as she, till this moment, had forgotten having heard it. Now, by slow degrees, it came back to her. Dawson had been a young servant in Mr Downe's service, and by a fall from a ladder had broken his leg. Being naturally delicate, this accident had altogether ruined his health; he was pronounced incurably lame, and Arthur had done his utmost to help and comfort the poor boy. I do not know that Lettice remembered all these details so clearly, but they were the facts, and she recalled enough to make her sure that Dawson was worth looking up. She knew he *had* been living at the little town near to which was Mr Downe's "cramming" establishment; she felt almost sure his home was there. In any case, it was more than probable he would there be heard of; and surely, surely it was worth trying!

Whatever were Lettice Morison's faults and failings, want of courage and determination were not among them. Her plans were soon made.

It was but little sleep that fell to her share that night.

"I must go alone," she said to herself. "If I have discovered Arthur's secret I have no right to share it with any other till I know what he himself wishes. Besides, it is I who am to blame for his having been driven away; it is I who should bring him back."

She quickly made her arrangements. For the second time in the course of but a few weeks, she wrote a note for Nina

to find after she should have left—a note to some extent explaining what she was about.

“I think I have got a clue, dearest Nina,” she said. “But I must follow it up alone. Do not be the least uneasy about me. I shall probably be back in a few hours; if not, I will telegraph in the course of the day.”

This was about all that Nina had to show to her uncle, when at breakfast-time that morning she rushed downstairs with the tidings of Lettice’s disappearance. Mr Morison looked, and was, terribly put out. For the first time, his patience seemed about to desert him.

“It is really too bad,” he said. “What have I done or left undone that Lettice should meet me with so little confidence? It is all nonsense about her being the only person who could act, if indeed there is anything to act about. It is too bad!” And then, catching sight of the excessive distress in Nina’s gentle face, his kind heart smote him for adding to it.

“After all,” he said, more cheerfully than he felt, “I do not know that there is anything to be really uneasy about I quite expect her back by luncheon. We let her off too easily the last time, eh, Nina? Poor child! What a child she is, to do things in this silly, ill-considered way!”

They went in to breakfast, and Nina tried to follow her uncle’s example, and to believe that there was nothing to be seriously alarmed about. But neither Mr nor Mrs Morison eat anything, and seemed eager to leave the table, in order, no doubt, to discuss what steps to take.

“Dear me,” thought poor Nina, her eyes filling with tears, “*what* trouble, from first to last, we have caused them!”

Just as the mockery of a breakfast was over—Miss Branksome and the younger children had had theirs earlier—and the three were rising from the table, there came, as the evening before, a short, sharp, authoritative ring at the door-bell.

“That sounds like Auriol again,” said Mr Morison, smiling at his own fancifulness, “though of course it can’t be at this time of the morning.” But he was mistaken. It *was* Mr Auriol. In he hurried, not waiting for the footman to announce him, a bright, eager expression on his face, an opened envelope in his hand.

“Good news!” he cried. “I have a letter from Arthur, giving an address to which I may write, if I have good news for *him*. I could not rest till I told you of it, so I rushed up here at once. Will you give me a cup of tea, Mrs Morison? The letter was to be private *unless* I could guarantee *all* of you feeling—as I know you do about it, Lettice especially. It all hangs on her, but I know she will be only too ready. Where is she—not down yet?”

The three others looked at each other—for a moment forgetting their own trouble in honest reluctance to chill poor Godfrey’s evident delight. Nina was the first to speak.

“Oh!” she said, and the exclamation came from the very bottom of her heart, “if Lettice had but waited till breakfast-time!”

He looked up in bewildered amazement. Then all had to be told, and Lettice’s letter shown. Godfrey bit his lips till it made Nina nervous to watch him, as he read it.

“What is the meaning of it? Is it my fault again? Have I frightened her away?” he said almost piteously.

At which, of course, they all exclaimed, though he seemed hardly convinced by what they said. Then he told them about Arthur’s letter. It had been drawn forth by the terrible home-sickness which had begun to prey upon him, and by the necessity of his coming to a decision about binding himself to his present employer for a considerable time. He gave no particulars as to where he was, or how employed, but spoke of his misery at being without any tidings of all at home, and how at last the idea had come to him of confiding in Godfrey. “I trust you implicitly, even though you are my guardian,” he said naïvely, “not to speak of this letter, not to endeavour to find me, unless you are assured that they all want me to come back; that they will not be, Lettice especially, ashamed of me; that Lettice will not insist on my trying again when I know I should again fail. All depends on Lettice.”

Then he gave the address to which Mr Auriol was to write, but entreated him not to let the person living at that address be blamed, or fall into any trouble on his account. “He has been a faithful friend,” Arthur wrote; “but for him I could not have written home at all.”

“Who is it?” asked Mr Morison.

“I have no idea,” said Godfrey. “I saw no necessity for inquiring. I meant just to write, and to ask his sisters to do so,” he went on. “I felt sure they, Miss Morison especially, would know how to write so as to bring him back at once. But now—there is no use writing till we know where she is, and what she is doing; and yet,” he glanced at the envelope, “he will be already wondering at my silence. This letter has been following me about for more than a week.”

“Mr Auriol,” said Nina suddenly, “do you remember what you asked us last night? To try to think of any one whom Arthur may have employed to post his letters. That may have put something in Lettice’s head; she may have thought of some one. I have a vague idea of some young man, some boy, living near Mr Downe’s, whom Arthur was kind to.”

“This may be he,” said Mr Auriol. “The letter is to be sent under cover to ‘T. Dawson,’ in a village near Fretcham, where Mr Downe’s is.”

“I believe that is where she has gone. She must have remembered it,” said Mr Morison. “What shall we do?”

“I shall start at once,” said Godfrey. “‘T. Dawson,’ whoever he is, will not be so startled by me as by any one else, as

he has sent on this letter to me. And of course there will be no treachery to Arthur in his telling me if Miss Morison has been there."

"Perhaps it is the best thing to do," said Mr Morison, "though I would gladly have gone myself."

"And I do so hope you will bring Lettice back with you," said Nina.

And almost before they had realised his apparition among them, he was gone.

"Another long miserable day of waiting for telegrams," said poor Nina piteously. And then determining to follow sensible Miss Branksome's advice, she went in search of her, to beg her to suggest some employment to make the time of suspense pass more quickly.

"Give me some piece of hard work, please. A very difficult German translation might do, or a piece of very fine old lace to mend." And poor Miss Branksome was cudgelling her brains as to what to propose, when Mrs Morison's voice, calling Nina, interrupted them.

"Nina, I want you," said her aunt. "Will you help me to write some notes and to attend to several little things I want done quickly? For I have just had a word from Philip Dexter. He has come back, and is to be here at luncheon, and I should not like to be busy the first time he comes after so long."

Thus occupation was found both for Nina's fingers and thoughts.

Late, very late that evening, a lady in mourning got out of the train at a junction far away in the north.

"This is Merton Junction, is it not?" she said timidly. "It is here that one changes for Greenwell, is it not?"

"Greenwell," said the porter questioningly; "that is on the other side of Middleham, is it not?" For Greenwell was a very little town.

"I don't know," said Lettice—for Lettice of course it was—"I thought everybody would know it here. They told me in London to take my ticket to Merton, and then get another."

The porter looked confused and rather bothered. He was on the point of leaving the station for the night. There were no more trains for an hour or two. He did not know what to do with this unfortunate traveller, and yet, not being of a surly nature, did not like to throw her off.

It ended in the poor man's giving himself a good deal of trouble to find out that there was no train for Greenwell till four o'clock in the morning. There was nothing for it but for Lettice to spend the night in the desolate waiting-room of the station, for the junction was some distance from the small town of the name. Even had she felt able to walk there, Lettice could hardly have had a couple of hours' sleep before she would have had to come back again.

It was not a cheerful prospect—four or five hours at a railway station in the middle of the night in January. The porter poked up the fire, and told her she'd no need to be "afeard;" he would speak to the night-porters, there'd be a couple of them there, and at four o'clock there'd be some one to give her her ticket. And with a friendly "good night," none the less so for the fee which Lettice gave him, he went off.

She *was* a little frightened. In vain she told herself she had no need to be so. All the horrible stories she had ever heard of in such circumstances returned to her mind. She tried to sleep on the hard horsehair sofa, and succeeded in dozing uncomfortably, to be startled awake by one of the night-porters coming in to stir up the fire. Then she dozed again, to wake shivering with cold, the fire out, the faint gaslight sufficing but to make darkness visible. She started up; there was light enough to see the time by her watch. With the greatest relief, she saw that it was half-past three!

Half an hour later, she had got her ticket, and was stepping into a first-class carriage of the train, which had come in from the south, and was going on to Middleham.

"Now at last," thought Lettice, "my troubles are over. In a few hours more I shall be with Arthur."

As she settled herself in her place, she saw by the feeble lamp-light that there were two other persons in the carriage—two gentlemen. She glanced at them, but with no interest curiosity, and she distinguished neither of their faces. One, an elderly man, got out at the first station they stopped at. The little bustle of handing him some of his belongings brought Lettice face to face with the remaining passenger. Both started, both gave vent to an exclamation; but Lettice's was of dismay, her companion's of relief.

"Mr Auriol!"

"Lettice—Miss Morison, how thankful I am to have found you!"

Lettice's face, cold as it was, burned.

"Found me!" she repeated. "Have you been sent after me to look for me? There was no need for anything of the kind. I telegraphed yesterday to say I was coming on to—" She hesitated, not sure if she would, to *him*, say whither she was bound. But her tone was full of resentment.



"WILL YOU ALWAYS MISUNDERSTAND ME?" HE SAID. Page 218.

Godfrey gave a sigh that was half a groan, of something very like despair.

"Will you *always* misunderstand me?" he said.

"What can I say? What can I do? You seem to think I have a mission in life of annoying and insulting you. What can a man do to prove that he does not deserve to be so thought of?"

Lettice looked at him in amazement, not unmixed with compunction. Was this the calm, stately Mr Auriol? Did he so care for her opinion? She could hardly take it in; and then, by a quick revulsion, she remembered how only the night before she had called him, and felt that he deserved to be called, generous.

"I am sorry for being so hasty," she said. "But I don't see why you or any one need have followed me. I wanted," she went on, and her eyes filled with tears—"I wanted to have done it all myself. It—it was my fault Arthur went away; I wanted to be the one to bring him back."

Godfrey moved away. He could hardly help smiling, and yet he was so sorry for her. What a child she was! What a mixture of gentleness and obstinacy, of generosity and devotion and self-will!

"Lettice," he said very, very gently, but very seriously nevertheless, "there are some things in which you *must* yield to those older and more experienced than you. It is *not* right for a young creature like you—so—now, you must not be angry—so lovely, and so sure to be remarked, to go running about the country, however good your motive may be. You don't know, you can hardly imagine, the anxiety they—we have all been in!"—and he hesitated—"I, I do believe, the most of all."

"*You*," said Lettice, and the tears in her eyes began slowly to trickle down her face. "You hate me, I know. Why should you mind what I do? It is I that have caused you all the trouble."

"I hate you?" he repeated. "Lettice, are you saying that on purpose? Yes, you have caused me more trouble than any one else has ever done, because, from the first moment I ever saw you, from that first evening at Esparto, I have *loved* you, Lettice. And everything has been against me. I am mad to tell you this; I meant never to have let it pass my lips."

Lettice's face was burning, but not with anger. She herself could not have defined her own feelings. She tried to speak, but the words were all but inaudible.

"You make me ashamed," she said. "I can't understand it."

But at that moment the train slackened. The faint morning light was struggling in the cold wintry sky. Mr Auriol

sprang from his seat.

"We get out here," he said. "This is Middleham;" and, submissive at last, Lettice allowed him to help her out of the carriage. He took her at once to the best hotel of the place, and then, having ordered some breakfast, of which she was sorely in need, for she had eaten almost nothing the day before, he gave her Arthur's letter to read, and explained to her what he intended to do. *Her* plans had been of the simplest.

"I meant just to go to the address at Greenwell and ask for him," she said; and she quickly saw that Mr Auriol's intention of telegraphing to Arthur at once to come over to see him at Middleham was much better.

"It will involve him in no awkwardness," he said, "nor will it lead to his blaming Dawson, poor fellow. For I," he added, with a smile, "am armed with his own credentials;" and he touched the letter as he spoke.

"You don't think Arthur will be angry with Dawson," said Lettice, "or," she went on, and the idea struck Mr Auriol as very comical, "with *me*? I *made* Dawson tell me."

An hour later Mr Auriol returned to the sitting-room, where he had left Lettice, with an open telegram in his hand.

"This is from Arthur," he said, "or rather from 'John Morris,'" he added, with a slight smile, as he handed it to Lettice.

"Thousand thanks. Will be with you by twelve," was the telegram.

"I don't think there is much fear of his being angry with anybody," observed Mr Auriol.

"Thanks to you. It was so much better to send for him than to go there," said Lettice impulsively.

Godfrey's face flushed. He half turned away; then, taking courage, he came nearer again.

"Lettice," he said, "are you not angry with *me*? I forgot myself. It is very good of you not to resent it."

"Resent it!" said Lettice simply. "How *could* I do so? I can't quite believe that you knew what you were saying. I think you must be so sorry for me, for all the trouble I have brought on myself and on other people, that—that—just that you are very sorry for me. For one thing," and her voice grew very low and her face very red, "I thought you cared for Nina."

"You, too!" he exclaimed. "How extraordinary! It is a good thing I do not, not in that way, for I should have had no chance of success. I met Philip Dexter at the Winthrops', where I stayed a night; and—I think he would not mind my telling you—in talking together rather confidentially, I found out that he, too, has had that idea, and has been very unhappy. But I put it all right, and he's back in London by this time. We may hear some news on our return."

"Did he tell you what gave him the idea?" asked Lettice, almost in a whisper.

"Some chance words of mine at Esparto," said Godfrey.

"It is very generous of him to have said so. But it was not only that," said Lettice, her eyes filling with tears.

But, somehow or other, the confession she made of this new offence did not lower her in Mr Auriol's eyes as hopelessly as she had expected.

A few days later a happily reunited family were assembled in Mr Morison's house. How easy it was for Lettice to convince Arthur of the complete change in her feelings, when she told him of the little-hoped-for reconciliation with their uncle, may be imagined! How more than ready to forgive her unfortunate influence in their affairs she found Philip and Nina! How her uncle and aunt promised to forget the anxiety she had caused them, on condition of her never again thus setting aside the judgment and experience of her natural protectors! How more than amazed was everybody when, a few weeks later, by which time Lettice had learnt to believe that Godfrey Auriol *did* mean what he said, her engagement to him was announced! All these "hows" I must also leave to my reader's imagination.

The old farmer and his family, whose honest kindness had so fortunately intervened to save poor Arthur from taking some really foolish step, were not forgotten. And in after-days, when his wish was fulfilled, and he had replaced his uncle at the head of his firm, he would sometimes recall with a smile the days when he had measured grey flannel and wrapped up parcels of tapes and ribbons for the dames of Greenwell.

There are many ways in which life's lessons are taught. Some have to go through hard and sorrowful experiences—harder, it often seems, than they merit; others, like Lettice, learn true humility and sacrifice of self-will by gentler discipline. As she often said to herself—

"How can I ever be good enough to show my gratitude? How little have I deserved such happiness—I who might have ruined not merely my own life, but those of others, by my foolish obstinacy!"

And "prejudice" was a word and a sentiment which Lettice Auriol's children were never allowed to know the meaning of.

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