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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IMOGEN; OR, ONLY EIGHTEEN ***

Mrs Molesworth

"Imogen"

"Only Eighteen"

Chapter One.

The Spirits of the Fells.

"Grey Fells Hall" was, I believe, the real name of the old house—the name by which it was described in the ancient deeds and documents, some of them *so* ancient as to be perfectly illegible, of which more than one chestful still existed in the squire's safe, built into the wall of his business room. But "The Fells" it had been called from time immemorial, and would no doubt continue to be thus known. It was a cheerful, comfortable, and not unpicturesque old place, with nothing grim about it except the dark, rugged rocks at one side, from which it took its name, whose very grimness, however, but enhanced the calm beauty of the pleasant slope of pasture land to the south.

On this side, too, it was well wooded, and by trees of a respectable size, notwithstanding the northern latitude and the not very distant sea. But it is no story of a lonely, dreary, half-deserted grange I have to tell. The Fells was deserted but during three months of the orthodox London season; for the rest of the year it was full, sometimes to overflowing. For the Helmont family who inhabited, it were a legion in themselves, and seldom content without congenial society in the persons of the innumerable visitors whose list every summer seemed to lengthen. "The boys" had their friends, a host to start with, for "the boys" began with Captain Helmont in a cavalry regiment, and ended with Cecil at Eton. And the girls were all grown up; two married, three still at home intent on finding as much fun and amusement in life as wealth, health, and good looks could unite in achieving. To assist them in this untiring pursuit, the companionship of kindred spirits was of course eminently desirable.

Papa and Mamma Helmont had their cronies too, though scarcely as many as their children. So one way and another The Fells was rarely free from visitors. "A family party" was almost unknown, and not desired. The young Helmonts were all more or less spoiled; nature and circumstances had done their part as well as the father and mother. The Squire was very rich and very liberal; he liked to see people about him happy, and saw no reason why he should not do so. Trouble of any kind had come near the family but slightly; perhaps their organisations were not of the most sensitive order to begin with, still they passed muster as good-natured and kindly, and to a certain extent this was true. If the other side of the medal revealed a touch of coarseness, of inconsiderateness for others, verging upon undisguised selfishness, it was scarcely perhaps surprising; prosperity, in some directions, is by no means the unalloyed blessing one might esteem it, to judge by the universal envy it arouses.

But the Helmonts are not, after all, the most prominent characters in my story. They serve as a background merely—a substantial and not unpleasing one on the whole, with their handsome persons, their genial ways; best of all, perhaps, their rough-and-ready honesty.

I have said that they were hospitable—to a fault. Curiously enough, however, the first words we hear from them would almost seem to contradict this.

It is Alicia, the eldest daughter at home, the second in actual order of seniority in the family, who is speaking.

"You needn't exaggerate so about it, Florence. It is tiresome and provoking, just when we had got our set so nicely arranged. Still, after all, a girl of that age—almost a child."

"That's the very point," said Florence, impatiently. "I wonder you don't see it, Alicia. If she were older and had seen anything—an ordinary sort of a girl—one might leave her to look after herself. But when mother puts it to us in that way, appealing to us to be kind to the child for her sake, for old association's sake, what can one say? I call it

ridiculous, I do really. I didn't think mother was so sentimental."

"It is a great bore, certainly," Miss Belmont agreed. "But I wouldn't worry myself about it, Florence. Take it easy as I do."

Florence gave a little laugh. It was not an ill-natured laugh, though there was a touch of contempt in it. For Alicia's "taking things easily" was proverbial in the family, and was probably as much to be traced to a certain amount of constitutional indolence, as to the imperturbable good temper which it must be allowed she possessed. Florence's laugh in no way disconcerted her.

"Or," she continued, with for once a little sparkle of mischief in her rather sleepy brown eyes, "give her over to Trixie's tender mercies. Trixie and Mabella Forsyth can take her in hand."

Florence turned upon her sister almost fiercely. She was the least placid, though decidedly the cleverest of the Belmont daughters.

"Alicia!" she exclaimed, "you can't think that you are making things easier for me by talking like that. I have *some* little sense of what is due to a guest, especially after the way mother has put it. Trixie indeed! Why, I mean to do my best to keep the girl out of Trixie's and Mabella's notice altogether. I pity her if she is what I expect, if she should come in their way. They are particularly wild just now, too."

"Mother should have waited till Mabella was gone," said Alicia, calmly.

"Of course she should. But she couldn't, by the bye. Mrs What's-her-name—Wentworth—this Mrs Wentworth wrote offering a visit before Christmas, when they are going abroad somewhere. Oh, it really is too bad—"

The sisters were together in a sitting-room, appropriated to themselves, and in which they firmly believed that an immense amount of important business was transacted. It was a pretty little room, not specially tidy it must be confessed; but with the comfortable, prosperous air peculiar to everything to do with the Belmont family.

"Yes," Florence repeated, "it is too bad."

She pushed her chair back impatiently from the table at which she had been writing; as she did so, the door opened. Her brother Oliver and another man came in.

"What's the matter? Florence, you look, for you, decidedly—how shall I express it?—not cross, 'discomposed' shall we say? Scold her, Rex; she has an immense respect for you, like every one else. Impress upon her that there is nothing and nobody in this weary world worth putting one's self out about."

The person addressed—a man ten years at least the senior of Oliver Belmont, who was the brother next in age to Florence—smiled slightly.

"What is the matter, Florence?" he repeated in turn, as he took up his station on the hearthrug; for it was November, and chilly.

"Ask Alicia," said Florence. "She's patienter than I. I'm too cross to explain."

Major Winchester looked towards Miss Belmont.

"It's nothing to make such a fuss about," she said. "It's only Florrie's way."

"It's not the *family* way, it must be allowed," remarked Oliver, complacently.

Major Winchester glanced at him quickly, not to say sharply.

"No," he said drily, "it is not.—Well, Alicia?"

"It's only that some stupid people are coming to stay here next week—a mother and daughter, and we have too many women already, for one thing. And the girl is almost a child, only just out, and the mother's not much better, I fancy. They have been living in some out-of-the-way place, I forget where, for some years, since the father's death, and he was an old friend of mother's, and his parents were very good to her long ago, when her parents died. So she wants to be kind to this girl, and she's rather put her upon Florence and me, and—I don't see that it's anything to fuss about, but—"

"As you have never fussed about anything since you were born, Alicia, it isn't to be expected you will begin now," said Florence.

"No, Rex, it's on my shoulders altogether, and I do say it's too bad. It's seven years ago since I was eighteen, I've forgotten all about it. I don't understand girls of that age, and I have my hands full of other things, too. And—"

"Make her over to Trixie," said Oliver.

"Trixie's only a year older."

Florence glanced at him with contempt. This second time of the suggestion as to Trixie being made, she did not condescend to notice it in words.

"Don't interrupt your sister, Noll," said Major Winchester.—"Well, Florence?"

"Well?" she repeated. "'Ill,' I say. What more do you want, Rex? Haven't I told you enough?"

"Who are these unfortunate people?" he asked after a moments pause. "What is their name?"

"Wentworth," said Alicia. Florence didn't seem inclined to speak. "Mrs and Miss Wentworth. The mother herself can't be very old, I fancy, and the daughter, as we said, is only seventeen or eighteen."

"Poor little soul!" said Major Winchester.

Florence faced round upon him.

"Now Rex," she said, "if you call that comforting me, and—"

"I never said I was going to comfort you," he said. "I never had the very slightest intention of doing anything of the kind, I can assure you. You don't need comforting, and if you think you do, it only proves the more that you don't."

"What do I need, then?" she asked more submissively than she would have spoken to many. "Scolding?"

"Something like it," he began. But here he was interrupted. Both Alicia and Oliver turned to leave the room.

"Rather you than I, Florrie," said her brother.

"I've had my lecture from him this morning, and I don't want any more."

"And I must go to have a dress tried on, I'm sorry to say," said Alicia. "Besides which," she added confidentially to Oliver when the door was safely closed behind them, "Rex is a very fine fellow, we all know, but his sermonisings are rather too much of a good thing now and then. And if it's Florrie he's at, there's never any saying when he'll leave off, for you see she answers him back, and argues, and all the rest of it. How she can be troubled to do it, I cannot conceive!"

"She's not cast in *quite* the same mould as the rest of us, I'm afraid," said Oliver.

"For that reason I suppose Rex thinks her the most promising to try his hand on."

"He might be satisfied with Eva," said Miss Belmont. "He can twist and turn and mould her as it suits him. Why can't he let other people alone?"

"He's looking out for new worlds to conquer, I suppose," said Oliver. "Eva's turned out; complete, perfect, hall-marked."

"Well, he might leave poor Florrie alone," said Alicia.

"My dear child, you are unreasonable. As far as I remember, you and she poured out your woes and grievances to him, and he was bound to answer."

"He might have sympathised with her and let her grumble," said Miss Belmont. "However, perhaps it will distract her attention. Poor Florrie," with a gentle little sigh, "it's a pity she takes things to heart so."

"There's a lot of vicarious work of that kind to do hereabouts for any one who's obliging enough to do it," said Oliver. "But I agree with you, Florrie's had plenty; she needn't go about hunting up worries for herself. After all, I daresay the little schoolgirl will be very good fun," and he went off whistling.

It was true. Florrie was not a Belmont out and out. She had had some troubles too. Of the whole family she was the only one who had been misguided enough to fall in love with a—or the—wrong person. And she had done it thoroughly when she was about it. He was a very unmistakably wrong person, judged even by the not exaggeratedly severe standard of the family of The Fells. He was a charming, unprincipled ne'er-do-weel, who had run through two, if not three fortunes, and in a moment of depression had amused himself by falling in love with Florence Belmont, or allowing her to do so with him. They had been childish friends, and the touch of something big and generous in the girl's nature, a something shared by all the Belmonts, but which in her almost intensified into devotion, had made her always "stand up for Dick." Foolish, reckless, even she allowed that he was; but selfish, heartless, unprincipled, no, she could not see it, and never would. So it was hard necessity and not conviction that forced her to give in and promise her father to have nothing more to say to him.

"He'd be starving, and you with him, within a couple of years," said Mr Belmont. "For stupid as he is in many ways, he'd manage to get hold of your money somehow, tie it up as I might, and I would never get at the truth of things till it was too late; you would be hiding it and excusing him. Ah, yes! I know it all," and the Squire shook his head sagely, as if he had been the father of half a dozen black sheep, at least; whereas, all the Belmont boys had turned out respectably, if not brilliantly.

So Florence gave in, but it changed her: it was still changing her. There was a chance yet, if she fell under wise influence, of its changing her "for good," in the literal sense of the words. But she was sore and resentful, impatient of sympathy even; it would take *very* wise and tactful and loving influence to bring the sweet out of the bitter.

Her second-cousin Rex, like the rest of her family and some few outsiders, knew the story and had pitied her sincerely. He had hoped about her, too; hoped that trouble was to soften and deepen the softer and deeper side of Florence's character. But there was the other side, too—the pleasure-loving, rough-and-ready, selfish Belmont nature. Major Winchester sighed a little, inaudibly, as he looked down at the girl and caught sight of the hardening lines on her handsome, determined face.

"If she could have been alone with Eva, just at that time," he thought to himself.

"Florence," he said at last, after a little pause. They two were alone in the room.

"Well? say on; pray don't apologise."

"I think you are really rather absurd about this little girl, Miss Wentworth; is that her name? It is the smallest of troubles, surely, to have to look after her for a day or two. Are you not making a peg of her to hang other worries on?"

"Well, yes, perhaps so," said Florence, honestly. She would bear a good deal from Rex. "Perhaps I am. But that is just what I *do* complain of. I'm tired, Rex, and cross, and they all know it. They needn't put anything fresh on me just now."

"Who are *they*? It is only my aunt's doing, as far as I understand, is it not?" he said.

"Of course mamma is responsible for the people's coming. But it's just as much the others' fault that it's all to fall on me. Alicia is too indolent for anything, and Trixie—you know, Rex, Trixie is going too far. She really forgets she's a lady sometimes. That's why mamma has to appeal to me in any difficulty of the kind."

"Well, my dear child, you should be proud to feel it is so."

Florence's face softened a little.

"I might be," she said, "if I felt myself the least worthy of her confidence. I don't mean that I won't do what she asks; but look at the way I am doing it. I have wasted a couple of hours and any amount of temper this very morning over the thing. No, Rex, it's too late for me to learn to be unselfish and self-sacrificing, and all these fine things. I'm not Eva."

"No, but you're Florence, which is much more to the purpose. And, if you care about my affection and interest in you—you have both, Florrie dear, and in no scant measure."

Florence's head was turned away; for a moment she did not speak. Was it possible that a tear fell on her lap? Rex almost fancied it, and it touched him still more.

"May not this very opportunity of self-denial, and having to take some trouble for another person, for perhaps small, if any, thanks—may it not perhaps be just the very best thing that could come in your way just now, dear?" he said, very gently. No one could have detected a shadow of "preachiness" in the words; besides there was that about the man, his perfect manliness, his simple dignity, that made such an association of ideas in connection with him impossible.

Florence looked up. There *were* tears in her eyes, but she was smiling, too.

"Perhaps," she said. "How you do put things, Rex! Well, if I do try to be good about it, will you promise to praise me a little—just a little, quite privately you know, for encouragement; beginners need encouragement, and I've never tried to be unselfish in my life. At least—oh I *could* have been, Rex!"

"You could have been devotion itself, Florrie, I know," he said. "But devotion to a bad cause? However," seeing that she shrank from the allusion, "we need not touch upon that. I'll do what I can to help you in this little matter, I promise you."

"At least you can help me to keep the girl out of Trixie's way—Trixie and that horrid Mabella Forsyth. There is no saying what they mightn't do if she's an innocent, inexperienced sort of creature, as she can't but be. And very pretty, too—extraordinarily pretty, by her mother's account; that won't make ugly Mab like her any better either."

"I thought she—Miss Forsyth—prided herself on being plain, and was sincerely indifferent about looks," said Major Winchester, rather inconsequently.

Florence laughed scornfully.

"My dear Rex," she said. "So you believe *that*! You are not more than a child yourself in some ways. I shall have to protect you as well as Miss Imogen."

"Imogen! What a pretty name!" he said.

"I don't like it; high-flown and romantic, I call it," said Florence as she left the room.

Chapter Two.

"The Girl" and her Mother.

November outside—a less attractive November than even up in the north among the Fells. For there, at least, though chilly and raw, it was clear and *clean*. Here, in a London lodging, very unexceptionable as to respectability and practical cleanliness, but not much above the average of London lodgings as regards attractiveness, it—whatever "it" means, the day, the weather, the general atmosphere—was assuredly not the former, and did not *look* the latter. For it was a morning of incipient fog; a state of things even less endurable—like an ailment before it has thoroughly declared itself—than full-fledged fog at its worst. Naturally so, for mature fog cannot last more than a day or two

after all, whereas indefinite fog may be indefinite as to duration as well as quality. And besides this, thorough fog has its compensations; you draw down the blinds and light the lamps, and leave off pretending it is a normal day; you feel a certain thrill of not unpleasing excitement; "it is surely *the* worst that has yet been known"—what may not be *going* to happen next; the end of the world, or a German invasion?

Hoarse cries from the streets, rendered still more unearthly by the false sound of distance that comes with the thickened air, garbled tales of adventure filtering up through the basement from the baker's boy, who, through incredible perils, has somehow made his way to the area gate; the children's shouts of gleeful excitement at escaping lessons, seeing that the daily governess "can't possibly be coming now, mamma;" all and everything adds to the general queerness and vague expectancy, in itself a not unexhilarating sensation.

But things were only at the dull unromantic stage of fog this morning at Number 33 Bouverie Terrace, where two ladies were seated at breakfast. It was not a bad little breakfast in its way. There were temptingly fried bacon and London muffins, and the coffee looked and scented good. But the room was foggy, and the silver was electroplate of the regulation lodging-house kind, and there was nothing extraordinarily cheering in the surroundings in general, nothing to call up or explain the beaming pleasure, the indescribable sunshininess, pervading the whole person of the younger of the two companions; brightness and pleasure reflected scarce undiminished on the older face of her mother as she sat behind the breakfast tray.

"It is just too beautiful, too lovely, mamsey dear. And oh, how clever it was of you to think of it! We might have been years and years without ever coming across these old friends, mightn't we?" she exclaimed.

"We might never have come across them; probably we never should, if I had left it to chance," said Mrs Wentworth, with a little tone of complacency. "But that I would scarcely have thought it right to do, considering the old friendship and the kindness Mrs Belmont when a girl received from my people. Not that I can remember it clearly, of course; she is ever so much older than I,"—and here the complacency became a little more evident. "Why, her eldest daughter, Mrs Poland, can't be much under thirty-five."

"*Almost* as old as you, mamsey," said Imogen.

"For you know you're not forty yet, and I don't think I'm *ever* going to allow you to be forty."

"You silly child," said her mother, smiling. "Why, you may be married before we know where we are, and it would not do at all to be a grandmother—fancy me a grandmother!—and not forty. I should have to pretend I was."

"Wait till the time comes," said Imogen, sagely. "I'm not at all sure that I ever *shall* marry. I should be so terribly afraid of finding out he had a bad temper, or was horribly extravagant, or—or—"

"You absurd child, who ever put such ideas into your mind?" said her mother, looking at her with fond pride.

"Oh, I don't know," Imogen replied, with a little coquettish toss of her head; "I *think* a lot of things, and then you know, in books mamsey, too often men who seem very nice are really dreadful tyrants or something horrid after they're married."

"Well, darling, there shall be choice care taken as to whom we give *you* to," said her mother. "I daresay it won't be the first comer, nor the second, nor third whom I shall think worthy of my Imogen."

"I wonder when he will come," thought the girl to herself, but she did not express the thought. She only smiled and blushed a little at her mother's words.

"Tell me more about the Helmons, mamsey," she said. "You have been there once, didn't you say?"

"Yes, but only for a day or two, not long before your dear father and I went out to India," said Mrs Wentworth with a little sigh. "I don't remember it very distinctly—it was a great big house, an ideal country-house for a large merry party. Of course, a good many of the young people were not grown up then—there was a baby if I remember rightly. Oh yes, the youngest daughter Beatrix, so she must be only a year or so older than you, darling. How very odd that Mrs Belmont and I have children so nearly of an age, when *she* might really be my mother!" and Mrs Wentworth gave the little self-complacent laugh she often indulged in when her comparative youth, or youthful appearance, was alluded to.

"How delightful!" exclaimed Imogen, ignoring entirely, though with no intention of disrespect, her mother's last sentence. "How delightful that there should be one daughter, anyway, of my age. There are lots older, I suppose?"

"Two, if not three, married, and three at home," Mrs Belmont said. "In her letter this morning you see she speaks of Florence as hoping to do all she can to make your visit pleasant. Florence—can that be the youngest daughter? I have such a remembrance of the baby being Beatrix, because I thought it such a pretty name; and when you were born I wanted to call you by it, but your dear father would have Imogen. I've always thought it rather an eccentric name, but some people like it. I always forget who Imogen was exactly, and it looks so foolish. I must read up about it, or her, again."

"Oh, bother, never mind about my name, mamsey. Go on about the Helmons. I daresay Florence is the youngest. You often muddle about people's names, you know, mamsey dear. And there are lots of sons, too, I suppose?"

"Oh dear, yes; but remember, dear, I don't *think* I want you to fall in love with any of them. They won't be particularly well off, except the eldest one, and he, of course, not till his father's death."

"How horrid!" said Imogen. "I can't bear counting on people's fathers and mothers dying. But I don't care about being rich a bit, mamsey. You have such funny ideas sometimes. We're not rich, and we're very happy—now especially

that I've left school, and we're not obliged to live all the year round at that stupid old Eastbourne, but can go visits—lovely, delightful visits! And oh, mamsey, *do* you think you'll let Thorn Bush and take a dear little house in London, anyway for a year or two?"

"We must see. I think very likely the Helmonts will be able to give me some practical advice, as they are so cordial and friendly. Nothing could be kinder than her letter, and you see she says a fortnight *at least*, Imogen; though she adds that the house is full already, and will be overflowing by next week."

"How lovely!" said Imogen again. She was at a loss for adjectives this morning. "Just fancy, mother, how the girls at Miss Cotton's will envy me. I must write to one or two of them from 'The Fells' to tell them of my adventures."

"Ye-es, perhaps," said her mother. "But you are not obliged to keep up those schoolgirl friendships *too* closely, darling. You may find yourself in such a different sphere before long, and then it becomes just a little embarrassing sometimes."

"Not with Dora Barry," said Imogen. "I don't care *awfully* for any one else, but I have perfectly *promised* Dora that she is to be my bridesmaid—" She stopped suddenly, blushing as she did so.

"Ah, Imogen," said her mother, "I have caught you. I thought you were never going to marry! But seriously, dear, you should be a little careful now; even Dora, though she is a nice girl, she is not—not exactly in the same position. I should have much *preferred* your never going to school at all, you know; only everybody said it would have been so very lonely for you;" and Mrs Wentworth sighed—a simple and unaffected sigh.

"Of course it was good for me to go to school," said Imogen. "I was as happy as possible there. And, mother, I'm *not* going to give up all my friends there, whatever you say," she maintained stoutly, with the slight want of deference in her tone which sometimes bordered rather nearly on disrespect in her way of speaking to her mother. "Above all, not Dora; she's every bit as much a lady as I am, every bit, even though her father's only a country doctor."

She glanced up with a touch of half-saucy defiance in her merry eyes.

"*How* pretty she looks!" thought Mrs Wentworth; and in her gratification she forgot to feel any annoyance at Imogen's persistency.

Then a good deal of talk and consultation on the absorbing and inexhaustible subject of "clothes" ensued—talk which demonstrated the absolute necessity of an immediate shopping expedition. Indeed, in shopping expeditions, and instructions endless, minute, and contradictory to the somewhat tried, but patient Colman, promoted *pro tem*, from the post of house-and-parlour-maid to that of the Wentworth ladies' personal attendant, passed the next few days, till the eventful Thursday which was to see the little party *en route* for Grey Fells Hall.

Other visitors were expected to arrive there that day—visitors more welcome and more congenial—yet on the Wentworths an unusual amount of anticipatory attention had been bestowed, attention which, had they known of it, they would certainly not have coveted. Not that it was all unfriendly; Mrs Helmont, and the Squire himself, so far as he ever interfered in the details of such matters, were anxious that the strangers, rather specially thrown on their hospitality, should be happy and at home under their roof. But the precautions they took to this end were not of the most judicious.

"It is Trixie I am uneasy about," said Mrs Helmont to her husband. "She, and indeed the others too—though Alicia never worries, and Florence, I must say, is good about it—are annoyed at having any 'outsiders,' as they call the Wentworths. I almost think, Ronald, you had better say a word to Trixie yourself. It comes with better effect from you, as you seldom do find fault with her."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," said Mr Helmont, whose strongest instincts, as I have said, were those of hospitality. "Nothing would vex me more than for any guests of ours not to receive proper attention."

"It is rather *too much* attention I dread for them, for the girl at least, at Trixie's hands," said Mrs Helmont, rather mysteriously. But the Squire was a little deaf, and did not catch the words.

"I will speak to Beatrix this very morning," he repeated reassuringly. And speak, unfortunately, he did. He had better have left it alone. Trixie had had the bit between her teeth for too long to be pulled up all at once, even by the most skilful hands. And the Squire had no thought of skill or tact; his only notion of "speaking" was to come down upon the girl with heavy, rather clumsy authority. It was with flashing eyes and compressed lips that Beatrix Helmont left her father's so-called study that day, as she flew to confide her grievances to her second and not *better* self, Mab Forsyth.

"I'll pay them out; see if I won't," she muttered. "It's Rex who's at the bottom of it, I could swear. He and his saintly Eva."

"Let us put our heads together, Mab," she wound up, when the whole had been related. "You and I should be a match for the rest of them. Florence has gone over to the enemy, it appears, but I can manage her; she's not in such a very Christian frame of spirit. It's Rex I'm furious at; he's been setting dad against me."

"But the worst of it is, we shall be spotted at once if we plan anything," said Mab. "You're so stupid, Trixie, flying into a temper and showing your colours."

"Don't talk nonsense. Did I show any colours? Had I any to show? Till this very moment did I care one farthing what became of the little fool of a girl? Even now it's not to spite her—it's that prig of a Rex. Didn't you hear him yesterday, Mab; his stilted, preachy tone: 'Is that exactly a young lady's place, Beatrix?' when I was doing nothing at

all? I hate him, and so would you if—”

“I do,” said Miss Forsyth, calmly; “but if what?”

“If you knew how he speaks of us behind our backs,” said Beatrix, mysteriously. “I’ve promised not to tell; but Jim let out something the other day that he’d heard in the smoking-room.”

“I wonder what it was,” said Mab. “You might as well tell me. You’re so absurd about promises like that; they’re never meant to be kept between friends like us. However, it doesn’t matter. I hate Major Winchester about as much as I *can* hate, and that’s pretty bad.”

“And I’m not going to tell you; there are some things we should never agree about, you see,” said Trixie. “But what was I going to say. Oh! about showing my colours; no, indeed, I hid them pretty completely. I opened my eyes and stared at papa, and asked him what *could* make him think so poorly of me; it really distressed me. I knew I had high spirits, but that was a Belmont peculiarity, and would probably cure with time; but as for disregarding the duties of hospitality, etc, etc, when had I ever done so? I didn’t know I could have spoken so well, and I looked so innocent—poor old dad, it ended in making him feel rather foolish, I do believe. But he said some nasty things—things I shan’t forget in a hurry;” and the girl clenched her hands.

“Don’t be theatrical,” said Mab, scornfully. “Keep to the point. Tell me about this girl, and why you’re so excited about her.”

“I’m not excited about her, I tell you. She’s a fool. I would probably never have noticed her if they had let me alone; it’s Rex I’m boiling at.”

“Ah yes, I see, and there I sympathise,” said Mabella. “And I have a good fund of dislike to silly little bread-and-butter misses at all times which may come in handy. So the plot thickens, Trixie; it’s quite exciting, upon my word. We must be cautious and watchful; first get to know our materials thoroughly. They are arriving to-day, you say, about the usual time?”

“Yes, the four o’clock train; that gets them here for tea in the drawing-room. There are several people coming. The young Girards, newly married, you know; but no nonsense about them, and up to any fun. They were both engaged to other people, you remember, and threw them over in the neatest way. And Gerty Custance and her brother, etc, etc.”

“When is Gerty going to retire; she must be nine-and-twenty?” said Miss Forsyth. But Trixie took no notice beyond an interjected “She’s Alicia’s friend, not mine,” and went on with her list. “So that you see, among so many, it will not be difficult to feel our way. The girl will be frightened out of her wits, and ready to cling to the first that offers. She’s never been anywhere, and thinks herself a peerless beauty; and they’re not rich, or clever, or anything. *Fancy* mamma asking such sticks of people!”

“And does Major Rex know anything of them? Why is he taking them up in this way?” asked Miss Forsyth.

“For no reason in the world except spite—spite at me, and priggishness,” said Trixie.

Mabella smiled. Her smile was not a pleasant one, and did not, as some smiles do, lighten up or soften her undeniably plain face.

“Spite at *you*, Trixie,” she said. “Excuse me; you like straightforward speaking, you always say. I scarcely think Major Winchester would give himself the trouble of going out of his way to spite *you*; he doesn’t think you worth it.”

“Thank you,” said Beatrix.

“It’s more likely priggishness, as you say, or contradiction,” pursued Miss Forsyth. “I wouldn’t even flatter him by calling it quixotry. It’s all conceit and love of meddling and thinking himself a saint. Oh, I do detest him, cordially!”

“After all, he’s my cousin,” said Trixie; “you might as well be civil when you speak of him, and if you know so much about his motives, why do you ask me what they are?”

Her tone was snappish, but her friend did not seem to notice what she said. Her eyes—Mabella had rather good dark eyes, they were her one “feature”—were fixed on vacancy, but her lips moved, though no words were audible. Suddenly she moved to Beatrix.

“I have it!” she exclaimed; “or I’m beginning to have it. No! I’m not going to tell you yet. I must know my ground and my puppets better first. But something I must say to you, my dear; you’re too clumsy for anything; you’ll be overdoing your part, I’m certain. Now, oblige me by telling me how you are intending to receive Miss Wentworth and her adoring mamma.”

“Oh, of course, very nicely,” said Beatrix, opening her eyes. “I shall be particular how I speak, and I shall try to seem—well, rather more of an *ingénue* than *you* consider me. And I’ll trouble *you*, to keep out of my way, if you please, Mab, and not come out with any of your agreeable, ladylike, little remarks or reminiscences.”

Miss Forsyth looked at her calmly.

“I always knew you were a goose,” she said, “but I never thought you quite *such* a goose. Don’t you see that if you take up that *rôle*, your people—Florence for certain, and even the others; one wouldn’t need to be very sharp in such a case—would see there was mischief brewing, *especially* if you kept *me* at a distance, and the whole thing would collapse.”

"I don't know, in the first place, what 'the whole thing' is," said Trixie, sulkily. "But if I'm not to do as I propose, what am I to do? Remember, I *must* behave decently, or father will be down on me in hot earnest. There's a limit to his patience, especially if he began to think I had been humbugging him this morning."

"Of course you must behave decently, and more than decently," said Mabella. "You must look rather *snubbed*, if you can manage it; and if I tease you a little, you must bear it in a good-girl sort of way, as if you were turning over a new leaf, and it was too bad of me to make it harder for you. Oh, I could do it to perfection! I only wish I could be you and myself too."

"But I don't see that that style of thing will attract Miss What's-her-name to me," objected Trixie.

"Oh, you can come round her if you try. Confide in her that you've been very self-willed, and wild, and rackety, but that you see the error of your ways, and would like to make a friend of her. I'll give you a helping hand when I can. I'll hint that Florence is rather down on you—that you're not a bad sort after all. You can take them all in if you like. Major Winchester will be quite hoodwinked—it will be delicious."

Trixie's face cleared.

"I must say you're not a bad ally, Mab, when you give your mind to it," she said. "But I wish I knew what it is you're planning."

"Wait a bit," said Miss Forsyth. "It's first-rate—I can tell you that much."

Chapter Three.

A Friend in Need.

It is sometimes almost worse to arrive too soon than too late. In the latter case you have at least the certainty of being expected, and even if people are cross and irritated at having been kept waiting, still your place is there for you; there is no question about it. Above all, if the case be that of arriving on a first visit, I for one should prefer the risk of the disagreeables attending a tardy appearance to the far from improbable humiliations consequent upon turning up prematurely. Not to speak of the positive inconveniences of no carriage at the station, or no room for you in the one that may have come to fetch some other guest by the previous train to your orthodox one, there is the blank look on your hostess's face—"more for luncheon" it seems to say; and the extraordinarily uncomfortable announcement that your room is not *quite ready*—will be so directly, but "the So-and-so's only left this morning, and the house has been so full;" and a sense of outraged and scurrying housemaids when it is suggested that you should just "leave your wraps in the dressing-room till after luncheon." The visit must develop into something extraordinarily agreeable which succeeds in entirely living down the annoying contrariety of such a *début*.

It was unfortunate, most unfortunate, that the Wentworths' visit to Grey Fells Hall should have been inaugurated in this uncomfortable way. They were not expected at Cobbolds, the small station five miles off, but the nearest, nevertheless, till four in the afternoon, whereas it was barely twelve o'clock when they found themselves, their boxes and their bewildered attendant stranded on the platform in a drizzling rain and biting north-country wind, absolutely at a loss what to do and whither to betake themselves. How had they managed it? you may well ask, for the journey from London to Cloughshire is a matter of some six or seven hours even by express train, and the travellers had not started in the middle of the night. This was what had happened. In an evil moment some mischievous imp had suggested to Mrs Wentworth the expediency of "breaking the journey" seven-eighths of the way, or thereabouts, at a country town where a cousin of hers was the wife of the vicar.

"They will be so delighted to see us," she said to Imogen, when Imogen, not unnaturally, demurred.

"But I don't want to see them; not the very least bit in the world, mamma," she said. "It will be such a nuisance to undo our things for one night when they're all nicely packed, and my new frocks will be *so* crushed—two days instead of one. And very likely we'll get into the wrong train or something, the next morning, just when Mrs Belmont has told us exactly what time to leave London, and all about it."

But in Mrs Wentworth, for all her gentleness—and it was genuine, not superficial—there was a curious touch of obstinacy; obstinacy in this instance grounded on a strong motive which her daughter did not suspect. The truth was she was dying to show off Imogen—Imogen in the freshness of her beauty and her new clothes—to the old school-friend, whose small means and large family prevented from often enjoying such sights. And Mrs Wentworth pleased herself by taking credit for the pleasure she believed she was unselfish in giving; "it will brighten up poor dear Henrietta to hear of all we are doing, as well as to see Imogen," she thought; not reflecting that the advent of a party of three in an already overcrowded parsonage would entail considerable trouble and, indeed, expense to their entertainers.

She enjoyed it however, whether "Henrietta" and her husband did or not. And Imogen made herself very happy with the children, especially the big boys; though she disappointed her mother by not in the least posing as a "come-out" fashionable young woman, and gave Colman an hour or two's unnecessary stitching by tearing the skirt of her pretty new travelling dress.

So far, however, no great harm was done. That was reserved for the next morning, when, on consulting the timetable at the early breakfast for his guests' benefit, worthy Mr Stainer made the appalling discovery that the train by which they were expected at Cobbolds did not stop at Maxton, their present quarters!

What was to be done?

"No matter—stay till the next. It gets to—stay, let us see—yes, it gets there at six. Plenty of time to dress for dinner. I suppose these smart friends of yours don't dine at soonest till half-past seven," said the vicar.

"Oh, not till eight, *certainly*," said Mrs Wentworth with a faint touch of reproach. "But I don't know—the evenings are drawing in so, and it is so cold. No, I think we had better go by the *earlier* train you mentioned, reaching Cobbolds at—when did you say?"

"Somewhere between eleven and twelve," Mr Stainer replied. "Well, as you like," for a glance from behind the tea-urn had warned him not to press the guests to stay over another luncheon; "of course you know best. But you will have to hurry. Shall I telegraph them?"

"You are very kind—yes please, at once. It is some miles from the post-office I fancy, but that won't signify; I can settle about the portage when I get there," said Mrs Wentworth airily, though not without some internal tremors. "Mrs Belmont will be all the more pleased to have us sooner than she expects." Blissful ignorance! The Fells was a good seven miles from the telegraph office, and there was a standing order that unless telegrams were doubly dubbed "immediate," they were to be confided to the groom who rode over to fetch the afternoon letters—an arrangement known of course to the *habitués* among the Belmont guests, as belonging to which Mrs Wentworth gave herself out.

Thus and thus did it come to pass that, as already described, a forlorn group of three shivering women was to be seen on the uncovered platform of the little wayside station that dreary, drizzling November morning.

"There *must* be a carriage for us," said Mrs Wentworth; "there has been heaps of time for the telegram to reach them. You may be sure they would send a man on horseback with it."

"All the same there just *isn't* a carriage nor the ghost of one. I told you how it would be, mamma," said Imogen, unsympathisingly.

Mrs Wentworth felt too guilty to resent the reproach. Suddenly came the sound of wheels. "There now!" she exclaimed, "I believe it's coming. Can you see," she went on anxiously, peering out from the very inefficient shed-like roof, which was the only shelter at that side of the station; "can you see," to the station-master, or porter, or station-master and porter mixed together, who was the only visible functionary, and whose good offices and opinion she had already sought, "if that is the carriage for us?"

"It's from The Fells, sure enough, but it's naught but a dogcart," he replied, disappearing as he spoke to reconnoitre the dogcart and inquire its errand.

"A dogcart!" ejaculated Mrs Wentworth aghast. Imogen could scarcely help laughing at her horrified expression.

"Well, mamma," she was beginning, "you know you—" But she was interrupted. The station-master returned, followed by a tall, a very tall man—a gentleman; of that there was no doubt, notwithstanding the coarseness and muddiness of his huge ulster and his generally bespattered appearance. Who could he be? Mrs Wentworth jumped to one of her hasty conclusions; he must be the agent or bailiff. She was profoundly ignorant of English country life, and was not without a strain of the Anglo-Indian arrogance so quickly caught by the small-minded of our country-folk in the great Eastern Empire—yes, that was it. They had doubtless sent him on quickly to say that the brougham, or omnibus, was on its way.

"Are you," she was commencing; but the new-comer had begun to speak before he heard her.

"I'm very sorry," he said, lifting his rough cap as he spoke, "I'm afraid there's some mistake—that is, if I am speaking to Mrs Wentworth?"

"Yes, of course I am Mrs Wentworth. Is the carriage not coming? I thought they—Mrs Belmont, I mean—had sent you to say it was coming. I telegraphed quite early this morning from Maxton. It's really too—"

"Mamma," whispered Imogen. Her young eyes had detected a slight, though not unkindly, smile stealing over the stranger's face at her mother's tone. "Mamma, I—"

"No," he replied, interrupting again, though so gently, that one could scarcely have applied to the action so harsh a word. "No, I was not sent, indeed I could not even have volunteered the office, for I happen to know no telegram had reached the Fells this morning. I came out on my own account to have a battle with a young horse." He glanced in the direction of his dogcart and groom. "It's all right now, he is thoroughly mastered; and, as far as *safety* is concerned, you would both be quite safe if you would let me drive you to the Fells. Upon my word, I think it would be the best thing to do." Imogen all but clapped her hands.

"Oh yes, it would be delightful," she said.

"How good of you! Do say you will, mamma." Mrs Wentworth looked both frightened and undecided.

"Are you sure it would be safe?" she said. "And, may I ask who you are?" she added with some hesitation, for that she had been on the verge of some rather tremendous mistake was beginning to be clear to her, "and it is so raining."

The stranger glanced upwards.

"Not quite so heavily now," he said. "I think we shall have a fine afternoon. And, after all, shall you not be better off under mackintoshes and umbrellas for half an hour or so, and then safe and warm in the house up there, than shivering down here in that wretched little waiting-room for two or three hours?"

"But, if they knew, would they not send down to fetch us at once?" said Mrs Wentworth feebly.

Major Winchester considered.

"Not *within* two hours," he said. "The stable arrangements at my uncle's are, to say the least, complicated. I *think* the wagonette that was to fetch you was bringing some 'parting guest' to the station to go on by the two o'clock train and then wait for you, so you see—"

"Of course," cried Imogen. "Mamsey, you *must*; only—there's the luggage, and—your groom?"

"He can come up on the wagonette, and see that the luggage comes too. The more important question," he went on, smiling again, "is your maid. But Smith can look after her: he's a very decent fellow, and I daresay he knows the station-master's wife."

"Oh, Colman will be all right," said Imogen. "She's not at all stuck-up, and very good-natured." Colman had very discreetly retired a few paces. "Mamma, you must see it's by far the best thing to do, as Mr—" She stopped short.

"Of course, I have not introduced myself; my name is Winchester," said their new friend. "I call Mr Belmont my uncle, or rather, I should say, *Mrs* Belmont is my aunt *à la mode de Bretagne*."

Mrs Wentworth's face cleared.

"I must have heard of you," she said. "You are really very kind, and, perhaps—"

Imogen had run off; in an instant she reappeared.

"The back seat of your dogcart, or whatever it is—it's larger than a dogcart, isn't it?"—she said, "is a very good size, larger than usual. You would be quite comfortable in it, mamma, and then," she went on, turning confidently to Major Rex, "she wouldn't see the horse whatever he did. Then you'd be all right, wouldn't you, dear? You know we should be really safe."

And so it was arranged. Imogen's first care, it must be owned, was for her mother; to Mrs Wentworth were appropriated the best of the wraps and rugs and mackintoshes disinterred from their own travelling gear, or extricated from some mysterious inner receptacle of the "trap," by the obliging Smith. And as the rain was evidently clearing, the prospects in every sense grew brighter, as Imogen stepped back a pace or two to contemplate admiringly the result of their joint efforts in the person of Mrs Wentworth, so swathed and packed that really, as her daughter said, she "couldn't get wet if she tried, and *certainly* couldn't fall out."

"And what about yourself, Miss Wentworth?" said Major Winchester kindly, as he seconded Smith in his efforts to tuck up the young lady, if not so completely as her mother, yet sufficiently to keep her dry. "Have you no objection to watching Paddy's antics?" for a dance or two and a playful plunge showed that the "old man" was not as yet entirely exorcised from the young horse. But he was well under control. No sooner had they started than it became evident that Paddy knew who held the reins. They went fast but steadily; notwithstanding the cold, and the rain, and the mist—now slowly rising on all sides, for the freshening breeze to chase it away—the sensation was exhilarating and exciting.

"I," replied the girl, after a moment's silence, given to watching Paddy gradually settling to work like a child after a feint of resistance; "I! no, of course I'm not frightened— It's delightful," and her glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes showed that she meant what she said. She did look exceedingly pretty just then.

"What a charming child!" thought Rex. "Quite as plucky as even bold Trixie herself, and so simple and unspoilt and refined. I only hope that two or three weeks hence, if they stay as long, I may be able to say as much of her." He glanced at her involuntarily, with a certain look of anxiety in his kind eyes.

"I'm all right, thank you," said Imogen, detecting the glance. "I'm not getting a bit wet."

"It wasn't—" he began, then stammered, and broke off, for he felt himself colouring a little. Imogen's face expressed some surprise. "It would almost be better for those girls to be uncivil and unkind to her, to the verge of endurance, than for them to 'take her up,' and make her like themselves," had been the parent thought of the misgiving in his face. He turned round to Mrs Wentworth. "I do hope you are not *too* uncomfortable?" he said. "That back seat, as Miss Wentworth discovered, is a degree better than is often the case, but still it must be rather wretched."

"No, truly; I am very fairly comfortable," she replied, "and I almost think you are right, and that the rain is going off."

Mrs Wentworth had a sweet voice, suggesting the possession of a sweet temper. Major Winchester began to like her better than he had done hitherto. "I should not think her the wisest of women, but a good creature all the same, though the daughter strikes me as having the more character of the two. Poor souls, I do trust they will never have cause to repent their expedition to The Fells. I will do what I can to make their visit pleasant," he said to himself, with short-sighted chivalry.

And he outdid himself in little kindnesses of talk and manner during the remainder of the drive, pointing out any objects of interest which they passed, amusing them with little descriptions of the guests and the family at The Fells, into which he endeavoured, so far as loyalty to his hosts permitted, to infuse some slight touches of warning.

"Yes, Beatrix Belmont, my youngest cousin, is the baby—at least, the youngest sister—and as is often the case, I suppose, very fairly spoilt. I don't fancy you will take to her as much as to Florence, Miss Wentworth. There is a great deal of good in Florence, though she requires knowing."

"But she is twenty-three or twenty-four—ever so old, isn't she?" said Imogen, in a disappointed tone.

"Ye-es, quite that; but still, that is not very old, is it?" and he looked round to Mrs Wentworth to have his opinion endorsed.

Mrs Wentworth, however, had not caught his last remarks.

"Are we close to The Fells now?" she asked, eagerly. "I fancy I remember this part of the way. Don't we come to the lodge at a turn up that hilly road?"

"Yes," Major Winchester replied. "What a good memory you have! We are regularly on the Fells now. Take care your wraps don't blow off."

They were just turning as he spoke. The road came right out on the moorland, and the wind met them straight in the face—the two in the front, that is to say—Mrs Wentworth was protected.

"Oh, how splendid!" said Imogen. "What delicious air! And what a great stretch of country, and those grim rocks. Are those what you call the Fells, Mr—are you Mr—Winchester?"

"Major," Rex corrected, smiling. "Yes, Grey Fells Hall is just in front of those rocks, but on the other side. You will see in a minute. The gardens and lawn are over there."

"Oh, I think it's delightful! Mamma, you didn't tell me it was half so nice," the girl exclaimed.

And as they passed through the lodge gates and up the long and rather steep drive, her face grew increasingly radiant.

"What a dear old house! I should love to explore it from top to bottom," she said. "I do hope the girls won't be out. I am longing so to see them. Of course, they can't be looking out for us, as we have come so much too early."

Chapter Four.

As Ill-Luck would have it.

Major Winchester did not reply. He appeared engrossed with Paddy, for as Imogen uttered the last words, they had driven to the front of the house, and he was preparing to draw up.

"I don't quite know how best to manage," he said, after a moment or two, glancing round him doubtfully. "Paddy has been very good, so far; but he will probably begin now to be fidgety, and to long for his stable. So I must not get down to ring. Can—?"

"Oh yes," said the girl, starting up as she spoke, and very nearly precipitating herself to the ground, "I'll jump down in an instant."

"Get down, please, but don't talk of jumping. There now, very cautiously. It needs an apprenticeship to get out and in of vehicles like this. Yes, that is the bell, the chain at your right;" and a ponderous resounding clang told that Miss Wentworth's vigorous pull had taken effect. Imogen looked round half alarmed.

"What a noise!" she said.

It was not too quickly responded to, nevertheless, and when a footman at last made his appearance, he raised his eyebrows with an expression of surprised inquiry, which would not have conduced to the two ladies' equanimity had they been alone and unprotected by Major Winchester's presence.

"Quick, Thomas," he said, with a touch of imperiousness. "Call some one, or catch hold of his head yourself. Don't you see the horse won't stand, and the lady has to get down?"

Thomas bestirred himself to the extent of hallooing to an assistant gardener, who happened to be passing; then, when Paddy's impatience was perforce calmed, he himself condescended to approach the back of the cart in a gingerly fashion. But Major Winchester was before him.

"I will help Mrs Wentworth down," he said.

"Go at once and tell your mistress, or—or Miss Florence—no, unluckily, she's out—Miss Belmont, if you can find her, that Mrs and Miss Wentworth have arrived by an earlier train. And tell Brewer to speak to me before he goes to the station; there's some luggage to come up."

Most of The Fells domestics liked "the Major," as he was dubbed in the servants' hall; but Thomas, lazy and conceited, was an exception. He disappeared, however, as he was told, but not without some inaudible mutterings.

"Queerish ladies," he said to himself, "arriving before lunch and no luggage, nor maid, nor nothing. The luggage won't be much to show when it do come, I'll take my—" But here he was interrupted, and by no less a person than Trixie. Thomas's face cleared: he wasn't going to scour the country in search of Mrs Belmont, nor Miss neither. Here was *one* of the ladies; it did not in the least signify that Miss Beatrix was a byword for never doing anything she was asked to do, or being of any use to any one. She would serve *his* purpose, which was to get back to his morning paper and glass of beer "comfortable" in the pantry without delay.

"If you please, ma'am," he began, "the Major's at the hall door with two ladies, arrived unexpected, and I was to tell you."

To his delight and rather to his surprise, instead of telling him to hunt up her sisters, Trixie stopped short with evident interest.

"Two ladies?" she inquired. "Did you hear their name? And did Major Winchester tell you to find *me*?"

Thomas was obliged to equivocate.

"Not—not exactly yourself persinly, ma'am, but one of the ladies."

"All right, I'll go at once," and Beatrix, enchanted at the first act in the drama opening so auspiciously, rushed off.

"Of course it's the girl and her mother, I'm sure of it, just because Rex evidently *didn't* mean me," she said to herself. "Mab shan't be able to say I'm stupid; I won't tell her how it happened, and she'll be all the more impressed by my cleverness when she sees me hand and glove with the little fool at the very first go." She looked very handsome and attractive as, moderating her rate of progress, she approached the front hall. It was a large square room, with corners screened off, containing couches and tables invitingly grouped. There were two fireplaces, in which for many months in the year great logs were always to be seen in glowing cheeriness. There was the usual display of antlered heads and stuffed glassy-eyed reynards and other trophies of the kind. To Imogen, new to English country life on this scale, it was entrancing, and as Beatrix in her trim sailor-blue serge, with wavy dark hair and the brilliant Belmont complexion and eyes, appeared at the curtained doorway, an unusual gentleness, almost appeal, in her expression and bearing, the poor little stranger's heart went out to her with a great leap. Considerably to his surprise, much more considerably to his disgust, when Rex Winchester turned round from his instructions to Brewer on the hall steps, the two girls were, so to say, already in each other's arms—literally speaking, they were just concluding their greeting with a kiss, while Mrs Wentworth stood by in smiling approval.

"Yes," she said. "I was sure I was right, and you are baby Beatrix; just—let me see—two years and a few weeks older than Imogen."

"How interesting!" said Trixie sweetly. "We must be *great* friends, must we not?"

"Yes, *indeed*," said Imogen. "I'm so glad to have seen you first, as you are so much the nearest me in—"

"Is Alicia not in, Trixie?" interrupted Major Winchester. "I sent for her."

His tone was dry, to say the least. Beatrix turned away for half a second: he did not see the flash of rage and malice in her eyes—she had calmed it down before she replied in the same soft, almost timid tones.

"I don't know, I'm sure. Florence is out. I daresay Alicia's resting: she generally is at this time of day."

"And every other," thought her cousin.

"What mischief in Heaven's name is the girl up to now?" he went on to himself. Then half shocked at his suspiciousness he glanced at her sharply: she had not anticipated this and her eyes fell. "I knew it could not be sincere," he thought, with a curious mixture of regret and satisfaction.

"I knew Florence was out," he said aloud.

"But before hunting up mamma or Alicia, had I not better take our guests to the morning-room?" said Beatrix prettily.

And Rex could not oppose so natural a suggestion.

Mrs Belmont was not in the morning-room. Truth to tell, she had dedicated the hours before luncheon to-day to some necessary household discussions with her upper servants.

"The Meldons will have gone, and the Wentworths not coming till nice and late in the afternoon," she had said to herself with satisfaction; "all the other people can be left to themselves—not like strangers."

So that, in spite of her really friendly feelings to the mother and daughter—her own peculiar guests indeed—it can easily be understood that the announcement of their premature arrival was not a joyful one in her ears.

"*Come!*" she repeated to the maid who had disinterred her and the old housekeeper in the linen-room, where she was really enjoying herself, "you don't say so. At *this* time of day! it is too provoking. My cap is all on one side, I'm certain, and we were just getting into the new pillow-cases, Baxter. The girls will be so put out too. And Florence gone for me to Culvey! Alicia is sure to be asleep. I *must* go—it will all have to stand over, Baxter; you must put everything back again," and with a very natural sigh the poor lady prepared to descend to the morning-room.

She was hospitable and kind, but of a slightly less easy-going nature than her husband and family in general: in reality she was less selfish. But she did not show to advantage as the *châtelaine* of The Fells, when she entered the morning-room, feeling and looking worried and perplexed.

"So glad to see you, so sorry I was not down-stairs!" she said in a somewhat constrained tone, as Mrs Wentworth pressed forward effusively. And the cheek which received the visitor's kiss was quickly turned away. "Your daughter? ah, yes, of course. I remember. You have a son too? No? Oh, I am confusing you with Mrs— Why, Trixie, you here!" in a tone of extremest surprise. "Wonders will never cease! *Can* she be going to turn over a new leaf?" she asked herself mentally. Anyway, it was a convenience for the time being to have one daughter at hand; "perhaps what her

father said to her this morning is going to have some effect," she went on to herself, feeling by no means disposed in the present emergency to quarrel with the goods the gods sent her, even though they were but Beatrix.

"I was just thinking that, perhaps, Mrs Wentworth and Miss— No?" In response to a smiling gesture of deprecation from her new friend, "am I really to call you Imogen; that *is* sweet of you." This was going a little too far. An undisguised frown on her cousin's face startled Trixie a little. "I was thinking," she repeated in a more natural tone, "that, perhaps, they would like to see their rooms."

"Very decidedly so, I should say," replied Major Winchester sharply.

Beatrix turned to her mother.

"Which rooms, mamma?" she said in a low tone. But Imogen overheard it. "Fancy," she thought, with a little thrill of disappointment, "fancy her not knowing. Why, if they had been coming to stay with us, I would have been running about to get flowers for their toilet-tables, and all sorts of things like that. But, I suppose, it is different when people have so many visitors."

The momentary feeling, however, was visible, as were most of the girl's feelings to quick observation at least, on her transparent countenance. As she raised her sweet eyes, she caught Major Winchester's fixed on her with a curious expression. She felt herself flush a little.

"I do believe he knows what I am thinking," she said to herself, with a strange mingling of pleasure and annoyance, "and I have not known him two hours!"

But the sound of Mrs Belmont's voice recalled her to practical matters.

"The brown room and the little pink room beside it; you know, Trixie, in the corner by the west staircase. Only—I am really so vexed—I am afraid your room is not quite ready, Mrs Wentworth, you see—"

"Mrs Wentworth," repeated the owner of the name reproachfully, "am I not to be 'Lucy' to you, dear Mrs Belmont?"

At another time the good lady would probably have been touched and would have responded kindly, but just now she was thoroughly put out.

"It is twenty years, if not more, since we met, and then only for a couple of days. I really had not the least idea what your name was; but the question is your room.—Trixie!" glancing round despairingly.

Mrs Wentworth put a brave effort on herself; she was determined that Imogen should not suspect she was feeling mortified.

"What does it matter about my room?" she said, laughingly. "I can't allow you to treat me as *quite* a stranger, even though you had forgotten my name. Can't I take off my wraps in—" "In Beatrix's room," she was going to have said, but she was interrupted.

"In mine," said a new-comer. "It is Mrs and Miss Wentworth, is it not? I heard of some arrival, and knowing Florence was out, and you busy, dear Mrs Belmont, mayn't I be of a little *use for once*?" and Miss Forsyth—for she it was—drew near her hostess with an air of half-timid deprecation. Mrs Belmont felt completely bewildered. She had little presence of mind at any time, and this extraordinary metamorphosis was too much for her. Major Winchester, be it observed, had before this taken his departure.

"I—I am sure I have never refused to let you be of use, Mabella," said the elder lady, rather stiffly.

Miss Forsyth drew still nearer, and whispered a word or two in her ear. Mrs Belmont's face softened.

"Now, Mrs Wentworth, do come with me," said the young woman. "My room is next to Trixie's, where I know she is dying to take your daughter. I can lend you anything—slippers, brushes, combs—even a tea-gown if your dress is damp, and if you would so far condescend?"

Mrs Wentworth looked at her. Miss Forsyth was undeniably plain, almost coarse-looking. Her features were large, her complexion swarthy; the only redeeming point, as not infrequently is the case with otherwise ugly people, was her eyes. They were large and dark, and therefore supposed to be beautiful.

"She has nice eyes," thought Mrs Wentworth, "and she seems very amiable. For such a plain girl to be amiable she must be *very* amiable, I should say.—And thank you very much, Miss—" And she hesitated.

"Forsyth," said Mrs Belmont. "Miss Forsyth is a very frequent visitor with us," she went on, her conscience smiting her a little for making over these innocent lambs to the wolf Mabella, whom, truth to tell, she herself was not a little afraid of. But Baxter would not have got all the linen put away yet: there would be time for her to resume and complete the interesting review of her possessions before luncheon if she went at once.

"If you will be so kind, Mabella," she went on.—"You, dear Mrs Wentworth, will, I know, excuse me. I really am very busy this morning."

"Of course, of course," cried Imogen's mother, delighted to have won the gratifying adjective. "We shall be perfectly happy.—Thank you so much, Miss Forsyth," and she turned to follow Mabella, Beatrix and the other victim having already disappeared. Trixie managed to hang back on the stairs, however, and to exchange an aside with her double.

"I like you," she said, "preaching to me about not overdoing it, and there you are, humbugging away to such an

extent. Any fool could see you were up to mischief.”

“I know what I’m about, thank you,” said Miss Forsyth. “If you manage your part of it as well, you’ll have no reason to turn upon me. Your mother is incapable of more than one idea at a time, and just now her only thought is to hand over these people to somebody or anybody till luncheon time.”

And long before luncheon time one part of Mabella’s task was accomplished. She had won thoroughly and completely Mrs Wentworth’s confidence, and this with so little difficulty that she almost despised herself as well as her unconscious victim for the ease of the achievement.

“She is charming,” said poor Mrs Wentworth, when at last she found herself alone with her daughter, “quite charming, so kind and unselfish. I really must say I should have felt just a little, a very little strange and uncomfortable arriving so early, and poor dear Mrs Belmont so busy and the elder girls out, if it hadn’t been for Miss Forsyth. It shows how unwise it is to judge by appearances; at first, I confess, I did not at all feel as if I should take to her.”

“I never shall take to her,” said Imogen, bluntly; “I can’t bear her. She has a sort of patronising way that I think is perfectly horrid. Still, I’m glad if she made you more comfortable. I felt *horribly* uncomfortable, and I don’t think Mrs Belmont is ‘poor dear’ at all: she really didn’t seem the very least glad to see us—hardly as if she knew whom we were. I felt inclined to beg you to go back to London again.”

“My darling!” exclaimed Mrs Wentworth in horror.

They were in Imogen’s room—which was at last ready—doing their best, though without their luggage, to make themselves presentable for luncheon.

“Yes,” said Imogen. “I did, indeed. And I felt very cross with you too, mamsey, for it really was all with you insisting on coming so long before they expected us: it *was* a stupid thing to do. Trixie allowed that it was, though she’s as nice as can be. *She* made me feel at home almost at once, I must say.”

“I am so glad,” said Mrs Wentworth, fervently.

“All the same.” Imogen went on thoughtfully, “I think I understand what Major Winchester meant.” Was it fancy, or did a faint, the very faintest pink flush steal over her face at the mere mention of his name?

“How do you mean, darling?” asked her mother. “You seem to have made great friends with this Major Winchester already.”

“Nonsense, mamsey!” said Imogen, not too respectfully, it must be allowed; “he was very kind to us, and of course it was natural for him to tell me a little about the girls, when he saw I was so anxious to know. He likes Florence much the best; but in spite of what he said, I am not sure that I shall. There is a great deal of good in Trixie, I am sure. She has been telling me about herself: she has been spoilt and selfish, she says, and rather wild. And though she didn’t say so, I fancy Miss Forsyth has not had a good influence on her. That’s why I don’t like her.”

“My dear, you must not jump to conclusions so quickly,” remonstrated Mrs Wentworth.

“I’m not jumping more quickly than you, mamma,” Imogen replied. “You have made up your mind that Miss Forsyth is all that is delightful; I only say I don’t think so. I did not at first think I should like Trixie particularly, except that she really met us very kindly. But she seemed to me to have something rather hard about her; only now I understand it.” Imogen paused for a moment, as if thinking out something to herself, and that not with perfect satisfaction—“at least I think I do. They don’t understand *her*; she wants to be nice and good, I’m sure, but nobody believes her. Major Winchester is dreadfully down upon her, she says; he can’t bear girls who are at all loud, you know, or fast. And poor Trixie has no friend to help her at all. She says she does so hope we shall be friends, mamsey.”

“Yes, dearest, I am sure she will learn nothing but good from you,” said Mrs Wentworth, well pleased. “It is very evident that he appreciates Imogen already,” she added, to herself with a little thrill of maternal pride. “But, darling, we must be quick. I do hope the luncheon bell hasn’t gone without us hearing it, and I’m half afraid I don’t remember the way to the dining-room.”

“We needn’t go straight there,” said Imogen. “Trixie said we should find some of them in the morning-room. You look quite right, mamsey; you do really. But oh dear! I do wish we hadn’t arrived before our luggage and Colman, my boots do clump so. Trixie offered to lend me a pair of shoes, but I could see hers would be too big, so I said I didn’t mind keeping on my boots.”

“Your feet are so tiny; just the least little atom longer than mine,” said her mother, with an amusing mixture of admiration and self-complacency. “And mine were always spoken of as *quite* extraordinary. Your dear father used to wonder how I could walk upon them.”

“Well, in India that didn’t matter much, as nobody ever does walk—not what I call walking,” Imogen remarked.

And thus chattering, with the real though unavowed motive of keeping up their courage and keeping down their shyness, the mother and daughter slowly descended the great wide shallow-stepped staircase which led to the hall.

Chapter Five.

The Duties of Hospitality.

They heard voices in the direction of the morning-room, so thither they turned their steps. The morning-room opened at one side into the large dining-room, on the other into the library. The doors of communication between all these were now open, and bright fires were burning in each. To Imogen, at the first glance, it seemed as if the rooms were filled with people, for the moving about and laughing and talking that were going on had a confusing effect upon her; she had scarcely time to do more than glance round her bewilderedly when the luncheon gong sounded, and universal making for the door ensued.

"Stay behind with me, and then we can sit together," said some one beside her, and turning round, Imogen saw Beatrix at her elbow. But at the same moment, another voice reached her.

"Excuse me, Trixie," it said; "you are forgetting that Miss Wentworth has not yet made acquaintance with your sisters. It is hardly my business to introduce you and your guest," he added, with a smile to the girl beside him.

"But still—under the circumstances—"

"Yes," said Imogen, smiling herself, "under the circumstance of its being very doubtful if we should have got here at all without you, I think certainly you may be—"

"Master of the ceremonies," said Florence, half interrupting her as she hesitated. Imogen looked at her. She was as tall as Beatrix, scarcely as handsome perhaps, but with an expression in her eyes which would have attracted Imogen much more than Trixie's bold defiance, had it not been for the prejudice already skilfully sown against her elder sister by that astute young woman.

"She *is* discontented and rather cross-looking," thought Imogen. "I am sure it is true, as Trixie said, that she has a disagreeable temper;" and the gentleness of Florence's voice and manner—gentleness which, to please her cousin, she endeavoured to make specially kindly—the little stranger dubbed as "patronising," while the real sadness underlying it she attributed to the chronic unamiability Beatrix had done more than hint at. Still, it was not in Imogen's nature to be altogether unresponsive. She replied becomingly to Florence's few words of welcome, and went on into the dining-room beside her. But there was a complete absence of the girlish *camaraderie* which lighted up her face as she threw back a laughing word or two to Trixie following with Rex behind them.

Major Winchester almost ground his teeth.

"Already!" he muttered. "So you have made friends with Miss Wentworth, I see," he said aloud, dryly.

A sharp and defiant reply was on Trixie's lips, but she prudently recalled Miss Forsyth's advice. Nor did she "overdo" her part either.

"I don't know what you call 'making friends'," she said quietly, and not without a certain dignity. "You know me too well to suppose that a child like that and I could have much in common; but after my father's exceedingly severe warnings this morning, I was bound to be civil and attentive, if I did not want to drive things too far." There was a touch, possibly sincere for the moment, of something like genuine regret and reproach, as she added, rather bitterly: "I don't, of course, dream of asking *you* to believe I mean to turn over a new leaf. It would be quite against you very good people's principles to credit one with such intentions."

Rex started. The words came home to his sensitive conscience. Was it not true that he had almost come to have no belief in Beatrix? "Trixie!" he exclaimed impulsively, "if you—" But she had already turned away.

She did not wish him to be kind to her; she resented his interference too deeply and maliciously; she did not wish to be in the slightest degree softened to him. But he did not see the expression on her face, or the mocking, spiteful smile on her lips, so he retained a certain feeling of pity and self-reproach, as he thought to himself, with a sigh: "If only Eva had been well and strong, her influence might have done something, even with Trixie."

And this touch of self-accusation with regard to Beatrix was, though unsuspected by the two conspirators, about the most fortunate thing that could have happened to further Miss Forsyth's silence. For it caused Rex, by a mistaken sort of loyalty to the girl who, he fancied, had appealed to his kindlier judgment, to measure his words about her, to be chary of repeating the warnings he had already hinted to Imogen. Not, perhaps, that she would now have believed them; they might, however, not improbably have made a barrier between herself and her first friend, Major Winchester, and thus prevented the success of Mabella's plot.

In spite of Trixie's manoeuvres, Imogen found herself at luncheon beside Florence. Beatrix, however, was just opposite, so that any sort of *rapprochement* between the young girl and her neighbour was impossible. Florence herself was not brave enough to dare the mocking glances of her younger sister's eyes, and her well-meant attempts at conversation fell flat, while her somewhat constrained manner only added to Imogen's prejudice.

"She speaks to me as if I were about two years old," thought the girl. "Of course she *is* much, much older than I; but still, even Major Winchester, who is nearly as old as mamsey, I daresay, speaks to me as if I had some sense."

And happening at the moment to glance down the long table, she caught his eye. He was looking towards her, in search of her, with a certain concern and anxiety which Imogen was at once conscious of. She felt herself blush a little, even as she responded to his inaudible inquiry with the tiniest nod and smile of reassurance.

"I'm all right, thank you," they seemed to say. And, "How kind he is! How nice it is to feel that there is one person among all these strangers who cares a little for me already!" she thought with a little thrill, as she caught the smile on Rex's face in return.

Some one else saw the smile and the blush, and it needed but a glance in the direction in which they had been

bestowed for Trixie to interpret them. Florence, unfortunately, by this time despairing of making any way with the girl beside her, had allowed her thoughts to wander far from the present, and was paying but little attention to what passed, till rousing herself suddenly she began an animated conversation with the man on her other side, thus throwing Imogen altogether on the mercy of her left-hand neighbour, Oliver Belmont. He had not yet been introduced to her, but a word to Trixie on the opposite side had the desired effect, and in a minute or two Imogen began to feel considerably more at home than she could have believed possible.

There was no harm in Oliver, as the saying goes. He was a good-natured rattle, more or less selfish, but honest and well-meaning, and not without some faint capacity somewhere about him for a species of hero-worship. And though there were few to whom he would have owned it, the hero down at the bottom of his heart was his cousin Reginald. So when, encouraged by his pleasant genial face and manner, Imogen confided to him the history of the morning's misadventures, they soon found themselves on common ground.

"Major Winchester was so kind," said the girl, after relating Rex's good offices. "We should have been there still, but for him."

Oliver's face beamed.

"Just like him," he said. "He is awfully kind. Fact is," here he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, "I don't think there's another fellow like him, search the world over. It isn't every one he takes to though, so a good many people call him a prig and a saint, and all that style of thing. My sisters now, though they've known him all their lives—naturally so, as he's our cousin—they don't get on with him, except Florence; she's rather made an alliance with him lately, or he with her, since she's been so down in the mouth, you know."

Imogen did not "know," but she scarcely felt as if she could ask for an explanation.

"That's his way—any one in trouble, or helpless, or that he can be any good to, you see."

"Yes," said the girl, smiling, "I do see, for we were very helpless, and he was of great good to us."

"No wonder," said Oliver, feeling as if he were putting things rather awkwardly. "In *this* case his benevolence was certainly a pleasure."

"Thank you," said Imogen, laughing.

"But you see," he went on, "in a general way, Rex isn't at all a ladies' man; he's rather standoff and severe, and he's got very, very particular ideas. I never dare stand up for him to my sisters. Not that he needs it, but they'd only make fun of me, you see. Trixie pretty nearly hates Rex, I do believe," he added, almost in a whisper, "and Alicia can't stand him. He's down upon them both in their different ways, you see."

"I have not spoken to Miss Belmont yet," said Imogen, "but Trixie has been so kind to us. I can't help thinking Major Winchester misunderstands her a little."

Oliver drew his lips together *almost* as if he were going to whistle. Then he thought better of it, and turned the conversation from his youngest sister.

"I suppose it's true what the parsons say," he remarked. "People have much kinder feelings to others if they've had troubles themselves. Rex has had lots; his mother died when he was quite a young fellow, and he adored her; and then—"

"Has he no brothers and sisters—no one belonging to him?" asked the girl, eagerly.

"He's got a brother, much younger—a very good fellow—and a sister. But it's very sad about her, and the saddest of all is—" But here a general move announced that luncheon was over, and Oliver's communications only left Imogen with a vague notion that Major Winchester was one of a thousand, and that there were some especially sorrowful circumstances connected with his only sister.

This latent sympathy gave an additional gentleness and almost deference to her manner, a still greater softness to her pretty eyes, when she came upon Rex in the hall, where with Florence and Captain Belmont, the eldest son of the house, and one or two others, he was discussing the plans for the afternoon.

"It is clearing, there's no doubt," Major Winchester was saying. "I've had driving enough for my part, for to-day; suppose we go off for a walk?"

"Dear me!" said a mocking voice beside him. "What condescension! You don't mean to say that *you*, Major Winchester, are offering to go for a walk with any of *us*!"

The speaker was Mabella Forsyth.

"Yes, really, it is wonderful," said Alicia as she sauntered up to join the group, which was gradually augmented by most of those present. "What's coming over you, Rex? Not that I want to go for a walk; it's far too sloppy and plashy, and I'm tired already. Besides, some one must stay with mother to receive the Girards and the Custances."

"I will come, Rex," said Florence, promptly though quietly. "There is nothing to do in the house: we can't begin settling our parts or anything till Mr Girard is here, and Gerty for the dresses is indispensable.—Perhaps Miss Wentworth would like to come too?" she added kindly. "We can lend you strong boots and a mackintosh if your things haven't come. And we must start at once—November afternoons in these northern latitudes are not much to boast of. Who else will come? You, Noll?"

"Very much at your service," replied Oliver, who had found his pretty neighbour to his taste.

Florence's eyes wandered round the group.

"No, thank you," said Miss Forsyth, pretending to think that they had rested on her, "Trixie and I prefer to be independent in our strolls."

"I was not thinking of either of you," replied Florence, icily. Mabella's swarthy face darkened; she was not quite proof against Florence's contempt. "Will you come, Mrs Wyngate?" Florence proceeded, "and your husband; and you, Fred?" turning to her eldest brother.

"Wyngate and I are reserving ourselves for our great shoot to-morrow," said Captain Helmont. "I think billiards will be more in our line, and this horrid damp makes us old Indians rheumatic."

"But I will come," cried Mrs Wyngate, "though I am an older Indian than either of you;" which was true, as she was some years her husband's senior—a fact which she never affected to deny, and had married him as a widow out in Madras. She was good-natured and lively without being fast, and Florence had selected her with a view to Rex's approval of her society for Imogen, the guileless.

So they all dispersed, and before long the walking party found themselves in front of the house scanning the sky and consulting as to their destination; Miss Wentworth, anxious to believe herself perfectly happy, though, as a matter of fact, Florence's stout boots were too big for her, and her own waterproof, worn above her thick cloth jacket—for it was *very* cold—far from an ideal garment as to comfort, or, as she sadly feared, as to appearance either. Truth to tell, Imogen was not an enthusiast about long walks. She was quickly tired, and entirely unaccustomed to real country life. Then she was a little afraid of Florence, and Mrs Wyngate was a complete stranger.

"If I could have gone alone with Major Winchester and, I suppose, Oliver, I should have liked it much better," she said to herself.

"No," decided Rex, "it will not rain again for three or four hours certainly. Don't you agree with me, Noll?"

Oliver, who was nothing if not a weather prophet on his native heath, did agree.

"So," continued Major Winchester in his decided, slightly autocratic tones, "we shall run no risk in skirting the Great Fell, by the Torwood road. We can show Miss Wentworth the two caves, and if we are very lucky we may catch a gleam of red sunset over the moor."

"Not much red sunset in this evening's programme, I take it," said Oliver, as he attached himself to Imogen. The path was narrow, accommodating but two abreast in its moments of generosity, and narrowing, every now and then, to scanty for one, considering the fringes of drenched bracken and other rough verdure at each side. Mrs Wyngate naturally took the lead, as Imogen had hung back at the start—Florence closely behind her. Then came Rex, and a conversation *à trois* began, leaving the girl to Noll's good offices.

He was not brilliant, and the only subject on which he ever approached eloquence being but a yard or two in front of him, could scarcely, under the circumstances, be discussed. Before long the young stranger began to feel considerably bored.

"I wish Trixie had come with us," she said to Oliver.

Oliver stared.

"Do you, really?" he said. "Well, no, I can't agree with you. I'd rather have Florence—no, she's talking, she can't hear, and no matter if she does—ten times over. If Trixie's in a good-humour she's sure to be up to mischief, and when she's sulky she's worse."

"I think you're all very hard on her," said Imogen, rather sharply.

Oliver looked still further taken aback. His admiration for his new friend slightly diminished. Could she have a bad temper? Oliver had no liking for bad-tempered girls.

"Well," he said, "to tell you the truth, I think it's rather the other way. Every one's been so uncommonly easy with her, that she's got to think she can do as she pleases."

"That's very unfair," said Imogen, still sharply. "People spoil their children, and then when they find the poor things *are* spoiled, they turn round upon them and abuse them."

"There's something in that, perhaps," said Oliver, good-naturedly. His good-nature disarmed Miss Wentworth a little.

"I shouldn't have spoken that way," she said, after a pause. "It wasn't my place to say it."

"It's all right," Oliver replied. "You needn't mind what you say to me."

But a little constraint had come between the two. One or two subjects were started which fell flat, and Imogen plodded on, hating the wet stony path, wishing devoutly she had not come out, and tantalised by overhearing the snatches of bright, interested conversation ahead of her, feeling as if her companions had completely forgotten her existence. It was not so, however. Then came a break in the path, which widened to emerge on a stretch of moorland; and Major Winchester, who had noticed the silence of the two youngest members of the party, turned to look for Imogen.

"One can't be very sociable in our recent circumstances," he said laughingly. "It is better now. Don't you admire this great bare spread of country, Miss Wentworth? I hope the air isn't too keen for you?"

Imogen shivered slightly, but still she brightened up.

"It *is* rather cold," she replied; "but I like it. If only it wasn't so wet under foot."

"But you have strong boots on," said he encouragingly, "and out here in the open it's never really wet for long. We shall not have any more walking as bad as the bit we've had. We cross a corner of the moor to those fells you see over there—the Tor Rocks they are called, where there are some very respectable caves."

"In summer they are charming places for picnics," said Florence. She meant to be genial to the young stranger, and with Rex at hand it was more easy to be so.

"Especially the smugglers' cave," said Oliver.

"Is there a real smugglers' cave?" said Mrs Wyngate, eagerly. "How nice! Can we explore it like that place—Poole's Cavern, don't they call it—in Derbyshire?"

"It's a very small thing in caves compared to that," said Oliver. But Mrs Wyngate went on to ask questions, and her cheery interest attracted him. Gradually the little party separated again into two sets, Rex and Imogen in front, Oliver and Mrs Wyngate behind, followed by Florence, who, seeing with a sigh of satisfaction that her cousin was himself taking charge of his *protégée*, thought she might feel herself off duty in the meantime.

How different everything became to Imogen!

The still cloudy sky seemed only pleasantly grey, the bare moorland broke out into patches of contrasting colour; her boots grew into a merry joke as she confided to Major Winchester that her feet felt as if they could walk about inside them, and, when at his suggestion the unnecessary waterproof was discarded and relegated to his arm, she felt herself like a chrysalis emerging into a butterfly.

And her brightness reacted on her companion. His grave, quiet face lightened up with pleasure at the success of his endeavours, and encouraged him to redouble them. They cost him something, for he had to the full as absorbing matter for his own reflections as Florence; indeed, in some sense, more so, and he would have hailed with relief the prospect of a solitary stroll this afternoon, or if that were impossible, the companionship and distraction of intelligent and matured minds. Even Mrs Wyngate, who was well read and cultivated, and Florence herself, who was not without thoughtfulness and originality, would have been more congenial by far than this little schoolgirl, sweet and ingenuous though she was. But Major Winchester was never one to shirk a task savouring of duty or kindness on account of its cost. He racked his brains to amuse his young companion, recalling reminiscences of his eventful and adventurous life, going back to his school-boy days even, till Imogen's ringing laughter sounded back to the three in the rear.

"Rex is excelling himself," said Florence, with a touch of sarcasm in her tone.

"How very kind-hearted he is!" said Mrs Wyngate, simply and warmly. "For a girl of that age is scarcely an interesting companion to a man of his standing, at least, not to a man like *him*, entirely above flirting or nonsense of that kind."

"Yes," Oliver agreed, "you're about right. It's all his good-nature. For though she's pretty, she's rather heavy—a bit spoilt too, I fancy."

"By her adoring mamma," added Florence.

"However, she's our guest, and we must look after her, heavy or not. Don't you think Rex must be beginning to have had about enough of it by this time? We had better overtake them; we are close to the caves too."

Rex *was* beginning to feel his self-imposed task a little wearisome by this time, and he was not sorry when a shout from Oliver called to him to stop.

"Oh, what a bother!" said Imogen. "I did so want to hear the rest of that story, Major Winchester. Need we walk with them?"

"It would scarcely be civil to walk on," he said smiling. "I will tell you the rest another time, Miss Wentworth."

She looked almost brilliantly pretty, but a trifle resentful when the others came up. Florence, not unnaturally, felt slightly indignant, and even Mrs Wyngate decided that the girl must be silly as well as spoilt. For Imogen took no trouble to conceal her annoyance.

"Can she really be so foolish as to imagine Major Winchester finds her society interesting?" thought the matron of the party, while Florence mentally decided that Imogen's innocence and timidity were not of a kind to "last."

"She will soon develop into a self-conceited little flirt," reflected the elder girl; "all the more danger if she falls into bad hands. I foresee no sinecure if I am to look after her." But she exerted herself to be amusing and agreeable, and to keep the party together. "Poor Rex!" she thought, "I daresay it's almost as hard upon him to look cheerful as it is upon me. I mustn't be selfish, either."

The caves were not bad caves in their way, and child as she really was, Imogen soon forgot her vexation in the fun of exploring their dark recesses. She ran on laughingly, declaring that she must go to "the very end," and Rex, who knew every nook and cranny, contented himself with a "Don't let her do anything foolish," to Oliver, who was doing the honours to Mrs Wyngate, and then returned to the entrance, where it was rather a refreshment to him to find

Florence, and to walk up and down with her, with the liberty of talking or not as they felt inclined.

Chapter Six.

The Plot Thickens.

"You're not cold, I hope, Florence," he said suddenly, waking up out of a brown study.

"Oh no, it is never very cold just here; the rocks shelter us," she said. "Besides, I am well used to it, and well wrapped up. I only hope your *protégée* won't catch cold," she added, somewhat uneasily. "I should get into a scrape both with her mother and my own."

"She's right enough," he replied, with the slightest possible accent of impatience, which did not altogether displease his companion.

"There's really less risk of catching cold in caves in winter than in summer, when it's hot outside."

Then he relapsed into silence.

After a minute or two Florence spoke again.

"Rex," she began, half timidly, "I didn't like to ask you before—indeed, I've hardly seen you to-day, but, at breakfast, I saw when you got your letters. Was there anything new, anything worse?"

Major Winchester sighed.

"You're very quick, Florry dear," he said. "Yes. There wasn't anything exactly *new*, but worse—yes, it was all worse. That was partly why I went out with Paddy. I wanted to battle off my—misery." He gave a short laugh. "No, that is a womanish word; my disappointment, let us say. And that was how I came to pick up the Wentworths, you see. I had to call at the station."

"But what is the disappointment—specially, I mean," Florence asked.

"Only that there is *no* chance of her, of Eva's coming home," he said. "The doctors won't hear of it. She is to go straight to Algiers from Ireland. And last week, when I left her, there did seem a lightening in the clouds. They won't even allow her to pass through London on her way."

"And everything—what you told me about—it is all put off again indefinitely?"

"More than indefinitely—most *definitely*, I fear," he said. "Heaven only knows." But here he broke off.

"Oh, Rex, I *am* so sorry for you," said his cousin impulsively. "And you are so unselfish. When I compare myself with you, I do feel so ashamed. Just to think of your bothering yourself with that silly little goose of a child."

"Poor little girl!" he said. "Under good influence there is the making of a nice woman in her, I think. I'm sure Eva would have been good to her. Perhaps it's partly that," he went on simply. "If ever I try to—to do any little thing for others, it seems to bring her nearer me."

The tears rose to Florence's eyes—assuredly she was *not* a thorough-going Helmont.

"It is beautiful to feel like that," she said.

"I can't altogether pity you and Eva, Rex. The sympathy between you is so perfect; it would be worth living for to feel like that for an hour of one's life."

Major Winchester smiled.

"Yes," he said, "I do feel it in that way sometimes. And the best of it is, that when you *do* feel sympathy and union of that kind, you feel that it is independent of circumstances—that it is, so to speak, immortal. Nothing that could happen could altogether shipwreck us."

Florence sighed deeply.

"I understand," she said; "or, at least, I understand that I don't understand; and there is a certain satisfaction, almost exhilaration, in realising that there are things, good and beautiful things, which one can't understand."

Major Winchester smiled again, a kindly but somewhat rallying smile.

"Florence," he said, "you are getting on. I'm not a clever man, and I'm not a prophet. All the same, I believe, some day you will say good-bye to scepticism and cynicism, and all the rest of them."

"It will be thanks to you and Eva if ever I do," she said softly. Then, with her usual dislike to any approach to sentiment or emotion, she hastened to change the subject. "How is Angey?" she said. "Mamma or somebody spoke as if there had been news of her."

"I heard from, or of her, too, this morning," her cousin replied. "Just the old thing, waiting till her eyes are ready for the operation. They are trying to be hopeful. Her husband is very unselfish, I must say; nevertheless, I cannot

understand what made her marry him. My letter was from Arthur. He says—" But a sudden sound of voices just behind where they were standing, or walking, made him stop.

"Who in the world?" he began; then added quickly, "We *are* unlucky, Florence. Here are Trixie and her double, and that offensive boy, Calthorp. I wish we had not let them know we were coming this way, and I wish I had not let Miss Wentworth go exploring. They have all been in there together."

He looked and felt really annoyed. Florence cared less, but in her softened mood she was inclined to sympathise with him, as the noisy party emerged from the caves laughing and talking loudly. Miss Forsyth was the first to greet them.

"I can't congratulate you on the way you do your duty as a cicerone, Florry," she said. (Florence especially detested Miss Forsyth using her pet name.) "We ran across Miss Wentworth all by herself in the cave. She might have been lost and never heard of any more."

Major Winchester tamed to Imogen. She was looking rather pale; truth to tell, she was tired and very cold, and rather cross.

"What was Oliver about?" he said. "He promised to look after you. You weren't really frightened, were you?" he added in a lower tone.

"No, not exactly. But I don't think any one would like to be all alone in a dark care where they've never been before," said Imogen, childishly but resentfully. "Mr Oliver Belmont and Mrs Wyngate went another way. I don't know where."

"It was all right, I assure you," said Oliver, who was just behind. "Mrs Wyngate wanted to see the large stalactites, and when we turned round, Miss Wentworth had disappeared.—It was you, I think, who went another way, not we," he added good-naturedly.

And so it was, for Imogen, annoyed at finding that Major Winchester was not following, and that she was to be left to the semi-guardianship of Oliver, had turned, with the intention of retracing her steps to the outer world; and not till she had proceeded some little distance did she discover that she was diving farther into the dim, almost black recesses of the cavern. Then she got frightened, and welcomed effusively the apparition of Trixie and her satellites.

"I don't see how you can say it was all right," said Imogen coldly. "People *have* been lost in caves, as Miss Forsyth says."

"Not in Tor Cave," said Oliver. "It's not really deep a bit. I'll show you a plan of it when we get home. You couldn't have helped coming out again in a minute or two."

"But I can quite understand your having been frightened, and I only hope you have not caught cold," said Rex with real concern in his voice. "I should say the best thing to be done under the circumstances is to walk home as briskly as possible. A cup of hot tea will be an excellent preventive of harm, as soon as we get in."

"We shall not be satisfied with walking, thank you," said Trixie. "We've got the dogs Gunner and Plunger with us, tied to a gate over there," and she nodded her head in a direction behind where they stood, "and we mean to have a good race with them.—Won't you come with us, Imogen?"

Then she got frightened, and welcomed effusively the apparition of Trixie and her satellites.

"Oh do," said Mabella, insinuatingly. "I'll take one hand and Mr Calthorp the other, as Trixie will have enough to do with the beasts. So you shan't come to grief even when we go at full-speed down Grey Bray.—Noll, won't you come?"

"Many thanks, no," said Oliver, dryly. Something in his tone made Imogen hesitate in the acceptance of the invitation she had been on the point of. She glanced half longingly towards Beatrix; but before she had time to speak, before Florence had time to break in with what, though well-meant, would probably have been an entirely ineffectual remonstrance, Major Winchester took the matter in his own hands.

"Miss Wentworth has had fatigue enough," he said. "I know what your 'good races' are, Trixie. Besides which, I promised Mrs Wentworth to bring her daughter safely home."

"Looks like it," murmured Trixie, who had drawn near him, "when you left her all to herself in the cave." No one but Rex himself heard the words, and he went on, without apparently taking any notice of the impertinence, "And I mean to do so."

Imogen's face flushed with mingled feelings, but she did not speak.

"You will stay with us—with Florence and me," said Major Winchester, turning to her, and speaking very gently. The pink on the girl's fair face grew into crimson.

"Very well," she said, not too generously, though with an undertone of submission which pleased Rex, who at heart, it must be confessed, was a bit of a martinet.

The group divided. Miss Forsyth, Beatrix, and their attendant turning off to the right in the direction of a low wall of loose stones which they proceeded to clamber over.

"You might have cleared it, surely, Mr Calthorp," said Trixie, contemptuously.

"I'll do it now: what'll you bet?" said the young man. He proceeded to execute his boast, thereby, as the girl had foreseen, giving her and her friend a few moments to themselves.

"What a donkey he is, to be sure!" said Mabella. "What do you want to say, Trix?"

"Only this—didn't I do it splendidly? Nothing pulls the strings for Rex like contradiction. He will be devoted to her all the rest of the afternoon, and she will imagine it's all the result of her fascinations. Really, it's the best joke I've had for ever so long."

"Provided Florry doesn't step in and spoil it all," said Mab.

"Florry!" ejaculated Beatrix. "She's more than half stupefied still. She sees nothing but what is forced upon her. It's really extraordinary how hard she's been hit. I couldn't have half believed it of one of *us*." She ended with a light laugh.

"Nor could I," said her companion. "To do you justice, there's uncommonly little heart among you."

"Now don't be rude," said Beatrix. "What do *you* know? Don't you begin setting up to be as good as Florry, my dear, or—"

They were on the verge of one of the quarrels which frequently relieved the monotony of their friendship. But Mabella thought better of it. Her spite had found an ample field in which to disport itself for the present, and she felt it wise to concentrate her forces.

"Don't be silly!" she said calmly. "Here comes that boy—bravo, Mr Calthorp! Now listen, Trix, let's get in before them, and you be sure to back up any remark I may make. I think I may have a chance of insinuating something already. But leave it to me—you're too clumsy—for remember I shall not say one word that could be brought up against us, should it go great lengths, and *you* would."

"And if it does go great lengths, what will happen?" inquired Beatrix, slightly aghast.

"A nice mess for Major Rex; that's all I care about," answered Mabella. "Goodness, how those dogs are pulling. They'd have strangled themselves or torn the gate-post down if we'd kept them waiting much longer. Thank you, Mr Calthorp, I think we had better leave them to Trixie. They know her more intimately than they do us. Discretion is sometimes the better part of valour." And she stood by coolly, while Beatrix struggled to loosen Gunner and Plunger, nearly knocking Mr Calthorp down in their first rush of freedom.

"You would have been safer beside me after all," said Trixie contemptuously to her two "discreet" companions.

The other party, meanwhile, were wending their way home in a more decorous manner.

Oliver, somewhat disillusioned by Imogen's unfair reproach, had re-attached himself to Mrs Wyngate. Florence, satisfied that Rex had undertaken for the time the "personal conduct" of his self-imposed *protégée*, walked on silently between the two couples, apparently one of the group, in reality thinking her own thoughts, though feeling a degree less entirely sad and hopeless than usual, thanks to the glimmer of reflected light she had been conscious of in her conversation with her cousin.

And Major Winchester, too, felt a little cheered. He began to have hopes of Florence, and he realised, though by no means for the first time, that his own sorrows were not without their brighter side. Then he was touched, even gratified, by Imogen's confidence in him, and he felt that she deserved some return. So he devoted himself to her anew, and this time their talk called for less effort on his part—they seemed to grow rather more on a level, as half unconsciously the conversation became of a somewhat personal kind.

"I'm sure Mrs Wentworth will say I did right in preventing your going over to the enemy in that traitorous fashion; don't you think so?" Major Winchester began. He spoke in a light half-rallying tone, for at first Imogen preserved her dignified silence, and he felt uncertain as to how the ground lay.

The girl gave her head the very slightest possible toss, as she replied:

"Mamma trusts me to look after myself. Indeed, she asks my advice more often than I do hers. Mamma hasn't a very decided character, and I'm afraid I have."

Rex was silent.

"Are you shocked?" said Imogen with a touch of apology, or at least timidity. And she glanced up at him from under her long eyelashes, like a naughty but repentant child.

"'Shocked?' no. That tone about one's elders is too common nowadays to shock," he said quietly. "But I own it would disappoint me in you if I thought you really meant it. It was your tenderness to your mother that—that first"—"made me feel an interest in you," he was going to have said, but the words struck him as priggish and patronising. Imogen blushed, but he did not see her blush, and he went on speaking:

"It reminded me a little of my own sister," he said. "She was my elder sister, and my mother was an invalid for many years. One of my clearest remembrances since early boyhood is of Angey's unflinching care and tenderness about our mother."

He seemed to be "thinking back," as I have heard a child express it. Imogen, glancing up again, caught the look in his face and respected it.

"You say 'was.' But your *sister* is not dead?" she hazarded after a little.

"Oh no," he replied, recollecting himself with a little start, "she is living. But I am in great anxiety about her just now. She is soon to undergo a very serious—very, very serious operation on her eyes. And we shall not know for months if it is successful. I am very foolish, I daresay, but I can scarcely bear to speak of it. I had a letter this morning—my poor Angey."

"I am *so* sorry," said Imogen softly. "What is her name?" she added. "I should like to think of her by it. Is it Angela?"

"Not quite. It is even more fantastic. It is Evangeline. Eva some people call her, but her home name has always been Angey. Evangeline is too much of a good thing in the way of names."

"It is very pretty. And 'Eva' is very pretty," said Imogen, simply.

Major Winchester smiled.

"Yes, 'Eva' is very nice," he said. "Of course, it is the diminutive of other names as well as my sister's." Then he seemed to wish to change the subject. "Don't think me impertinent, Miss Wentworth, apropos of what you were saying about having a 'decided character.' Young people—*very* young people especially," and here he gave a slightly deprecating smile—"often make a mistake between impulsiveness and self-will *and* decision of character, much in the same way that obstinacy and firmness are often confused."

"I am not so *very* young, Major Winchester," Imogen returned, much more irate, evidently, at the reflection on her youth than at the other suggestion. "I am eighteen *past*, and I don't think I am particularly self-willed; at least, I don't mean to be. Mamma and I *generally* wish the same things. And when you live with a person who can't make up their mind, and you have to decide, that isn't being impulsive."

"No, certainly not," he agreed.

"Besides," she went on, "sometimes I have to give in very much against my own will. As about coming here," and she related the history of the "breaking the journey," which had led to such uncomfortable results.

Rex listened with considerable amusement.

"But after all," he said, "it's an ill wind, you know. But for the little episode in question, I might never have had the pleasure of getting to know you so well."

"No," said Imogen, with the sort of bluntness of manner which was, somehow, one of her charms, "that's true." Then there fell a little silence.

"Major Winchester," said Imogen after a moment or two.

"Miss Wentworth?" he replied.

"You mustn't mind my saying so," she began, "but do you know I can't help thinking you are all a little hard upon Trixie."

His face darkened at once.

"How so?" he said.

Imogen hesitated.

"It's very difficult to answer when you're asked like that," she said, pouting a little. But her companion seemed to have lost his playfulness. He did not speak.

"I mean—I mean," she went on, "that because she's spoilt, perhaps, and rather noisy, and—and what you call loud or fast sometimes, you all, you and her sister, and even her brother,"—with a glance round to make sure that Florence was not within earshot—"seem to think there's no good in her."

"Heaven forbid!" Major Winchester ejaculated; "Heaven forbid that I should say such a thing of anybody!"

"Well, well, you know what I mean," Imogen went on; "you don't think there's *much*, anyway. Now she was really very kind to me when we arrived, much kinder than anybody; except you, of course," she added naïvely.

Rex's tone softened.

"I am far from saying there is no good in Trixie," he repeated. "If we could get her away from other influences, if she could really be made to *feel*, if—if— But it's no use discussing her. And, excuse me, my dear child,"—he was scarcely aware that he used the expression—"but can you judge in so very short a time as to whether we are hard on her or not?"

"N-no," said Imogen, consideringly. "Only sometimes one seems to see things at first better than afterwards."

"Or one fancies so," he remarked. "But don't begin thinking Trixie a martyr. She is nothing of the kind, I assure you. I am glad—if she has been really kind to you, I should be glad. Still, I cannot help hoping that you will make more of a friend of Florence."

Imogen made a little *moue*.

"I will if I can," she said, adding: "It's Miss Forsyth you think the bad influence, I can see. I'm afraid you don't think

there's much good in *her*."

"No," said Major Winchester, gravely; "I'm afraid I do not."

"I don't like her," continued the girl, "but mamma does. Miss Forsyth's so nice to her. You'd better warn mamma. Major Winchester," she added, rather flippantly.

"You know perfectly well I could not do anything so impertinent," he said, with a touch of asperity. Imogen reddened. "Forgive me," he went on, "I do not mean to speak harshly. But one thing—do promise me, Miss Wentworth, that if you are in any real trouble or dilemma here—anything in which your mother, as a stranger herself, might not be able to help you—you will not be afraid of applying to me."

"Yes," said Imogen, "I promise you."

They were close to the house by this time. As they entered the hall they came upon the two who had preceded them, warming themselves at the fire. Major Winchester stalked across and disappeared through a doorway without speaking. He had gone to look after some hot tea for Imogen, for she was blue with cold.

"What's the matter now?" said Miss Forsyth.

"Have *you* offended his majesty, Miss Wentworth?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Imogen.

"How silly you are, Mab!" said Trixie.

"Don't you see, Imogen, she—like the rest of us—is so flabbergasted that she doesn't know how to take it?"

"Well, no wonder," Mabella replied, lightly.

"Did any one *ever* before see Major Winchester devote himself like that to anything in the shape of a young lady? How *have* you done it, Miss Wentworth?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Imogen again. She turned to go up-stairs as she spoke, and she spoke coolly. All the same the shot had taken effect.

Chapter Seven.

Acting and not Acting.

Some guests had left The Fells that afternoon, but others had arrived. There were further goings and comings during the next few days, but more of the latter than the former. The Helmonts were in their glory, but to Imogen and her mother, fresh from their uneventful monotonous life *à deux*, the effect was almost as confusing as that of a kaleidoscope too rapidly turned. It became a relief when the party settled down as it were, for a little, into the chosen guests especially selected for the private theatricals which had been for some time under discussion, and at which the "assistance" of the Wentworths had *not* been desired.

But Imogen was undoubtedly pretty; every one, even Miss Forsyth, allowed it. And her face was a novelty. She proved to have more spirit, or "go," as Trixie called it, in her, than had seemed probable; on the whole, she bid fair to be a very creditable success. Her inexperience and shyness were amusing, not tiresome. Her mother watched her with enchantment, ready and eager to swallow any amount of even the most thinly disguised flattery on Imogen's account from the astute Mabella.

"She is really turning everybody's head. I never saw anything like it," said the young lady in question over and over again, whenever she got a chance of Mrs Wentworth to herself. "Noll is grateful for a glance; and Fred"—Fred was Captain Helmont—"who is considered a tremendous critic, admires her out and out, only, of course, his admiration is due elsewhere." He was shortly to be married to a girl not at that time one of the party at The Fells. "I don't know what Lady Lucy would say to it if she were here."

Mrs Wentworth smiled. Captain Helmont had been one of her dreams for Imogen before they came.

"Lady Lucy is very pretty herself, some one said," she remarked politely.

"Not a patch on Imogen, if I may call her so," Miss Forsyth continued. "But *the* marvel," and here she dropped her voice discreetly, "is Major Winchester! A man who never knows if a woman has a nose on her face or not—who stalks about the world like the great Mogul. Of course, we all admire him and respect him—oh, immensely!—but we look upon him as a being quite apart. And there he is—perfectly devoted—taking the greatest interest in these theatricals, which as a rule he would have thought beneath contempt, and all, I am sure, for your daughter's sake. Trixie and I can't get over it."

Mrs Wentworth's smile was positively beaming.

"My dear Miss Forsyth, you are too kind, too partial," she said. "I quite appreciate all you say, but—I must not have Imogen spoiled. She is so young. Major Winchester, for instance—I am sure he considers her a perfect child."

"But she is not—not in *some* ways," Mabella went on, insidiously. "She has been so well brought up,"—and here she sighed deeply—"so well educated. I heard Rex saying to some one that he could see she had excellent abilities. It will

be such a good thing for my poor Trixie if a girl like that takes to her—her influence would be everything. Much better than mine,” here she sighed again. “I can do my friends no good, I can only love them. I was not well brought up—far from it, as I daresay you can see for yourself.”

“Poor dear!” said Mrs Wentworth, too ingenuous herself to doubt another, and too candid to express any civil disagreement. She gently stroked Mabella’s hand, while the ready tears rose to her eyes. “You had no mother, perhaps?”

“Yes, my mother is still living, but—she never understood me,” said Miss Forsyth, vaguely. And Mrs Wentworth, suspecting some painful family history behind the words, forbore to question further. She would have been not a little amazed had she heard the true side of the story. A father and mother, simple-minded and devoted to their daughter, erring only in their too great unselfishness, to be repaid by contempt and scorn, when, by dint of a certain unscrupulous cleverness, Mabella made her way into a higher social sphere. She and Trixie had met accidentally, and the elder girl at once laid herself out to obtain an ascendancy over the spoiled Belmont “baby,” in which she succeeded only too well.

“No,” Mabella repeated. “I was never understood, and—I was not naturally patient and docile, I fear; and now, though I see it all, I am too old to change, I suppose.”

“Too old!” repeated Imogen’s mother. “Nonsense, dear Miss Forsyth. You can’t be more than seven or eight and twenty?”

“I am three-and-twenty,” said the girl, which was true. She was furious, but she hid it. “Will you take me in hand, dear Mrs Wentworth,” she went on, “if you don’t think me too old! You can’t be many years older yourself,” she added, sweetly.

“I shall be thirty-eight next month,” Imogen’s mother replied. “That is dreadfully old, is it not?”

“I shall count you my elder sister then, and you must tell me when you see me doing anything you don’t like, and dear Imogen will look after Trixie. Shall that be a compact? Who knows how much good you may not do me in a fortnight! Even Major Winchester himself would not give me up as incorrigible, if he heard of it.”

And under Mabella’s direction, hints, though less broad, were not wanting on Trixie’s part to Imogen herself. They were seed for which circumstances, including her own inexperience and vanity, her mother’s blind devotion and Rex Winchester’s well-intended kindness, were steadily preparing a congenial soil.

Everybody knows the atmosphere of excitement, general fuss, anxiety, and eager anticipation which seizes upon a house—a country-house especially—where “private theatricals” are in question. And to those fortunate people who have never themselves had personal experience of it, it has been too often described to need more than an allusion. It is a grand test—almost as good as a sea voyage—of temper and unselfishness. So far, perhaps, we may consider it salutary. But no doubt such a state of things has its undesirable side. To the inexperienced, especially, it brings with it a curious sense of unreality, a throwing off of one’s actual self and responsibilities which call for peculiar good-sense and self-control.

“I don’t feel as if I knew who I was,” said Imogen, looking up at Major Winchester somewhat wistfully one day, about ten days after her arrival at The Fells, when a long rehearsal had tried everybody’s patience and good-humour to the utmost. “I don’t think I am the least good at acting, and yet I feel as if I weren’t myself. I seem more than half ‘Valesca.’ Yet I shall *never* be able to do it the way Mr Villars tells me.”

“He is rather inexorable, certainly,” Rex agreed; “but then he wouldn’t be fit to be stage-manager if he were not. I think you will do very well, quite well enough.”

He did not add the truth—that though she was quite without dramatic power of the mildest kind, she *looked* the part so charmingly that no one would be inclined to be critical.

“That is faint praise,” said Imogen with one of her little pouts. “Of course I know it is a most unimportant character; still I would like to manage it decently well. How capitally Trixie and Miss Forsyth act, Major Winchester!”

He glanced at her sharply.

“Then I hope no one I care for will ever act capitally,” he said.

Imogen reddened.

“You are very severe on them,” she said. “I don’t mind what you think of Miss Forsyth, for I don’t like her; but I am, sometimes, at least”—and here, for some unexplained reason, she grew still redder—“very fond of Trixie. She is very kind to me generally;” for candour compelled her to qualify the statement. Trixie not being so case-hardened in diplomacy as her ally, was not always able to keep her temper or to hide her growing jealousy of Imogen’s universally acknowledged beauty. “And I think she would like to be more—more like what your sister must have been. I think you can scarcely judge of Trixie, Major Winchester. She shows to disadvantage to you because she is so frightened of you.”

Rex laughed; he could not help it.

“My dear child, you really must not be so desperately confiding,” he said. “Trixie is frightened of no one—man or woman.”

But Imogen’s advocacy touched him and increased his favourable opinion of her character. An opinion to a great

extent deserved, for below some superficial selfishness and vanity, there was in her real sweetness and generosity—material, in wise hands, for much good. The generosity in this instance was conspicuous, for Rex had himself been witness to some far from amiable conduct on Beatrix's part towards the young guest.

"How is it," he went on, "that you seem to see so little of Florence?"

"I don't know," Imogen replied. "I have tried to make friends with her, because I knew you wished it," she added naively. "But I'm afraid she does not care for me. And she is always so busy. I think she does a great deal to help her mother."

"Yes, Florrie's a good girl," said he approvingly. "I wish you could know her better."

It was as Imogen said. Florence did not care for her. Yet, when taxed by her cousin with her disregard of his *protégée*, it was difficult to prove her to blame.

"I really did what I could," she assured him. "But she threw herself into Trixie's arms from the very first, and unless I actually speak against my own sister, I cannot help it."

"No 'speaking against' any one would have the desired effect with Miss Wentworth; rather the other way," said Major Winchester. "There is a strong strain of chivalry in her composition."

"What a high opinion you seem to have of her!" said Florence, half pettishly. "To me she is just a pretty, shallow child—with something ingenuous and sweet about her—yes, that I must allow. But really, I know little more of her than on the day she came. I have had to give up taking any part in the theatricals, you know, Rex, and it is the one thing I could have thrown myself into, and—forgotten myself a little. But Alicia took it into her head to act, and mother would have been left all to herself really. Besides which I *couldn't* have kept my temper with Trixie and that Mab of hers," she concluded, honestly.

"I am sorry you had to give it up. But I am sure you did it for the best. It makes me still more anxious about that child, however," said Rex. "And I am afraid her mother is—well, very silly."

"You will have to look after her doubly," said Florence. "She couldn't have a better guardian. It may distract your thoughts a little—poor Rex. What is your last news, by the bye?"

"No better, except that she has stood the journey so far pretty well," he replied.

The same question was asked him again that afternoon in the interval of one of the daily or twice-a-day rehearsals. Imogen, blushing as she did so, asked gently what news he had.

"No better, thank you," he said half absently, "except that the crossing has been accomplished pretty successfully."

"The crossing?" Imogen repeated. "Then is she—is your sister to undergo the operation abroad? Or is it over?"

Rex recollected himself.

"Oh no," he said quickly. "I was confusing—no, no—Angey, my sister, is pretty well in herself. Nothing can be done about her eyes for some time yet." He gave a half sigh and hesitated. "I was thinking of—"

But Imogen would not let him finish.

"I am so sorry," she said, "for speaking of it. It was very thoughtless of me, for I know it must be very painful to you."

She really felt guilty, for only the day before Mrs Wentworth had told her that Miss Forsyth had warned her never to allude to Major Winchester's anxieties; he "could not bear them spoken of to him."

"All the kinder of him," Imogen had said to herself with a little thrill of pride, "to have confided in me about them," though she had not expressed this to her mother.

There were times when Imogen's confidence in Beatrix received a shake. Trixie was too unused to self-control of any kind to keep it up for long, even in a bad cause. And Miss Wentworth's acting often gave opportunity for ridicule, it must be allowed. Then Mr Villars was severe and enthusiastic, and Imogen's perfect fitness in *appearance* for the part assigned to her made him doubly provoked at her absolute incapacity to carry out his directions. More than once the close of a rehearsal found the poor girl all but in tears, and the sympathy she met with was often but scant.

"You do look so absurd when Mr Villars scolds you," said Trixie, one day after one of these scenes. "If you talk in that brokenhearted voice I shall not be able to keep from laughing, I warn you, on the grand night itself."

"You are very unkind," said Imogen, flashing out. "I never wanted to act, and I never said I could. I have a good mind to—" But here her voice failed her. She turned away abruptly and left the room.

"She has gone to complain to her mother. You are a fool, Trixie," said Miss Forsyth, elegantly.

"Not a bit of it. Her mother would put a stop to it, and Miss Imogen doesn't in her heart wish that, by any means," said Trixie.

"What a pity Rex isn't here; it would be a part of the play for him to go to comfort her."

"*Hush!*" said Mabella hastily, as Florence at that moment came in.

"What is the matter with that child?" Florence asked sternly. "I was writing in the library just now, and she came rushing in. She pretended she was looking for a book when she saw me, but I am almost sure she was crying."

"She is such an idiot—" began Trixie, but a warning glance from Mab stopped her.

"Do you wish Florence to take her up and spoil all?" she said afterwards.

"I mean," Beatrix went on, "she takes things up so. I couldn't help laughing at the way Mr Villars scolded her."

"You don't want to frighten her out of it now at the last?" said Florence. "It would be very awkward, and might get you into hot water, I warn you."

She had an additional motive for not desiring such a catastrophe. No one, she knew, failing Miss Wentworth, could take the "Valesca" but herself, and this, Florence was by no means inclined to do. It was the part which faintly shadowed her own story—the devotion of a girl to an unworthy object. So with these words of remonstrance to Trixie, Florence went her way.

Her way was to seek for Rex, and enlist his help. She found him writing in her brother's smoking-room.

"Rex," she said abruptly, "I'm afraid you are not looking after your Miss Wentworth after all. She's in a sea of troubles about her acting, and I cannot meddle. For one thing I can't and won't take 'Valesca,' if she throws it up," and she crimsoned as she said it.

"Nobody could propose such a thing," he said.

"*Wouldn't* they? I would rather not risk it. But you know something about acting; quite as much as Mr Villars, I believe, only you are not so exaggerated and affected; couldn't you coach Miss Wentworth a little? You see I don't hide that my motives in seeking you are half, or more than half, selfish ones."

"They are very natural," he replied kindly. "And, of course, though I am interested in this little girl—she is very sweet—I can't but be far *more* interested in you, dear Florrie, and I believe you are more unselfish than you allow."

Florence looked and felt pleased. A little praise from Rex went a long way with her.

"Then you'll see what you can do," she said, persuasively. "You would find her in the library at the present moment; better catch her red-handed, or red-eyed rather, and then she cannot deny her troubles."

Poor Major Winchester! He had been promising himself a peaceful half-hour to finish his letter to Eva; but after all it was too late for to-day's post. "It wouldn't really go any sooner," he reflected, "so I suppose I may as well."

Still, it was not without an effort that he went off to the library on his benevolent quest.

Yes; Imogen was there, busily reading or making believe to do so, in a corner. The Fells library was a large and imposing room, filled with books, the most valuable of which seldom left their shelves except to be dusted. But everything about the house was well kept and well managed. Not being of a literary turn himself, nor possessing children with strongly developed intellectual tastes, was no reason, said the Squire, why there should not be a good library. And he had engaged the services of a properly qualified person to look after it, so that the volumes were clean and well arranged, and from time to time added to.

This, however, was not one of the librarian's days, so Imogen had it all to herself. A gallery ran all round, to which there were two means of access—a stair at one end of the room itself, and a door from an upper passage in the house; for originally the library had been a ballroom, with a musicians' balcony, since discarded. Rex glanced round once or twice before he discovered Miss Wentworth, half-hidden in a big leather arm-chair by the fire. He smiled as he saw her.

"She is not so very upset after all," he thought. "Ten to one she is very happy over a novel, and won't thank me for disturbing her."

But it was not so. Imogen *was* both angry and unhappy, and she was only pretending to read. She glanced up quickly at the sound of Major Winchester's approaching footsteps, and a gleam of pleasure came over her face, to be, however, almost instantly replaced by a flush of shame and mortification as she became conscious of her swollen eyes and tear-stained face.

"What are you studying?" said Rex, as he sat down beside her. "Oh, *Great Expectations*. Why, you must have read that long ago!"

"No, I haven't," said Imogen, "but I don't think I care for it."

"Not just now, I daresay," he said kindly, "for you are vexed and upset, I know."

"How do you know?" she asked, some laggard tears rising slowly as she spoke.

"Never mind. I was told I should find you here, and so I have. I know what it's about too," for Major Winchester was great at going to the point. "It isn't a *very* big trouble after all, but then at seventeen—"

"I'm eighteen—eighteen *past*," interrupted Imogen, so indignantly that the tears hid themselves in a fright, which her friend was not sorry to see. He smiled.

"Well—even at eighteen. I was once eighteen myself," (Imogen could not help smiling a little); "and I can understand

that, as you have to do this thing, you would rather do it well than badly. I can understand, too, that Trixie is probably not the most delicate and tactful person to have to do with in the circumstances."

"I *hate* being laughed at," said Imogen frankly.

"Naturally. Villars is really not a bad fellow, but he thinks he's bound to keep his hobby always at full-speed. Now—have you got your part?"

"Yes," she replied, extracting some rather dilapidated-looking pages from her pocket, "here it is. This is the worst bit," she went on, "the little dialogue with Hubert. 'Oh, to think how I trusted you,' it begins."

Chapter Eight.

"Valesca."

"'Oh, to think how I trusted you,'" repeated Major Winchester, "hum, hum," and he read on a few sentences to himself consideringly.

"Yes," said Imogen, "and 'Hubert', you know, is Mr Calthorp. Just fancy! If only I were going to do it with you now, Major Winchester, I—"

She stopped short. The sound of a door softly shutting startled her. "What was that?" she said.

"Oh, nothing; some unfortunate actor seeking the solitude of the library to study his part in," said Rex.

He went on reading for a minute or two. Neither he nor Imogen heard a door overhead open, even more softly than the other one had closed.

"Fancy," Imogen repeated, "*Mr Calthorp*, Major Winchester. Now, if you were it, I am sure I could do it better."

"For *your* sake I wish I were, though the character is scarcely one which recommends itself to me," he said. "But now, look here, my dear child;" and he leant forward towards her a little, while he pointed out a passage on the page; "when you come to—" And he proceeded to emphasise a line or two.

The door above closed very, very gently, and two ladies slipped quietly back into the up-stairs passage from which it opened. They were Mrs Wentworth and Miss Forsyth. Imogen's mother was smiling with a slightly self-conscious, slightly alarmed expression; Mabella was whispering eagerly.

"There now," she said; "I am so glad you have seen for yourself. Wasn't I clever?" Mrs Wentworth spoke half nervously.

"I hope you don't think any one else has seen them?" she said. "I am so afraid of any gossip. You see, I have scarcely realised that Imogen is more than a child—a mere child. I am afraid I am not a very efficient chaperon as yet."

"Oh, it's all right. Major Winchester is discretion itself. I only wanted to give you ocular demonstration of his devotion. It is not to be wondered at; she did look irresistible when she glanced up at him just now, did she not? But you know he is usually *so* unimpressionable and high and mighty. Only be *sure* you never tell anybody that I made you peep. You promise, don't you, dear Mrs Wentworth? I always feel as if you were a girl like myself, you know. I cannot take in that you are really the mother of a grown-up daughter."

Mrs Wentworth beamed.

"Of course I will never betray you," she said. "But she is so very young. I do feel so at a loss."

"There is nothing to feel at a loss about," said Mabella quickly. It would not have suited her at all for Mrs Wentworth to take others into her confidence. "Imogen is quite charming. You must just make up your mind that every man she comes across will be at her feet; she will have any number to choose from, and she can afford to be *difficile*."

"Are you not too partial, dear Miss—?"

"You naughty woman," said the girl, playfully laying her fingers on Mrs Wentworth's lips, "what was it you promised? Miss Forsyth indeed!"

"Well then, dear Mabella, if you really wish it," said Imogen's mother; "are you not too partial?"

"You are so incredulous; other mothers would not be nearly so difficult to convince," said Mab. "That's why I wanted you to see his high mightiness's devotion with your own eyes; not that it's of any consequence in itself. Imogen will do far better than that; it's only to convince you of her fascination."

Mrs Wentworth gave a gentle little sigh.

"I suppose I must not hope to keep her very long," she said, "hard as it will be to part with her. But if it is for her happiness, that is all I think about. I would not ask or expect any extraordinarily brilliant marriage for her. I should be quite content to give her to some really good man, whom I could trust her to."

"Oh yes, of course, of course," said Miss Forsyth, with an undertone of slightly contemptuous incredulity, which Mrs Wentworth was too simple to perceive. "All the same, you must not be *too* unworldly—too easily pleased, you know."

It is not every day one sees a girl like Imogen, *so* well brought up too."

"Dear Mabella, you *are* too partial," Mrs Wentworth repeated.

"It is true that when I take to any one I can see no fault in them," said Miss Forsyth. "I think I may say of myself that I am a very thorough-going friend—*and*," she added to herself, "a very thorough-going enemy."

Half an hour or so later Imogen was up-stairs.

"Mamma," she said, as she glanced in at her mother, "I'm going out for a few minutes' blow before luncheon. I won't be long."

"No, don't be late, darling," her mother replied; "the Squire does like people to be punctual. It's one of the few things he *is* strict about. But come in for half a second, my pet. I have not seen you all the morning. How bright and well you are looking!"

Imogen stooped to kiss her mother.

"Don't keep me, mamsey dear," she said, "Major Winchester is waiting for me. I only ran up for my hat and jacket. You wouldn't have said I was looking bright and well if you had seen me half an hour or so ago. I was in the depths of despair about my part. Indeed, I was almost making up my mind to throw it all up."

"And are you in better spirits now, dearest? I am sure they would all be dreadfully disappointed if you gave it up. You will certainly be the central figure in it, by what I hear."

"Oh, mamsey dear, you mustn't believe such nonsense," said Imogen. "I truly can't act a bit, and—I'm not at all sure but that some people would be glad if I give it up. However, I think it will go a little better now. Major Winchester has been so kind, so painstaking and patient with me about it—he has been coaching me for ever so long down in the library."

"Indeed, dear. I am very glad you have got him to help you. He has really been your good fairy here ever since we came."

"Yes, truly he has," said Imogen. "And he *is* so nice. I had no idea he was such a hero, mamma. You should hear the stories Trixie was telling me of the wonderfully brave things he has done. And Trixie, you know, is by no means one of his admirers in a general way. But I mustn't keep him waiting. Good-bye, mamsey darling," and off she flew, a perfect picture of sunny brightness.

"Dear child!" thought her mother. "*She* seems as happy as possible. It is really wonderful—such a child as she is to have made a conquest of a man like him. He *does* seem rather old for her, but yet—if *she* is content; and of course it is not a connection one could in any way ever feel *ashamed* of. Still, I hope he will not think of precipitating matters: it would be almost more honourable if he were to wait till she has seen a little more of the world. If I could manage to give her a London season next year; but I hardly see how I can. Mrs Helmont has her hands quite full with her own daughters, and she says their London house is too small for visitors. I wonder if there is any one else I could look up; or if we let our Eastbourne house, and could take a little one temporarily in London, as Imogen wishes."

Whereupon her mind set off on an interesting journey of practical details, ways, and means.

"The nicest of all," she decided, reverting to the original subject of her meditations, "would be if Major Winchester were to speak to *me* in the first place. If there were an understanding between him and me, it would all be so much easier; perhaps he will speak to me. Of course, I *may* have to allow an engagement almost at once. Dear, dear! how astonished everybody will be; it is not often nowadays that a girl so young— But really I must get my letters written and not waste time."

The said letters contained more than one hint of coming events, for Mrs Wentworth found it impossible altogether to repress her sense of maternal exultation.

And several times during the next few days her heart beat faster, and she was conscious of a flutter of pleasurable expectation, when Rex happened to approach her or seemed to be seeking her society.

"I must give him all the opportunities I can," she reflected. But she was not clever enough to do so with the real adroitness and apparent nonchalance such tactics require. Miss Forsyth saw through the little manoeuvres, and enjoyed them with strange, almost impish acuteness, though her pleasure could not be shared, as she had too small faith in Trixie's powers of discretion to draw her attention to them.

But Major Winchester himself, though the least suspicious or self-conscious of human beings, was uncomfortably aware of a certain change in Mrs Wentworth's manner.

"What can it be?" he asked himself. "She is a nice woman, though not a very wise one. Surely she is not a silly old coquette at bottom. I should be very sorry to think so, for that child's sake."

But the very suggestion of such a misgiving tinged his manner in turn with a faint constraint, which gave colour to Mrs Wentworth's prepossessions.

The very evening before that of the grand representation a little scene of this kind occurred. The full-dress rehearsal, for the benefit of the upper servants and some of the out-of-doors retainers and neighbouring small tenants on the estate, had just taken place; and while the actors were changing their dresses Major Winchester, who had good-naturedly volunteered to be prompter, strolled into the drawing-room in search of Florence. She was not there; but

Imogen's mother was standing by the fire. He was moving away, when Mrs Wentworth recalled him.

"No; Florence is not here," she said, in answer to a word or two that he had let fall; "but she will be back directly. She went to say something or other about the lights, I think. She was speaking to Mr Villars about them."

"Ah, yes, that is all right then; it was that I wanted her for. They must be changed." And out of a sort of reluctance to seem abrupt or discourteous, he lingered for a moment.

"Do stay a little and talk about the acting. It seemed to me *so* successful. You are all so busy I never see any of you. Of course, I don't pretend to be anything of a judge; but it really is very good now, is it not?"

She spoke simply, and Major Winchester, who was really interested in the play, sat down and replied with his ordinary natural and simple cordiality.

"Yes, things have improved wonderfully these last few days," he said. "I think it often is so in these cases. Amateurs warm to the work, and a sense of desperation makes even the weaker members forget *themselves* at the last, which, after all, is half the battle."

He smiled as he spoke, for there flitted across his mind's eye several amusing episodes in the recent struggles after dramatic art.

"Your daughter," he went on, "has really improved surprisingly. I own I was rather nervous about her till quite at the end. But it went so very fairly to-night that I think we need have no misgivings. Besides, after all, there is no terribly critical audience to fear; every one will, I hope, *wish* to be pleased."

Mrs Wentworth's expression took a touch of offence at Major Winchester's tone about Imogen.

"I heard several people saying that 'Valesca' was the gem of it all," she said, and Rex, glancing at her, detected his mistake. "She really is too silly," he reflected; "she cannot imagine that child, pretty as she is, to be a Mrs Siddons in embryo." But his quick kind-heartedness made him add aloud: "I can well believe that, as far as *appearance* goes, that opinion will be pretty general. The dress, too, is remarkably becoming to Im— to Miss Wentworth. Still, dramatic power, even in a small degree, is a distinct *gift*, like talent for music, sculpture, or any art. It cannot be acquired, though it may be developed."

He was already rather beyond his hearer's range, though his words were intended as an explanation. But they had the effect of smoothing down her ruffled plumage—or rather, perhaps, his manner did so.

"Of course, he does not want me to imagine for an instant that he *could* say anything derogatory to Imogen," she reflected. "And after all, unless he felt quite a peculiar interest in her, he would not speak so frankly," and her tone was quite itself again as she replied.

"I am sure Imogen should be, and is, most grateful to *you*, Major Winchester. She has said ever so many times that she never could have managed it but for your help. *I* think she acted beautifully to-night,"—and the simplicity with which she said this pleased Rex—"but then I am not nearly clever enough to be a judge."

"I myself did really think it very—extremely pretty," he said. "And it has been a great pleasure to me to help her, I need scarcely assure you."

"You have been our good angel ever since our first arrival here," said Mrs Wentworth. "Dear Imogen was saying so only yesterday. Altogether, when I remember our distress that wet morning at the station, and your appearing just at the right moment—it was quite romantic." She hesitated a little. "Now is his time," she thought. But Major Winchester did not seem on the alert, and he again detected the slight tendency to "gush" in her tone, which had before this disappointed him in Imogen's mother. "I am always so, I fear, really, foolishly anxious about my darling child," she went on. "My only one, and—alone as we are."

"But after all, it ended all right, did it not?" he said. "Miss Wentworth did not take the least cold, nor did you yourself, I think."

"Oh no," she replied, "none whatever. I was not only thinking of cold and such things. I—of course, I am *always* anxious about her. And this visit here—a sort of 'coming out' it really was—and among comparative strangers—"

"Still, after all, it has turned out all right," he repeated, still with that vague instinct of annoyance. "At least," he went on, as his own misgivings and anxiety concerning Imogen's friendship with Beatrix occurred to his mind—"at least, I hope so. I—I have done what I could," but here he hesitated. It scarcely came within the lines of loyalty to his hosts to discuss them with an outsider, and an outsider concerning whose discretion his doubts were grave.

"I am sure of that. Oh yes, indeed," said Mrs Wentworth, with a recurrence of gush in her tone. "As Miss Forsyth was saying only yesterday, Imogen is really a most—"

"Excuse me," said Rex, much more stiffly than he had yet spoken, "one thing I must ask of you, Mrs Wentworth, and that is not to repeat to me any of Miss Forsyth's remarks on *any* subject whatsoever. As regards Miss Wentworth, so far as you are good enough to allow me to advise, I was going to say I wish she had made, I wish still she could make, more of a friend of Florence. Believe me, I am not influenced by prejudice or anything of that sort in saying so. For the future, too—"

Unconsciously to himself the stiffness had melted away again as he spoke. Mrs Wentworth's perceptions were not of the quickest; still she could not but hear the contempt in his voice when he spoke of Mabella. Against this, however, she was, so to say, forearmed by Miss Forsyth's own plausible regrets that Major Winchester, a man for whom *she*

had the profoundest respect, should dislike her so.

"It may have been partly my own fault," she had said, with a sigh. "I know I have been wild and foolish; but some one has made mischief too, I feel sure."

So Mab's new friend did not resent his rather imperious request as she might otherwise have done, and the vague, uncompleted sentence at the end of his speech—"for the future,"—aroused in her all sorts of pleasant surmises.

"You are so kind, so very kind, dear Major Winchester, to take so much interest in my Imogen," she murmured. "Yes, I wish she knew more of Florence, as I see you think highly of her. Of course she is a good deal older—"

"Florence cannot be older than that other girl," said Rex, rather gruffly. "And *her* age does not seem to be any objection to her as a friend."

"Imogen is not a particular friend of Mabella's," said Mrs Wentworth, quietly. "In fact she—I think she has rather taken a dislike to the poor girl. I like her, I confess, very much. I am sorry for her; she seems to me much misunderstood; and of course, if a little friendly, elder-sisterly sympathy can do her any good, or be any help to her —"

Major Winchester could not help smiling. Mrs Wentworth's simplicity was sublime.

"My dear lady," he said, "you are years—centuries younger than Miss Forsyth. I cannot agree with you about her, I am sorry to say; but that does not signify. I am only uncommonly glad to hear that Miss Wentworth is rather of my way of thinking than yours in this matter."

He rose as he spoke, but Mrs Wentworth was reluctant to let him go. "How stupid men are!" she thought to herself. "When could he have a better opportunity of taking me into his confidence?"

"Thank you so much, Major Winchester," she said. "You may indeed trust me. I shall consider all you have said as quite, *quite* between ourselves."

Rex almost started. He looked and felt bewildered. He had had no intention whatever of establishing any private understanding with the amiable lady; it was about the very last thing he desired.

"I must go," he said. "Florence will be looking for me elsewhere. It really doesn't matter in the least if you repeat anything I have said. Do not feel any constraint about it, I beg of you."

But Mrs Wentworth chose to take it her own way.

"I see where Imogen has learnt her dislike to Mabella," she thought to herself. "Ah, well—it really does not signify. But how oddly Major Winchester expresses himself sometimes."

The theatricals were pronounced a great success. Nothing of any consequence went wrong, and the audience, composed of all the society to be got together within a reasonable radius of The Fells, professed itself delighted. This was the festive and sociable season in the north country, of course; several of the large neighbouring houses were nearly as full of guests as Grey Fells Hall itself, and their respective hosts were most ready to be grateful for this entertainment on a large scale. So the unfavourable criticisms, if there were any, were not made in public, and congratulations and compliments were the order of the day.

"It wasn't half so dreadful, after all, as I expected," said Imogen, throwing herself down on a couch standing in a passage just outside the temporary green-room. "Now it is over, I almost feel as if I should like to do it again."

She was speaking to Major Winchester. He could not help laughing at her exceedingly untechnical way of expressing herself.

"I am afraid there is nothing of the 'born actress' in you, Miss Wentworth," he said. "'Do it again,' oh dear!"

"Well, 'act it,' 'play it'—what should I say?" she replied childishly. "Oh dear, I am so hot. And we are going to dance; did you know?"

"For your sake I am glad to hear it, if you are fond of dancing," he said.

"I have only danced at school with the other girls," Imogen replied dubiously. "But even that was very nice. Only this dress is so heavy. And it's fixed that we are to keep our dresses on for the rest of the evening."

"It is heavy, and hot, too, I daresay. But *il faut souffrir pour être belle*, you know," he added lightly, "and it certainly is very pretty and becoming."

He touched, as he spoke, some of the richly-coloured draperies of the fantastic costume. Imogen flushed with pleasure.

"Do you really think so?" she said. "I am so pleased. Do you know, Major Winchester," she added, half shyly, "I believe that is the very first compliment you have ever paid me!" Rex looked at her kindly. She was very sweet, very lovely just then.

"What a dear child she is!" he thought to himself. For the best of men are but men, and he was keenly sensitive to beauty. He stroked the little hand that lay on the couch beside him, and Imogen's colour deepened still more.

"And after all," he said, "I fear my compliment, such as it was, was more for 'Valesca' than for Imogen."

"Never mind," said she, her voice trembling a little, "Imogen thought it very nice."

"Imogen is very sweet and—" he replied, but suddenly started up, exclaiming, with a complete change of voice:

"Robin, my boy! Where have you dropped from? I had no idea you were in the neighbourhood."

Chapter Nine.

Robin.

Imogen looked up, not without a feeling of irritation at the interruption, to see whom Major Winchester was thus greeting. The new-comer was a tall, good-looking young fellow, of four or five and twenty at the most, with pleasant eyes, and a likeness—rather strong at first, but fading even as she looked at him—to some one she knew.

"Whom is he like?" thought the girl. Then as her glance fell on Major Winchester she could not help smiling at her own dullness. Of course, it was Rex himself the younger man resembled! But as they stood together talking, she lost it; when she came to know Robin Winchester's face better, she found it was much more a resemblance of expression than of feature or colouring.

"I didn't expect to be here to-night, or I would have written," she heard the stranger reply. "I'm staying at Wood Cross for three days' shooting. We drove over, a large party. But I say, Rex, have you heard from Angey the last day or two? I had a letter from Arthur that rather startled me."

"No; I have heard nothing for a week or more," said Rex, hastily, his face clouding over with anxiety. "Is it—is it anything new?"

"No, no; you would have heard, of course, if it had been anything exactly critical. Perhaps I should not have told you of it. Arthur says he would write to you if it got worse. I have his letter in my pocket. Here it is. You can read it afterwards;" and he held out an envelope. "Your not having heard is a good sign, you see. I've made a muddle of it, and frightened you for nothing. Angey didn't want you told, if it could be helped. She—she said you had enough on your mind already, just now."

The last few words were spoken in a lower tone, so low that Imogen scarcely caught them, and they were accompanied by a glance in her direction which made the colour rise to her cheeks. There was a sort of questioning in the glance as well as undisguised, but entirely respectful, admiration. She got up from her seat and touched Major Winchester very slightly on the arm. He turned at once with a quick gesture of apology. But before he had time to speak, she forestalled him.

"I think I will go into the drawing-room. Mother, or some of them, are sure to be there," she said, gently.

"Forgive me," he said, quickly. "Wait one moment. You must not go alone. The dancing is beginning. Robin—Miss Wentworth, may I introduce my brother, Mr Robert Winchester? My *little* brother," with a smile, though the anxiety was still visible in his face. "And, Robin, will you take care of Miss Wentworth for a few minutes while I read this? Then you will find me here again; and—I hope I shall still have my dance with you—*Valesca?*" he said, and the smile was brighter now.

Imogen brightened up too.

"If—if you are not disinclined for it," she replied.

"No, no; it will do me good."

"Don't you think, Miss Wentworth," said Robert Winchester, as he offered Imogen his arm and they walked away, "that I can best take care of you by replacing Rex as your partner. You were dancing with, him, were you not?"

"I don't think we had settled anything about it," Imogen answered, simply. "But I should like to dance very much. Only first—I could not help overhearing a little—I am so sorry. Is it about your sister, Mrs Bertrand?"

"Yes," and Robin glanced at her. "He has told you, I see. Poor Rex! he's lucky to have your sympathy. He—I wish a few less troubles would fall to his share. I wish I could see him really happy at last." And again he glanced at her, half inquiringly.

"He told me," she said, hesitating a little, out of a sort of shyness, "he told me of his anxiety about Mrs Bertrand; but that must be an anxiety to you, too, Mr Winchester."

"Yes, of course. I'm awfully fond of Angey—we both are. But Rex has so much upon him just now, so many different things. Of course, it's not *all* anxiety; there's the bright side, the hopeful side to it too. I don't know that I've any right to talk to you like this though, Miss Wentworth, but somehow I feel as if I'd known you before. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh no," said Imogen, wondering a little at his manner, nevertheless, and conscious of looking slightly awkward—why, she scarcely knew. "It's—it's very kind of you. I do trust Mrs Bertrand will be all right again soon. I am so sorry for Major Winchester. He—he has been so kind to me."

"I am so delighted to see you understand—appreciate him," said the young fellow boyishly, and Imogen felt herself growing red as he looked at her. She was half pleased, half puzzled by his manner. "I think him—well, perfection—the

most splendid fellow going," he went on, laughing a little at his own enthusiasm. "But all the same everybody doesn't take to him. Some people think him so cold and stand-off."

"He has never—never from the first seemed so to me," she replied, impulsively. "I couldn't tell you what a difference his being here and—and his goodness has made to me. I feel as if I could tell him anything—he understands so;" then she stopped, feeling ashamed of her little outburst, and very conscious of her glowing cheeks. "I hope he won't think me gushing, or anything like that," she thought. "I couldn't bear his talking of me that way to Major Winchester; I know *he* hates gushing."

For she felt that Robin was looking at her with an expression she was at a loss to understand. There was admiration in it undoubtedly—admiration as respectful as it was genuine; but there was something of questioning, of slight misgiving in the eyes that now and then looked so like his brother's.

"You are right," he said quietly; "there's no one like him."

They were in the dancing-room by this time. Imogen began to feel nervous in another sense.

"I hope you don't dance very well, Mr Winchester," she began. "*No*—I don't mean that, for it would make it worse. I mean I hope you are not very—difficult to please. For I have had very little practice. Oh yes," as she noticed the surprised expression on her companion's face—"I can dance; of course I have learnt, but I haven't danced *properly*—among other people, you know—at balls."

"I'm sure we'll get on all right," he replied; "you look as if you would dance well. Don't be nervous."

He proved a true prophet; after a moment or two's slight hesitation, Imogen found herself quite at home.

"Oh," she said, when at last they stopped, "I had no idea it could be so nice; ever so much easier, too, than dancing when it's a dancing-lesson, you know."

Mr Winchester could scarcely help laughing, but he was pleased too.

"You really dance beautifully," he said. "So if your only experience has been dancing-lessons, as you say, you have certainly profited by them. But you should dance with Rex."

"Does he dance so well?" asked the girl, with interest.

"Splendidly: his worst enemy can't deny *that*," answered Robin with emphasis.

"Who is his worst enemy? I shouldn't have thought he had any," said Imogen, half thoughtlessly, but with a spice of curiosity too.

Robin glanced round the room, but suddenly checked himself.

"No," he said, "I won't make mischief. Never mind, Miss Wentworth; it's a shame to spoil a jolly good dance by talking of disagreeable things. Shall we have another turn?"

His spirits seemed to rise as the dance went on, and so did Imogen's. Truth to tell, she had never enjoyed herself so much in her life.

Robin was really much nearer her in every way than his elder brother. For kind as Major Winchester was to her, Imogen was conscious of a certain strain in talking to him, and her pleasure in his society was largely composed of gratified vanity at the attentions of a man of his age and position; vanity only too cleverly and steadily fed by the two conspirators—directly by Beatrix, with her irresistible appearance of candour and *bonhommie*; more astutely by Miss Forsyth's remarks to Mrs Wentworth all of which sooner or later were sure to find their way to the girl herself.

The first dance had become the second, before the two happy young people separated. Just as the latter was coming to a close, Imogen caught sight of Major Winchester dancing with Florence. Her face clouded.

"Why," she said, "I thought your brother was reading his letters. He promised *me* his first dance."

"Never mind," said Robin. "It's a pleasure to see those two dancing together; they're worth watching, I assure you. And how could Rex dance with you, when you were already dancing?"

"He should have come and asked me. I only danced with you to—to—because he was busy," said Imogen, bluntly, and with evident pique.

"Thank you, Miss Wentworth," Robin replied. He could not help laughing a little. "It will be all right after this dance, I have no doubt," he went on. But he looked at her as he spoke with the same expression of inquiry, almost concern, in his eyes, which she had before been conscious of without understanding it.

He was not offended, however; his tone was as hearty, his whole bearing as kindly as before.

"He is *very* nice," thought Imogen, "and—I don't think he's quite as clever and grand as his brother;" and in the reflection there was a certain unacknowledged sensation of relief. But the sight of Florence and Major Winchester, who just then came in view, brought the cloud back to her face.

"Don't they dance splendidly?" said Robin. "You see they've been used to each other's paces for so long—ever since Florry grew up."

"Yea, that is a good while ago," said Imogen, with a faint touch of spite.

"She is a year older than I, and I am twenty-four," Mr Winchester replied, simply. "I am fourteen years younger than my brother. Why, he is *almost* old enough to be your father."

"Nonsense!" said the girl, sharply. "I am eighteen—eighteen past; that only makes—"

She stopped and looked confused.

"Twenty years," said Robin, calmly. "Practically a generation. Still, as Wordsworth says—what is it he says about 'a pair of friends'? One was—I forget how old or how young, but Matthew was seventy-two, I'm sure."

"I don't know," Imogen replied. "I don't know Wordsworth well, except 'We are Seven,' and I can't bear it. I had to learn it when I was seven, and I always thought her such a stupid little girl. After all," she went on, "twenty years don't seem so much. When Major Winchester is seventy-two I shall be fifty-two, and I'm *sure* once a woman is fifty-two she might as well be a hundred."

"Perhaps you won't think so when the time comes," said Robin. "Shall we take one other turn, Miss Wentworth? We shall not have time for more."

The music stopped before they had got well round the room. Then Imogen, espying her mother in a corner not far from where Florence and her partner were standing, made Mr Winchester pilot her thither. But she did not volunteer to introduce him, though he lingered in the neighbourhood for a moment or two.

"The mother is a sweet-looking woman," he thought. For he had noticed the adoring smile with which the girl was greeted. "But she never can have been as charming as the girl. *She* has much more character, I should say, than her mother. But she is very, very young. I wonder if—I hope;" then his thoughts became less defined, as he went off in another direction to claim the dance which Alicia, his eldest cousin, had promised. Still they had brought a somewhat anxious expression to his usually unclouded face, and more than once during his waltz with her, Miss Belmont reproached him with being nearly as solemn and "absent" as Rex himself.

And there was some reason for her remarks. Robin's misgivings intensified, as the first turn round the room brought into full view his late partner, glancing up in his brother's face with what looked to him like not-to-be-concealed delight, as Major Winchester appeared to claim the dance he had been somewhat tardy of remembering.

"She has forgiven him already," thought the younger man. "I never saw that look in her face all the time she was dancing with me," and he gave a little sigh. "Rex should be—"

"Robin, what *is* the matter? Are you in love? You are sighing 'like a furnace,' or an old man with asthma?" said Alicia. And the young man had to smile and excuse himself.

His interpretation of Imogen's face was not quite correct, but it would have required much deeper discernment than his—than Imogen's own indeed—to eliminate the elements of gratified vanity and girlish triumph from the nobler feelings with which they were intermingled.

Major Winchester almost never danced, Trixie had taken care to tell her, "except with one of us, or some very great friend. He says he is too old and grave. But, indeed, he scarcely ever speaks to girls at all; of course every one sees *you* are quite an exception, Imogen."

The evening was pronounced on all hands to have gone off excellently.

"You have really enjoyed it thoroughly, my darling, have you not?" said Mrs Wentworth, fondly, when she looked in to Imogen's room to bid her good-night—or good-morning, rather, for midnight was well past.

"Yes, mamsey, very much indeed," was the reply, "only I'm dreadfully sleepy. I think I enjoyed the first part the most, before I got at all tired, you know, and Mr Winchester just suits me for dancing."

"*Mr* Winchester?" her mother repeated, inquiringly.

"Yes; didn't you see? A tall man, though not as tall as his brother, but just a *little* like him, only much younger. He came over with the Penmores—I think that's the name. He's staying there for shooting. Didn't you know? He's so nice looking."

Mrs Wentworth looked slightly discomfited.

"Oh yes," she said, "I think I did see you dancing with a young man whom I did not know—a mere boy."

"No," Imogen replied, rather hotly, "he's not a mere boy; he's twenty-four or twenty-five; and he's *very* nice."

"But it was Major Winchester you were dancing with at the end?"

"Yes, he's rather too tall for me, and he *is* very old, mamsey," and Imogen glanced up with a curious, somewhat perplexed expression.

"Old!" repeated Mrs Wentworth with a little laugh. "What ridiculous ideas girls have! I was just thinking you and he looked so—no, I mustn't say what I thought when I saw you dancing together."

"Mother!" exclaimed Imogen, and her cheeks grew scarlet.

"And what was that I heard him whispering as he said good-night just now?" Mrs Wentworth went on. "Something about 'forgive' or 'forgiven?'"

"Oh, nothing," said the girl, "only that he hadn't come for the first dance he had asked me for. He danced it with Florence."

"Poor Florence!" said Imogen's mother, patronisingly. "She does not get too much attention. You should try to be kind to her, dear."

"I!" Imogen exclaimed. "Nonsense, mamsey: She would not care for that sort of thing at all. I am only too flattered when she notices *me*. I don't take to her much, but of course I admire her. Indeed, I'm rather frightened of her. *Me* be kind to Florence! Oh, mamsey, Florence could have any amount of attention if she cared for it."

"My dear little modest darling," said Mrs Wentworth. "Well, some day my pet will have to learn to take more upon her, I daresay. In the meantime no one loves her the less for her humility."

"It isn't humility; it's common-sense," said the girl. "But, oh, I'm so sleepy!"

"Off with you, then. There's no beauty-sleep for you to-night; but you must not think of getting up early. I know more than one person who would not be pleased to see you pale and wearied-looking."

Mrs Wentworth's dreams that night were roseate-hued. She had been well primed in the course of the evening by Mabella Forsyth with her clever hints and suggestions, so clever that when told over in simple language they sounded but natural and ingenuous little kindly compliments.

Imogen slept the sleep of her eighteen years, untroubled by dreams, for she was really tired, but with a pleasant undercurrent of gratification and vague anticipation which her mother's words had greatly tended to strengthen.

And while the little conversation I have repeated was taking place between Mrs Wentworth and her daughter, another was passing between the two brothers. Down-stairs in the smoking-room—for it had been arranged that he was to stay the night at The Fells—Robin Winchester was sitting, more silent than his wont, while his cousins and their friends kept up a rather noisy chatter, unrestrained by the awe-inspiring presence of Major Rex.

"It's hardly worth while to go to bed," said Robin at last. His brother got up and went over to him.

"Oh yes, it is: you can have four or five hours' sleep; nobody will be very early here. What have you been about, Robin? You seem done up."

Robin started slightly.

"I'm all right. Perhaps I was thinking about Angey," he said. "There may be a letter for you in the morning, Rex. That was one reason I was glad to stay. That girl—Miss Wentworth—was so sympathising about it."

"Yes," said Major Winchester. "She has a kind little heart. She's a nice child; a great deal of good in her. And isn't she pretty? Last night she looked really charming. But, Robin, about Angey. I almost think I should go."

This point was discussed for a moment or two. Then Robin again managed to bring in Imogen's name. Rex answered carelessly; he was thinking of something else. "Miss Wentworth, did you say? Oh yes, that was her mother. Then, Robin, if *you* hear anything,"—and so on about arrangements and plans in connection with Mrs Bertrand.

It was no use. Robin could not manage to bring the talk round deftly, as he had hoped. He must plunge in boldly.

"Rex," he said abruptly, though in a low voice. He glanced round; they were practically alone, for the room was large and the Helmonts and their friends were still making a good deal of noise at the other end. "Rex, does Miss Wentworth know, about you?"

"Know about me!" Major Winchester repeated. "How do you mean?"

"About your—about you and Eva?"

Rex looked a little surprised, but in no way startled or even interested.

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said. "Yes, I daresay she does. Everybody who knows either of *us* knows it. But she's too young to understand that kind of thing. I don't think I have ever talked about it to her. It would have seemed so—I don't know how, exactly—so incongruous. And I have not felt inclined to talk about Eva lately—you can understand."

"No, of course not," Robin agreed. "But I think Miss Wentworth is more of a woman than you imagine, Rex. She was very sympathising about Angey."

"Yes. Well, I may tell her about Eva some day, if you think it would please her to have her sympathy sought. I am going to warn her to-morrow again about Trixie, now this acting is over. But she is such a child, I like to see her enjoying herself; knowledge of troubles comes soon enough. Well, good-night, Robin. I am rather sleepy, I confess. So glad you came over, old fellow."

But Robin, though he shook hands and half moved to go, still lingered.

"What is it, Robin? You've nothing on your mind, have you, my dear boy?" asked the elder brother, half anxiously. "You're not quite like yourself, somehow."

"I'm afraid of annoying you, Rex, that's the fact of the matter," said Mr Winchester, and his colour deepened a little. "But I can't help telling you. I think Miss Wentworth *should* know, and I feel sure she doesn't. She's—"

And he hesitated, then repeated his former phrase, "she's more of a woman than you think, Rex."

It was now Major Winchester's turn to hesitate: he did so from his utter and complete astonishment.

"My dear good boy," he exclaimed at last, "you are too absurd. That little childish creature! Why, she looks upon me as a sort of father. She does, I can assure you."

And he laughed, sincerely and without constraint.

But Robin did not give in. On the contrary, his grave face grew graver.

"I might have known you would take it so," he said, half provoked and half admiringly. "I wish, Rex, you were just a little more—conceited; I don't know what word to use. But I can quite believe it might have been as you say—all quite simple and natural, with a genuine innocent-minded girl such as she is, had you known her elsewhere; but here—There can be nothing simple and refined where Trixie and that odious Forsyth girl are. And Miss Wentworth rather stands up for Trixie."

"I know she does, out of a kind of misplaced chivalry," said Rex, speaking more seriously now. "I am afraid, though I have done what I could, that Trixie has got some influence over her. But I don't see how she can make mischief in this case."

Robin shook his head.

"I wouldn't answer for her," he said. "Well, anyway, Rex, it can do no *harm* for you to talk to Miss Wentworth a little about Eva. Dear Eva," he added, with a sigh. "How I wish—"

"Don't," said Rex, almost sharply. "I—I can scarcely bear the sound of her name sometimes. I daresay that has made me avoid alluding to her in my talks with little Imogen. For I told her about poor Angey. But I will see about it; though, remember, I do not in the *very* least agree with your reason for thinking it advisable. Of all things I hate that style of thing, imagining one's self an attractive young fellow like you, Robin, when one's hair is growing grey."

He turned it off lightly. Still, his brother's words had their effect.

"I had no idea little Robin was so worldly-wise; no, that's not the word," Major Winchester said to himself when his companion had gone. "He means it for the best, but it *must* be nonsense. Still, the mother is silly enough for anything. I must think it over."

Chapter Ten.

Mabella Pulls the Strings.

Imogen slept late the next morning, later than she had ever done in her life; for she was new to gay doings, and when at last she opened her eyes, it was but to close them again with a sleepy smile as she gradually recalled the scenes of the night before.

"How nice it was! I wonder if all girls enjoy their first real grown-up party as much," she thought. "I wonder if Major Winchester will manage the skating." (For a hard frost had set in somewhat prematurely.) "What fun it would be, only I'm afraid I shall tumble about dreadfully. I wonder," as another recollection suddenly returned to her mind, "what he meant when he said he wanted to have a little talk with me to-day—to tell me something; it must be something particular, for he whispered 'Remember about our talk to-morrow,' last thing. Mother noticed it, but I wasn't going to tell her all he said; she is so—so fanciful!"

The colour deepened on the girl's cheeks, alone though she was, as she reached this point in her cogitations. *Was* it all "fancy" of her mother's? Could it be that Major Winchester really *was*?—and remarks of Trixie's as to the astonishingness of his "making such friends" with a girl of her age, "he who never scarcely speaks to a girl," returned to her memory in full force. Imogen's heart beat faster with a sensation of mingled gratification and vague fear. Was "it," the great "it" of her girl life, really coming to her already? Did all girls feel as she did when such things drew near? It was not what she had expected, somehow: she liked him, liked and respected and trusted him thoroughly, but he seemed so old in comparison with her. And—oh, after all, perhaps it was all nonsense—mamsey was silly about her; all mothers fancy their daughters something wonderful—very likely there was nothing in it; and with a sigh, half of relief, half of disappointment, Imogen threw herself back on her pillows. Would she be glad or sorry if it *were* all nonsense? she asked herself. And it was not easy to answer.

Her meditations were interrupted by a tap, the gentlest of taps, at the door, and in reply to her "Come in," Mrs Wentworth appeared. She was all dressed and ready to go down-stairs. Imogen started up.

"Oh, mamsey," she exclaimed, "I am so ashamed of myself! I had no idea it was so late. Why hasn't Colman wakened me?"

"I would not let her," her mother replied, kissing her tenderly as she spoke. "She said you were sleeping so sweetly an hour ago. I tapped very softly, not to wake you in case you were still asleep."

"But I must jump up now and be as quick as possible," said Imogen.

"There is really no hurry," Mrs Wentworth replied. "Indeed, Colman and I were wondering if you would not like your breakfast brought up. I am sure it will be a most irregular meal this morning."

"Breakfast in bed, and I quite well! Oh dear, no," said Imogen, laughing. "I will be ready in twenty minutes, at most."

"But first," said Mrs Wentworth, "here are two letters for you; at least, a letter and a note," and she held them out. Imogen seized the former.

"From Dora," she said. "How nice! Now, when I answer it, I shall have all about last night to tell her. And a note." She took it and examined it doubtfully. "I don't know the writing—at least, I'm not sure. I fancy I've seen it before—oh yes; I believe it's Major Winchester's. What can he have to write to me about, when he's just going to see me at breakfast?"

"I don't know about that," said Mrs Wentworth, who was dying of curiosity, mingled, it must be allowed, with a worthier feeling. "I have heard some news already this morning. Major Winchester has been called away. He and his brother breakfasted early, and started off to catch the ten o'clock express."

Imogen's face fell.

"Oh dear, how dreadfully vexing!" she exclaimed. "Just when we had planned such a nice day. I'm afraid there must be something wrong; bad news about his sister, probably. And this note will be to explain about it."

She looked up questioningly in her mother's face, toying idly with the letter in her fingers as she did so.

"Very likely; it is pretty sure to be so," said Mrs Wentworth. "But why in the world don't you open it, my dear, and then you would see?" There was a touch of impatience in her tone; but she controlled herself and turned away, as Imogen began to tear the envelope, feeling that the girl might prefer to read it unobserved. But scarcely a moment seemed to have passed before she heard herself called back to Imogen's bedside. She started as she caught the sound of her child's voice. It seemed choked and gasping, and Imogen herself was lying back, almost as white as the pillow.

"My darling," Mrs Wentworth exclaimed, "what is the matter? Are you fainting?"

"No, no. Read that. Oh, mamma!" said the girl, incoherently, and she thrust the sheet of paper into her mother's hand. These were the words on which fell Mrs Wentworth's bewildered gaze:

My Dearest,—

I am just off—and Robin, too—summoned to poor Angey by this morning's letters. The operation is to take place at once. God grant it may be successful. You will feel for us, I know. Though I have scarcely a moment, I could not go without one word to you to explain my movements, though I hope to be back at The Fells in a day or two. I have so much to tell you, and to lay before you all that I have been thinking of, and I had planned for an uninterrupted hour or two to-day. I know you will not have misunderstood my recent silence, and when we meet, a few minutes will be better than pages of writing. Ever yours,—

Rex.

P.S.—Say nothing of this at present to any one.

Imogen's mother read and re-read. Gradually her bewilderment gave place to delight—though delight strongly mixed with astonishment. She looked up at last. A little colour had by this time returned to the girl's cheeks.

"Mamsey," she said, anxiously, "what does it mean?"

"Darling," Mrs Wentworth replied, "it is rather for you to tell me; I had no idea, my pet, that things had gone *so far*."

But though her tone was playful, it failed to raise any smile on Imogen's face.

"I don't know how you mean. / had no idea that—" But here she stopped short.

Imogen was really truthful, and the remembrance of her morning's cogitations just then returned inconveniently to her mind. Mrs Wentworth smiled.

"I see," she said; "you do well to stop short, my pet. Well, well, poor old mothers must expect to be treated with reserve at such times, I suppose."

Imogen raised herself on her elbow.

"Mamma," she said, very gravely, "I am telling you the literal truth when I say that I did not in the least expect anything like this. Nothing that Major Winchester has said or done has led me to think that—that it was anything more than that he just liked me, and, in time, possibly—when I was older—"

"You have been too unconscious, too simple and ingenuous to see it, my sweet. Thank God we have had to do with a good and honourable man, who has not taken advantage of your innocence," said Mrs Wentworth with a burst of real feeling. "But others have seen it, if you have not."

"Have they?" said Imogen, opening her eyes. Then some of Trixie's remarks recurred to her, and she blushed a little. "Do you mean, mamsey," she went on, "that this," and she touched the letter, "is what one would call a proposal? It isn't like what they are in books."

"It is almost *more* than a proposal," her mother replied. "It is as if he was quite sure of you—as if you quite

understood each other. Have you not given him more encouragement than you quite realise, my pet?"

Imogen reflected.

"He did say something last night about hoping for a good talk to-day—something he wanted to say to me," she said, hesitatingly.

"Ah, I thought so; he has in a sense taken the definite understanding for granted, as it were," said Mrs Wentworth. "And you know, dearie, he is much older than you—about my own age, in fact," with a touch of her little bridling of self-satisfaction, "and you must let him, as it were, do things in his own way."

"Yes, I know he is much older than I. You do not need to remind me of that," said Imogen, in a melancholy tone. And a vision passed before her of the ideal husband—rather, perhaps, the lover—she had pictured in her girlish dreams, eager, devoted, ardent; it was not the staid, almost paternal Major Winchester!

Mrs Wentworth's face clouded. "But, my darling," she said, "you don't mean—"

"Oh, I don't know what I mean. I am not good enough or clever enough for him; but I daresay it will be all right. I will tell him so; and he is very kind and patient. He will teach me, I daresay, and—I know it will be a comfort to you to—to feel—and—" Here a smile for the first time broke through her troubled expression: "Just fancy, mamsey, how astonished every one will be! It *will* be fun to write to Dora; and, mamsey, I must have her for one of my bridesmaids."

"We shall see, dearie; we shall see. Yes, indeed, every one *will* be astonished," and visions of the delightful letters of *faire-part* of the exciting news to her special cronies that would fall to her own share floated before Mrs Wentworth's dazzled eyes. "Not but that Imogen might have made a more *brilliant* marriage," she imagined herself saying; "but Major Winchester is a man one can so thoroughly *trust*, and—" Here her daughter's voice interrupted her. She was pointing to the postscript and looking rather dismayed.

"Mamma," she said, "did you notice this? I don't think I did; at least, I was so startled I don't know if I noticed it or not. But I shouldn't have told *even you*."

"Oh, nonsense, darling! He could not have meant to exclude *me*," said Mrs Wentworth. "However—"

"You will be very, *very* careful, won't you, mamsey?" urged, the girl, who was not without experience of her mother's impulsiveness.

"*Of course*, dear, in any case; about such a thing you don't think I need warning?" said Mrs Wentworth, in a slightly aggrieved tone.

"But—that Miss Forsyth," said Imogen; "she is so wheedling, and you know you *are* rather easily taken in, mamsey, dear."

The adjective and the caressing tone—for Imogen was not given to gush—smoothed down Mrs Wentworth's ruffled feathers.

"I'll be *very* careful, dearest," she said; and then, at last, she tore herself away, Imogen promising to follow her downstairs with the utmost possible speed.

It was with a sense of delightful, though almost bewildering, elation that Mrs Wentworth entered the dining-room, where various members of the party staying in the house were lounging over the irregular breakfast. No member of the family was present except Alicia, who half rose to greet her in her usual good-natured, apathetic way.

"Am I not praiseworthy, Mrs Wentworth, for being down so early?" she said.

"Is no one else down?" asked the new-comer, somewhat surprised; for the Belmont energy extended to early rising. "I mean to say, none of yourselves?"

"Oh dear, yes. Father and mother are off on their usual behests, and Florence was down at nine to give our worthy cousin his breakfast. Major Winchester was obliged to go up to town this morning."

"I know—at least I heard so," Mrs Wentworth could not resist saying.

"Really!" said Alicia with a glance of surprise. And as Miss Forsyth at that moment came in—"Did *you* know, Mab, that Rex and Robin went off first thing this morning? Oh yes, by the bye, I believe you and Trixie didn't go to bed at all, did you?"

"It was much jollier sitting up in our armchairs over the fire," said Mabella, carelessly. She did not look the least tired or fagged.

"Give me a cup of coffee, won't you, Alicia? It's such a time since I had breakfast, I feel ready to begin again.—And how is the fair Imogen, Mrs Wentworth? You yourself look brilliant," she added.

Mrs Wentworth smiled graciously.

"Thank you," she said; "Imogen is very well, very well indeed. She will be down directly. She would have been down already, but she had—we had some rather important letters this morning."

Miss Forsyth drew her chair a little closer to her dear Mrs Wentworth's.

"Nothing wrong, I trust?" she said in a low voice. "No, you could not look as you do if it were. Really, dear, there are times, and this is one of them, when, I *cannot* take in that you are Imogen's mother—you do look so ridiculously young. If there is anything—any business matter—I can be of use about, you *will* tell me, won't you?"

"You are so kind, dear Mabella," murmured Mrs Wentworth vaguely.

"Let us take our work and go and sit in the large conservatory after breakfast, and have a good cosy talk," the girl went on. "Imogen is sure to be—oh no, I forgot; Major Rex is off there will be no one especially to claim her this morning."

Mrs Wentworth closed her lips in a peculiar way but did not reply. Just then Trixie came in, like a whirlwind, as usual, but looking very handsome.

"Where's Imogen?" she exclaimed. "We're going to skate—Noll and I and one or two others—and she said she wanted to learn. Is she still asleep?"

"Oh no, she will be down directly, and—if it's not too cold, and—" she hesitated, for her faith was small in Trixie. "Would you like to go, dear?" she went on to Imogen, as she made her appearance.

"I have just told Florence I would go," Imogen answered quietly. "I met her in the hall. She said she had undertaken to look after me. You know I can't skate a bit, Trixie."

"Promised Major Winchester to take care of her, you see," whispered Mabella to Mrs Wentworth, with a smile. And for the life of her, Mrs Wentworth could not repress a certain self-consciousness in her "Perhaps so," in reply.

How sardonic were Mabella's inward chuckles of satisfaction!

"It is too good to be true almost, Trixie," she told her semi-confidante that morning. "Revenged! I should think so, indeed—never was anything so neat in this world."

But beyond this, not one word would she say.

And in spite of Imogen's warnings and expressed misgivings, ere the day was many hours older, Miss Forsyth was pretty fairly in possession of all she wanted to know.

"She is so sympathising, and interested in Imogen," thought Mrs Wentworth, "and I cannot tell what is absolutely untrue."

But when after events had caused her to qualify Miss Forsyth's character with very different adjectives, she found it impossible to recall any words of that astute young woman's which, when repeated, could be fairly said to endorse or strengthen her own belief as to Major Winchester's attitude towards Imogen. On the contrary, little phrases literally expressive of doubt or perplexity, though contradicted even while uttered by her tone and smile, returned to her memory.

"Of course, *I* cannot give an opinion, whatever I may *think*."

"No, Major Winchester cannot be called a flirt, and every one speaks of him as a most honourable man; but *I* am not in his confidence, and one can only judge by what one sees."

"I have been *told* of some attachment or engagement of old standing, but then one knows how such things often end,"—and so on, all providing a more or less safe shelter for Mabella should she ever be brought to book for her treachery.

And the next two or three days passed like a confused dream to Imogen herself. There were times when she felt girlishly exultant and elated; times when she was half inclined to entreat her mother to keep to their programme (for the original term of their visit expired two days after the theatricals) and leave The Fells before Major Winchester's return; times when she longed to see him and test her own feelings; times when she dreaded meeting him again more than she could express. But with the obstinacy which I have before alluded to, on one point Mrs Wentworth was immovable. Leave The Fells before his return she absolutely would not. In vain Imogen pleaded that if he "really meant it," he could follow them, and that it would be both more dignified and "much more comfortable," to meet again elsewhere.

"It would be the most distinct refusal you could give him under the circumstances," Mrs Wentworth maintained. "And a man of his age and position must be allowed to take his own way to some extent, even if it be a little eccentric;" adding, in her own mind, "And just *supposing* he wrote that odd letter impulsively, not being really quite sure of his own mind," (which was, to do her justice, Mrs Wentworth's only misgiving), "if he came back and found us gone, and Florence, who I *know*, does not like us, got hold of him and talked him round, where would we be? We might never hear of or see him again—quite as honourable men as he have backed out of things of the kind before now—and Imogen's whole career might be spoilt, for of course he would not suppose she had shown me the letter, considering the postscript, and knowing what a punctilious darling she is."

But these reflections she kept to herself—the effect of revealing them to Imogen would, she felt instinctively, have been disastrous, for the slight strain of coarseness, undeniable in the mother's nature, despite her real gentleness and unselfishness, would have found no response in the perfect delicacy of the high-minded though undisciplined daughter.

A hint or two to the effect that another week at The Fells would be a convenience as well as a pleasure was cordially

responded to by the Wentworths' hostess. Truth to tell, the seed fell on ground already carefully prepared by Mabella, through Trixie, bribed by the promise of a speedy *dénouement* of their cherished scheme of revenge.

"I am really pleased to see that Trixie has made such friends with Imogen Wentworth," said honest Mrs. Belmont to her husband. "She is a thoroughly sweet, refined girl. And even Mab seems quieter lately."

"Trixie was none the worse for her bit of plain-speaking, you see," said the Squire with satisfaction. "I think I know how to manage that sort of thing when it is really called for, though I have no idea of nagging at the children as some do. I wish poor Florry could pick up her spirits a bit."

"She misses Rex; he has such a good influence on her," said Mrs. Belmont, "though he has troubles enough of his own, poor fellow. I daresay she is anxious about his troubles too."

For Florence, of all the party, had perhaps the most perturbed aspect just then. She was both distressed and bewildered—vaguely conscious that mischief was brewing, though unable to define how or where. And her anxiety was not lessened by the perception that Imogen was avoiding her.

"I wish Rex were back," she said to herself. "And still more I wish he had not left that child in my charge, as he said. What can I do? She gives me no confidence, and she is always with Trixie, just as her silly mother is with Mabella."

It was true, though the further truth that in those days it was not Imogen seeking Beatrix, but Beatrix Imogen, Beatrix was clever enough to conceal from her elder sister.

"Keep her always in view; for Heaven's sake don't let her get confidential with any one else, or it will all be spoilt!" were Mab's instructions to Trixie.

"She's not confidential with *me*; she's as dull as ditch-water. I'm getting sick of your secret plots and plans that come to nothing," grumbled Beatrix.

There came a morning, however, when Mabella altered her commands for the day.

"Trixie," she said, in a low voice, "*he*—your cousin—is returning this afternoon. His luggage is to be fetched, and he himself is going to walk up from the station. He comes by the 2:15 express. No one is to be told; but I trust to you to let it out to Imogen."

Beatrix faced round upon her.

"How do *you* know, if no one is to be told?" she asked sharply. Mabella smiled, a peculiar smile.

"I have ways and means," she said. "He wrote it to Florence, and I was sitting beside her at breakfast. I knew he *would* be writing to her when he fixed his return."

Trixie flamed up; her patience had been over-taxed.

"You mean, despicable—I don't know what to call you," she said. "I've a great mind to throw it all up, and tell what you're capable of."

"As you please," returned Mabella, coolly. "I'm getting rather sick of it myself. But remember, you can't tell on me without telling on yourself. It wouldn't, after all, matter so very much to me, only a house the less to visit at; but it would be uncommonly unpleasant for *you*. Your father would *never* forgive you for playing tricks on his guests, and you couldn't pack up and go off comfortably enough, as I could."

Trixie looked blacker and blacker; there was truth in Mabella's words.

"I *haven't* played tricks, if it comes to that," she said. "I've only connived, to a certain extent, at what you're doing; and what you're after just now I don't understand in the least."

"Wait a bit and you'll see," said Miss Forsyth. "We may as well have *some* fun for our pains. Be sensible, Trixie. After all, no one will be any the worse for it in the end, and it will be very wholesome for some people to be brought down a peg or two."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Trixie, sulkily.

"Find ways and means to confide to Imogen that Rex Winchester is coming to-day, and that he will be walking up alone from the station at a certain hour. He wanted Florence to meet him, but she can't. She had promised to go to Catborough to luncheon. You might insinuate that Florence wants to keep him all to herself, which is true. She never tells any one anything. I often wonder you and Alicia stand it. Ten to one Imogen will jump at the chance of meeting him unobserved. She hates her mother's silly meddling, I can see."

"And what will happen then?" demanded Trixie.

"Not much to hurt Imogen—I don't believe she really cares for him, it's only gratified vanity—but I hope and believe Major Rex will have a more thoroughly uncomfortable *quart d'heure* than he has ever experienced," said Mabella, smacking her lips, so to say, in anticipation. "And you will be revenged, Trix, gloriously revenged on him, for his priggish meddling. And it will be all his own fault! That's *the* beauty of it; he won't be able to blame any one else—not a shadow of suspicion will fall on you or me, if only you are sensible."

"And," she added, to herself, in a lower tone, "*I* shall be revenged. What are Trixie's babyish wrongs compared to

mine?"

Thus worked upon and primed, Beatrix, as usual, agreed to carry out Miss Forsyth's very precise and exact instructions. But Mabella's dictatorial and scornful tyranny had overshot the mark.

"I know what she's after," thought Trixie. "*She's* to have all the fun, to be in at the death; but *I'm* not. And then she'll make some flimsy excuse afterwards! I know you, Miss Mabella Forsyth, and I can plot and plan too—ah, well, we shall see."

It was a bright, clear, slightly frosty day. "The perfection of a day for a quick, brisk walk," thought Imogen, as in ample time to meet a passenger by the train in question, walking up from the station, she let herself out by a side door which opened on an unobserved path joining the long winding avenue at some distance from the house. It had not been without difficulty that she had escaped from her mother, or avoided telling her of Major Winchester's return. The girl's head and heart were in a state of ferment, and to her overstrained nerves Mrs Wentworth's fidgety excitement and anxiety was becoming almost unendurable. Added to this was a considerable element of perplexity and sore indignation—by every post she had looked for another and more coherent letter.

"After writing like *that*" she thought, and not unreasonably, "he had no right to leave me all these days in this way." And now, Trixie's communications had still farther increased her mental distress by the jealousy of Florence they had skilfully suggested.

"I believe he meant to consult her before he said anything more to me," thought Imogen, though the next moment her loyal trust in Rex's perfect honour caused her to discard the notion with disgust at herself for having entertained it. "No, not after going so *far*," she reflected. "Yet, but for Trixie, I could never have known he was coming. Poor Trixie! she is far truer after all, than Florence. I wonder if a letter can have miscarried," was her next idea, and one which so plausibly explained things, that she could not help turning it over and over in her mind. It had already occurred to Mrs Wentworth, and she had not failed to suggest it to Imogen.

"If we knew his address, I almost think you might write to him," she had said. But Imogen turned upon her sharply.

"If I did, it would only be to enclose his letter in an envelope and send it back to him," she said. "If—if it is possible that he wrote it impulsively, and is regretting it, do you think I would move one little finger to recall him?"

And on the whole Mrs Wentworth saw that it was best for her to keep *her* fingers, for the present anyway, out of the pie.

The road—the latter part of it at least—from Cobbolds to The Fells, was straight and direct. There was no possibility of missing any one on his way to the house within a mile. The first gates opened on to a sort of continuation of the drive—less carefully kept than the part within them, but still a private road. And before emerging on to the highway it led through a little fir-wood, where, as somewhat screened from the observation of any curious passers-by—not that many such were probable, for the men were shooting in a different direction that day, and a large party had started to join them at luncheon—Imogen had determined to try to meet Major Winchester.

She walked quietly, half unconsciously hoping by so doing to calm her momentarily-increasing agitation. The first time she emerged from among the firs there was no one to be seen in the stretch, of open road before her. So she retraced her steps, and it was not till she had traversed the little wood two or three times that she descried a tall, familiar figure moving quickly towards her. And in another moment, considerably to her surprise, she saw that she was herself—as she supposed—recognised. For Major Winchester took off his cap and waved it towards her.

"How could he know I was coming?" she thought, with a thrill of gratification nevertheless. "A letter must have miscarried. He *must* have written to me as well as to Florence."

Chapter Eleven.

In the Fir-Coppice.

But the reassuring thrill lasted barely a moment. Suddenly, as Imogen walked on, feeling that every step was bringing the meeting nearer, a terrible, agonising rush of shyness and shame overwhelmed her. For the first time she realised that she was going, unbidden, uninvited, to seek an interview with this man whose position to herself was still so undefined, whose conduct had been so inexplicable! She, who had so proudly declared to her mother that not one finger would she move to influence him, were it the case that he had acted upon an impulse which he had afterwards regretted! It was all Trixie's doing, she said to herself. Not that Trixie had suggested her taking Florence's place, but she had alluded to the thing so simply, as if it were the most natural idea in the world to go to meet Rex on his way up.

"Florence would have given anything to go; she likes to get Rex to herself for a good talk. I wish he didn't hate *me* so, for I'd like a good talk with him myself. I'm getting rather sick of his seeing everything through Florrie's eyes." And the chance had seemed so opportune that Imogen had seized it—in her eagerness to get the meeting over, to come to an explanation before her mother could complicate things by any interference—without realising the difference between *her* position and Florence's.

She was well punished in these few seconds for her thoughtlessness. Unmaidenly and bold were among the mildest epithets she applied to herself, while her imagination sought in vain for some pretext or excuse in which she could find shelter. "But I can't pretend I came by accident," she thought; "he knows me too well, even if I could be so deceitful."

So it was in utter indecision as to how she meant to bear herself that she at last met Major Winchester.

He was smiling; he looked well and cheerful. And he was feeling as he looked. He was relieved from anxiety about his sister, and there was a gleam of brightness in the clouds surrounding his engagement. And even though the smile was broken by a start, unperceived by Imogen, as he came near enough to recognise her, it soon appeared again.

"I thought you were Florence, do you know?" were almost his first words.

They acted as a cold shower-bath on Imogen; nothing could have so helped her to regain her self-possession. She stiffened at once.

"I am very sorry I cannot turn myself into Florence," she said, though the tears were, all the same, not far from her eyes. "But I needn't keep you; I am going on a little farther."

"I hope not," he said kindly; "as I am so lucky as to have met you, can't you turn and walk a bit of the way back with me?" ("It will be a splendid opportunity for following Robin's advice and telling her all about Eva," he suddenly thought.) "You know we were going to have a good talk the day I was called away." He walked on slowly as he spoke, and Imogen could scarcely avoid accompanying him. "By the bye," he added, "you got my note that morning?"

Imogen's breath came fast and chokingly.

"Ye-es," she said, and he saw that she was growing very pale, "I—I got it. That was why—I wanted to see you first alone." Poor child! even as she uttered the words she felt what she was doing. Where were all her hoped-for evasions? she was no diplomatist indeed.

"Then you knew I was coming?" he exclaimed, thoughtlessly. But, almost in the same breath, his perfect though simple chivalry came to his aid. "I am so glad you came," he went on, "if I can be of any use. I have been anxious about you; I had wanted to warn you even more definitely about some of our friends at The Fells. Florence promised to do what she could, but you have not got to know her as I hoped. By the bye, did she tell you I was coming? I asked her not; but still—if *she* told you—"

He was getting a little bewildered himself, now. For, of course, Florence would never have counselled or sanctioned the poor child exposing herself to such gossip as might result from her present step.

"No," Imogen replied. "Trixie told me, not Florence. I suppose coming to meet you was a dreadful thing to do, Major Winchester, but I didn't think of that at the time. I—"

She seemed unable to say another word.

Rex felt relieved. He thought he had got at it all now.

"Don't take it to heart so," he said, encouragingly. "It was a very natural thing to do. You know I asked you to trust me. It is only—people gossip so. But I'll tell you what, we will walk up and down in this wood for a little, while you tell me all your troubles, and I—if I have time—will tell you some of mine: then I will hurry on, and you can finish your walk and come home at leisure. Not even Miss Mabella Forsyth can make mischief out of that." He laughed a little as he spoke.

Neither he nor Imogen heard a faint rustle a few yards off, on one side where the brushwood was thick, and where there still stood the ruins of a summer-house or hut, which the Helmont boys had constructed years and years ago. But there was no response to his laughing tone, and glancing down he saw that the girl's very lips were pale. He grew frightened again; what *could* be the matter? That it had anything to do with Robin's warnings—which, after all, had not impressed him deeply—never occurred to him.

"My dear child—Imogen!" he said, impulsively, "what *has* happened? What *is* the matter? Do tell me, whatever it is," and he tried to take her hand, but she tore it away.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed half wildly. "If there is anything the matter, you must know it. Why have you made me think—made everybody, almost, think Oh, I don't know what I am saying, and I don't know what to do. You said the evening before you went away that you had something to say to me, and then you wrote. What was it, then, that you were going to say to me?"

"I wanted to warn you again, more definitely, about being on your guard in some ways, and I was sorry to see you and Beatrix Helmont so much together," Major Winchester replied very quietly. He was growing very nervous himself; terrible misgivings that Robin's discernment had not been at fault began to make themselves heard. He felt that everything depended on his own perfect self-possession and presence of mind, if this girl, so strangely thrown on his mercy, was to be saved, spared from what might cast a miserable shadow of mortification and loss of self-respect over the rest of her young life. So he allowed himself to show no pity; no impulse of sympathy must tempt him to go a hair's-breadth beyond what he felt intuitively was the safe limit.

"I must try to be matter-of-fact and commonplace," his instinct told him, "so that afterwards, when she thinks over it coolly, she will be able to believe I had imagined nothing else."

"I am afraid you have had annoyances and difficulties I would have saved you from if I could. But don't tell me anything you would rather not," he went on, hesitating a little, half because he really did not know what to say, half to give her time.

But Imogen scarcely heard his words. It was growing too much for her; every sense seemed absorbed by an overmastering irritation and impatience.

"Are you purposely trying to mislead me? Are you making fun of me? Or," as a new idea, like a flash of lurid lightning, crossed her mind, "has some one else been doing so? Yet—you spoke of a note? You sent me a note? See here—this is it—that is your writing, is it not?"

"Certainly," Major Winchester replied, trying his best to speak lightly, though a strange vague fear was upon him. "That is the little note I left for you the morning I was called away." And he looked down at her, smiling as if amused. "You don't mean to say my poor little note has made any mischief?" he added.

"Read it," said Imogen, hoarsely.

He did so, drawing the letter calmly out of the envelope, the slight smile still on his lips. But if his unconcern had hitherto added to the girl's irritation, she had her revenge now. For the change which came over Rex's face was almost appalling. A sort of grey pallor seemed to spread itself above and through the healthy ruddy bronze; he looked for the moment an elderly man.

"What can I have done?" he exclaimed involuntarily.

And Imogen, watching him breathlessly, gave a shivering gasp.

"What is it?" she said. "Is it some wicked trick? Oh, if only I had not told!"

The last word was almost inaudible; it was not till afterwards that Major Winchester recalled it. By a strong effort he had already mastered himself and recovered his self-possession. He looked almost as usual, as he turned to Imogen.

"I cannot understand how I could be so terribly, so inexcusably careless, Miss Wentworth," he said. "I am not usually careless. It is only lucky for me—I should indeed be *very* thankful," he went on speaking with intentional, deliberate impressiveness, "that my ridiculous mistake occurred between two people I can trust so perfectly and who will be as ready to forgive me as yourself and—and—the person this letter was intended for. I was going to ask your permission to tell you about her, if—"

But the last sentence was lost upon Imogen. She was staring up at him with the strangest expression in her eyes. "Then this letter was not meant for me at all?" she said.

An instant later, and she saw what she had done. The burning crimson rushed over her face like a scorching blast. She glanced round her desperately, as if in vain search of shelter.

But Rex's voice recalled her to herself. In the intense strain, the fatal yet so commonplace words almost made him laugh. There was only one thought which gave him any relief. How young, how almost absurdly childish she was! So, though he had now no longer any self-deception in the matter, though he could scarcely trust that in any sense Robin's warning had been uncalled for, he began to hope that out of the very inexperience which had caused the mischief might come in time the cure. For a moment or two he did not look at her. Then he said quietly—and from the tone of his voice no one could have suspected the almost passion of pity he was feeling—

"Of course I intended a letter for you. That is the envelope, properly addressed, you see. I—I blame myself more than I can ever express."

His words meant far more than met the ears, but this, in her confusion of mind, Imogen did not take in.

"Then it wasn't a trick?" she said in an odd, dull voice. "I think I would rather it had been a trick."

"What put that into your mind?" he said, half sharply. "Supposing it had been a trick, what then?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think, if it had been a trick, I could have felt quite so—so degraded," she said.

The word was almost more than he could bear. How he longed to comfort her, as a brother might have done!

"Miss Wentworth—Imogen," he said, "do, for mercy's sake, spare *me* a little. You cannot—you cannot possibly say or feel half so bitterly and severely to me as I do to myself. But if you cannot now, some day you will forgive me, won't you? It will all seem so different, you will wonder you cared. I can promise you it will be so, and I am nearly old enough to be your father, you know; and, at worst, no one need ever know except ourselves; for she, Eva," and he lightly touched the letter, "is like myself to me. She is absolutely sweet and trustworthy."

"Is her name Eva?" asked Imogen, in a dazed sort of way.

"Yes. How is it you have never heard them mention her? My cousins are not generally so reticent," and again the idea struck him, *could* there have been malice at work in all this?

"She has been very ill: that was what I was going to ask leave to tell you about."

"I think I heard Florence speak about her. But I thought it was your sister. Her name is Evangeline, and some one said she was sometimes called Eva, and they said it troubled you to have it mentioned; so, even though you had told me about your sister, I scarcely liked to ask how she was."

She put great control on herself to speak thus; but as she went on, Rex was relieved to see that she was rewarded for the effort by her calmness increasing. He had been dreading tears. Once let them begin, and he scarcely knew what could be done.

"I see," he said; "but still, some day perhaps I may be able to tell you our melancholy little romance. We have been

engaged five years, Miss Wentworth!" with a smile that was sad enough. "But who told you that Eva was my sister? Who warned you not to speak of her?" he added, with another flash of the strange, on the surface unreasonable, suspicion he had already felt more than once.

Imogen tried to collect her bewildered faculties.

"Trixie, I think," she said; "and—and—I am not sure, but I think Miss Forsyth said something of the same to mamma."

The lines on Major Winchester's face hardened.

"They are both so likely to consider my feelings tenderly!" he said sarcastically.

"No," said Imogen, bluntly, not detecting the satire. "I think they both almost hate you."

The quiet, matter-of-fact tone in which she spoke startled him. "Hate," uttered in cold blood, is an ugly word. But a new misgiving was now making its way to his mind, and for the moment, in his intense anxiety to save Imogen further suffering, he put aside the question of the present terrible complication being more than accident.

"Your mother?" he said, with quick inquiry.

"Do you mean—" He hesitated. It was *so* difficult to express what he wanted to know. "She—she has not seen this?" and again he touched the fatal letter.

"Yes," said Imogen, simply. "She was with me when I got it. Indeed, she gave it me," and as the remembrance of that morning—when she had wakened so happily—came back to her, it was very, very hard work to force down her tears; "and so, naturally, I showed it her, before I noticed the postscript. And she has thought—oh!"

"Never mind what she has thought," he said hastily. "If only—you don't think she has told any one else?"

"I don't know; not exactly. She promised she wouldn't; but Miss Forsyth is so cunning, and mamsey is so—so simple," said the girl. Major Winchester pulled himself together. "Miss Wentworth," he said, "I must stop farther mischief, at once: they must not and shall not torture you. But will you trust me still? I shall hurry on, and take measures to put your mother on her guard."

"You—you won't tell any one—not Florence, about me—about this morning?" said Imogen, piteously.

"No, no, of course not. Come on quietly to the house in half an hour or so, and I think I shall be able to manage it. Now, my poor dear child—don't be angry with me for calling you so this once—good-bye in the meantime."

"Good-bye," she said. "If you don't mind, I wish you would count it good-bye for always."

He glanced at her; she did not mean it, but in these few words was the bitterest reproach she could have expressed. Again the dull pallor crept over his face for an instant.

"Perhaps you are right. God bless you!" and he hurried away.

Imogen retraced her steps again to the outer margin of the wood. Then she turned, and walking slowly, found herself in twenty minutes or so at the gates of the inner drive. She looked at her watch mechanically: no, she must not go in yet, it was too soon. It was a winter day, but she did not feel cold, only very, very tired. She looked about for a seat. There were several, she knew, in among the shrubberies, which were here very thick. She turned down a little path, bordering, though she did not know it, a side entrance to the stables; there was a rustic seat there, almost an arbour, for it was shaded by the trunks and branches of a group of old elms. There she sat down, and for the first time the pent-up misery burst out. She could keep it in no longer, but broke into a passion of convulsive sobs.

She did not cry loudly. She was too worn out and spent to do so, even though for the first few moments her abandonment was so great that she gave not a thought to the possibility of attracting attention. But it was a very still day; sounds carried clearly. Beatrix, on the lookout for a scene of some kind as she came hurrying down the drive, caught the faint gasping sobs not many yards off, and stood, still to listen.

She had been forced to make one of the luncheon party in the coverts, sorely against her will; for Mabella, on pretext of a headache, had skilfully backed out of it, and Trixie more than suspected her motive. Florence was not to be back from Catborough till too late, and Alicia flatly refused to undertake the management of the party without one or other of her sisters. But Trixie succeeded in escaping in time to get back to the house not very much later than the hour at which Rex was expected. She wasted some minutes, however, in looking for Mabella, and hearing from a servant that Miss Forsyth had gone out some time before by herself, her suspicions redoubled, and she set off, racing along in her usual reckless harum-scarum fashion. Major Winchester, so far as she could discover, had not arrived (nor had the dogcart sent for his luggage); the truth being that Rex, by good-fortune having met Florence at the side entrance, was at that moment in close confabulation with her in the library.

But the strange sounds which reached her made Trixie slacken her pace. What could it be? At first she was by no means sure that they were not those of some animal in distress, in which case, to do her justice, the wild girl would not have been without some feeling of pity.

"Can it be one of the dogs?" she thought, as she pushed aside the thick-growing shrubs and made her way "cross country," as she would have described it, in the direction of the gasping sounds. But she was quickly undeceived. On the rough bench lay or crouched Imogen, her face hidden, her whole figure shaken by sobs, now and then broken by low moans, equally piteous to hear. The Helmonts were not given to vehement grief or vehement feeling of any kind, except when Beatrix, the only really hot-tempered one, got into a passion, and the display of it was almost like an

unknown language to them. In Trixie it seldom roused anything but a sort of contempt. But if this was her first sensation on seeing Imogen's prostration of suffering, it was soon mingled with other emotions. Pity of a kind, and quickly succeeding to it remorse—of a kind also—and speedily overmastering both, extreme and unreasoning fear.

"Imogen," she called out, though not very loudly, and instantly concealing herself again.

"Imogen, what is the matter?"

But there was no reply. Trixie's terror increased.

"Can she be having some sort of a fit?" she said to herself; and as there was a good deal of cowardice, moral and otherwise, mixed up with the rough animal courage of the girl, no sooner had the idea struck her, than she turned and fled, rushing off, heedless of aught else, in search of some one or something, she scarce knew what.

At the turn of the path—the same path down which Imogen had wandered, and which, it will be remembered, led into a side road to the stables—Beatrix ran full tilt against a man, walking quickly towards the house. It was the younger of her cousins, by good-luck; for, in her state of excitement, she would scarcely have cared who it was—silly Percy Calthorp, or Newnham, the stately butler, would have suited her equally well.

"Robin, oh, Robin!" she screamed, "do come! I believe Imogen Wentworth has gone out of her mind, or else she's dying in a fit."

Chapter Twelve.

The Bull by the Horns.

For so young a man, Robin Winchester was possessed of a remarkable amount of presence of mind. Added to which, he was not, as will be seen, wholly unprepared for a *dénouement*, probably stormy, and very certainly painful, of the complicated state of affairs as to which, Cassandra-like, he had lifted up his voice. At Trixie's appeal he turned and walked rapidly back in the direction whence she had come, without speaking; he had no idea of wasting his breath in words, and for another reason. So strongly was he imbued with the suspicion that the girl beside him had been "at it again with one of her odious practical jokes," that he doubted his own self-control should he once allow his indignation to find words. He had no cause to ask her for direction. Two or three moments brought them to a spot whence the pitiful, and, it must be allowed, almost alarming sounds were clearly audible.

"She is there," whispered Beatrix, "on the bench behind those trees."

"Go on first and show me," he said, sternly.

But to his amazement his guide rebelled.

"I won't," she said. "I'll stay here. She's given me such a fright already, and I don't want her to see me. You speak to her and I'll wait."

Robin was not given to strong language, especially to a woman; he opened his mouth and shut it again without speaking. Then a second thought struck him. Perhaps it was better so, though no thanks to Trixie. He caught her by the arm and held her, not too gently.

"You'll give me your word of honour, Beatrix Belmont," he said, "that you will stay here, on this spot, till I come back and say you may go?"

"Yes; if I must stay, I will. But you are very rough and unkind, Robin. Why are you angry with me?"

He gave her no answer, but hurried on to the bench. Some instinct had warned Imogen that she was no longer alone. She had sat up, and was trying to look about her composedly. The effort only made her seem the more piteous. Robin's heart positively swelled as he looked at her, recalling the last, the only time indeed he had ever seen her, and her glad girlish beauty.

She did not start as he came near; she sat still as if stupefied.

"Miss Wentworth," he said most gently and respectfully, "I am afraid you have had a start or a fright, or—or that you have had bad news. Can I do anything?"

She looked at him and smiled, the strangest smile he had ever seen, and with a thrill of horror he remembered Trixie's words, "Gone out of her mind." But in a moment he was relieved of this worst of terrors.

"You are Mr Robin Winchester," she said. "Yes, thank you. I have had bad news, and I am so dreadfully tired. I want to go home—to go in, I mean; but I am afraid of meeting any one, because, you see—though it is very silly of me—I have been crying. How can I get in without meeting any one?"

"Do you know the way in by the fernery, and the little back-stair up from what used to be the schoolroom?" he asked.

She shook her head. Then he considered for a moment in silence.

"Miss Wentworth," he said, "Trixie is there, behind the trees. It was she that saw you and called me. If you could agree to it, the very best thing would be to let her take you in. You need not speak to her, and she will do what I tell her."

She gave a little shiver, but did not object.

"Very well," she said, "if she has seen me already. You will make her promise not to tell? There is something else—you are very kind—could you do it?"

"*Anything*," he said, fervently.

"My head is getting so bad, and I don't want to be ill *here*," she said. "I do so want to get away. And mamma would want to know; there would be so many explanations. It has all got quite clear while I have been crying. Could you get a telegram sent for me, without *anybody* knowing?"

"Certainly; at once," he replied. "I have a pencil and paper."

She pressed her hand to her forehead. Then she quietly dictated an address and a message, which he wrote down without comment.

"You should have the reply this evening," he said. Then, "Wait here one moment," he added, and he retraced his steps to Trixie.

"You will do as I tell you, exactly," he said, "and without a word now or ever to *any one*? You hear me?"

"I'll do it," she said, sulkily, "because it suits me to. All the same, I'd like to know what business it is of yours?"

"It's this much my business, that if you break your promise I will tell your father all I know; and if you want proof that I *do* know, well I have in my pocket a letter I got from Eva Lesley last night, enclosing—*another letter*. Eva wrote to me in preference to Rex, not wanting to worry him, and—well, for other reasons."

Trixie had grown pale, but she stood her ground. "*I never touched anybody's letters*," she said. "And how can you say any one did? People—accidents happen about letters sometimes."

"Yes, they do; but there is such a thing as circumstantial evidence; and what is more, *I*, with my own hands, put the right note into the envelope addressed to Miss Wentworth that morning, as Rex was so hurried, and I laid it with the other one, stamped and directed to Miss Lesley, on the hall table."

She grew paler and paler.

"*I didn't touch them*," she repeated.

"We have only your own word for it," he said, scornfully; "and supposing Mabella Forsyth says you did? But I am wasting time upon you. I have warned you. Take your own way."

"I won't tell anything about this morning. I swear I won't," she said, in terror.

Five minutes later saw Imogen safe in her own room, thither escorted by Trixie, silent and panic-stricken. And an hour or so later, when Mrs Wentworth returned from a drive in the pony carriage, to which she had been invited by Florence, she was met by Colman with the news that Miss Imogen was in bed and asleep, her head was so bad. It was only to be hoped, added the maid, after the manner of her kind, that the young lady had not got a bad chill, and was not going to have a regular illness.

Mrs Wentworth spent the rest of the afternoon in her own room, which opened into Imogen's, watching for her to awake. The anxiety almost absorbed all other feelings.

"How can I tell her?" she kept saying to herself. "And why, oh why did Florence not tell me before? And to think that *he* is actually back, and that she must meet him after, and I that have encouraged it. There is no one—no, not one creature—I can confide in. For Florence meant something when she begged me not to trust Miss Forsyth. But—oh dear, and how my darling Imogen warned me too!—but how could Major Winchester have been so careless, if the letter he is so annoyed about really was the one sent to Imogen; and *how* am I to tell her, and she perhaps sickening for brain fever or typhoid fever, or something?" The poor woman's brain was in a whirl, for Florence had not dared to do more than warn her vaguely. It was a relief when, about six o'clock, an orange-coloured envelope was brought in by Colman.

"Can you both spend a week with me on your way home?" it said. "Welcome any day; the sooner the better."

It came from an old friend, Imogen's godmother, and as there had been vague talk of the visit it was not altogether unexpected; not at least too surprising that Mrs Hume should have telegraphed.

"Can I send an answer back?" asked Imogen's mother.

"Yes, ma'am. I was to say the messenger is waiting. There are telegraph forms in the envelope case on the writing-table," was the maid's reply.

And in another moment the answer was forthcoming—a warmly-worded acceptance, announcing the Wentworths' arrival some time the following afternoon.

This settled, Mrs Wentworth, who did not often act with such promptitude and decision, relapsed into nervousness and depression. She established herself on a chair beside the door of communication with Imogen's room, longing for and yet dreading her awaking.

For, strange as it may seem, the girl was really asleep, and soundly so. It was her first experience of violent emotion,

and, coming on the top of the past days of tension and excitement, it had completely exhausted her. At first she had meant to lie still, and, if need were, feign sleep till time sufficient for Mrs Hume's telegram should have elapsed, but real slumber had come, saving her, not improbably, from the illness that would not have been an abnormal result of all she had gone through. But at last, half an hour or so before the dressing-gong sounded, she awoke. For a moment or two she was in a chaos of bewilderment; then by degrees, as this cleared a little, she became conscious of one overmastering impression; the latest and strongest on her brain before she fell asleep. They—she and her mother—must leave, must seek shelter somewhere, anywhere, at once. Then the remembrance of the commission she had, in her desperation, entrusted to Robin Winchester returned.

"Has it—has the?" she began to say, raising herself to look about her. But her full senses revived before she said more. The room was quite in darkness, except for the faint red glow of the slumbering fire. It might have been the middle of the night; nay more, days might have passed, for all she knew, since that terrible afternoon.

"Perhaps I have been very ill, and am only now beginning to get better," she thought. But no, though her head was dizzy and ached a good deal, she did not feel weak or exhausted. Then she had on her usual dress, the same dress she had worn all day. With a sigh almost of regret Imogen had to decide that nothing very remarkable had happened. She was still in the world of ordinary doings, and she must face what lay before her.

A dark figure, aroused by even the half-audible words she had begun to utter, crossed the room to the bedside.

"Mamma?" said Imogen.

"Yes, darling. I have been watching for you to awake. Is your head better, sweetest?"

"I think so," the girl, now fully on the alert, replied. "What time is it? The middle of the night?"

"Oh no, dear, the dressing-gong has not sounded yet."

"Has it not?" in a tone of disappointment.

"I won't come down to dinner; you will tell them about my headache. But you must *go* down, mamsey," with unconscious selfishness, "and—it would not do to seem to make a fuss."

"No dear," very submissively. "But first, Imogen, I have to tell you what I have done. I don't know *what* you'll say. I have had a telegram from Mrs Hume, begging us so to go to her at once. I fancy she has some party she wants you for; and so, as it was so near our time for leaving, and you not seeming very well, and—"

"You have said we would go? Oh, I do hope you did," said Imogen, with feverish eagerness.

"Oh, why didn't you wake me?—if only we could go to-night."

"Not to-night, dearest; that couldn't be; but to-morrow. I have telegraphed that we will be with her to-morrow."

"Oh, thank you! I am *so* glad," said Imogen. Then after a moment's pause, "Mamma," she went on, "you have heard something, and you see that I have. It has all been a terrible mistake. But do not ask me to speak about it yet. Afterwards, when we are away from here, I will tell you all. I cannot *yet*. Only one thing, you must understand that Major Winchester has not been to blame. So, if you see him to-night, you will be nice to him; promise me you will."

"I will do my best," said poor Mrs Wentworth.

"For every sake," Imogen went on. She frowned as if thinking deeply. "I am not sure yet that there has not been some trick in it. Mamma, do not say one word you can help to Miss Forsyth or Trixie, and try not to let them think there is anything the matter."

"Yes," her mother agreed. "I will tell Mrs Helmont of the telegram—that it has hastened our going a little. They won't be surprised; they are so accustomed to comings and goings. It really is most fortunate, *most* fortunate, that Mrs Hume should have thought of telegraphing. Lucky coincidences *do* happen sometimes, you see."

She was trying to speak cheerfully. Trouble affecting Imogen brought out the real unselfishness underlying the superficial frivolity.

"Yes, they do," said Imogen, smiling in spite of herself.

There was more truth in Mrs Wentworth's remark than Imogen was aware of. Coincidences do occur in real life more strangely, more fortunately, sometimes, than even in fiction. It had been specially fortunate for all concerned that it was Robin and no one else whom Beatrix ran up against in her fright, and Robin's being there at that moment was only thanks to his having driven round by Wood Court, where he had left some of his belongings, before his brother's hasty summons to London. Fortunate, too, had been Major Winchester's meeting with Florence on her return from Catborough, so that the two were able to lay their heads together as to warnings and explanations to Mrs Wentworth. And the kindness and sympathy Florence extended to the mother as well as to the daughter met with its reward. Never before had Florence been able to feel to her so warmly as by the close of that—to some at least of the party—terribly trying evening.

"There is real heroism in her," Florence could not help saying to Rex. "No one would have suspected what she must be feeling, to see her so cheerful and composed."

The climax had come when Mrs Wentworth was bidding Major Winchester good-night; "and good-bye, probably," she added, "for we are leaving so early in the morning. But I must not forget to ask how Mrs Bertrand is," she went on.

"Imogen called me back as I was coming down to dinner to remind me to ask you."

"She is going on wonderfully well; there is every hope of a perfect cure," he replied. "Thank you and Miss Wentworth a thousand times. Yes, I think it is good-bye, not on account of your early start, but I am off before breakfast tomorrow for a shoot at Gorsage."

"I shall be here, however," Robin had put in softly, "if I can be of the least use."

"It is far more than I deserve. They are good, truly good women," said Rex, in reply to Florence's remark. And this, in her heart, his cousin endorsed. "Rex has been foolish—very foolish," she said to herself. "But he has done his best to put things straight. After all, poor child, she will outlive it. It seems to have left a mark on him, however. He looks ten years older than when he went away."

Some one else was remarking this with satisfaction.

"It has hit him in a tender point, I delighted to see," Miss Forsyth was saying to herself. "Major Reginald Winchester, the mirror of chivalry and honour, to have flirted so egregiously with an inexperienced little fool, as to have brought her to the brink of a brain fever and goodness knows what not: it would be a nice story to tell, if I *could* tell it, which, alas! I fear I can't. But, after all, it is not the publishing it I care about; it is the delight of knowing I have scored one *against* him."

He caught her eye fixed upon him with something almost diabolical in its malice, and his strange suspicions redoubled. Then came his talk with Robin.

"Why did Eva not write to me direct—telegraph—anything?" he said at first, with a touch of impatience, when he had heard what his brother had to tell.

"*Telegraphing* would have done no good. Then she wanted to save you annoyance, to spare your ever hearing of the—mistake—at all, if possible," was the reasonable reply. "Don't you see, if the Miss Wentworth whose note *she* received had been an elderly spinster, no harm would have been done; at least so Eva thought, though I am not sure that I agree with her," with a touch of grim humour.

"I have told her about Imogen," said Rex. "Not by her surname. Eva specially says she had never heard of a Miss Wentworth. That postscript was so extraordinarily unlucky too," he added reflectively.

"Angey particularly wanted no one to know the exact date of the operation."

"And the confusion between the names—Evangeline and Eveleen," Robin went on.

"Upon my word, I never knew anything like it. It is as if malicious imps had been told off to play into that—into Miss Forsyth's hands. If *she*—if Miss Wentworth gets ill, and anything happens to her, I, for one, shall feel as if she had been murdered."

Rex could bear no more.

"Robin," he exclaimed, "do you want to send *me* out of my mind? In your—only natural, I allow"—and he threw a quick and searching glance at his brother—"feeling for her, you seem to think *I* have no feeling at all. Keep to the point. What motive had that woman in doing as she did? and how can she be shown up and punished?"

"Spite," answered Robin. "Spite, at *her*, Imogen, or *you*; that is my answer to the first question. And—"

"She has no special motive for malevolence at me," interrupted Rex, "and her jealousy of Imogen can scarcely be so deep-seated. Beatrix hates me, in her mad, reckless way, for getting her a scolding, as she would express it; but even she, wild as she is—"

"Would have hesitated to open two envelopes, read their contents, and fasten them up again, after changing the letters," said Robin. "Well, yes, it is to be hoped so; at least, I can't help hoping so, considering she's our cousin."

"And you are certain, entirely *certain*, that the letters were rightly put in at first?" repeated his brother.

"Absolutely, entirely certain that the one I shut into the envelope addressed to Miss Wentworth was *for* Miss Wentworth. Yes, as certain as that I'm sitting on this chair. And I am also absolutely certain that as I was crossing the outer hall to look if the dogcart had come, I saw Miss Forsyth come down-stairs and stop at the table where notes and letters for the post always lie, and stand there looking at the letters. There was no one about; everybody was late that morning except ourselves, and Florence, and that woman. But that is all I can vouch for, though Trixie's terror made me surer than ever."

"Do you think she knew?"

Robin shook his head.

"I can't say. Perhaps not all the details; but she tacitly owned to a plot of some kind."

"If I can frighten Miss Forsyth into silence, that is the best we can hope for, I suppose," said Rex.

"The best one *should* hope for, I should say," Robin replied. "Of course one yearns to expose that woman, but the real concern is to shield Miss Wentworth. Miss Forsyth has put herself beneath contempt. I care nothing about her, provided we can stop her making a good story of it and—and getting Imogen laughed at; and you, too, for that

matter.”

“Don’t take *me* into consideration,” said his brother.

“Not for Eva’s sake?” suggested Robin, gently.

“Eva would only feel as I do,” said Major Winchester. “Her whole sympathies will be with Miss Wentworth.”

“She *is* an angel, I know,” said Robin. “Well, keep cool about it, Rex, and be prepared for Miss Forsyth if you see your chance.”

Major Winchester had not to wait for it, nor did it come in any way such as could have been predicted. He was off the next morning, almost as soon as it was light, and did not return till about three in the afternoon. As he came up the drive, tired and depressed, with every step the painful scenes of the day before seemed to be re-enacted. He could not forgive himself, even though it was difficult to define precisely where and how he had been to blame. But he found no difficulty in defining and concentrating his overwhelming indignation. Instead of at all softening it, the last few hours had increased it tenfold. And now that, to a certain extent, Imogen was beyond the reach of Miss Forsyth’s malevolence, Rex almost felt as if silence were becoming impossible to him.

“She *must* be exposed,” he muttered to himself, “so that every honourable door may be closed to her. At all costs I cannot see that she should be allowed to get off scot-free.”

So thinking, he did not at once notice steps coming quickly behind him, nor till he heard his own name pronounced, in a mocking tone, did he realise that some one was overtaking him.

“It is you, Major Winchester, is it? This is your first appearance here to-day. You were off betimes this morning; early starts seem to be the order of the day with you.”

The effrontery of this greeting—for the voice was Mabella’s—almost took away Rex’s presence of mind and power of speech. He soon recovered them, however, and turning sharply, faced her.

“Yes, Miss Forsyth,” he said, quickly, “it is I. If you have anything to say to me, say it; if not, be so good as to walk on. Unfortunately, there are not two roads to the house from here.”

She laughed; there was not a trace of nervousness in her laugh.

“You are no diplomatist, Major Winchester. Here you are showing your colours to the enemy at once, before you have really any to show.”

“I have not the slightest objection to your knowing what I was thinking about,” he said. “I am only considering whether I shall expose you, or whether, for the sake of others, I must leave you to the punishment which is sure to come sooner or later, even if I have no hand in bringing it upon you.”

“Goody-goody talk runs off me like water off a duck’s back, I warn you,” she said. “Keep to common-sense, if you please. I shall not pretend I don’t know what you mean; I do perfectly, and I intend to treat you with entire candour. What I would ask you is this: *how* can you ‘expose me’—to use your courteous phrase—without proof, reliable and certain, that I am guilty? Such proof you know you have not got. All you can say is that your brother saw me standing at the table whereon lay the two letters in question. Is it *likely* that people would believe that I, a lady born and bred, would have done such an unheard-of thing as to open them, read them, and change their envelopes? And when the circumstances are explained further, of your agitation and hurry that morning, *do* you think you would gain much by your attempt at showing me up?” He was silent for a moment. Then, “Yes,” he said, “I believe my story would be accepted. There is not only this last distinct act; there is the whole string of misleading remarks and suggestions on your part, and,—he hesitated to name her—“Trixie’s, which show the plot into which, Heaven knows why, you inveigled that misguided girl as a fellow-conspirator.”

“Ah, Trixie,” she said. “I will revert to her in a moment, though, *en passant*, I may tell you there was not much ‘inveigling’ required on my part. Your cousin Beatrix *hates* you, Major Winchester, with a very pretty hatred;” and she laughed gently, delighted to see that he started a little. If “hate” was not a pleasant word on Imogen’s childish lips, it did not gain when pronounced by Mabella.

“Yes,” she went on, “she hates you, though not as— But that will keep. But what I am going to say will indeed surprise you. I am going to treat you with unheard-of generosity—to furnish you myself with the necessary weapons. Here they are. You are perfectly correct in your surmises. I *did* open the envelopes and change their contents, not out of mischief, but from a far deeper motive; and I did, and have done, and meant to do all I possibly could to mislead that silly woman and her daughter into believing you were in love with the girl, and on the point of proposing to her; in which scheme I persuaded Trixie to join me, even as far as I remember, before they came. There, now, what do you say to that?”

“Why do you tell it me?” he asked. “If it is with any idea that your confession may force me to be silent, I—”

“Nonsense,” she said. “It is not a confession; that word is associated with penitence and coming for forgiveness. *I* am not penitent. I glory in what I have done. I triumph in it. And you will be silent. You cannot tell the story without making that girl a laughing-stock, even if people believed you—which I doubt—for you would scarcely like to say you were publishing what you call my ‘confession.’ And nothing, no word or sentence I have said to Mrs Wentworth, but could be naturally and innocently explained, and every one can see what a fool she is. And still more, you cannot tell the story without incriminating Trixie. Indeed, the moment I find you telling it, *I* shall tell her part of it. That would be very nice; your own cousin, the daughter, of the relatives you owe so much kindness to. For you know the Squire

would be capable of turning her out-of-doors for such dishonourable breach of hospitality to guests."

It was all quite true.

"Why have you told me, then?" he asked.

"Because I wanted to come to an understanding; to show you that you had better decide not to tell I shall not tell, for the story is nothing to me. I am leaving Grey Fells at once, and I don't think I care to return. I am sick of Trixie's atrocious temper, and I have got what I stayed for."

"What was that?" he added. There was a curious fascination about the girl, with her entire absence of principle and absolute indifference to his opinion.

"My revenge," she said quietly. "Not as much as I could have wished. I should not be easily satisfied; but it is better than nothing. I have made you suffer. I have lowered you in your own estimation. I have touched you in a tender part, for you *know* that Imogen Wentworth's sunny girlhood is gone—gone for ever; she will never be the same again, and all through *you*?"

He winced, and she saw it.

"And why, may I ask, mystery of mysteries, have you condescended to this flattering interest in me? When and how did I incur the honour of offending you?"

His sarcasm made her for the first time lose a little of her self-control. Her black eyes positively glared as she went a step or two nearer him.

"The day you warned Harry Curzon against marrying me," she replied. "Do you remember? You are good at that sort of dirty work; insolent meddling is rather a *speciality* of yours. Still, I think you cannot have forgotten this particular case."

Rex grew visibly paler. Yes, he remembered. But without waiting for his reply, Mabella turned and fled swiftly up the avenue to the house. And she left The Fells the next day.

It had been several years ago—five or six. Harry Curzon was a subaltern in his own regiment—handsome, attractive, weak, and easily influenced; and Rex *had* warned him against the, even then, fast and noisy and unscrupulous girl. He had thought it his duty, and he thought it might save Harry. It had not done so. The young man had gone from bad to worse, and the watching his downward career had been one of the saddest pages in Rex Winchester's life. But as he glanced up the darkening road after Mabella's retreating figure, a strange pity thrilled him.

"They say no one is *all* bad," he thought to himself. "I suppose it is possible she really loved that poor, foolish fellow."

Chapter Thirteen.

Eva.

Late autumn again. A year, a year fully since Imogen and her mother left The Fells that bright, chilly November morning. Since then their life had been a wandering and unsettled one. Mrs Wentworth's dreams of a modest season in London had not been realised, for Imogen had shrunk from anything and everything of the kind. So, having disposed of their house at Eastbourne, they had travelled about aimlessly enough, the one guiding influence the girl's fancy for the time being. For Mrs Wentworth had entirely, as the French say, "effaced herself" for her child. And in this there was a strong element of not altogether undeserved self-reproach, as well as of adoring maternal devotion.

Of course it had not been wisely done, but she was not a "wise" person. And the very unwisdom of her devotion should have touched a nature essentially generous as was Imogen's. It did so from time to time, but not lastingly; only adding, therefore, to the poor girl's restlessness and irritability, new and perplexing developments in her character.

They had been abroad for some months, and were now, when we meet them again, hesitating as to their winter destination. For once, there had been a diversity of opinion; that is to say, for once, Mrs Wentworth had expressed a wish, and Imogen had dissented from it. That this had not already occurred was no thanks to the latter, as with the spirit of contradiction fast becoming chronic in the formerly sweet-tempered and still gentle girl, it is much to be doubted if she would not have opposed any distinct suggestion. But hitherto every proposal had emanated from herself. That her mother had at last made one was due to the influence of Mrs Hume, Imogen's sensible though not peculiarly refined godmother, who had of necessity been taken to a certain extent into the Wentworths' confidence.

"You are ruining her," Mrs Hume said, without beating about the bush; "ruining her character, and laying up a store of future discontent and misery for her. Never marry! tut, tut, nonsense! She's not twenty yet; of course she'll marry. And even if she never did? Much better have a settled, respectable ladylike home of your own than go wandering about in this purposeless fashion, as if there were some mystery about you. You have money enough to live very nicely: make your headquarters in London, which you will like yourself, and where Imogen can find something to do. She is not too old to have some lessons and girls do all sorts of things nowadays—cooking, ambulance classes, meddling and muddling about among the poor. It's all very wholesome for them, and Imogen would get to like London."

But no; Imogen would not hear of it. She was not going to like anything. She would take no interest in the idea of furnishing a pretty little house and making some pleasant acquaintances; she had, or imagined she had, a morbid

terror of going into society, for fear her tragic story should be known; she had taken up the *rôle* of a being *a part*—a Mariana, without Mariana's ghostly and illusive hope. She had nothing to watch or listen for; still, that made it no better: if she could neither watch nor listen, she would at least do nothing else. Far ahead in the dim future, when "mamsey," somehow or other—she did not define how, for she was too true-hearted to say "when mamsey dies"—would no longer need her, she had sketched out for herself a shadowy possibility.

"I will become a Sister," she used to think, as if for such a life no qualification were wanted but the having lost heart and interest in everything else!—while a not unpleasing vision of herself in trailing and sombre garments, pale face, and unearthly eyes, carrying solace and sympathy by her very presence to the "haunts of wretchedness" of which she knew naught but the name, or lost in devotion through long hours of midnight vigil in some dimly-lighted chapel, rose before her eyes—all, as Mrs Hume's rough common-sense had already in its way perceived, centring round "self." For of the real meaning of religion, apart from sentiment and self-seeking, it is to be feared that the poor child as yet knew not even the alphabet.

It was in this mood that she was pacing the sands one mild morning, tempted out by the soft sunshine and unusual stillness of the air, unusual at that season, even at the seaside winter resort where for the time they were staying. She had come out alone, for the discussion as to their future plans had begun again at breakfast, ending in a nearer approach to positive disagreement than had yet come to pass. For Mrs Wentworth's eyes were opening, and she was growing more rationally anxious about Imogen every day.

"I can't think what has made mamma take up that craze about London," she thought. "I should detest it; at least,"—for, after all, London was an unknown quantity to Imogen, and at twenty there is charm in that very fact—"I am sure I should, though I daresay other girls would like it. But—"

At that moment she became aware that she had all but run against a Bath chair, drawn up in a sheltered position below the rough cliff-like bank.

"I—I beg your pardon," she said hastily, fearing lest she had jarred the chair and its invalid occupant.

"It does not matter the least," a sweet, bright, though feeble voice replied; and looking up, Imogen saw, half lying, half sitting, a girl—quite a young girl she seemed at first sight—whose exquisite complexion and brilliantly beautiful eyes told their own sad tale, even without the cough which quickly followed her few quick words.

"I am so sorry," Imogen could not avoid saying, imagining that she had agitated the young lady.

"Oh no!" the stranger went on, when, after a moment or two, she had recovered her breath and voice, "it was not you at all. I made myself cough by trying to reach my book, which had fallen down. If you would be so kind—oh! thank you *so much*," as Imogen eagerly started forward to pick it up. "It is my own fault, for I sent my maid home, and I never care to keep the chairman standing about. I love to be alone when I am pretty well, as I am this morning."

Imogen gazed at her with eyes full of wondering pity. How could she be so cheerful? She had heard that consumptive patients never realise their state: it must be so in this case.

"I must not disturb you," she said gently.

"It is a very nice mild day. May I say that I hope the air here will do you a great deal of good?" and she was moving on when the invalid stopped her.

"Do stay and talk to me for a minute or two, if you don't mind," she said. "I have noticed you passing so often; now and then with—your mother, I suppose?"

Imogen gave a sign of assent.

"But more often alone. And I wondered—" But here she stopped rather abruptly. Imogen looked up; she was carrying a little folding-stool, which she set down beside the stranger's chair. "I am rather tired," she said with a sigh; "but please, what did you wonder?" The young lady smiled, but shook her head "No," she said, "I don't think I will tell you: it might sound impertinent—from an utter stranger. If—if possibly I got to know you even a little, I think I *would* say it."

"That is not likely to happen, I fear," Imogen answered. "We are leaving here on Monday. Are you going to stay all the winter?"

For the first time a rush of sudden colour overspread the lovely face, leaving it more delicately pale than before. Imogen began to change her mind about the girl's age. Something in her tone and manner made her feel as if the invalid were some years her senior; a slight, very slight touch of gentle authority made itself felt, as if the speaker were not accustomed to have her words or opinion lightly set aside.

"I do not know about the whole winter," she replied. "But I feel sure—quite sure—I shall never be able to go abroad, as my friends are still hoping. We are to have a grand consultation in a day or two: others of my friends are coming on Saturday."

"But you could scarcely find a milder place in England than this," said Imogen, a little puzzled by her manner.

"No: that is why I shall stay here, till—till I go still farther away," said the invalid gently. "And yet it *cannot* be really far away—not from those we love," she added, as if speaking to herself, while her beautiful eyes seemed to be gazing at unseen things.

Imogen did not speak; and when the stranger glanced at her again, she was startled to see some large tears stealing down the girl's face.

"My dear child!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said Imogen, "I am crying. I think it is dreadful. I think nearly everything is dreadful in the world. Why should you have to die, so beautiful and so good—I can feel you are good; and why should I, though I'm not good at all, be so very unhappy?"

Then, not a little ashamed of herself, she started up.

"I shall only do you harm if I talk to you," she said. "Good-bye. Oh! don't you think perhaps you will get better after all?"

She held out her hand; the lady took it and held it.

"No," she said, "that cannot be. And, believe me, there is nothing dreadful in it all to me now. The struggle is over both for me and, I hope, even for those who love me most. It is all right. But thank you for your sweet sympathy. Do not mind about me, however. You have said of yourself what I hesitated to say. I was wondering why you looked so sad, and I see it is true that you are not happy. Yet—" She glanced at Imogen's pretty fur-trimmed winter dress, "you are not in mourning; you have your mother, and health and youth, and—plenty of things both useful and pleasant to do?"

"I don't do them," the girl replied bluntly. "I suppose they are there, if I cared to look for them. But I have no heart or interest in anything. I was really ill last year—last winter—rather badly, and I got into lazy ways, I suppose, and—and—oh, I'm just unhappy, and I don't see why I should be, and why there should be so many things all wrong and sad."

"If we *could* see the 'why' of such things, the wrongness and the sadness would be gone," said the invalid.

Imogen looked perplexed.

"Ye-es," she said. "Yes; if we saw it was a good 'why,' of course it would seem different."

"Then should we not *believe* it is a good 'why?'" and the young lady smiled again.

"I suppose we *should*," Imogen allowed.

"There is one thing that all who know anything about human nature agree upon," said the invalid, "and that is, that without suffering, without having suffered, we should be very poor creatures indeed; we should scarcely be at the beginning of better things."

"Yea, suffering like yours—high and good and noble sort of suffering," said Imogen. "And suffering borne meekly and patiently and cheerfully—that's quite different. But when it's only selfish, and mostly your own fault, and when you do nothing but kick at it and feel horrid—"

The invalid smiled again.

"If we were able at once to accept and bear patiently the suffering, we should not need its discipline," she said. "No, it *goes* deeper and wider than that. Suffering is the door opening for us—opening on to the higher road."

Imogen was silent. She was impressed, but still perplexed.

"Mine—the—the trial or disappointment, or whatever it should be called, that spoilt my life was not like that. It seemed only *lowering*—only degrading."

"Don't say that!" the invalid exclaimed eagerly. "Nothing can degrade us but our own wrong-doing, and the true lowering is that which lowers us only to raise us higher in the end."

Imogen considered.

"I don't know that I quite understand you," she said. "I am afraid you are too clever for me. I am not clever, and I have never thought much about religious things; they seem so dull and difficult—at least nearly always. I know I am wrong *now*; I am useless and selfish and discontented."

"The last is sure, thank God for it, to follow on the two others," her new friend interpolated.

Imogen glanced at her earnestly: the reverent expression struck her. "But," she went on, "for the thing itself, the miserable mistake and mortification, I don't think honestly that I was to blame, except that I was silly and, I suppose, vain."

Her candour impressed the other favourably. It is a proof of real humility to own one's self *vain*.

"You must have been very young," she said almost more gently than she had yet spoken. "Supposing you begin at the *now*; try to put right some of the wrong you *now* are conscious of. Do not think me officious or presumptuous," she added. Then almost in a whisper, "The dying are privileged, you know."

"Oh, don't!" Imogen exclaimed, raising her hand as if to ward off an impending blow. Then she answered by a question, "Shall you be here to-morrow morning, about this time?"

"Yes, if it is fine, I think I may say certainly so."

"I am going to *think*," said the girl simply. "And perhaps you will let me talk to you a little more. To-morrow is only Thursday, and we don't go till Monday. I do hope I have not tired you?" she added anxiously.

"No, truly no. You have interested me very much. And if I can be of even the tiniest bit of help to you, it would be delightful. The feeling one's self *so* useless, so condemned to lie still, is almost the worst part of it;" and again the colour rushed over her face.

"I think just to see you is use," Imogen replied.

Then she went home, and she *thought*.

And "to-morrow" was fine, and Imogen had not thought in vain, nor had her new friend in any way forgotten her.

"I am going to tell you everything," said the girl. "I don't like it at all, even though you do not know my name, and perhaps we may never meet again. But I know I can trust you, and I want you to say plain, even hard things to me, if *you* think I need them."

Then followed the story—simple enough, after all, which we know.

The invalid listened intently. Once or twice, when Imogen came to the climax of the changed letters, alluding, though but slightly, to her faint suspicion that all had not been mere accident in the little drama, she started as a restrained exclamation of pity or of indignation, perhaps of both, rose to her lips. But when Imogen had finished, quite finished, though she took her hand and held it, for some moments she did not speak. Then said the girl, waxing impatient, as was her way:

"Why don't you say something? I told you I would not mind plain-speaking or hard speaking. Do you think me beneath contempt?"

"My dear," said the older woman, with a touch of reproach, as she pressed the restless little hand, "I was *thinking*. I won't attempt to say what I feel for you; I might say too much. Just be satisfied that I *do* feel for you intensely. I think it was a cruel, a really cruel trial; and if any one was an active agent in it—no, it is best not to say what I could say of such wickedness. The word is not too strong; but let us put all that aside. If so cruel a trial and mortification were sent to you, it was for a good purpose. That is a truism; but truisms are useful sometimes. Special suffering—and I do think it was very special and unusual—is meant to show special possibilities for good in those it comes to. That should take away some of the bitterness of the *mortification*, should it not, by helping you to rise above it?"

It was the second time in her little speech that she used the word, and as she laid a slight emphasis on it, she looked at Imogen keenly. It is not a pleasant word to have applied to one's self, but the girl did not resent it. She only repeated it inquiringly.

"*Mortification?*" she said. "Yes, of course I know there was a good deal of that in it;" and her colour deepened. "But, that couldn't have been the worst of it. I was—I had got to be very fond of *him*—of the person it was all about."

"Naturally so," said the invalid. "I don't see how you could have helped it. And he deserved it. You need not feel ashamed of having cared for a man such as—as you describe. But—yes, I think the mortification *was* the worst of it, and the part that has left you so sore and morbid. I don't think—and remember you told me to speak plainly—you can have been what is called 'in love' with him. You were more in love with the idea of it all. The sort of romance of it, and the girlish pride in being so quickly chosen, and your mother's gratification too."

"It is true," said Imogen, "that at the very first, when I thought it was really going to be, I wasn't at all sure if I was glad or not. I was more frightened and worried than glad. But mamma said girls often feel as if they didn't know their own minds."

"Perhaps; but not exactly as you felt. Then there is another thing. I think and believe you would be capable of a very true and unselfish love. Now, if yours for him had been like this, it would not have spoilt your life hitherto as you tell me it has been spoilt. You would have been thankful to know the mistake had not caused *him* suffering. Oh, my child, that is the bitterest, to know that we have been the cause, however innocently, of sorrow to those we love better than ourselves!"

Her words and manner almost overawed Imogen. But after a little pause she replied:

"No," she said, honestly, "I certainly did not care for him like that. I was even almost glad to think he *had* suffered a little. For though, of course, he was not the least atom in the world in love with me, *he* was unselfish. I know he was dreadfully sorry for me. But, after all, if it was more the mortification than—than any better feeling, how does that help me?"

"Because it is so clearly *wrong*—even 'lowering,' to use your own word—and it should be and must be so possible for you to throw it off and start afresh."

Imogen raised her head; there was something inspiring in the last words.

"What should I do?" she asked gently, but eagerly too.

And an earnest consultation followed.

The next day was rainy. Then came Saturday, fine and mild again—the last but one of the Wentworths' stay at

Tormouth. Imogen stole down for a few minutes to the sheltered nook where she had found her new friend.

Yes, she was there.

"I felt that I must see you—for a moment," said the girl, "though I cannot stay, and I know you have friends coming to see you to-day. But I *had* to thank you again, and I want to tell you that I have told my mother I will do exactly what she wishes; so we are going to London on Monday to look for a house, and poor mamsey is so pleased. And I am going to follow your advice about everything. I am not going to be idle and useless any more."

The tears were in the stranger's eyes by this time.

"Dear child," she said, "I am so glad."

"Would you like to know my name?" the girl went on simply. "I thought at first I could not bear to tell it you; but if that is foolish and false pride, and if you would tell me yours?"

"No, dear," the invalid replied. "Do not tell it to me. And I will not tell you mine. I think it would a little spoil the charm of our friendship, and there *might* come times at which you would wish you had not confided in me. No, I shall *never* forget you. And you may feel that your secret is as safe as it can be, for—"

"I know what you are going to say, but please don't. You *may* get better for a while: do let me think so."

The dying girl shook her head, though she smiled—yes, her own sweet smile. And this was Imogen's last remembrance of her. So when, some few months later, in the daily list of deaths came the name of "Eveleen, only surviving daughter of General Sir Jocelyn Lesley, etc, etc, aged 28," it called forth no remark from the girl whose eye it caught for a moment, save that of "'Eveleen Lesley.' What a pretty name! And Eveleen spelt the Irish way."

"Is it a marriage?" asked Mrs Wentworth across the table.

"No," Imogen replied, with a softened tone in her voice, "it's somebody dead. But not a very young girl."

Five years later, and The Fells again, in its normal condition of hospitable cheeriness, and with, at the first glance, but few changes. The Squire is a little greyer, perhaps—a little greyer and a little stouter—and Mrs Belmont a trifle more grandmotherly in bearing and appearance. And the handsome figure and face of wild Trixie are conspicuous by their absence; for she is married and away—far away with her husband and his regiment in India, learning wisdom and other good things, it is to be hoped, by experience. In her stead there sits Lady Lucy, the pretty and irreproachable, though decidedly uninteresting, wife of Captain Belmont. Alicia and Florence are both in their usual places.

It is breakfast-time, and newspapers are handed about. From Oliver at one corner there comes an exclamation:

"I say, did any of you know that Robin—Robin Winchester was going to be married? Not going to be, he *is* married, and guess to whom—that's to say, if you remember her."

"Who?" said Alicia, languidly.

"That pretty, spoilt little girl who stayed here once, ages ago, before Trixie was married. What was her name—Gwendolin? No; Imogen Wentworth."

"Dear me, how very odd!" said Alicia, with more interest in her tone. "They met here, then; no, they didn't—did they, Florence?"

"They did meet, but only just," said Florence; "still, I believe Robin dates his falling in love with her from then."

Her father and mother turned to her. "Then you knew about it; you might have told us. Indeed, for the matter of that, Master Robin might have told us himself," said the Squire.

"He is only a second-cousin after all," said Florence, "and we never had seen anything of him scarcely. We never knew him like Rex—in the old days. And I believe he has been very little in England all these years."

"We have seen little enough of Rex for a long time," said Mrs Belmont. "Poor Rex! why, he always called us uncle and aunt, you remember, my dear. I suppose he has never got over poor Eva's death. But I think the girl's mother might have let me know. I always meant to ask them here again—indeed I think I did once—but something came in the way. Who told you about it, Florry?"

"I only heard it vaguely, some months ago, from Rex himself, as a thing that would be some day, but not an announced engagement. And this very morning I have a letter from him. It appears Mrs Wentworth is dead: she had a very long and painful illness, and her daughter would not leave her. Rex speaks of Imogen very highly. I think he seems quite cheered by the marriage."

"We must ask them down: don't forget about it, my dear," said the hospitable Squire.

"And perhaps we could persuade Rex to come too. Ask them all for Christmas: they'd feel at home and cheer us up a bit—make up for poor Trixie, eh?"

The Christmas invitation was declined, though graciously. For Imogen's mourning was still recent, and her marriage had been of the quietest. But the course of the following year did see the Winchesters—all three of them—at Grey Fells. And at last came to pass the friendship between Florence and Imogen, which so long ago Major Winchester had wished for and tried to compass.

"I like her exceedingly—thoroughly," said Robin's happy wife to—her brother-in-law.

"But, surely, is she not much softer, less standoff and much, much more sympathising than she used to be?"

"Yes; she has been through the fire, and come out of it very fine gold—tried and purified," said Reginald. "One could scarcely wish her in the least other than she is now. Dear Florence! How pleased Eva would have been!" he murmured.

"Robin," said Imogen, not many days after this, "do you know I cannot help praying and hoping that perhaps in time. No, I am afraid of vexing you by saying it."

"Do you mean Rex and Florence? Why should it vex me, my darling? Hope it—yes, indeed I do, with all my heart. And what's more, I *think* it. It is what Eva would have rejoiced at more than anything. She was so unselfish. How I wish you had known her, Imogen!"

But neither he nor his wife, nor anybody else, ever suspected that Imogen *had* known—and that she thanked God for it every day of her life—the girl whom others loved, and remembered by the name of Eveleen Lesley.

The End.

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