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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CARTOUCHE ***

Frances Peard

"Cartouche"

Chapter One.

Love Me, Love My Dog.

"Cartouche! Cartouche!"

The call came from a young Englishman, who, having just walked through the streets of Florence on his way from the station, now found himself before a small house which stood not far from the Cascine in an open space, pleasantly planted with trees, and within view of the Arno. The house itself was white, if so cold a colour may be taken to represent that mellow and golden effect which quickly enriches the plaster of Italy; and it was gay with green shutters and striped awnings, for it was yet early autumn, and the City of Flowers had not long cooled down from the extreme heats which make it unbearable in summer. There was still a hot and languid glow lying on the violet-tinted hills which on either side surround the plain; still the Lung' Arno was avoided, and people kept close under the shadows of the narrow streets; or, if they must needs cross the river, crossed it by the Ponte Vecchio, under the shelter of its quaint old shops.

The door of the house at which the young man had arrived was open, but his call having produced no effect, instead of entering he stood still and repeated it. "Cartouche!"

This time there was a dull thud on the ground to his right; a great black poodle had jumped from an upper window, and recovering himself in a moment, broke into the most extravagant demonstrations of welcome, leaping upon the new-comer, barking and rushing about with every hair flying out from his body. The young man, who was fair and curly-haired, and tall, though inclined to stoop, looked at the window and then at the dog, and gave a whistle of surprise.

"Let me advise you not to try that too often, my friend," he said seriously. "It is just as well for you that the house is not a trifle higher, as I presume you would not have taken the difference into your calculations. And a nice time your mistress must be having, if these are the ways in which you indulge."

The dog's answer was a vigorous bound, which almost upset the young man's balance; then rushing wildly round and round the open place under the plane trees, his black hair streaming in the wind, he suddenly pulled himself up and stood watching his friend, his head on one side, his small eyes gleaming from a dishevelled tangle, and his long tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"Yes," said the tall Englishman, still regarding him meditatively, "I understand what all that means, old fellow. You have a good supply of animal spirits, and a difficulty in working off the steam under present circumstances. I don't know that I feel as sympathetic as you have a right to expect, but, at any rate, I shall be able to do something for you, and if you could contrive to make over a little of what is really inconveniencing you, I have not the slightest objection to be troubled with it. Where is your mistress?"

As he spoke he turned towards the door and went in. The house seemed to have fallen by accident among all the great buildings of Florence: it had no porter, no staircase with flats going on and on; it had been built or altered by some Englishman, who had a fancy for a home that should be like England, although the beautiful Italian skies were overhead; and Jack Ibbetson, when he came out with his aunt, Miss Cartwright, to look for a house, fell upon this place, and did not rest until he got hold of it for her. Inside the door there were flowers; a few steps led into a passage which turned off at right angles, and then Ibbetson opened the door of a small salon, and walked through it towards the window, while his eye took in certain evidences that Cartouche had been holding high revel there to the detriment of cushions and covers.

"So you still go on the rampage, old fellow?" he said to the dog, who kept close to his heels in a state of suppressed excitement. "If I were you I would leave off this style of thing, I really would. It is nothing short of tyranny on your part. Hallo! what's up now?"

For with a wild swoop Cartouche pounced into a corner, dragged out a basket, rushed to the window, and in a moment more was careering round and round the little garden in which the proprietor had indulged his English tastes. It was an odd little garden, with a wall round it, and a poor pretence at English grass, but the wall had capers and pretty hanging things growing out of it, and lizards darting up and down; and the beauty of the garden lay in its great flowering shrubs, in the magnolias, just beginning to show scarlet flames of seed among their glossy leaves, in the bright green of an orange tree and the broad ribbed foliage of Japanese medlars. That some one was sitting there became evident in another moment, when there were uttered a series of appeals in a feminine voice—

"Cartouche, Cartouche! Oh, Cartouche, how can you! Come here, you naughty, naughty dog! I shall be obliged to beat you, you know I shall! Come, now, like a good dog. Cartouche, Cartouche, come here!"

The young Englishman, standing back at the window, smiled at the little scene, at the pretty soft little lady who had got up anxiously and left her work on the chair, at the dog's evident enjoyment, his pretence of remorse and abandonment, the slow wag of his tail as he waited for his mistress to approach, the swift rush with which he made his escape. At last, when he had drawn her to the limit of the garden, he suddenly dropped the basket, raced back to her chair, and seizing a loose tassel which she had been about to sew on to a cushion, pranced up to the young man with an air of infinite triumph. Miss Cartwright turned round and saw her nephew emerging.

"Jack, is it you?" she cried. And then she hurried towards him with both her kind hands outstretched. "My dear, dear boy, I can hardly believe it; this is delightful, this is why I have had no letter! Have you just come? Have you had nothing to eat? Angela shall send up something at once, and Winter shall go to Franconi's. My dear, it is so good to see you, and I was thinking of nothing but that naughty dog. What is that you are taking out of his mouth?"

"I'm afraid it's a tassel," said Jack gravely. "Shall I flog him?"

Miss Cartwright was one of those kind gentle people whose conscience and soft-heartedness are always falling foul of each other.

"Perhaps it does not so much matter," she said hurriedly; "it is only the same tassel which he has torn off so often before, that I daresay he fancies he has a sort of right to it."

"I'm very much afraid he is giving you no end of trouble," said Jack remorsefully.

"Oh, my dear, no! He is wonderfully good, and so affectionate that sometimes it quite brings the tears into my eyes. But of course he is young, and one can't expect him to understand everything at once, can one?"

"That is the old story, Aunt Mary," said Jack, smiling kindly; "I have got too much good out of the excuse myself to begrudge it to Cartouche."

But Miss Cartwright hardly heard his words; she was looking at him, her face full of that sweet warm happiness which often brightens lives which seem to us on-lookers grey and commonplace. What do we know, after all? The passionate thrills, the great tides of emotion, which we call happiness, are often more nearly allied to pain; true bliss creeps out from strange, unlooked-for crannies, from the unselfishness which has seemed to set it aside. Jack was struck and touched by the gladness in her face, by the peace of the little garden, its vines and its roses. He had a feeling as if it could not last, as if he himself were bringing in the element of unrest. He stopped his aunt when she was beginning to question him.

"You have not heard how Cartouche got at me."

"No—did he know your step? Oh, my dear," she said, pausing blankly.

"Well?"

"I have just remembered I had shut him into an upstairs room, and the key is in my pocket."

"It's quite safe, you need not feel for it," said Jack gravely. "The fact is, he jumped out of the window."

"Oh, but I hope, I do hope you are mistaken," said Miss Cartwright in great perturbation. "I have always felt so safe when we have got him upstairs; it really will be serious if this is no restraint. Because, even if the windows were closed"—she stopped and looked doubtfully at Cartouche, who presented an aspect of complete indifference.

"He would go through them—not a doubt of it."

"My dear boy, don't say such dreadful things! But then, what can we do? Never mind, I dare say he will not be naughty again," she went on, bringing her unlimited hopefulness to bear; "besides, it was owing to your coming so unexpectedly, and you have explained nothing as yet. I shall just go and see Winter, and tell her to get everything ready for you, and then I shall come back, and hear all that you have been doing."

Left to himself, Ibbetson sat down on a garden bench, and with his head sunk between his shoulders, his long legs stretched stiffly out, and his hands disposed of in his pockets, fell into a reverie, which, to judge from his looks, was not of an altogether agreeable nature. So absorbed by it was he, that Cartouche, tired of a short-lived goodness, went off to relieve his spirits by bullying the cat of the household, an animal which, having been always distinguished for a singularly placid disposition, was now rapidly acquiring the characteristics of a vixen, goaded thereto by a good-humoured but unceasing persecution. What with barks and spittings, there was noise enough to disturb a less

profound meditation, but when Miss Cartwright at length came hurrying out, her nephew kept the same attitude, and was unaware of her approach. Thinking that he was asleep, she stood looking at him with a tender wistfulness in her soft eyes; for now that his face was in repose she noticed a tired and grave expression which she fancied should not have been there. It was not a handsome face, for there was a greater squareness than is considered consistent with good looks, and the mouth was large. But his eyes were grey and honest, and all the features gave you a pleasant impression of openness and health which in itself was a strong attraction to less partial observers than his aunt. Nor was the partiality itself wonderful, when it was considered that she had acted as mother to Jack since the time when his own mother had died, a time so long ago that he was too small to know anything about it—or so they decided. When it happened, Miss Cartwright went to live with her brother-in-law, and to bring up Jack.

She did this—the more loyally and creditably that she and her brother-in-law never got on well together. It was not that they quarrelled, but that they had little in common. Sir John Ibbetson was a poor squire who farmed his own land, and never seemed to grow any the richer for it; perhaps the truth was, that being haunted by the impression that ill-luck dogged his footsteps, he could scarcely be induced to take any but a gloomy view of whatever concerned him. That Jack's early life was not coloured by such grim presentiments was owing to Miss Cartwright's persistent cheerfulness, which, while a perpetual trial to Sir John, made the home atmosphere healthy for the boy. Few people could have retained their sweet temper and interest in minor matters so thoroughly as she retained them, in spite of constant rebuffs; nor could she ever be talked into taking despairing views of Jack's juvenile naughtinesses, or into foreshadowing future disgrace from his inability or unwillingness to master the intricacies of the Latin grammar. But perhaps her best service both to father and son was in keeping well before the boy his father's actual affection, and thus preventing Sir John's over-anxiety from alienating his son, which might have been a not unnatural result. As it was, the lad grew up high-spirited and perhaps a little wilful, but generous in his impulses, and with a sweet temper which it was difficult to ruffle. He was universally liked at Harrow and Oxford, and, like other men, got both good and bad out of his popularity; but being too lazy for hard work, only scrambled through what had to be done, and grievously disappointed his father, although the latter had never professed to look forward to better things. It might have been owing to this disappointment that Sir John took a step which caused the most lively amazement to Jack, Miss Cartwright, his servants, and, in a lesser degree, to the whole circle of his acquaintances. He announced his engagement to a rich widow.

When the first astonishment had been got over, nobody had a word to say against it except Jack. He disliked it so vehemently as even to surprise his aunt, who, with all her knowledge of him, was unaware how tenderly he cherished the idea—for remembrance it could scarcely be called—of his lost mother, or how much he resented a step of his father's which seemed to prove her to be forgotten. However, though the sore remained, his nature was too sweet not to suffer it to be mollified, although he entirely refused to benefit by the substantial kindnesses which his stepmother—to her credit be it spoken—would willingly have heaped upon him. It seemed, indeed, as if the necessary spur had at last touched his life. He studied for the bar more closely than he had ever done before, was constant in his attendance at the courts, and in his letters to his aunt expressed such an eager desire for her briefs, that if her disposition had not been absolutely peaceful, she might have returned to England on purpose to seek for a lawsuit. As it was, she began to develop what seemed like a sanguinary thirst for crime, reading the police reports in her English papers with less horror at the wickedness there brought to light, than anxiety that something should turn up for Jack.

Sir John's marriage had taken place nearly a year ago, and Miss Cartwright, uprooted from what had been her home for a long series of years, had, partly from old associations, partly to please Jack, and partly because an old maiden friend was bent upon the scheme, determined to make Florence her home for a time. It was the last thing anyone expected from her, but those are just the things which people do. She and Miss Preston had moved to Siena for the summer, and now had come back to the pretty homelike little house on which they had fallen. Miss Preston was the part of the arrangement against which Jack protested in vain. She was tall, hook-nosed, commanding: she did not believe in him; she set her face against weaknesses of all kinds, and considered it her mission to protect Miss Cartwright. When people's worth takes this sort of disagreeable shape, it is astonishing how much more indignation it raises amongst their neighbours than falls to the share of real sinners; and perhaps this was the tie which kept these two—unlike as they were—together. Miss Cartwright, who looked up to her friend with all her heart, was really filled with a vague and tender pity which Miss Preston never knew. It was she who was the actual protector—smoothing down, explaining, thinking no evil, and making people ashamed of their own.

Then there was Cartouche. Jack had picked him up as a puppy in the South of France, and insisted upon his aunt taking charge of him.

“He will have plenty of room here to run about and get himself tamed down a little,” he explained, “whereas in London he would be miserable. You need not trouble yourself about him, he is clever enough to take care of himself and you into the bargain. If you don't really like him I can send him to my fathers, only it struck me he would be just what you want here; what do you say about it?”

He put the question, but would perhaps have been surprised had a third person pointed out how little doubt he felt about the answer. Miss Cartwright would have looked upon herself as a barbarian if she had refused any gift offered her by Jack, and immediately set herself to apply to Cartouche the same hopefulness which she had brought to bear upon her nephew's education. Miss Preston's wrath was great, but there was another power in the house—Winter, Miss Cartwright's maid, and Winter hated Miss Preston. Opposition, therefore, carried Winter to the side of Cartouche, and opposition forms as strong a bond as anything else.

Chapter Two.

An Agreement.

Jack's slumbers were far too sacred in the eyes of his aunt for her to think of disturbing them; she was preparing to retreat carefully, when he looked up and began to laugh.

"I was not asleep, I give you my word."

"Oh, well, my dear," she said, happy again now that the shade on his face was gone, "I am sure it would not have been wonderful if you had dozed off after your journey, though I really don't know where you have dropped from; and I shall be quite glad to sit down and have a long talk, for you know there is a great deal to be told."

"Well, yes, I suppose there is."

But he did not seem inclined to begin, though Miss Cartwright looked wistfully at him. She said presently, with rather a quavering voice, "There is no bad news?"

Just enough of a pause followed her question to make her heart sink, then he said quickly—

"Certainly not. What has come to you, Aunt Mary? You never used to indulge in these sort of fancies. If Cartouche makes you nervous I shall take him away. But I know what it is, Miss Preston has been scolding you for all the wickedness of the world. Even in Florence that woman is as bad as three fogs and an east wind."

And he rattled on with more nonsense of the sort, but it was so evident that he was making talk to avoid some subject closer to each of them, that Miss Cartwright almost grew vexed.

"My dear," she said, "do leave poor Miss Preston alone."

"She won't leave you alone, that is what I complain of. Come now, hasn't she got some unhappy clergyman of whom she falls foul?"

"Well, she did say she thought the new chaplain had too much self-possession for so young a man, and I said I did not think he was so very self-possessed, because when he makes a mistake he always coughs, which obliges one to notice it the more."

"Worse and worse," said Jack gravely; "she's making you as severe as she is herself."

"My dear, you don't really think I was unkind? I am sure I only thought what I could say for the poor young man, she seemed so annoyed about it. You don't really mean it, you are only laughing, and after all there is so much to say."

He jumped up suddenly, and walked a few steps away from his chair. The pretty quiet little garden was full of light and colour and keenly-edged shade; the beautiful glossy leaves stood up against the blue sky. Over the wall they could see other houses and other trees, and catch here and there a little glimpse of the opposite hill with its occasional cypresses. The great bell of the Duomo was clanging, all the glory of the day changing softly into another glory, deeper and more mysterious. Was it of all this of which Jack was thinking? Miss Cartwright followed him and laid her hand gently on his arm.

"My dear boy!" she said imploringly.

He looked round at once and laughed at her pleading face.

"Well, it's all—right, if that's what you want to know."

"You—"

"I'm engaged, yes, hard and fast. Why," he said, with a quick anxiety in his voice, "what's the matter? Sit down, sit down," he went on, dragging over a chair, and putting her into it very tenderly, for the delicate colour had quite faded out of her face. But she smiled at him the next moment.

"It is very silly of me, but I have been thinking so much about it; and somehow I fancied from your manner that things were not going straight, and I was foolishly anxious."

"You shouldn't care so much about me," said the young man with real remorse; "nobody else in the world would trouble themselves as you do. I should have told you directly, if it had entered my head that you were taking it to heart like this. Let me go and get you a glass of water or sal-volatile or something, you are as shaky as possible."

But Miss Cartwright sat up cheerfully.

"It is nothing at all, Jack; I am quite well again, and your news is the best thing for me, if I really wanted anything. Is it all settled?"

"Yes," he said with a little restraint again, and pulling a magnolia leaf as he spoke. "Phillis is at Bologna with the Leytons, we all came out together. Yes, it is true; I expected it to astonish you."

"Don't tell me anything more for a minute or two," said his aunt gently, putting up her hands; "it is one thing on another. Phillis at Bologna? I don't quite understand."

"But you like the news, don't you?" said Jack, turning suddenly on her.

"Like it! how could I fail? Such a good girl, and all that money, and your uncle wishing it so much. Nothing could be so desirable, only, my dear boy—"

"What?" sharply.

"Sometimes you get odd touches of perversity, and the very fact of a thing being quite unexceptional sets you against it. I remember it so well when you were a boy. It would have been a sad misfortune in this case, though, of course, it is too momentous a matter for me to have said much about it beforehand. I suppose that is the reason you did not know how anxious I felt, but I assure you I have scarcely thought of anything else. And Phillis is at Bologna! When do they come on?"

"To-morrow—Saturday. I don't exactly remember. I suppose you know the terms of the agreement?" said Jack, looking at her.

"My dear!"

"Well, it is an agreement," he said perversely; "what else would you call it? I, Peter Thornton, of Hetherton Grange, in the county of Surrey, Esquire, do hereby declare you, John Francis Ibbetson, barrister—how shall I put the London lodgings, second floor, to best advantage?—to be the heir of all my estates and properties—excluding, let us hope, his gout and his temper—on condition that you take as your wife my step-niece, Mary Phillis Grey, to have and to hold with the timber, freeholds, messuages, and other etceteras of the said estate. If that is not an agreement, I don't know the meaning of the word."

Miss Cartwright, leaning forward, tried to look into her nephew's face.

"My dear," she said slowly, "of course you are in joke, but I don't think I like to hear you talk in such a way. I should be miserable if I did not feel sure you were quite happy."

Jack turned round and took her soft hand very kindly in his own.

"Well, then, don't be miserable," he said lightly; "why, you know it stands to reason that every one must be perfectly happy directly he or she is engaged to be married. What shall I do to prove my load of bliss?"

But she shook her head.

"I sometimes fancy it would be better if money were not mixed up with marriages at all. I don't think it was so much thought about in old days."

"It is a stronger necessity now."

"Your father would willingly increase your allowance."

"I don't choose to live on that woman's fortune. Aunt Mary, I thought you would be the first to congratulate me on the splendour of my prospects!"

"My dear, and so I do," she said quickly, laying her hand on his shoulder; "I do, with all my heart. If I ask these questions it is only that I care so very, very much, that I was afraid, Jack, whether you might have rushed into this without quite thinking enough beforehand. But I dare say that was only my foolish fancy. Tell me one thing: if you had not married Phillis would your uncle have left the estates to her?"

"Not he," said the young man, flinging a stone into the bushes where Cartouche was still annoying the cat. "He told me in so many words, that unless I married her she would be penniless, and the money would go to some tenth cousin or so."

"I hope the poor girl did not know this," said Miss Cartwright uneasily.

"He is not the man to keep that sort of pressure to himself."

"Jack, you liked her before there was any talk of these estates?"

"Of course I did."

He spoke impatiently, as if the subject were already exhausted, whereas Miss Cartwright, longing for fuller details, felt as if it were only beginning.

"I wish I had known Phillis before," she said sighing, and at the sigh the young fellow's heart reproached him again.

"She said the same," he said, turning towards her and speaking gravely; "I fancy you'll get on with her—everybody doesn't, you know. She's—but there's no good in attempting to describe her, I was never good at that sort of thing; the only thing I could say about you was that you weren't tall or black."

Miss Cartwright brightened. She had a warm corner ready in her kind heart for the girl who was to be Jack's wife; no jealousy made the prospect bitter, she was already planning, welcoming, sympathising. Jack himself jumped up; he said he would go to the hotel where he was putting up and come back to dinner. It was a concession, for he would encounter Miss Preston, but he had not the heart to disappoint his aunt that first evening, and afterwards he acknowledged that it had not been so bad. The window was open, the moon was sailing through blue, profound skies, her light fell like silver on the glossy leaves, and there was a sort of happy hum in the air, distant talk and gay laughter. Miss Preston fell asleep, Jack and his aunt sat near the window, sometimes silent, sometimes chatting. As for Cartouche, he pleased himself in his own way, rushing every now and then into the garden in pursuit of a foe who he was quite conscious did not exist, and returning with the proud air of one who has discomfited his enemy.

As Ibbetson strolled home that night he was thinking of many things, half against the grain, as it were, for he would willingly have put them aside. There were enough outer things to interest him if once he could have got them uppermost, but we cannot do that always, try as we will. The Arno was running along, bright with the moonshine, lights were twinkling across the bridges, clambering up the hill opposite; black shadows stood out strongly, and as you looked, all sorts of strange memories seemed to rush towards you. But they took no real hold on Jack, who was only conscious of them in a vague, dreamy way. The people were strolling in all directions, enjoying the evening, as they do in Italy, chatting, whispering, half-a-dozen, perhaps, linked together, taking the whole breadth of the pathway, or coming mysteriously out of the dark shadowy streets. In front of the Ognissanti a little lamp threw its dim radiance upon the beautiful blue and white Luca della Robbia over the door; the grave and sweet figures in their perpetual adoration seemed nearer and yet more delicate than by day. Jack noted this as he passed, but all the while it was not really Florence in which he was living, but a more homely and pastoral country. He was provoked with himself; he had not wanted to go over the old ground; he had said to himself a dozen times, that having taken a certain step, there was no need for mentally retracing it.

Only something seemed always to be carrying him back.

Would he have had it different? He said No, resolutely, when the question took so keen a shape. He had always felt a quiet liking for Phillis Grey, and it moved him deeply when he heard Mr Thornton's rough declaration that if he, Jack, did not marry her she would be left with no more than a miserable pittance. His uncle, after all, showed some knowledge of the character of the man with whom he had to deal, for the personal advantages did not really affect Jack half so much, although he took pains to assure himself that they did. He used to go over them to himself with a half-comic, half-serious air of business, as if he were quite convinced of their value—independence, position, idleness—the worst of it was that, try as he would, he found each carrying a sort of contradiction with it, which prevented him from enjoying it comfortably. But poor Phillis, how could she bear the loss of everything? Why should he not marry her? He liked no one better, or so well. It was the course which gave the least trouble to everyone. It offered palpable good, and there was no drawback on which he could exactly lay his finger. Jack Ibbetson's mind wandered away, up and down, this way and that, but all the time it was tending slowly in one direction, so that on the evening of the day when his uncle had made his announcement, a walk round the shrubberies and a couple of cigars brought him to the window where Phillis was sitting in her white dress, and when he had asked her to come out, it was not difficult, especially on that quiet tender evening, to ask her to marry him. It was not difficult, it was almost pleasant. There was a tremulous happiness in the girl's answer, and yet all the time Jack was conscious, and hating the consciousness, of what he was saving her from. If it had not been for that, he thought—but there it was, and, after all, was it not one motive?

Before this happened it had been decided that Phillis should go abroad with some friends, and Peter Thornton would have no change. His wife wanted the wedding to have been from Hetherton, but he scouted the idea so fiercely that no one dared to repeat it. Phillis should go, and Jack could go too. As for the marriage, he did not care where it took place, so long as they did not lose any time about it, and then if they wanted to honeymoon it in Italy they would be on the spot. And having announced his wishes, he took refuge in such a violent fit of the gout, that contradiction became an actual impossibility, and the odd little party started. It seemed more unreal to Jack every day as they came flying on. He had been rather unkind about the journey. Mrs Leyton felt attractions in Paris. Captain Leyton, who went about with a very elaborate sketching apparatus which provided against rain, sun, and all possible evils of flood or field, and contained a larger supply of paints than could be used in a lifetime, was desirous to turn aside into the country of the Italian lakes, but Jack was obstinately determined to go directly to Florence, and somehow carried his day so far as to get them all to Bologna. There he graciously permitted them to rest; and indeed Ward, the lady's maid, was in a state of rebellion, while Mrs Leyton, who was good-natured but sometimes plaintive, went about declaring that having come abroad as much for society as anything else, it was a little hard to be whirled through the country at a rate which prevented your seeing anyone but the horrid people to be met with in the trains.

As for Phillis—but Phillis must wait. Jack was very kind and polite to her, and sometimes amused by her inexperience. He would have been surprised beyond measure if any objection to his plans had come from her.

Chapter Three.

Cartouche Kills a Turkey.

Florence had gone back to summer the next day. The heat was intense, the streets were deserted, the very blue of the sky seemed to burn, all the poor green things to have the life drawn out of them by the scorching sun. There was a little loggia at Miss Cartwright's Casa Giulia, where Jack and his aunt could have managed to keep themselves cool if Miss Preston would have permitted it, but she routed them out more than once. Heat or no heat she had no compassion for idleness, and she came tramping up the stairs with bundles of book labels for the Church library, with horrible knitted garments which she had dragged from wintry receptacles, with all kinds of out-of-season duties which were to rouse Miss Cartwright. She was one of those people whose presence is a perpetual rebuke; it is impossible to fulfil their requirements, you feel yourself making feeble excuses, and going down, down, down, lower and lower in your own opinion and in theirs.

"Why do you let her tyrannise over you?" said Jack indignantly. It is to be feared that he called her an old cat, but all the same he was himself conscious of this uncomfortable sinking in her presence.

"She does not always do things in the pleasantest manner," said Miss Cartwright gently, "but she is so conscientious and so useful that it is impossible not to admire her. There is a great deal of misery in Florence, and I am sure I often feel how selfish and idle it must seem to her when I sit in this pretty loggia out of the reach of it all, while she is always toiling and planning. Indeed, Jack, if you only knew half she did, you would appreciate her better."

"Heaven forbid!" said the young man fervently.

Even Cartouche, who had made his way up to the loggia, was too sleepy to do anything but snap at persevering flies; the others sat lazily pretending to read or work; every now and then Miss Cartwright asked questions about Phillis; it was all dreamy and quiet. From where they sat they could see other loggias—people at their windows, women coming out on flat shady roofs to water their plants, odd little nests of chimneys like honeycombs, pigeon-holes, mysterious gratings, a curious kind of roof-life of which they made part and which had its interests. In those sunny countries it takes little to make a picture; here the business is elaborate, but there sun and sky do so much that you want little more—a scarlet flower in a pot, a clambering vine, and the effect is given. Jack lay back idly wondering at the beauty of an old house wall opposite on which the sun poured in golden splendour, and the rich shadows of the eaves marked bold outlines against the sky, when Miss Preston's voice behind made him start.

"If you are busy I am sorry to interrupt you, Mary," she began, with a searching glance at Miss Cartwright, who was hastily settling her cap, and trying to look as if she had not been asleep, "but it is necessary that some one should take back the books to the library this afternoon."

"Oh, I think not," said Miss Cartwright nervously; "they may really wait until to-morrow, the heat is too intolerable for anything not absolutely necessary to be done."

"I consider this necessary. The books were promised to Vieusseux for to-day."

Miss Preston spoke in her uncompromising tone, the two culprits looked at each other and fidgeted. Some old nursery story began to run in Jack's head of naughty children, severe fairies, impossible tasks, heaps of shining silks which had to be sorted. Miss Cartwright made another feeble effort.

"I could not ask Winter to go out until it is cooler, but then she might take them."

"I shall take them myself," said Miss Preston decidedly. "I have no desire to delegate duties. I have only come to know whether you wish to try the candles at Lanzi's? In that case, I will call there."

When she had gone, Jack jumped up in a fume.

"The woman is unendurable," he said. "She will be up here again in a moment with some other horrible propositions. I can't stand any more of them. Look here, Aunt Mary, I will take Cartouche back to the hotel, and in an hour or so it will have cooled down enough to give him a run. You need not think about dinner, I shall get it at Dony's, or somewhere, and look in here again lateish in the evening. If she is human she will be asleep then, after all this hunting her fellow-creatures."

Ibbetson could not stay long at the hotel, where the air was heavy with heat. He made his way through the shady alleys of the Cascine; the people were collecting, the carriages drawn up, gay ladies in all sorts of bright and delicate colours, gentlemen wearing oddly-shaped hats and conspicuous gloves; a gay brilliant scene enough, but not one which at that moment had any attractions for Jack. He had in his pocket a letter from Phillis—the first. It was written with some care and restraint, as he noticed with a sigh which yet he could not have explained. They would leave Bologna for Florence on Saturday—this was Thursday. The heat was terrific, the arcades were a great comfort, the hotel was excellent, the Etruscan remains were most interesting. The little letter told everything there was to say—mentioned Mrs Leyton's health, Captain Leyton's sketches—yet Jack was dissatisfied with it, and vexed at his own dissatisfaction. The old vein of thought kept recurring; it was not Tuscany in which he was walking, Tuscany with its golden lights, its wealth of colour, its grapes clambering from tree to tree, but more prosaic Surrey where carts were drawing their heavy harvest loads along the roads, and Hetherington lay low amidst its masses of dark trees. The picture caused him a little thrill of revulsion, and then a sharper thrill of self-reproach.

Jack knew nothing of the road along which he was plodding; indeed, it was not always a road, he went here and there where it seemed shady and out of the dust, along the tall canes by the side of the Arno, sometimes through a vineyard, where the contadini were gathering the beautiful fruit with their sickles. At last he found himself climbing a hill, where the road was white, steep, and stony, and to his left was one of those walls which you may yet see built round the old villas, sloping inwards, as if originally set up for defence. Presently he came, of course, to the little niche high up in the wall, where, behind a grating, were rudely coloured figures of the Madonna and Child, and an earthenware pot in which some scarlet lilies were flaming. Somehow such little tributes are more touching than the most elaborate decorations; Ibbetson found himself wondering who had placed them there, as he went toiling up his hill. The next moment he reached the entrance of the villa; iron gates standing open led into a rather untidy looking drive, arched over by tall trees of paradise and paulownias; and the shade of their broad leaves was so attractive a contrast to the dusty road, that he stood and looked in for a few minutes. There was an unreasonable attraction to him about the place. He smiled at himself when it struck him, and whistling to Cartouche, who had plunged among the trees, prepared to continue his tramp up the stony hill.

But Cartouche was not forthcoming. On the contrary, certain sounds were to be heard implying that he had met with a very congenial amusement within—a rustling among bushes, short sharp yelps, terrified gobblings, flutterings, then a girl's cry. Jack whistled and called in vain, finally ran along the drive and found himself in a broad space before the villa, where two men armed with sticks were pursuing Cartouche, three or four young turkeys were flying helplessly about, and a girl stood holding another, apparently dead, in her hands. The instant she saw Ibbetson she stamped her foot, and cried out passionately in Italian—

"Take away that wicked, villainous dog, do you hear!"

Jack was struck dumb, not at the command, but at the face which was turned towards him. He had never in his life seen so beautiful a creature. The large brown eyes flashed reproachfully through their tears, the rounded and glowing cheek might have belonged to a Hebe, the indignant curl of the short upper lip only showed more strongly

the beauty of its curves. She stood facing him, one hand holding the dead bird, the other pointing inexorably at Cartouche, who, aware of his misdeeds, skilfully avoided a blow aimed by one of the gardeners, and fled behind his master. Then her face changed slightly, and she looked down at the bird.

"You are not Italian," she said still vehemently, but in English so pure as to excite the young man's wonder more keenly, "and perhaps you did not know about it; but your dog should not come in and kill our turkeys. See, it is quite dead," she added, holding it out; "and they were such dear little things, my sister and I had just brought them in a basket from the *podere* to show my mother."

"I am very sorry, very sorry indeed," said Ibbetson with great earnestness, "and very much ashamed that I did not keep a better look out."

"If you were only passing by in the road, of course you could not help it," said the girl, looking at him gravely; "but perhaps you will try to prevent his doing it again. I should be very much obliged if you would, for I cannot bear to see things hurt."

"I will certainly flog him."

There was a pause, and she took another survey, but this time it was of Cartouche, whom his master was holding.

"He does not seem a very fierce dog?" she said inquiringly.

"Quite the reverse," said Ibbetson smiling. "He is little more than a puppy, and this mischief is only play, but still it is necessary he should be taught what he is not to do."

Jack was looking very determined; Cartouche had the air of a victim. The girl glanced at the turkey which she still held, and again at the dog.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, as if rather ashamed of herself, "you will not beat him? The turkey is dead, and I think he understands he is not to do it again. Indeed, Antonio shall carry the rest back to the farm. You will not beat him?"

"You have a right to say what shall be done."

"Then I say that," she said, brightening and clapping her hands. "Here is my sister, I must tell her about it."

She ran to meet a younger girl who came down the steps of a terrace. Ibbetson stood where she had left him, feeling a little awkward, it must be confessed, and not knowing whether he was to go or stay, or into what strange place he had fallen. Were these people English or Italian? The girl's type of beauty was Italian, but the English she spoke bore no trace of being acquired. The villa was square, large, and apparently out of repair; there was a tower which looked older than the rest of the building, and a handsome high-arched entrance. Plants were arranged in pyramids round vases or statues; there were lemon trees in great tubs, tiny oranges hanging between the leaves, tube roses scenting the air, glossy acanthuses. In the centre of the broad space in front of the house, where Jack was standing, was a pond with a fountain in its midst, which you might reach from the villa through a covered way matted over with banksia roses, and having seats at intervals under the cool shade. He had just time to notice all this when the two girls turned and joined him.

"This is my sister," said his first acquaintance with a pretty little gesture of introduction, "but we do not know your name, or anything about you, except that you are English."

"My name is Ibbetson, John Ibbetson," said the young man laughing, and yet reddening slightly.

"You are quite right in supposing that I am English, but will you pardon me if I ask whether you can possibly be my country people?"

"I am," said the younger girl shyly, and her sister turned upon her a reproachful look.

"And I, too," she said quickly. "What makes you doubt it? English people often live abroad, as you must know. We are called Masters, my mother is in the house, and you will come in to see her, of course."

Jack muttered something about his dress and the dust, but the girl shook her head imperatively.

"That does not matter in the least. We live here alone and see nobody, that is why I wish you to go in; I know it is not good for mamma to be so solitary, and have no one but us. Kitty and I often talk about it, but what can we do? There are only the gardeners, and old Andrea, the cook, and the people at the farm, and she does not care about the farm. We brought the turkeys back to-day just for a little amusement."

"And I was so unfortunate as to be the cause of putting an end to it."

"Yes," said the girl gravely, "but never mind. Your coming to see her will be better, perhaps. This way, please."

Ibbetson followed, half amused and half piqued. It was quite evident that he was only looked upon as a new and possible means of entertainment where other means were wanting, and yet the girl's manner was so simple and frank that it was impossible to feel offended. And the brightness, the unconventionality of the scene charmed him. The air was full of wonderful gleaming lights, of sweet scents. Every line of the old villa seemed in harmony with the rich colouring about it; so were the sisters in their cool white dresses. It was all strange and yet familiar, and he followed, wondering what new features would presently disclose themselves, whether it was to end in a fairy tale or plainest English prose. Cartouche, fortunately still a little subdued by the consciousness of misdoing, was tied into a thicket of scarlet geraniums by the side of the entrance, then Kitty pushed the heavy door, and passing through a

small marble-paved hall, opened another door leading into an immense salon, perhaps fifty feet long. To English eyes it looked but barely furnished, but it was cool and well shaded; two large windows opened on a terrace, and there, on a white marble table, under the shade of a magnificent paulownia tree, was spread the dinner service. It was like a feast in Boccaccio, Jack thought, after the stuffy table-d'hôtes and the stuffier dining-room at Hetherton—stands of bright flowers, piles of rosy peaches, grapes full of lustrous colour, plums, figs heaped on their dishes, and two or three green melons lying in the midst of this gay confusion of colour.

"It is nearly seven o'clock, I see," said the elder girl, glancing carelessly at it. "Kitty, tell Pasquale to set another place; of course you will dine with us," she added, turning to the young Englishman, "but please to come to the breakfast-room, mamma is sure to be there."

As she spoke she opened a door which led into another and smaller salon, and from this they went through another. Both had inlaid floors and marble tables; in one a couple of marble statues stood looking sadly and reproachfully, so Jack fancied, at the girl who went quickly by without so much as glancing towards them, her beautiful face eager, her cheeks glowing. There were no statues in the second room, only black negro boys holding flower-stands; but the stands were empty, and evidently the rooms were uninhabited, and even on this day a little dreary. It was different with the little room to which they led; there all the available furniture had been gathered. It was not very handsome, but a pretty homelike air hung about everything. A glass door opened on steps which went down to a gay little flower-garden, and were shaded by a weeping willow, while from some unseen source there came a pleasant refreshing sound of bubbling water. In a low chair near the window sat a lady who had probably been asleep, from the bewildered air with which she looked up, and Jack's companion evidently thought so too, for she gave a little impatient pat upon her shoulder.

"Wake up, mamma, we have got something quite new for you to-day," she began in the tone in which one would offer a toy to a spoiled child. "Here is an English gentleman who is going to dine with us. I dare say you have just come from England, and know about things?" she continued, addressing him.

Jack felt an irresistible inclination to laugh, and yet there was something in the little scene which touched him. He had been taken possession of without much freedom of action being permitted him, and now was expected to play off his tunes like a wound-up barrel organ. But it was impossible not to see that the girl was free from any thought of self, and as she made this last appeal the wistfulness in the beautiful brown eyes went to his heart. He was going to speak, but she interrupted him.

"Wait a moment," she said quite gravely, "I had forgotten. This is Mr Ibbetson, mamma. Mr Ibbetson—Mrs Masters."

Her mother put out her hand languidly.

"Beatrice is original in her introductions, but she knows that anyone who can tell me about my own country is welcome at Villa Carlina," she said.

They fell into chat quite easily, indeed everything about the house seemed free from formality or stiffness, Ibbetson thought. Mrs Masters was a largely built, fair woman, slow in movement; generally her face looked placid, but sometimes a startled expression crossed it which gave a sudden sharpness to the lines on her forehead. She dressed rather untidily, and with an evident leaning towards bright colours; her voice went on in a pleasant plaintive ripple, and there was no labour in the conversation. Bice took no part in it. She had drawn a low chair to the head of the steps, and sat leaning forward, her elbow on her knee, her chin resting on her hand, all the delicate lines of her white dress falling in graceful folds. Jack thought, as he looked, that a sculptor could not have found a more perfect attitude, or a more exquisitely moulded head, thrown out as it was by the background of cool green outside. Who was she? How came she by an English name, and yet the highest type of Italian beauty? The other girl came in, and he could see that she was three or four years younger; she was so slender as to be thin and almost angular, and bore not the least resemblance to either Bice or her mother.

"Yes, it is pretty here," the mother was saying, "especially just now in the vintage time. But it becomes very monotonous; the days go by one after the other, all alike, and all dull. There are no neighbours, or hardly any. The Moronis come sometimes, young Giovanni brings his guitar, and the girls sit out there on the steps and sing. Yes, that is pretty, too, but still one tires, and in the winter of course it is a hundred times worse. I do envy the people in Florence, who have theatres and the Cascine always to fall back upon. For myself it does not matter; but you will understand that it is a trial to see these children growing up with none of the advantages of other girls—I am afraid very unlike others."

She looked at Ibbetson for sympathy, but what could he say? It was in this very unlikeness that it seemed to him the charm lay, and yet he was sure this was not a woman to understand it. Bice had clasped her hands round her knee, and was staring out of the window frowning.

"Don't talk about Florence, mamma," she said impatiently. "Everybody knows what Florence is; Kitty and I would not live there for anything in the world. Is it any good for people to drive about in their best clothes and look at one another? But we are English, you know; please tell us about England," she went on, addressing Ibbetson, "or stay—there is the dinner bell, come to dinner; I will meet you on the terrace, and bring your dog, for he must have something to eat, though he did kill my poor little turkey."

To Jack that dinner was unlike all others; he half expected to awake from a dream of delicious air, of sweet scents, and the gorgeous fruits with which the table was piled. The little party sat on two sides of it; Beatrice, opposite, looked at him with grave questioning eyes; Kitty was shy and did not say much; but Mrs Masters' talk rippled on without more break than a little accompaniment of sighs. Old Andrea, the fat cook, brought up one of the dishes himself in order that he might see the English signore. He stood with his hands behind him, smiling and gossiping in a full rich voice about the news of the little town from which he fetched the letters every day. Afterwards they went

back to the morning room. Crimson cushions had been laid on the steps; Mrs Masters buried herself in an arm-chair at the top, the others sat about on the cushions. The glow of the setting sun still lingered in the clear sky; there were faint sounds of rustling leaves, of dropping water, the cry of *grilli*, the soft patter of naked feet as the gardeners ran about, watering.

"We should have no flowers otherwise," explained Kitty; "the lemon trees alone require it every night. They will go on until ten o'clock."

"I am looking out for fire-flies," said Jack.

"Oh, you are much too late; you will not see them after June. They come to light the corn to grow, and every night as the clock strikes twelve they creep up the stems of the trees and go to sleep."

It was all possible, Jack felt, in this land of enchantment. Presently, without any prelude, the two girls began to sing a wild sweet stornello. The voices were not very strong, but they were like one; they went on rising, falling, answering back again, dying away at last into the other sounds. Cartouche came rushing along; Jack got up and shook himself.

"Must you go? We often sit out here until very late," said Mrs Masters, rousing herself from a nap. "But you will come again?"

"Will you come to-morrow? We are going on a fig-eating expedition with the Moronis. We shall start at about four," said Bice, "and go to their farm."

"I will be here without fail," said the young man eagerly. He went away into the cool dusky shadows in a sort of bewilderment; there had been something so unlooked-for and novel in this little episode, that it impressed him more than a hundred more important things. The questions he had half forgotten came forward again. Who were they? What had brought them there?

"Buona notte, *signore*."

It was old Andrea the cook, who was standing smoking a cigar at the entrance gate, and probably on the look-out for a little gossip.

"A fine vintage this year. The *signore* has without doubt seen our vintage? No? Is it possible? Then he will do so this September. The *padrona's* grapes will be brought to be weighed next week; the *signorine* will take the *signore* to see them cut. Eh, eh, the *signorina* Beatrice can tell him everything. See here, she has a head as good as my own, though I say it. It is wonderful, a young girl like that, whom I have nursed on my knee many and many a time. Sometimes, when I hear her giving her orders, I stare, I cannot believe it. But then she is one of us, which explains it," added the old man with pride.

"Do you mean that she is not English?" asked Jack, interested in this confirmation of the ideas which had been floating about in his head since the first moment of seeing Bice.

Old Andrea shook his head vehemently.

"No, no, no," he said, "not the *signorina*. Her father was a Capponi; she is a Capponi, anyone can see that who looks in her eyes, if the *signore* will excuse me for saying so. She is a Capponi all over."

"But she told me she was English," said Jack, amused at the old man's indignation.

"She has whims, though she is so clever," said Andrea testily. "Most of the clever ones have. Her mother is English, if you will—what of that? And possibly the *padrone* did not treat her over well—who knows? He was a man who liked his own way, and perhaps did not much care how he got it. *Altro!* The *signore* knows that men are not all made in the same fashion, and the Capponi were used to being masters. At any rate, he is dead."

"And his wife?"

"*Si, signore*, as you see. She married again, before the stone that covers his grave up at San Miniato had time to lose its whiteness. I go there sometimes. There are not many others that remember. But as I was saying, the *signora* married quickly, and this time it was to a stranger—an Englishman—with two children."

"Two?"

"Two. There is a young man in some country of strangers, very probably it is England, and the *signore* has perhaps brought news of him? No? Ah, then he will see him on his return. That will delight the *signorina*, for she has given her heart to these newcomers. But for all that she cannot help being a Capponi, and no one can mistake her. Such a *padrona* as she makes! Such a head, such a head! Only ask them at the *podere* what it is like. The *signore* goes to Florence?"

"Yes," said Jack, who had been lighting his cigar. "I suppose there is no shorter road than down this hill?"

"If the *signore* can keep in his dog he can branch off through the vineyards to the left. I will show him the path in a moment, and it will be much quicker."

Andrea, delighted at this chance of a gossip, talked on as they went down the hill. It was chiefly loyal, admiring homage to the *signorina* which filled his mind, and Ibbetson was interested in the ideas he gathered of a homely and simple life, unlike that of which he was accustomed to think. When he parted from Andrea, it seemed to him as if he had known Bice for months instead of hours; a curious charm already hovered about her, and the remembrance of

the wistful looks which sometimes crossed her face like a contradiction. He left the old man standing in the road, and turned off into the steep and stony track which had been pointed out to him as his path. No one was visible when he got among the vines, but following Andrea's advice, he kept the unwilling Cartouche close by his side, and walked quickly, for it was growing late, though a bright moon made the blue sky clear. The air was light and fresh. A few olive trees, twisted and gnarled, bordered the path, their grey leaves catching the light like silver; then the Arno came into sight flooded with radiance; presently the twinkling lights of Florence gleamed out from dark masses of building, and cupola, and tower, and one larger blot which marked the Duomo of Our Lady of Flowers. All over the plain these lights glittered, faintly bright, here far apart, here tremulously disclosing themselves to the eye, as shyly as the stars of heaven itself. When Ibbetson reached the city streets he felt as if he had left enchantment behind him. The thoughts which had troubled him the evening before, now did not once intrude. Hetherton might never have been, and the charm of Italy was at work.

Chapter Four.

The Farm on the Hill.

Most people are acquainted with the sensation of being caught in a sudden and unexpected manner in some little eddy of society or circumstance, and how they are swept away before they know where they are. But if it is odd and startling to ourselves, it is much more so to those who are untouched by the currents; and when, at the appointed time on the next day, Ibbetson went off to Villa Carlina, he left Miss Cartwright a little perplexed at what he had told her, and at his newly-awakened interest.

To himself the villa, when it came in sight, seemed full of pleasant and friendly expectations. He heard sounds before he saw where they came from; then Cartouche boldly plunged under the banksia arches, and there was a little cry of dismay, laughter, children's voices. "This way," some one called out, and when he reached them he found a gay little company sitting under the green shade, and was welcomed without formality.

"Now we are all here, we will start directly," said Bice. "Come, little children!"

But the children were in a state of ecstatic delight over Cartouche's amazement at the hundreds of gold fish which came crowding to the edge of the pond. He barked and snapped, snapped and barked in vain, and at last, in a frantic attempt to reach them, tumbled headlong into the pond, out of which he scrambled with his enthusiasm a little checked.

Mrs Masters was not going; the walk, she said, was quite beyond her strength, and they left her strolling back to the house, where she gave them the hope she might employ herself in writing some letters which had long been waiting. The others set off merrily. There was Giovanni Moroni, a youth of two or three-and-twenty, dark, bright-eyed, with cropped hair, and a frank pleasant smile. It was to his *podere*, high up the hill, that they were bound. There was also his sister, the Contessa, and her husband, who was grey-headed and fierce. The children were theirs; they came from Genoa, and were wild with delight at the country life and their escape from a dark old palace. Kitty and Cartouche speedily became their victims. Bice was kind, but, this afternoon at least, a little graver than the others, for many thoughts were rushing through her head as they went clambering and laughing up the hill.

That little outline which old Andrea had given to Jack told as much of her story as there was, to all appearance, to tell. But to her own thinking a great deal remained unknown—problems, possibilities, were sweeping through the air, and troubling her with a hundred perplexing doubts and shadows, which it was left to her unaided to solve or to disperse—to her, little more than a child, as she was! Everything was simple and a little dull to Mrs Masters. She had gone through such ill-usage and insult as would have seared most women's lives; and when it was all over, feathered out again with no more result than a mild assurance that from that time forward she had a right to whatever comfortable compensation she could get out of existence. Bice's passionate little soul reached the same conviction through quite another road, through all sorts of fiery impulses, horror at her father's cruelty, contempt, devotion, flinging of herself into the breach, heedless of anything she might have to suffer for her championship. So sad a warfare was it for a child to go through, that it was a wonder so much that was good and noble had survived it. She had always constituted herself her mother's protector, and now that her father was dead she had a sort of odd notion that it was she who had to make up to her for the sufferings she had gone through. She was ready to accept Mr Masters, anything that could help them to forget the old life. She was glad that her mother bore another name, and insisted upon sharing it herself against all law and right, and the equally persistent obstinacy of old Andrea. It was this which brought a sudden flame of anger into her cheeks that very afternoon, as they climbed along a steep stony track, on one side shaded by hawthorn bushes, on the other falling away into fields, a valley, and a little stream.

"One might be in England," Ibbetson said, standing still to look round.

"Is it so like?" asked Bice eagerly. "Kitty never told me that it was. I shall come here often."

"You have a great fancy for England, and yet you might be content with your own country," said Jack smiling.

"England is my country," she said, and it was then the red began to deepen in her cheeks.

"But you are a Capponi?"

She stopped and faced him, her eyes flashing, her whole figure quivering.

"Who told you so?" she cried angrily. "It was that old Andrea, I am certain. I will not have it. I am not Capponi any longer. I am English, and English only."

She kept away from him for some time after this outburst, though he tried more than once to make his peace. It was only after he had pointedly called her by her mother's name that she relented and became friendly again.

The *podere* lay some way up the hill which they were climbing. At last they reached it; a picturesque building well baked by the sun, with a low tower, tiled, a round arch or two, and deep eaves. Outside stood beautiful great oxen with wide-spreading horns, and two or three children were watching and ran eagerly to fetch the contadino. When he had come out and had spoken a few words to his padrone, young Moroni, the latter led the way to a door in the wall, within which was a kind of rough garden, full of fig-trees laden with fruit. One or two brown-faced boys came running with tables and chairs.

"Ah! but this is truly idyllic, my Giovanni," said the young countess, sinking into a chair. "If I must confess the truth, I could not have walked another ten steps."

She was not exactly pretty, but slender and fragile-looking, and she generally contrived to do as much as she liked and no more. Her fierce husband adored and petted her, and she was very fond of him and of the children, whom she expected him to keep in order or amuse as the case might be. Wherever she was she liked to form the centre, and now she managed to draw them all round her, except Bice. Bice strolled away alone towards the other end of the garden, here and there picking a rose, or one of the half-wild flowers which grew without care just as they had been stuck in. The girl was in a strange and dissatisfied mood that day; it seemed as if different strings were vibrating together, making odd discords and harmonies. Some had been set in motion by things which Ibbetson had said the day before, others had been touched and jarred, she scarcely knew how or why: questions and perplexities seemed to have awakened just at the moment when she had intended them to be silent. From that father from whose memory she shrank she had inherited many characteristics: among them a strong will, and a desire to thrust whatever was painful to her out of sight. "Why should I be obliged to remember now?" her heart cried out angrily, as she turned and looked at the gay little group, already beckoning to her to return to them. "Give is Kitty's own brother, and she is not thinking about him, and Oliver has not come yet, and things are not worse than they were yesterday, when I was not half so unhappy. And to-day I meant to enjoy myself and to forget it all. Why does it come back now?"

She was impatient at her own weakness and yet could not master it; tears rushed into her eyes, she turned hastily away, and laid her arms upon a low wall, heedless, for the moment, of anything but her own unhappiness.

"You must not desert us in this way," said some one behind. "We are waiting for you before we begin the great business of the day, which is much more formidable than I thought." And then his voice changed, and, became very kind and grave. "Is anything the matter? Has anyone vexed you, that you go away and leave us?"

For she had turned and looked him full in the face, careless that the tears were running down her cheeks. A desperate longing seized her to tell him her troubles and to ask his help. The poor child had so few from whom she could seek it, that it seemed to her as if this kind voice might give her aid in the labyrinth where she was losing herself. The longing was of course utterly foolish and unreasonable. Jack was an utter stranger, and the next moment her face burnt at the thought of what her impulse had been. He for his part could not understand the piteous appeal in her eyes, or the change in which it died out. She said quickly—

"Vexed? Oh, no! I was unhappy because I was thinking of my brother Clive."

"Is he ill?"

"No, not ill. He is in some trouble in England. I don't quite know what it is myself," she went on, looking frankly at him, "and I dare say that makes it worse. But it is nothing new, and I cannot think why it should come to me so strongly just now. Do you ever feel as if things seized you with a rush and without any reason?"

Jack thought of his walk by the Arno the night before. This girl with her changing moods, her frank appeals, interested him. He felt a strong desire to help her—a desire which was perhaps made more vigorous by the consciousness of her wonderful beauty. He answered the first part of her speech.

"You must have so many friends that it seems ridiculous to suppose that I can do anything about your brother. But can I?"

A sudden gladness lit her eyes.

"Could you?" she said, eagerly answering his question by another. "I daresay you could. You are very much mistaken if you suppose we have many friends; I don't know that we have any at all."

It was said slowly and as if she were considering, and for that very reason it almost startled Jack. The words were strange, coming from such lips.

"That is impossible," he said decidedly. "But about your brother?"

"It is a long story, you see. I couldn't tell you now."

"No, I understand, of course you couldn't. Come back to the other's," he went on kindly. "You can talk the matter over with your mother and your sister,"—Bice shook her head with an amused smile—"and tell me when you like. Then we will see what can be done."

The swift changes in her face and manner were certainly interesting. The cloud had passed; she was smiling, radiant, flashing out with odd unexpected speeches, playing with Cartouche, helping Giovanni to pick up the figs, helping everybody. Two or three boys ran up the tree like squirrels, and in a few minutes had brought great baskets full. All

the Moroni party ate them Italian fashion, as a sandwich between raw ham and bread; the contessa teased Bice.

"She knows there is nothing more delicious; it is only the Anglo-mania which prevents her doing as we do. I can forgive Kitty—but you, Bice!"

Ibbetson thought that young Moroni looked annoyed. "Why should the signorina have Anglo-mania?" he said hotly. "At any rate the signore has just said there are no such figs in England."

"Ah, why, why, why?" cried out the girl gaily. "Do not let us ask questions or find fault. Do you know, Giovanni, that it is absolutely delicious here in your old farm garden. I did not think it had been half so pleasant."

"Yet you have been here before," said the young man, flushing with delight.

"Was it it like this? Then I must have forgotten. There is nothing so nice at our *podere*."

"Have you a farm?" Ibbetson asked Kitty.

"Yes," she said, with a little shy stiffness in her manner. "It is in another direction."

"And who manages it?"

"Bice is really padrona. But the contadino, who is the tenant, manages it; you know that is the custom here. He pays us half of everything, the live stock and the crops."

So long a speech was almost too great an effort for Kitty, and she jumped up and took refuge with the children, who were sitting in a heap munching figs, and occasionally trying to thrust one down Cartouche's throat. A boy in the tree over their heads tossed the cool green fruit into their laps.

"Pippa has only eaten twelve," said little Gigi, planting his white teeth in the rind. "Only twelve! That is because she is a girl, and so little!"

Pippa plodded on sturdily, paying no attention to the insult. The broad leaves cast broken masses of shade upon the long grass, the clear whiteness of the western sky was changing to amber.

"How well you speak our language!" said the little contessa graciously to Ibbetson. "Believe me, it is a compliment we all appreciate. Now when Bice's other English friend is here, the Signore—Trent—how do you call him? we are obliged to fall back upon French. Eh, Bice, it is so, is it not?"

"Yes," said the girl shortly.

She was grave again, as Ibbetson remarked. The changes in her manner and in her face were so rapid that he found himself watching and wondering. He had never met with anyone who showed so openly whatever passed across her mind.

"Is he coming again soon? He is your relative, is he not?" persisted the contessa.

"He is Kitty's cousin."

It was the first time she had spoken as if Kitty and she were not absolutely one in their possessions, and her tone had an unwilling ring about it. Perhaps it piqued her friend's curiosity, for she threw back her head, and said in a low amused voice—

"You are mysterious, *carina*. Is the subject too sacred to be discussed?"

The girl's eyes flashed, she sprang up angry and impatient.

"Are we going to stay here all our lives?" she cried with a sharpness which cut poor Giovanni to the heart. If he had heard what had just passed he might have been better satisfied, but he had been looking another way, choosing some of the best figs for the beautiful Eve who had praised his little Paradise, and he heard nothing until there came this sharp, scornful speech, which made a desert of it all. Yet how lovely she looked standing there, her head thrown up, the exquisite outline of her profile clear against the golden sky! And when she turned, and saw the young fellow's frightened face, her own melted, and a sudden smile dimpled her cheeks.

"Was I so rude, Giovanni?" she said gently, "I did not mean it, really. It has all been charming, delightful, only now it is time to go. Nina knows it, but she is lazy. I must be the one to tell you what is prudent. Come, Kitty, come, children, the reign of figs is over, but we will carry back a basket-full for mamma. She always says there are none like those which grow up here on Giovanni's mountain."

All the way home she was softer and gentler than Ibbetson had yet seen her. Pippa was tired, and nothing would please her but that Bice should carry her. The little creature, with her curly black hair, fell asleep in her arms, and the girl would not have her moved or awakened, walking on firmly and strongly with her burden. She led them down by another path, in spite of the contessa's complaints that it was both longer and steeper.

"It will not harm you," Bice said quietly, "and you will see something worth seeing."

But it was not until they had turned a shoulder of the hill where, on a sort of stony terrace, a few old olives stood grey and shadowy in the midst of a flood of colour, that Ibbetson knew what she had brought him to see. For below, and stretched before him, spread that wonderful plain of Valdarno which is beyond the power of pen or pencil; and now, as it lay bathed in the radiance of the setting sun, he felt as if he had never before known its beauty. A haze, not of

mist, but of colour, seemed to rest upon it, so delicate and so varied that its intensity was scarcely felt, and the villas and farms with which the plain is thickly studded gleamed like jewels in the midst of this wonderful setting. On the opposite hill rose Bellosguardo with its cypresses, those trees which throughout Italy give point and force to softer beauties; and below, the domes and towers of Florence lay in the full glory of the sunset lights.

Only one of the party did not look at its beauty; young Moroni was looking at Bice instead. She still had the child in her arms, and he came to her side and said wistfully—

“Let me take Pippa the rest of the way, she is too heavy for you;” and quite unexpectedly Bice gave her to him with a smile. She would not, however, walk by his side, as he had hoped; she would walk with nobody; she lingered behind, gathering here and there a flower which had survived the summer heats. The contessa claimed the other gentleman, Kitty had the children in charge and Cartouche, who was a little overwhelmed by an unusual sense of virtue, Bice straggled after them, singing to herself. Ibbetson, who was listening for it, could now and then hear a little break of song come flying down from behind in a tantalising manner. He began to hate the little contessa, who was not half so interesting as this girl with her contradictions, her odd moods. He waited his opportunity, but not until the villa was in sight could he make an excuse for pausing to join Bice. She was some distance in the rear, and came towards him very slowly. Then he saw that something was wrong.

“What is the matter?” he asked quickly.

“Nothing. Why did you wait?” she said with a touch of petulance of which he took no notice. He was looking at her hand, round which she had wrapt a handkerchief.

“What have you done to your hand?”

“I have told you it is nothing,” she said in the same tone. “I have run a thorn into it, that is all.”

“A thorn would not give you so much pain.”

“Well, it may be a little splinter; I think it is. Go on, please, and don’t say anything about it.”

“Not to your sister?”

“Oh, dear me, of course not!” she said with vexation. “Anything of this sort makes Kitty quite ill, don’t you understand? Please go to the villa, I shall be there presently.”

“But I am not going to the villa,” said Jack quietly; “I am going to look at your hand.”

“I can take it out myself.”

“If you please—”

Bice was evidently unaccustomed to have her own will set aside; she stared at him in amazement, and a bright flush which looked like resistance rose to her cheek. Perhaps, however, she thought resistance undignified, or perhaps Jack’s waiting attitude took too much for granted; for after a momentary struggle she hastily unwrapped her hand and silently stretched it out. He could hardly repress the exclamation which rose to his lips. It was cruelly bruised and torn, and the suffering must have been great.

“How could you have done it?” he said reproachfully.

“I was standing on a stone to gather a little flower which I saw in a bush, and the stone slipped. I fell on my hand, and I think something caught in it and ran in.”

She held her hand steadily for his inspection, but she had grown pale, and to tell the truth, the prospect of his amateur surgery made him very uncomfortable. He turned in his mind the possibilities of finding a doctor, but it was most improbable that one lived within a moderate distance, and the splinter was momentarily increasing the irritation. She would not hear of getting help from the house, and Jack hastily determined to do the best he could for her, uttering a fervent mental hope that she would not faint.

He need not have feared. After the first sharp pain had made her shrink, she let her hand lie quite passive, and although persistently keeping her face turned away, from first to last uttered no sound. Perhaps this self-restraint made him nervous, perhaps he was inexperienced in the work, for he knew through every nerve in his own body that he was giving her sharp and even unnecessary pain. When the splinter was drawn out, his own face was nearly as white as hers. The girl noticed this as he straightened himself.

“I am afraid you disliked it as much as Kitty,” she said remorsefully.

“It was clumsy work,” said Jack; “I know that I hurt you horribly.”

“Never mind,” said Bice. “Chiara shall put some of her healing herbs, and I think the pain is all over.”

Was it so indeed? Did nothing whisper to her of another pain, a deeper smart, which this very moment was bringing? What sweet and tremulous pang seemed to smite her in the silence which fell for a moment? A moment—no more—and yet there are moments which go on for years.

Bice drew back her hand without another word of thanks.

The others, too, had had a little misadventure to detain them—the contessa had torn her dress, and it required

consultations, laments, and pinnings; so that when they were finished, Jack and Bice were not far behind. They were all to dine at the villa, and went along straight stiff walks bordered by cypresses towards the little flower-garden by the breakfast-room. As they reached it, Cartouche growled angrily at a gentleman who was coming quickly down the steps. Moroni, still carrying the child, met him first, then came the contessa, who turned and beckoned gaily to Bice. The girl, when she saw him, half stopped. Ibbetson noticed that she became pale, and that her lips quivered.

“Who is it?” he asked curiously.

“It is Oliver Trent,” she said in an odd, frightened undertone.

Chapter Five.

The Ilex Walk.

Ibbetson was not quite himself the next morning, Miss Cartwright thought with a gentle uneasiness. He did not always hear when he was addressed, and he did not say much about the event which was filling her own mind—the arrival of the travellers. They were to come from Bologna by the evening train, and Miss Cartwright would willingly have talked of nothing else. Miss Preston, whose delight it was to paint darkly the characters of her friend’s friends, had shaken her head with great energy over all she had gathered of the villa, and Jack’s conduct in absenting himself there, but Miss Cartwright was altogether impervious to the most direct innuendoes. She was very glad he had made pleasant friends, and seen a little of Italian villa life; she was very sorry for the two fatherless young things, and when Phillis came, perhaps they might all drive out together to Villa Carlina; worst of all, she was quite sure Miss Preston would enjoy the change. As for any danger to Phillis’s happiness, the idea never crossed her simple and loyal mind.

Nor, after all, was there much danger as yet Jack was struck, interested, touched, but the feelings kept themselves where they started, not having run on into any thrill of love. Whether if he had been free when he saw Beatrice matters might not have been different, one cannot say. Perhaps. But he, too, was loyal. To him his engagement was a fact, and his word a bond; and bonds and facts do exert an influence over an honourable man, let passion say what it will against them. That there was a certain peril cannot be denied, and it lay in the fact that he did not love Phillis. He felt a sort of attraction, a pitying tenderness, a conviction that to marry her was the best way of bringing a skein or two out of their tangle, but this was not love. And, meanwhile, the white villa set on the hillside, with its flowers, its sweets, its Italian charm; the girl with her beauty, her passionate nature, and yet her revolt against that very nature, interested him. Who was this man, this Oliver Trent, who had so suddenly appeared among them? A red-faced, hard-featured man, the cousin, as, they said, of Kitty. But it was not Kitty whom he had watched when they sat on the steps the evening before. It was not Kitty who had seemed the most disturbed at his coming. Jack said to himself that it was all nothing to him, still he could not help feeling curious, and of course common courtesy demanded that he should go that morning to the villa in order to inquire for the injured hand. After that morning he would not be so completely his own master.

This, it will be seen, was the man’s view of the matter, neither more nor less. His imagination had been touched, but his mind was clear enough to see things as they were, uncoloured by any strange and dream-like tints. For the girl’s, it was different.

Think at what a time of ferment he had suddenly touched her life. She had grown through a childhood, saddened by that dreariest sorrow which can befall a child—want of faith in those it should love—to a womanhood from which it seemed as if all the sweetest belongings of her age—care, watchfulness, guiding, were withdrawn. Its brightness was darkened by memories, burdened by pledges. No doubt her state of feeling was exaggerated, but through what strivings, seekings after light, yearnings for justice, had that poor bent shoot struggled upwards. The girl had an instinctive hatred of oppression, a longing to protect, to deliver; the sort of spirit which has made heroines before now, but also has often wrecked a woman’s own peace. For those who have it sometimes give up what is not theirs to give, the happiness of others—or their own hearts, when they have passed from their keeping.

They have, too, their moments of revulsion, such a moment as had come to Bice. She had believed that she had the strength to do anything which could shield her mother or Kitty—whom she loved with all her heart—from trouble, and the trouble was there like a threatening cloud. Clive Masters, Kitty’s brother, had gone to England, and the lad, never very wise, had fallen into some scrape such as the women out at the Florentine villa did not understand and could but tremble over, when Oliver Trent hinted darkly at its consequences. How darkly, only Bice knew. It had been a revelation to him to note the eagerness, the anxiety with which she listened when first he let drop the suggestion that all was not going well with Clive; a revelation and—a temptation. Nothing of his had touched her before beyond the surface; he had felt with sharp bitterness that the girl in her beauty and her simplicity was absolutely inaccessible. But not now. The tears would spring into her beautiful eyes, a mute anguish of pleading would rise in her face when he talked to her about Clive, the dangers of his position, the probability of some dreadful discovery and disgrace. And then he would gently let fall hints of his own efforts, of how his was the only hand which could restrain the lad, his the one influence staving off exposure and ruin. Very often he wondered at the readiness with which his inventions were received, but what did Beatrice know of the world—such a world as he described? To her it was all vague, unreal, far off; for her, alas, it was not difficult to believe in its wickedness!

But it was only by little and little, by subtle touches on the strings of gratitude and hope, by a gradual coiling round her of a net made up of threads so fine that they were scarcely palpable, that he dared hint at his purpose. If he had shown his hand too openly, and asked her to be his wife as the price of his saving Clive, she might have yielded; but all the generosity of her nature would have risen in revolt against his meanness, she would have married and have hated him. Oliver wanted something better than that for himself, and felt sure of gaining it. To do so he would risk anything, and it seemed as if his purpose were on the verge of accomplishment; Bice knew what he wanted, knew it in a manner which let it seem the most natural thing in the world, and then Oliver Trent made his great mistake. He

went back to England, believing that reflection and solitude, and the judicious letters he would write, would all work for him, believing that he had skilfully provided against all emergencies.

But how could he provide against Cartouche frightening a turkey to death?

If it is strange that two days' acquaintanceship with another man should have been enough to shake his influence, and to awaken the revulsion which has been hinted at, surely the strangeness is not improbable. Oliver's influence had been a power from without, a bewildering mist raised with which he had hidden or distorted one thing after another, and skilfully enveloped Bice's perceptions, but there was nothing in her nature which was in sympathy with his; nay, rather there was something which drew back shuddering. She might have been stirred to a blind leap for those she loved, but to walk slowly along towards the gulf made it seem a hundred times more terrible. And when—though as it were only in passing—she came face to face with a man out of whose eyes looked truth and straightforward honesty, the contrast affected her, although she hardly knew how. Although she had believed Oliver, she had never really trusted him, and Jack was a person whom you could not help trusting absolutely. Certain characteristics write their signs in a face with unerring accuracy. That night, in the shadowy fragrance of the garden, Oliver Trent, jealously and uneasily watching the girl, did not know that she too was watching him, noting, comparing, growing stiller and sadder as she did so. A wild longing to escape and to burst her bonds had seized her; horror at what she had done, hope that Ibbetson might find a way to help them; none of them knew what a tumult was driving through her heart as she sat silent.

When the two girls went up to their room, Bice hurriedly pushed back the outer persiennes, and knelt down with her arms on the ledge. A sweet cool air came up laden with the delicious sent of tuberose, water splashed dreamily in the distance, the grating croak of frogs and the saw of the *grilli* gave a little sharp invigoration to the softness of the evening. Presently one of the odd little owls which Italians call *civette* began to hoot and call, and Kitty answered it back.

"I wish Pasquale would get us a *civetta*," she said. "Why don't you tell him to do it, Bice? Pasquale never minds what I say, and they are the dearest, wisest little things in the world. By the by, did you hear Nina telling Oliver that Italians call a girl who jilts her lover a *civetta*? And then—"

Kitty hesitated. Bice, still kneeling at the window, turned her head towards her sister, with her cheek resting on her crossed arms—

"And then?" she repeated inquiringly.

"I don't quite like to tell you. Sometimes Nina is horrid. Well, she gave a little nod towards you, as if Oliver should take care. Wasn't it a shame?"

No answer came. Bice was looking out into the night again. Kitty, who was very affectionate, but not quick in her perceptions, went on with her small ripple of talk.

"What business has Nina to know anything? I can't think how she is clever enough to find out, she has not seen much of Oliver. And why should she trouble herself about it?"

"Don't you know?" said Bice, in a proud and bitter voice, "she is afraid of Giovanni."

"Of Giovanni? Oh, nonsense! Why—he is a boy, he is nobody but just—Giovanni! She can't be quite so silly. Bice, I do think you must be mistaken; besides, why should she be afraid?"

Kitty's merry laugh rang out childlike and confident. Bice started to her feet and turned round with a gesture that was almost fierce.

"You don't understand; you don't know anything about the world, you are only a girl. Why should she be afraid?—because we are poor, and Nina is a contessa living in a palace, and so she has found out that there is nothing in all the world so good as money; and as she is fond of Giovanni, she wants him to have a great *dola* with his wife. That is all, if you want to know."

"Then she is a silly," said Kitty, unmoved by this outburst. "As if Giovanni were good enough for you!—or as if money were everything!"

"Perhaps it is more than we think," said Bice, still bitterly; "sometimes I feel almost sure it is."

"It would give us some new dresses, to be sure," Kitty said, with a general readiness to assent to her sister's ideas, "and a piano. I should enjoy a piano."

"It would do more than that," Bice said abruptly. And then her voice softened, the beautiful eyes grew wistful; she put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and looked into her face. "Oh, Kitty," she said, "if we only had a little money, you or I, we could save poor Clive without—"

She stopped suddenly, and Kitty looked startled, for something in Bice's manner thrilled through her.

"But," she said hesitatingly, "Oliver will do that. He has promised, hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Bice, very slowly.

Alas! but it was she who had to promise also. "Then it's all right. Oliver can do anything."

"Only if he is to do this, I must marry him."

She still spoke slowly, but her voice sounded strained and unnatural. Kitty answered cheerfully—

“Yes, I know. But you like him, don’t you? You made up your mind the last time he was here, and there has been nothing to make you change. And you always wanted to live in England. I don’t think Oliver would be at all a bad sort of person to marry.”

“I have never said I would marry him,” interrupted her sister.

“No,” said Kitty doubtfully, “not exactly. Still you intended it.”

“What has Clive done?” said Bice, looking at her with troubled eyes. “We know very little about it all. Oliver always says we cannot understand, and that it is better for us that he should not attempt to explain; but I think it would be better if he *did* explain; for now it is like some dreadful dark shadow of disgrace hanging over us, never off one’s mind day and night.” Kitty’s eyes filled with tears.

“Is it so bad for you, dear?” she said sadly. “I have not troubled myself much about it since Oliver said he would arrange. Surely he knows best, and he is the only person to do anything.”

“Why shouldn’t Mr Ibbetson help us?” said Bice in a low voice. Her sister cried out in astonishment, but the girl persisted. “There are kind people in the world,” she said, as her eyes brightened. “If you or I saw anyone in trouble we should do what we could; and he is a man, he knows about England and this world into which poor Clive has tumbled—he might advise us.”

“Not better than Oliver!” exclaimed Kitty, amazed. “Oh, I’m tired of Oliver,” cried Bice with petulant impatience. Her heart was rising up in revolt against its fate till it burned within her. She was angry with Clive, with Oliver, with Kitty, who could only praise him; most of all with herself, the self which had grown all of a sudden discontented, frightened, and indignant. How was it that the change had come, if it was a change and not rather an awakening? How was it that life had in a few hours blossomed into a hundred possibilities? She had thought of Oliver Trent before with a sort of dull satisfaction, as a means of helping Clive and of averting sorrow from those she loved; and as he had skilfully managed to make himself necessary to her, her feelings towards him were passive. But this calm was at an end. All that evening she had been comparing, watching, reflecting; a light seemed suddenly to have been turned upon him; she saw things written in his features which she had never discovered before—some, very likely, which were not there at all. “His eyes are close together, and there is a broad piece of face beyond them—that is not good, I know,” said the critic, “and his face is red and hard.” And all the time, joined with this revolt, some strong new hope seemed to have leapt into her heart, uncalled for and inexplicable. “There are kind people in the world,” she had said to Kitty, but what had brought her the sudden conviction? Is it not pathetic sometimes to see how little will win a heart, and yet how much fails to touch it? We take some trifling trouble, and, lo, an affection is laid at our feet which years cannot change or parting cool. And then, again, we give our life blood, and the gift is scorned. Jack had felt attracted and touched, and had looked and spoken as he felt—kindly, but it was no more than the commonest kindness, though to her it seemed altogether special and delightful.

When Ibbetson reached Villa Carlina that morning, only Mrs Masters, in her usual condition of good-natured drowsiness, was in the breakfast-room, eating grapes from a great golden bunch which had just been brought in with stalk and leaves attached; but before he had had much time to ponder where he should find the others, Bice came, flushed and smiling, and carrying a great bunch of flowers, Jack felt himself again wondering at her beauty. She had a white dress—indeed, as yet, he had seen her in no other colour—but over her head she had flung a veil of black lace, Milanese fashion, and the bright flowers in her hands—big scarlet lilies, blue larkspurs, and another blue flower with green spikes—made a brilliant flash of colour against the cool white folds. Mrs Masters said plaintively—

“Where can you have been, Bice? They have been looking for you everywhere until Oliver is quite vexed; go and find them in the garden, and say that you are come.”

“There is no hurry,” said the girl lightly; “they do not want me.”

“But where have you been?”

“To gather flowers for the Virgin’s niche; and they are so scarce at this time of the year, that I had to go a long way.”

“So it is you who keep the flowers supplied?” said Ibbetson, remembering that on the day he first saw the villa he had wondered whose hand had placed the pretty nosegay.

“Yes. But we are English, and belong to the English Church,” said Beatrice quickly. “You will see us in Florence tomorrow. Only it seemed so sad to leave that little shrine in the wall desolate after flowers had been laid there for so many years; and the poor peasants who come along that dusty road like to see something fresh and pretty when they look up and pray; and so I am going there now,” she said smiling; “and you may come if you will, just to see how they get into the grating.”

“But there is Oliver,” said Mrs Masters anxiously. “He has Kitty,” Bice answered. “Or, if that does not content you, they are in the garden, for I heard their voices, and it is there we are going.”

Nevertheless Ibbetson fancied that she led him along paths which looked mossy and unfrequented. There was a gloom about these paths even on this bright day; dark ilexes shut out the sun overhead, long leaves of narcissus straggled about, weedy-looking and untidy, amid the undergrowth; one or two mutilated statues kept desolate ward over the silence and dimness. The girl glanced round her and shivered.

“I wish I had not brought you here,” she said uneasily; “there is something in this walk which always oppresses me.”

"If I had not seen it you would not have made me believe there was so cheerless a spot so near the villa. But then, if you had not told me the contrary, I could not have thought there was any dark shadow near you in your happy country life."

Foolish, kind Jack! Ever since he had seen the tears in her eyes he had felt that he should like to help her.

Bice stopped and looked earnestly at him.

"That is why I asked you to come with me," she said with a simple straightforwardness which he had noticed in her before. "I thought if I could tell you about Clive you might advise us what to do. I fancied I understood, but it has all got into a tangle in my head. May I really tell you?"

If Ibbetson had been less interested than he was, it would have been impossible to have remained untouched by the frank simplicity of her appeal.

"You may depend upon me," he said gravely.

Then she told her little story in a quiet voice, trying to put it into as few words as possible. Clive was their brother, a lad of twenty-one. About two years before, he had gone to London, having, by Oliver's help, got into some great business house; "because we are poor, and it was necessary he should do something to make money," she explained. At first things had seemed to go well; he was quick and pleased his employers, so that lately he had been promoted, but since then all had been unsatisfactory. Oliver had been the kindest friend, and was the first to give them a warning that the young fellow was not going on so steadily. They had written imploring letters, and Clive had answered them with such a frank acknowledgment that he had been wrong, and such a clearly-expressed determination to turn over a new leaf, that they had been happier. But, alas, six weeks ago Oliver Trent had come out from England and had brought the worst news with him. He persistently refused to tell them in plain words what had happened, but he hinted at conduct on the part of Clive which had come to his knowledge though not as yet to his employers, conduct which—known—must bring terrible disgrace and ruin. The poor women were overwhelmed. He was not Mrs Masters' son, but he was Kitty's brother, and the others entirely accepted him as their own. What was to be done? Bice's first impulse had been to write and question Clive, but that Mr Trent had absolutely forbidden. Clive must not know that he was aware of his guilt, or it would be impossible for him to help him. Whatever was done must be done through himself alone, and this at a great risk. Bice could not understand what plan Mr Trent had in his head; he did not confide it to her: she imagined only that there was some man whose silence he meant to buy; at any rate he had promised to help them provided everything was left in his hands. She flushed and looked down as she said these words, and Ibbetson, whose suspicions had been awakened the night before, guessed that there was another "provided" which had received a tacit acquiescence. But, good heavens, what was he to say! He had not bargained for a story like this, for being asked to assist in condoning a felony—to which it all pointed. Probably the unfortunate boy had forged a signature, and Trent held the proofs, and meant to use them. He remained altogether silent.

In the trouble of her own feelings the girl was not at first conscious of his dismay. She was walking along and looking down, but as he did not speak she glanced at him and stopped with a little cry.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I shouldn't have told you, I have only set you against him. I should have believed Oliver when he said that no one must know."

"You need not fear me," said the young man gravely. "I mayn't be able to help, but you may be sure I will never betray your trust. And if I can't help, perhaps I may at least advise."

She stood still and began nervously to pick off the leaves of a branch of ilex and to roll them together.

"If there is any way by which we could save him from disgrace," she began hurriedly, when Ibbetson interrupted her —

"But if I understand you rightly, that is just what Mr Trent has promised to do?"

The girl became very pale.

"Yes," she said at last with an effort. "You are right. I don't know why I appealed to you. Forget it, and don't let us say any more."

Her voice was proud and hurt. She looked straight before her, and was moving forwards when Jack detained her.

"You must let me give you my advice," he said kindly. "It will not be the same as Mr Trent's, and I fear you mayn't like it so well, but if I had a brother in the same position as your brother, I should not rest until—"

"Until—?" she asked with eagerness.

"Until I had induced him to make a clean breast of it."

"You mean to us?"

"No: I mean to his employers."

The girl started as if she had been stung. She stood still, her breast heaved, the burning colour rushed into her face.

"But that is the very disgrace we are trying to avoid!" she cried with a sharp ring in her voice. "It is cruel to mock me with such words. Why, why that is the worst that could happen, and you speak of it as calmly as if—"

"Mock you!" cried Jack, hurt in his turn. "Have I ever said anything which should make you think me such a brute? At least hear me until I have explained myself. This affair, whatever it is, if it is covered up and concealed in the manner in which you have hinted, will hang over your heads with a never-ending dread. Something may always bring it to light, and your brother will be haunted by fear of it. But if he takes courage and speaks openly, his employers will be at once half won over, I am sure of it; they will think of his youth, of his inexperience—even business men have hearts, Miss Masters. Believe me, it is the most honourable way."

She listened very quietly, though her face was still flushed, and when he had finished she remained silent. Suddenly, at a little distance, they heard voices, and Bice said hurriedly—

"This is your only advice?"

"I can think of nothing else."

"I must have time for considering it, and I don't want Oliver to guess that we have been talking: if you will go straight along this path you will come to a door in the wall by which you can get into the road. Do not be vexed with me for sending you away."

"One word—how is your hand?"

"Oh, almost well."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"When you like to come," said Bice smiling; "or, perhaps, to-morrow in Florence. We shall be there, as I said, for the service."

"Then will you come afterwards to luncheon at my aunt's—Casa Giulia? She is longing to make your acquaintance, and I shall feel sure you have forgiven me."

"Oh, I have forgiven you," said Bice, after a pause, "Well, we will come—"

Chapter Six.

Cartouche Interrupts.

When Ibbetson had left her, Bice hastened to that part of the wall where was the niche to which she was carrying the flowers. A little terrace ran along by means of which she could reach and open the grating, and take out the vase with its withered blossoms. She carried it to a small fountain close by, filled it with clear water, and put in her flaming lilies. Then she took it back to the niche, closed the grating, came down from the terrace, and after a moment's consideration walked slowly towards the place where she had heard the voices.

Kitty and Mr Trent were standing under a large acacia tree, and turned quickly round to greet her. Kitty poured out her questions—Where had she been? what had she been doing? did she know they had been looking for her?

"Mamma told me," said Bice carelessly; "surely you two might have amused each other for an hour. And it would not have required any superhuman sagacity, Kitty, to guess that I had gone for the flowers."

"If you are cross, I shall go to the terrace and leave Oliver to his fate," said Kitty, laughing and escaping.

The two who were left looked at each other as she ran off—he with open admiration, she with a tremulous quiver of her lips not lost upon him. Oliver Trent was a man of about five and thirty, tall and thin, with dead, dusty-coloured hair; his features were not ill-looking, but, as Bice had remarked, hard in their lines, and he spoke with a slow sweetness curiously out of keeping with his face. He now slowly repeated—

"To my fate. I wonder if Kitty quite understood what happy prognostications lay in her words? Yes, this is the fate I have been looking forward to all these weary weeks; and I began to think, Bice, that you delighted in cruelty, or else had learned the woman's art of tantalising. Come and sit here in the shade."

She followed him more readily than he, perhaps, expected, for he half-suspected that she was bent upon avoiding a *tête-à-tête*; but in actual truth she had scarcely heard his words, or at any rate had not taken in their meaning. Another thought possessed her. As they sat down she turned and looked steadily into his face.

"What is Clive's exact position?" she said sharply.

He hesitated. She repeated the question.

"You had better not ask for particulars, for they can only give you pain."

"I can bear pain."

"Yes," he said, glancing at her hand, "such pain as that; but there are other and worse pangs, and from those, Bice, I shall always endeavour to shield you. Clive has been doing his utmost to ruin himself and make you all miserable; I am trying to save him. It is a hard task, and unless you trust me and follow my directions, I tell you honestly that I have no chance of success."

"You threaten us with shadows," said the girl moodily.

"Oh, Bice," he said—and his voice became yet softer and more slow—"you are not yourself to-day. What has changed you? I have often found you hasty, wilful, unreasonable, but never before ungenerous. Is it I that threaten? Is it not rather I that at any cost am trying to keep the danger a shadow? Once let me remove my hand, and it will be real and tangible enough—"

She could not endure such a reproach; it seemed horrible to her, and also true. She stretched out her hand to him with a quick gesture of kindness.

"You have been our very good friend, I know, Oliver," she said, looking at him gratefully, "and I ought to be content and not tease you. Only tell me, is it absolutely necessary there should be this secrecy?"

"Absolutely. I am obliged to use the greatest caution."

"Out here, how would it be possible for us to interfere with any plans?"

He began to be vexed with her unusual importunity, but allowed no trace of his vexation to appear in his face or voice. On the contrary, he said with a smile, "Excuse me; if there were no other way, I should feel by no means certain what you and Kitty might not write to Clive. No. Complete ignorance is the safest state of things for you; for of one thing I am sure, nature never intended either of you for a conspirator."

Bice turned and looked at him thoughtfully. He felt uneasy, for her eyes seemed to be asking whether it was for that he was intended. He said more abruptly than he had yet spoken—

"Do you not care any longer that Clive should be saved?"

"Do I not care!"

The sudden fire which leapt into her eyes answered him. He had at last touched the right string.

"You have considered it thoroughly?" he said, speaking deliberately again. "I particularly desire that you should do so. If this act of Clive's is brought home to him, it means dishonour and disgrace; I cannot hide it from you. Your mother is very fond of Clive, she will never hold up her head again. As for Kitty, you know best whether she will care or not. It may not be so bad for you, it is true, because you bear another name."

Bice interrupted him in a low passionate voice. "You shall not say that!"

"You refuse to separate yourself from them? Well, then, for you too the shame and the disgrace. And poor Clive, so young, so foolish, not wicked, but led away. He writes to you all, I know, as if nothing had happened, but if you could see him as I do, you would long to save him!"

"You must save him."

The girl's voice was choked. Oliver leant forward and looked at her.

"At all costs?"

"At all costs."

"And by all means, whether right or wrong?"

"Whether right or wrong."

He leant forward still further and forced her to look at him.

"I will," he said slowly. "For you."

They were silent after that for a time. He felt that he had won a victory, but her moods were so changeable that he was afraid of endangering it by trying to push his advantage further. And yet he wanted more. More than ever since this other man, of whom he felt insanely jealous, had appeared on the scene. At this moment, when her feelings were all stirred and thrilled, he knew that skilfully led she would be capable of any self-sacrifice, that it would even have an attraction for her. Once get her to make a definite promise, and he felt certain the generosity of her nature would keep her to it. And once his—he looked at her beautiful face, grew pale, and set his teeth—he would make her love him: his work should not be left half done.

Now, if ever, was his time.

He said presently, in a pained and gloomy tone—"I could almost envy Clive."

"Why?" she said, looking round quickly.

"Clive, and Kitty, and your mother. Do you ever think of anyone else? Would you care if I—we—the rest of the world were swept away in a common deluge? Would it matter to you in the least, supposing you four were safe?"

"You are very unjust, Oliver," she said in a low tone, and he saw tears shining in her eyes.

"I think not," he said gently. "So long as I can save Clive you are quite willing for me to run any risk—and the risk is great, remember. I am a chancery barrister, working upwards with quite my share of difficulties. Suppose my attempt fails—yes, it is always necessary to look what one undertakes in the face."

"Clive would be ruined," she said as he paused. Then, as he did not speak, she looked at him again and saw him smiling. "What do you mean?" she said half angrily.

"What did I tell you?" he answered. "It was not of Clive that I was speaking at that moment but of myself. I should be ruined as effectually as Clive, but that, of course, is not worth mentioning." She started from her seat as if she had been stung, but he laid his hand on her arm and drew her down again beside him. "Wait a moment, Bice," he said in a changed voice, "wait and listen; I have a right at least to ask so much from you. I am not saying this to you because I have any dream of retracting my promise; it is given, and there is an end of scruple. It is dangerous, perhaps wrong; I shall have to use means that I detest, and mix myself up with scoundrels who will be on the look-out to catch me tripping—never mind. I have promised. Only understand what it is you ask me to do, and understand also that I do it for you—solely and entirely for you. What is Clive to me? Nothing. Do you suppose that one's cousins are so dear that one would risk reputation and honour for them. But what are you to me? Everything. Everything in the whole world, and you know it, you know it. Have you no word for me? Am I to sacrifice everything and to have nothing in return? Bice, Bice, can't you give anything for Clive?"

She was looking straight before her, the colour had faded out of her face; his voice, dangerously low and sweet, sounded in her ears. All her life long she never forgot that moment. Long afterwards, if she shut her eyes, she could see the great leaves of the trees of Paradise swaying backwards and forwards against the deep blue sky; a vine, golden in the sunshine; a pumpkin with its odd parti-coloured gourds flinging itself down a steep bank; a clump of lilac crocuses breaking through the grass—her eyes wandered over them all while he waited for her answer. She knew quite well what it must be; her poor little generous untaught heart had felt all the time he was speaking that he had a right so to speak, that it was not for her to hold back. Never before had it seemed to her so terrible—Oliver would have been bitterly disappointed had he known—but not for that could she hesitate. She hated herself because the sacrifice seemed so unendurable. Why did she not speak? What years were dragging slowly by while he waited, holding her hand in his—waited, waited!

There was a rush, a swoop. A great black dog came tearing through the bushes, springing upon Bice. Old Andrea followed, breathless and panting.

"He is a demon, that dog of the English signora," he cried, "and he has lost his master. Signorina, for pity's sake take him where he is, or he will knock the house down. He has been in my kitchen and gobbled up a heap of *amoretti*, and broken half the eggs, and upset the milk, and before that he had frightened the padrona out of her senses. *Che, che, che*, we cannot have such doings! Signorina, where is his master?"

"He is gone," said Bice, jumping up; "he has been gone a long time. What shall we do, Andrea? Can one of the men take him into Florence?"

"Would he go?—the signorina should rather ask that question. Otherwise the cart from the *podere* is here, going in with a couple of pigs that have been sold. But the creature would not follow."

"Then we must tie him to the back."

"Già, *già*, that is it, the signorina has always got her ideas." Old Andrea, who had recovered his good humour, stood shaking his broad shoulders and pointing at Cartouche, who kept close to Beatrice. "And he really is clever, too, he knows he has found a friend. Come along, come along, signorina mia."

"You will not go?" said Oliver, holding her back. He was furious with the dog, with the old cook, and with the knowledge that Ibbetson had already been there that morning. One other moment and the girl would have been his, he had known it, and now—

It seemed to Bice as if a weight had fallen from her, she caught her hand from his and stood breathing quickly.

"Yes, I must go," she said, almost angrily. "Don't you see they cannot manage him by themselves. Come, Cartouche; come, Andrea."

She ran towards the house, the dog followed her, leaping and barking. Oliver turned sharply away and went to the Virgin's niche. He wanted to see if she had really taken fresh flowers there. Had Ibbetson helped her; was she playing a double game? He stood for some time thinking, his head bent and a frown on his face; and while he was there, a cart came jolting down the white and stony road. Behind it, and dragged unwillingly along, was poor Cartouche on his way to his home. Bice was walking by his side to console him for a little part of the road by encouraging words. She did not see Oliver Trent, nor hear his exclamation of rage, but she looked like a creature who had escaped to freedom, and had thrown off a burden. He was half disposed to follow her, but something seemed to warn him that the spell was broken, and must be re-woven before he could succeed.

Perhaps people do not very often—except, indeed, in books—lay those elaborate schemes, those widely-spread toils of villainy, which are supposed to belong to a bad man's career. It is probable that they open out to them almost as unexpectedly as to us, time and opportunity seeming to throw themselves on their side. Certainly Trent, who was growing more involved week by week, had laid no such plans when he took his first step; nay, more, he was made very uneasy by a clear perception of the dangers to which he was exposing himself as he went on. He would gladly have pulled himself up before, and looked forward almost feverishly to laying down the net which he told himself he was forced to weave, with the full intention of never again engaging in such rash work. He had no dislike of Clive to make it easier to do him a mischief, though he salved his conscience in the curious short-sighted way in which that work is often done, telling himself that the means he was obliged to use would not really injure the young man, although they might seem to cloud his prospects for a time:—nay, he sometimes almost succeeded in assuring himself that they were likely to work for Clive's advantage, giving him just the lesson he needed, and putting him through a wholesome time of trial. But as this view of himself as a kind of abstract justice was one which no effort could keep always in the position where he would have liked to find it, he was subject to fits of impatience, wishing

very heartily that he could reach his end and wash his hands of all this miserable business, which both irritated and annoyed him. When he had reached the villa he had confidently looked forward to being free in a week. And already he was feeling as if his acts were turning into scourges. Yet he had no thought of giving up Bice; the more he saw her, the more determined he grew to make her his wife, and when he was in her company all compunctions for Clive and fears for himself vanished in reckless resolution.

Chapter Seven.

A Sunday in Florence.

No one who has not seen Tuscany in its golden autumn can have any idea of its deepest, its most enchanting beauty. For, whatever men say, autumn in these colder northern lands carries, in every gorgeous tint and flaming leaf, a profound melancholy. A shiver of coming winter creeps over you in spite of yourself; it is a farewell, a dirge which comes sighing through the crimson and yellow woods, where the leaves are dropping to decay. In Italy there is no such sadness. Winter there is, to be sure—wind and snow, and sharpness of frost; but through it all the sun is laughing out, wonderful colours glow; spring, hope, youth, are never lost, or even for a moment forgotten. And therefore autumn brings no dread, only its own rich fruition and the joy of fulfilled toil.

As they drove down from the villa into Florence on the Sunday morning, the beauty of the time seemed at its height. The road, after descending between the high walls over which here and there the roses thrust themselves, branched off and ran gaily down to the Arno and to Florence through bordering vineyards, where the purple and yellow grapes hung in luminous clusters between the intense fresh green of their leaves as they tossed themselves from one tall tree to another against a clear brightness of sky. All round lay the soft and delicate glory of the mountains, and below them the town glowed white in the sunshine, even the cool shadows on the towers and walls gleaming with a strange translucent golden pink. There are no words for such colours; they burn and blend, everything is touched with an enchanter's wand; it is only when you try to hold them fast, or come away to our cold greens and greys, that you learn something of their power.

Oliver Trent had done his utmost to get Bice again by herself, but she had as yet contrived to avoid him, and he was a good deal more disquieted by her doing so than he ventured to show; for hers was not a nature which it would be safe to stir into opposition, or to attempt to intimidate, and he had studied her closely enough to be aware that she would resent nothing so much as suspicion or distrust. Every hour that passed endangered his plans, and yet he could do nothing but wait. He was even obliged to see them drive off to Casa Giulia after service without him, as he was to go to other friends, and to meet them afterwards at Miss Cartwright's. All that he could do was to whisper into Bice's ear, as he put her into the carriage, "Remember," and then he stood and watched them go with a black cloud on his face, which he no longer troubled himself to mask.

Bice's spirits rose as they left him behind; at any rate, she was free for a few hours. The sun was shining, the bands were playing, all Florence was alive with gaiety, and the girl's Italian blood leapt into answering life. Something else, too, there was, another spring of joy, none the less real that it was hidden away from touch or sight—was she not going where Jack would be? would she not at least see him, and hear his kind voice? He had not helped her as she had hoped, she acknowledged to herself. She could read in his face only strong condemnation of Clive and contempt for his weakness, and condemnation and contempt seemed to leave the burden just where it was before. But she forgot all that now. She was content to ask herself no questions, to take the joy of the moment. She had seen him in the distance, at church, with some ladies; and as she thought of him, such a sweet and gentle expression stole into her face, that the people who looked at her smiled with the ready sympathy of their country.

"She is a girl, and she is happy," said old Bertuccia, who on week-days sits in the Borgo Ognissanti, near the church, selling her flowers and vegetables.

A brown old man who was standing by chuckled.

"*Altro!* But where is *he?*" he said, and they all laughed.

Miss Cartwright was at home alone, she had not been well enough to go to church, and a hot, nervous flush was on her cheeks when she arose to receive three strangers. But Bice's face, its beauty, its happiness, won her heart at once. Jack, who, in spite of his condemnation, had been greatly touched by the pathetic little story, had asked her to be kind to the girl, and though this radiant beauty was different from her expectations, it was charming in itself. When Jack came in, after taking the others to the hotel, he found them on the best of terms. Even Miss Preston thawed at intervals, especially when Mrs Masters showed a docile inclination to adopt her favourite prescription for a chill. Cartouche welcomed them with patronising dignity. There was a striped awning running out from the window, and under this they sat and chatted. It seemed to Bice like a little haven of rest and kindness, for, perhaps unfortunately, Ibbetson took, particular care that she should be looked after and amused. Presently they went for luncheon into the cool little dining-room. Miss Cartwright asked her nephew a question in a low voice, and Bice heard him say that they were all coming by-and-by. Who were they, she wondered; little knowing, poor child, what the knowledge would cost her. Then there were other questions. Miss Cartwright was interested about the old villa and their solitary life; Miss Preston was alarming Mrs Masters by searching demands for statistics of the farm expenses, of the vintage.

"Beatrice is my manager," said her mother apologetically. "I was never a woman of business, or able to understand accounts. Fortunately she has taken to that sort of thing from the time she was a child. But we shall soon be going to Rome, for we have let the villa for a few months, and shall spend that time with a relation of the Capponis."

"You are going to Rome?" said Ibbetson to Bice, with interest. "Then we shall meet, for I too am to be there this winter." He hesitated whether he would or would not say "after my marriage," but he did not add the words, and the

girl looked up brightly.

“Oh, I am glad!” she said in a shy, quick voice.

How swiftly the moments flew! Every now and then a thought of Oliver and of Clive forced its way up into her mind, but she crushed it down again before it had time to shape itself—for this one half-day she would be free, she would be happy. Kitty, who had seen her the night before, looked with wonder at her smiles.

They were in the garden again when four more people arrived—Captain Leyton, his wife, Phillis Grey, and Mr Trent. When Bice saw Oliver, a sudden sickness seemed to overpower her, but she was still bent upon defying fate; and when he made his way to her side as if to claim her, she turned away with something more like a movement of dislike than she had ever yet shown to him. That he saw it was evident, for he drew back at once, but it was with a smile on his lips which a close observer might have called triumphant.

“The world is so small,” some one was proclaiming. “Who would have supposed that Mr Trent, whom we met at Bologna, and who lunched with us to-day, would have been coming to this very house on quite another account? It is almost provoking, I think, the way everybody knows everybody. One can never make discoveries on one’s own account.”

Mrs Leyton, who said this, was a fair, bright-faced woman, with a wish to be pathetic and a face which belied the attempt. She was a very popular person, for she had the power of adapting herself readily to those in whose society she happened to find herself, and was never unwilling to do a little kindness.

“I can’t quite agree with you, Mrs Leyton,” said Trent, in his deliberate voice. “It seems to me just the means by which one *can* make discoveries.”

“What does the fellow mean?” said Jack to himself. “He looks as hard at me as if he had raked out an escaped convict. Why did Phillis not tell me they had met him?”

When they first came into the room, Phillis sat down close to the door, and Ibbetson only nodded to her, and went on talking to Bice. Kitty was nearest to her, and the two began to talk, shyly, and with many pauses. Cartouche rushed up to Phillis and lay down at her feet. Miss Preston looked first at her, then at Bice, and shook her head. Certainly the contrast was great. Bice’s beautiful face was sparkling, her eyes were bright and soft, her colour came and went; it was like watching the changing lights of a spring day, there was so much youth and sweet freshness in the face. Phillis looked still and grave by comparison. No one could have called her beautiful, many the reverse. She was pale, and her features were irregular, her mouth large, though her teeth were charming, and her eyes clear brown, such as one sees sometimes in a dog—as honest and as faithful. Bice, looking at her once when she was smiling at Kitty, was struck by the feeling of restfulness which her face suggested; it smote her own poor little storm-tossed heart with a sharp pang of envy.

“Who is that lady? Is she one of your party?” she said quickly to Jack.

“Miss Grey? Yes. You will see her in Rome also,” he said, rather oddly, Bice thought.

“I am glad of that,” said the girl with a sigh; “she looks as if she could help one.”

It was proposed presently that some of them should go to the American Church, on the other side of the Arno, for the afternoon service. Mrs Masters was afraid of the walk, and would stay with Miss Cartwright, the others set out. The day was cooler, and the Lung’ Arno was crowded with gay people strolling down to the Cascine. It was like plunging from the present into the past, to cross the river and reach the dark dirty little streets which lead to the Carmine Church. Captain Leyton dragged a well-worn Baedeker out of his pocket and turned in there, where Masaccio’s frescoes glow in soft sad colours in his chapel, and the old beggars keep guard over the doors; the rest of the party were faithful to their aim, and went on to the little whitewashed building close by.

He rejoined them when they came out, and they wound through more dark crooked historic streets—streets where, as you pass, memories jostle you, and the famous dead come to life again, streets which are gloomy and yet brightened by flashes of gay colour; until they came to the Pitti, and so on to the Old Bridge. There, on either side, are the goldsmiths’ shops, which long years have kept unchanged, where, in little dens scarcely big enough to hold their master, twisted coils of yellow-looking pearls hang in long loops, and diamonds flash, and forget-me-nots of blue turquoises are heaped up; while behind, the quaint buildings bulge out in all sorts of strange shapes, with red roofs stuck on, and rooms hanging over those great stone arches under which Arno comes swooping down in all his winter strength and fulness. And there, in the centre, is the opening through which Tito leapt to his death, hounded on by the people behind him, the opening through which you may see the sunset lights softly touching the Carrara mountains, and turning the muddy river into a tawny sheet of gold.

To Bice it was full of strange new beauty; it seemed to her as if she had never known before what it was like. Ibbetson had been separated from her when they came out from the church, and had walked for a little while with Phillis, but he had come back to her again, and talked quietly and kindly. Phillis and Beatrice were not very much thrown together, but the girl often looked at the other, whose face attracted her powerfully. She noticed, too, that when information was wanted, if Phillis were asked she invariably had it to give, and she said something of the sort to Jack.

“Is it so?” he said, with a little surprise in the question. “I had no notion Miss Grey had had time to read up much about the place.”

Mr Trent kept out of Bice’s way, it seemed as if nothing were to interfere with her happiness, or as if, by sheer force of will, she were able to ward off whatever threatened. They were to drive back in the cool evening, and when they

reached Casa Giulia, there was tea, and more sitting about in the pleasant drawing-room or under the glossy magnolias. Somehow or other, Ibbetson was generally near Bice. He had no intention of neglecting Phillis, but the last few days had thrown him into another circle of interests from which she was shut out, and the strong pity he felt for Bice demanded a good deal of attention for her—or so he thought. He was pretty sure, too, that Phillis would have shrunk from any open appearance of claiming her on his part, she was too shy to stand it. “And, after all, she has got what she wants,” he said in his heart with a bitterness which was not like himself, but which showed itself when he thought of Hetherton.

It was settled that they should all drive out to the villa on Tuesday and see something of the vintage, which would be at its height in the vineyards. Then the carriage came round and the little party separated. Florence was no longer white but golden, and there was a sort of golden mist before Bice’s eyes as they drove away into the Cascine woods. Was it over? Had it been no more than a dream, and was she going back to a reality which grew darker and darker every hour? Her heart cried out in passionate denial. Clive should be saved by other means—for she was in one of those moods when anything seems possible—and she would act in defiance of Oliver. She looked at him as she made the resolution, and it is possible that he read the defiance in her eyes. But for the moment he did nothing more than address a few languid remarks to Mrs Masters, who was getting drowsy. They went climbing slowly up the stony roads, through the vineyards. The glow faded away, a fragrant stillness seemed to rest; here and there an olive tree stretched out its grey and solemn boughs. Only once they passed a peasant; he had his dog with him, and a gun, and was perhaps going home from watching the vines. No one had spoken for at least ten minutes, when Oliver Trent touched Kitty.

“Are you dreaming, too?” he asked softly. “Wake up, child, you are too young to be tired and sleepy with the rest of us. And I have not inquired how you enjoyed your day, or how you liked my Bologna acquaintances? It is strange, is it not, that your new friend, Mr Ibbetson, should have been travelling with them? Leyton told me the reason, he is engaged to Miss Grey, and they are to be married very shortly.”

Chapter Eight.

“Blue Bubbles of Grapes down a Vineyard Row.”

The cleverest men make mistakes, and Oliver Trent had made a second. He had not told Bice his news about Ibbetson cruelly, or in such a manner as to force her to feel that either by start or word she had revealed to another the secret of which she had not actually been conscious until that moment. He had only mentioned it in her hearing, when the dusk of evening was there to hide any sign of emotion, treating it as a trivial matter with which Kitty was at least as much concerned as she, and he had talked on so as to give her time to recover her composure. His mistake lay in telling her at all. A woman who has received a wound of this kind may be brave enough to hide the wound, but she never forgets the hand that has wounded her. To the day of her death its touch recalls something of the sharpness of the first pang.

No one saw much of Bice through the next day. Trent let her alone, having a perception that she would not brook interference, and that, at whatever cost, he must be patient. Mrs Masters, when he asked her, said that she had taken Andrea’s daughter, Chiara, and had gone up to the *podere* to speak about the vintage.

“You let her do too much of that sort of work,” said Trent, frowning.

“How can I help it?” asked Mrs Masters, moving uneasily in her chair. “She has been accustomed to it ever since she was a child. I am quite unfitted for it, and, as you know, it is impossible for me to keep an agent. This poverty is odious. I suppose we shall save something this winter by letting the villa, and living with the Capponis in Rome; otherwise I have spent all the money you lent me, and have never even dared tell Bice I had it from you.”

“And how do you mean to help Clive?”

“I cannot, I cannot!” she said, beginning to cry helplessly. “How is it possible? You will do something for the poor boy, Oliver?”

“Why?”

“Why?”

She looked at him in bewilderment.

“He is my cousin, certainly,” he said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, “but, on the whole, I have a good many cousins, and have never committed myself to the idea that I was bound to be general guardian and protector to all the young idiots among them who run their heads against stone walls. I don’t even profess to be a benevolent philanthropist. I have told you before that I will do what I can for Clive on one condition—that Bice marries me. You had better urge her not to keep me too long in suspense. Patience is not my chief virtue.”

“I will, indeed—to-day.”

“Not to-day,” said Oliver, considering. “To-morrow. Say as much as you like about Clive, but do not let her know I have desired you to speak to her. And stay, you had better own that you have borrowed money from me.”

“It will make her so angry,” said Mrs Masters piteously.

“No matter, I wish her to know the fact. You will want more, I suppose, when Bice is my wife, and you will not find me ungenerous.”

He left her crying, but her tears lay very near the surface, and he was not even made uncomfortable by them. It was curious how, in a scene of this sort, all his softness of manner and voice seemed, without any remarkable change, to become frozen or petrified, so as to give the impression that it was in vain to attempt to affect him. He had been disappointed when he came back to find Bice a little further from him than when he had left her, and he was determined to risk everything to put matters on a secure footing. Why should they not marry at once?

As for Bice, she was not angry, as he had hoped, or even hurt, her dream having been too short and vague for any hopes to have actually shaped themselves in her heart. She was conscious that during the last few days some sweet atmosphere had seemed to have surrounded her, and that suddenly, after Trent's words to Kitty the evening before, a dull weight had fallen which told her what it all meant. Her heart ached with the burden of this weight, but the poor child did not cry out against any other for having brought it on her. She was humble with all her pride. Nobody's fault, only a man's kindness and a girl's mistake—a common story enough; something which a day had brought and long years must carry as bravely as they could, and without a word. She thought of Phillis without any bitterness of jealousy. He had been hers all the time, nothing to any one else—that was all. She walked on and on, up the steep hill, through the pleasant grassy paths between the vines. Chiara toiled after, chattering, exclaiming, every now and then when she stumbled or grew hot, saying, Florentine fashion, naughty things of the Madonna or the saints.

It was the time which, of all the times of the year, Bice loved the best. As she turned into a larger vineyard, its exceeding beauty flashed upon her in spite of her heavy-heartedness. It was as well kept, as daintily trim as a garden, only the vines swept freely from tree to tree, climbing, curving, flinging their long tendrils, with all the bounty of unchecked luxuriance. The sun was shining on the gleaming leaves, on the purple and yellow splendours of the fruit, on the women's gay dresses as they stood under the trees and caught the branches which the men cut off with their sickles. Carts, painted in brightest vermilion, stood in the cool shadows of higher trees, the beautiful white oxen, with soft eyes and huge wide-stretching horns, waiting patiently until their rich load was ready. The *padrona* was welcomed volubly; the *contadino* in charge brought a couple of great bunches for her and for Chiara; the whole scene was so gay, so busy, and so bright, that poor Bice, who had come with a sort of determination to seek what might change her thoughts, turned away sick at heart. It was not only the fading of a shadowy dream; something there was more tangible, more oppressive; her own fate seemed to be closing round her; with the shattering of her visions had come the keener realisation of what hung over her—of Clive, of Oliver. All the pretty sights and sounds jarred. She gave her orders, and called Chiara away from her chatter, and went home, avoiding them all, or keeping Kitty close by her side whenever it became absolutely necessary to meet Oliver. That she must yield she did not doubt. All her castings about for deliverance from her doom seemed childish and hopeless. She must yield, but she clung to every hour gained as an infinite boon.

To-morrow, perhaps. Not at any rate to-day.

To-morrow, which must be so full of pain that a little more or less would scarcely be noted, and yet to which her foolish heart was flinging itself forward, dreading and longing for. After they had come and gone, after she had seen Jack once more, she thought she could do what had to be done, but not till then.

Phillis was looking with great interest at the old villa when they drove up to it early the next day. Miss Cartwright was not strong enough to venture on the drive, but Miss Preston was there laden with projects for the moral improvement of the *contadini*, and bent upon collecting a fund of valuable information as to the vintage of Tuscany and its shortcomings. Cartouche, with his head full of sweet recollections of *amoretti*, plunged at once into the thicket of scarlet geraniums which led down to Andrea's domain, and presently they heard the old cook's voice raised in high indignation as he drove him out. Captain Leyton was very much delighted with his own prospects. He was slung all over with sketch-books and water-bottles, and carried a great white sunshade with a pointed stick.

"Capital bits about the place, capital bits," he said cheerfully. "Nice tone of colour, plaster peeling off, fine arch, acanthus leaves against the stone—plenty to do here, and no mistake."

As they went into the house the sisters met them in the hall; Bice paler, and without the radiance of the day in Florence, but quiet and smiling. She gave one long and rather wistful look at Phillis, and Phillis noticed and flushed slightly under it.

"Will you come to the little room?" she said. "My mother is there, for the steps outside the window are cooler than any other place at this time of day."

She had scarcely spoken to Jack, and when she moved away he followed her with a dissatisfied feeling. As they passed through the silence of the great rooms he could not help contrasting this day with the first on which he had seen her, when he had been alone with her, and her frank determination had made him smile. Miss Preston, who was close to him now, was a very unwelcome substitute.

"It is too distressing," she was saying in a sharp undertone. "I have always known that the Italians had no idea of what was fitting, but not a carpet, not so much as a hearth-rug!"

"How would it answer to speculate in a few, and to bring them out for the good of this benighted people?" asked Jack dreamily.

Meanwhile Mrs Leyton, who liked it all, was genuinely enthusiastic.

"What a room for a dance! You *do* dance here, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! Sometimes Kitty and I dance together, or the Moronis come over, and then we are more," said Bice simply. "If you would like it, by-and-by we can wheel in the piano, and I will play for you." But seeing an irrepressible smile in Mrs Leyton's face, she coloured and said hotly, "You think us foolish—you don't do such things in England!"

It was Phillis who came to the rescue, eagerly and yet a little shyly.

"If we don't, it is not that you are foolish, only wiser than we are, and lighter-hearted. It takes a great deal to make us dance in England—"

"Lights and music and a month's preparation, and then enough people to prevent the risk of anyone being seen," added Jack. "Your plan is much the most sensible, Miss Masters. But you see we have all been brought up to think it a serious matter, and so for the moment you shocked our prejudices."

But Bice was vexed. It always vexed her that anything, however slight, should mark her as un-English in her ways. She walked gravely through the other rooms holding her head with a little haughtiness. It passed, however, directly they had joined her mother and Oliver Trent in the smaller room—she was watching Ibbetson and Phillis.

Phillis, as often seemed the case, happened to be a little apart from the others. She sat quietly, saying little herself, but evidently interested in what was going on. Twice Bice saw her, apparently unperceived by the others, do a trifling kindness; once in disentangling Miss Preston's veil which was in danger of being torn, and once in placing outside the window a stray butterfly which was blundering up and down against the glass. But she seemed to have a little difficulty in joining the gay-spirited chat which flowed with unbroken ease from Mrs Leyton, and if Jack addressed her, she showed a greater hesitation. Here was no secure and haughty rival to sting poor Bice by contempt; the girl, who would have had the worst side of her nature roused by such treatment, felt for Phillis a strange thrill of pitying sympathy. Yet pitying is hardly the right word. There was something about her which Bice envied, a kind of sweet dignity, of self-possession, in spite of shyness.

Captain Leyton very soon began to fidget over his opportunities.

"And if he once sits down to a sketch there will be no moving him!" said his wife with good-humoured impatience.

"Let somebody suggest a means of prevention, then," said Jack. "You shall have mine first—the vineyards."

"Perhaps that would be the best plan—"

"You will miss the long shadows," Bice said doubtfully.

"But we shall get them in this enchanting garden," exclaimed Mrs Leyton. "I know exactly how it will be with Arthur otherwise. Cart ropes won't drag him away when once he has begun a sketch."

She had her way, as she generally had, and the eight started, a merry party to all appearance, though there were doubts and heart sinkings pressing heavily on more than one of the eight. Cartouche was left behind, to his great disgust, but too many dogs were employed in the vineyards for it to be safe to take him.

"It always seems strange to me that your vineyards should be so undefended," Jack said, determined to speak to Bice. "Have you such perfect trust in the honesty of your fellow-creatures?"

"Touch a grape and you will see," answered the girl briefly.

"What shall I see?"

"A man with a gun. And he will be quite ready to use it. The very dogs are trained to watch."

"You excite my curiosity. I shall experimentalise to-day."

"To-day you will be safe, because you will be with the *padrona*. But I do not advise you to try elsewhere." He noticed with vexation that her manner was abrupt, and that she evidently tried to avoid him. Had anything offended her? He determined to win her back to the easy frankness which he had found so charming that he had no mind to part with it.

"So that is why Cartouche was not allowed to come?" he said with a smile. "Do you know how he distinguished himself last night? Somehow or other he got on the roof and sat there. Quite a crowd gathered round the house before we had any idea what was the attraction, and Winter, my aunt's maid, went into hysterics. But I assure you his effect among the chimneys was absolutely demoniacal."

She smiled, but she was looking straight before her. Why did not some one join them? she thought with a throb. Why did he talk to her? Why was fate so cruel and yet so sweet that she could not get away from it? Apparently her coldness only provoked Jack, who wanted nothing more than her past friendliness, but thought himself ill-used at its withdrawal. He said at last boldly—

"Something has vexed you. What is it? Has anything fresh turned up about your brother?"

She coloured and caught at his second question, feeling that sooner than let her secret betray itself she would talk with him, walk with him, and endure any torture.

"Nothing new," with a faltering voice. "We have not heard again from Clive, any of us. But it is impossible to forget; and oh, Mr Ibbetson, I wanted to say that I have thought it over a great deal—I mean what you were so kind as to suggest the other day. But it is impossible; it is of no use. Nothing seems as if it could be of use." She corrected herself. "I should not say that; Mr Trent will do his utmost."

"Anyone would do his utmost," said Jack, more warmly than he need have spoken. It was almost impossible for poor Bice to repel his eagerness and kindness. They were a little in advance of the others, the path went twisting and

clambering upwards. Once, perhaps because she was not thinking of the rough stones, she slipped, and he put out his hand and caught hers. It was not for more than a minute, but those behind saw the movement. Jack did not know it himself, but this shrinking, this apparent coldness of the girl's was stirring him to a stronger interest. All his life as yet he had had pretty much what he cared for—liking, popularity, success; finally, a fortune and a wife were waiting for him. The things had come too easily, so that a charm was wanting in them all. It piqued and roused him when he found a difficulty in the way. If he had known what he was heaping up for Bice it would have shocked him. She did know, and had thought that she would avoid him; but he would not be avoided, he was bent, as it seemed, upon monopolising her. The poor child was bewildered, miserable, happy, all at once. Trent, who had fancied he had stopped it, was furious.

Along the slopes of those hills of Florence there are lovely delicate colours and sweet pastoral pictures meeting you at every turn. Looking upwards you see Pan leaning against a tree, his goats browsing round him, over his head a vine is flinging itself from bough to bough. Grey olives clothe the slopes; a sombre cypress rises like a sharp blot against the blue; an ox-cart comes rumbling down the road; far away in the plain the river shines till the mountains rise up beyond. In the vineyard to which they went that day you may look along a broad grass walk for a quarter of a mile at least; on either side of it the vines clamber from tree to tree, and at the end rises a distant line of Apennines, glowing faintly purple in the sunshine; the grapes—white, pink, yellow, purple, black—gleam with the most exquisite lights, the very shade seems to be lit up by them, luminous colours flash out from under fresh leaves, from wreaths of cool foliage.

Captain Leyton was in an ecstasy of despair. The head *contadino* came up to Bice smiling and showing his white teeth.

"Are there any grapes in particular the signorina would like for her friends?" he asked. "The biggest of all this year is Il Bordone."

And then at a sign one of the men in the trees cut a branch or two with his sickle. Miss Preston began to demand particulars.

"The signora will see," said the *contadino*, rather perplexed. "The women carry the grapes to the tubs; there is one close by which is just full."

He was right. A girl had just brought the last load of long festooning branches to a tall wooden tub. She was cutting off the bunches with her sickle, and letting them drop among the others already piled high, a mass of beautiful colours. Then a man, standing by and leaning on a thick stick, began to thump and beat them down into a pulpy mass. Miss Preston was very much interested; Phillis turned away, she could not bear to look at all the beauty beaten out of shape. She strolled into a little grassy side path from which, out of the way, she could see the gay and busy scene. Two men passed her presently carrying the tub, suspended from a stick, to the ox-carts which stood, brilliant bits of colour, in the shade. Phillis was left quite to herself; every now and then she caught a glimpse of one of the party crossing an alley, moving here and there among the vines and the sweet changeable lights. She saw Jack and Bice together; he was bending down and speaking. The beauty of everything seemed to add to the pain in Phillis's heart. If we want to describe pain we are inclined to throw its gloom upon all the surroundings, to paint the outward signs of sadness in greys and dim cheerless tones. But who knows whether to an aching heart the glow of sunshine and the fairness of nature do not bring the keenest sting of all?

Phillis's pain was full of perplexity. She wanted to be sure what was right, what was best for Jack, and for all. Her nature was altogether true, simple, and free from the snare of self-torment, so that she was spared many doubts in her life; only at this time they seemed to gather about her like a mist. She knew little of the world. Mrs Thornton was her aunt, she had lived at Hetherton since she had been a child, and Mr Thornton was fond of her in his rough way, and had made out this plan of his with a good deal of satisfaction.

"Two disinterested young fools," he had said to himself, chuckling, "or at any rate they think themselves so. Play them off against one another. See if that don't bring them together."

As it did.

Only it gave Jack the unjust impression that Phillis was swayed by the desire to keep her position, and left him quite unconscious that to her the threat of disinheriting him had been used. But, indeed, for her no threat was needed. Jack had been her hero from the time when she looked shyly at the big, fair-haired boy from the school-room window. It amazed her when he asked her to marry him, but she took his words with the simple trust which belonged to her character, and was quite content to be happy. Should she have done otherwise? she thought—looking back with a vague uneasiness. For, alas, she had begun to doubt, to wonder. In the long days of travelling together, in the letters he had written, something had forced itself upon her. Perhaps he had hardly cared it should be otherwise, hardly wished to profess more than the quiet liking he unquestionably felt, had no misgivings that she herself would desire more. At any rate she had reached Florence in some perplexity of mind, and by this time imagined that she had found the solution of her riddle.

It was curious how little Ibbetson knew of her true character. He believed her to be easily influenced by stronger wills, and, indeed, to require some such support. In reality her judgment was clear, and, once formed, no pain would turn her from what she felt to be the right course. There, sitting between the vines, she set herself to consider it. If Ibbetson did not love her, whether he loved another or not, it would be wrong for them to marry. No dreams of his or her inheritance must affect the question. No visions of self-sacrifice would be safe guides. She went to work honestly, asking—how earnestly!—for the "right judgment," and she would not shrink though the answer came heavy with pain.

Phillis sat on, forgetting what was round her. The peasant girls looked with some wonder at the signorina who stayed

there away from all her party. Presently Jack, who had missed her, came to search for her, a little vexed with her and with himself. But Phillis showed no displeasure, she only rose with a smile and told him that she had been resting, but that she would not be unsociable any longer.

Chapter Nine.

Bice Writes.

Oliver Trent had been too much enraged by Ibbetson's monopolisation of Bice to be as prudent as was his wont; indeed, he began to feel as if he had been over cautious already, and that it would have been wiser to have checked matters more decidedly. She avoided him, but he was determined to give his warning, and when Jack went to seek Phillis he caught at the opportunity to say—

"New friends for old—is that your last motto, Bice?"

"What do you mean?" she said, faltering.

"I mean that I could envy you your powers of forgetfulness if I did not unfortunately happen to be one of the sufferers. Clive and I—have we really altogether dropped out of your mind?"

"You take care to prevent such a possibility, even for a moment," she said angrily.

"Oh, I will not offend you again, if that is your feeling. I will leave Florence to-morrow morning, and nothing shall remind you of my existence. As for Clive, I am afraid I cannot make so large a promise."

She was so changed and shaken, that for the first time in her life he frightened her. She felt as if she were powerless in a strong grasp. Where could she turn?

"Why do you say this to me, Oliver?" she said slowly. "What have I done? I have not forgotten your goodness about Clive, or—what you said. Why should I? There is no one else to whom I can turn. But you—you should not oblige me to speak of it here, with all these people as our guests."

She said the words very softly and gently, but she did not look at him as she spoke.

"When will you speak, then?" he said moodily. "To-night?"

"Not to-night, not to-night, please! To-morrow."

"I am tired of to-morrows. Why should it always be to-morrow? No. This evening in the garden."

She did not contradict him any further. After all, it was hardly worth while.

Ibbetson could not get any more conversation with Bice on their way back to the villa, for Oliver quietly baffled his attempts, and Miss Preston was pouring out to every one her own views as to possible improvements in the vintage—the grapes should be trained differently, there should be a revolving wheel in the tubs, someone should read to the *contadine*.

"Still I own to one improvement, for I am pleased to have had ocular demonstration that the barbarous fashion of treading out the grapes is no longer in practice. It gives one a certain hope."

"But that is another stage," exclaimed Kitty innocently; "don't you know? They put the grapes into huge shallow tubs and jump on them till the juice is extracted. All the boys and girls help. After our share has been weighed in the cellar we shall make it at home."

The little party were playing at cross-purposes all the way back. Perhaps no one was content, not even Captain Leyton, who gazed moodily at a blot of green, purple, and golden, which was all he had got out of the vineyard. Bice looked pale and depressed, and said nothing to Oliver, who marched by her side all down the hill. Mrs Leyton tried to draw a little amusement out of the others by talking of them to Phillis, but Phillis, too, was silent.

After luncheon they went different ways. Bice took Miss Preston, who was anxious, as she said, to make the round of the premises; Captain Leyton became supremely happy over a promising sketch; the others strolled or sat about, eating figs and peaches, Mr Trent keeping near Jack, though with little pretence at cordiality. Phillis, who wanted time for herself, slipped away at last with Cartouche for a companion, and wandered about in the quiet alleys, of which there were so many. Suddenly she turned a corner and came upon Bice alone.

Something—stronger than circumstances—had all along attracted these two to each other. They were different, but each had a certain nobility of soul which may have had something to do with the attraction. Each had grown up out of the world, and though Bice had had sharp experience of evil, it was not the evil of petty spites and jealousies. Then for Phillis beauty alone had that intense charm and interest which it often has for those who themselves lack its power, and she felt a strong pity for the girl who had looked sad all the day, and now had evidently been crying; a pity no less real because she believed that she herself must take up the burden of pain if she were to relieve it. She could not pass by, or pretend not to see.

"I am afraid you are unhappy," she said gently. "Mr Ibbetson said that you were very anxious about your brother, but he told us no particulars. Is he ill, or is he in trouble? Can we help you in any way? I should be very glad if you would try not to look upon me as a stranger, although I know it is difficult."

Bice, whose heart was in a tumult, who did not know what to think, who believed she hated Oliver, Jack, Phillis, and herself most of all, was touched in a moment, not so much perhaps by the words, as by the kind, steadfast eyes which interpreted them.

"I don't think it is difficult," she said, and with a sudden impulse she caught Phillis's hand and kissed her. "Ever since I saw you I have felt somehow as if you would do us good."

For the moment she had forgotten Jack. Phillis, who read more in the words than the girl meant, felt her heart swell.

"Perhaps I can," she said steadily. "Things often come about in the manner we least expect. Who knows whether you and I, if we put our heads together, may not find a way out of some of your troubles? Can you trust me with them?"

"Yes," said Bice after a moment's pause. "Oliver forbade me to speak, but I don't see that he knows best. I don't know who to consult. I asked Mr Ibbetson, and he seemed to think it all very bad indeed." She went on hurriedly. "There were some things I could not tell him—but you! Oh, I am very, very miserable. Do you think it will be very ungrateful of me if Mr Trent saves Clive and yet I do not marry him?"

"Is that what he wishes?"

"Yes. He says he risks everything—that it is only for me."

"And you don't love him?"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

The girl shivered as she spoke. There was a little pause, then Phillis said—

"How long has he been asking you to do this?"

"I don't know," Bice said, letting her hands drop wearily. "Ever since he brought us the bad news of Clive, I suppose. But it is in the last few days that he has said the most, and every day it seems to grow worse and worse. To-night I must tell him."

Phillis took her hands in hers and looked into her face.

"You must tell him you will not marry him," she said quietly.

The girl's face flushed with sudden joy, then the colour faded quite away.

"Ah! you don't know," she said, shaking her head. "So much I do know. Nothing that you can tell me can make wrong right. But perhaps you will let me hear more."

"Wrong?" repeated Bice, looking at her. To her, poor child, it seemed that she was only shrinking from a duty, from the stern call to self-sacrifice. That there could be any higher principle, that no aim, whether we call it self-sacrifice, or self-surrender, or anything else, can sanctify one step taken out of the right road, she did not realise. All her life she had been brought up to think of right and wrong as having somewhat hazy outlines. As she told Clive's story over again, perhaps she dwelt more on the fear of disgrace than on his sin. But she could not help noticing the look of pain which gathered in Phillis's brown eyes. She stopped and sighed.

"Now you are shocked," she said. "So was Mr Ibbetson. You think it is hopeless."

"Wait a moment," said Phillis, "let me think."

They walked on silently beneath the trees; the grass near them was lilac with autumnal crocuses, a great crimson rose swung itself down from a pole.

"I wonder if I am right," Phillis said, hesitatingly. "It seems to me there might be some mistake. Mr Trent may not know, and you have no right to think hard things of your brother without proof. Surely you will ask him, ask him directly."

"But Oliver said—"

"Oh, never mind," said Phillis, with a touch of impatience. "Tell him that you can't follow his advice in that respect. Suppose it is not so bad as he imagines, I don't see how you can expect Mr Masters to forgive your want of confidence. No, be open and write. Perhaps he can clear himself. At any rate do not marry without love. If Mr Trent is an honourable man, he will not attempt to take advantage of your anxiety."

Phillis had not meant to say so much, but feeling strongly as to Mr Trent's conduct, she could not abstain. An instinctive aversion had risen in her mind when she first saw him at Bologna, and this story of Bice's awoke more doubts, not to use the harsher word suspicions, than she liked to acknowledge even to herself. At the best his conduct was both ungenerous and unmanly.

Bice caught at her advice, which seemed to lift off some of her perplexities. She was very grave and quiet all the rest of the afternoon, keeping away as much as she could from both Jack and Oliver, and looking every now and then wistfully at Phillis. If she had known what Phillis, too, was thinking, what other resolutions had been made on that day, when doubts and fears seemed to be flying about in the air!

They dined at the marble table on the terrace, and the picture, with the piled-up fruits, the dancing shadows, was as pretty as when Jack first saw it, though he had a dissatisfied feeling of change. Cartouche sat on a balustrade, and

caught grapes when anyone threw them to him. Captain Leyton was full of glee at having got one of the gardeners to stand as a foreground for his sketch. Trent looked uneasily at Bice; she was quieter, and did not shrink from his glance as she had done in the morning, and he was not sure that it was a good sign.

She did not shrink either when they had watched the others drive away; on the contrary, she told Kitty she had something to say to Oliver, and herself led the way to a seat under the banksia trellis close to the pond, where yellow and white water lilies were still flowering. He watched her very closely. Her mood puzzled him, and he wanted her to be the first to speak. She did speak at last, without looking at him. "You had something to say?"

"No," he said quietly, "nothing. You mistook my meaning, Bice. I have said my say, and that perhaps was more than was wise or prudent. But I do not regret it. I said it, and already have taken steps to carry out what I promised. I have nothing either to add or to retract. But you!—have you not tried me enough? Do you ever think of the hours of torture you are inflicting?—such hours as to-day for instance, when I have been driven mad with doubts and fears? Is it not you who have something to say?"

She was silent. A month ago it would have been impossible for her to have listened unmoved to such an appeal, but a month ago she had never loved, and love—unreturned—hardens the heart strangely against another lover. His words seemed to her unreal and almost absurd. He put out his hand and took hers, and she caught it away angrily.

"Let me go, Oliver!" she exclaimed.

"Why do you turn from me, why do you hesitate?" he went on, in a voice which shook with his efforts at control. "You cannot doubt my love, for I could hardly give you a greater proof than I am giving. Danger, risk of ruin, all would seem to me as absolutely nothing compared with one word from you; and though all I do I do for your sake, you will not speak that word, Bice. Is this generous?"

"I don't wish you to run those risks."

"Do you forget what you said? 'At all risks.' That was your request."

"Then I was wrong, and you were wrong," said the girl, more faintly.

"Perhaps. But the alternative?"

"I have an alternative. I shall write to Clive." Oliver grew pale.

"You have, then, no more wish to save him?"

"He may not have done it, he may be able to explain, and it is shameful of us to condemn him unheard."

"I warn you, Bice, that you will put it out of my power to save him."

"We must run the risk," she answered, in a low, resolute voice.

Oliver could scarcely restrain his passion. He was certain that Ibbetson was at the bottom of her determination, and it seemed as if all his plots, his hopes, were to be baffled by this man. He longed to charge her with it, to taunt her with Jack's engagement, but he did not dare, for Bice's was not a nature which could be safely goaded into resentment, and he feared the flash of her eyes and what it might tell him. He controlled himself.

"Write, then," he said, "write at once. Clive will not acknowledge that anything is wrong."

"We shall see."

"And am I still to be your shuttlecock?" he said hoarsely. "Have pity, Bice, have pity! Such love as mine deserves some return—"

She interrupted him.

"It deserves to find love, I know, and that is what I have not got to give. I am very sorry, Oliver, only I must be true with you, at all costs."

"You are rather late in your resolves," he said, biting his lip until the blood sprang.

"I have thought and hoped," she said, looking down, "that one day I might feel differently, and be able to give you what you wanted, if only out of gratitude to you for your kindness. I thought, perhaps, it was that you had taken me by surprise, that I was ignorant and inexperienced, and that my feelings would change."

"You were right!" he cried vehemently. "Think so still, Bice, my darling, my own! You do not know, how should you? Marry me, and I will teach you to love me. I have no fear, no doubt."

"But now I know," she said, going on as if he had not spoken, "and it is all different. I can't marry you, even to save Clive. I could not even if I had promised. Do not be sorry, Oliver, I am not worth it."

"It is easy to say 'Do not.' Do you suppose our feelings are so under control that we can master them at pleasure?" he retorted with bitterness. "You let me hope, you hold the cup almost to my lips, and then tell me not to be sorry when it is dashed away. Who has been teaching you to play fast and loose, Bice? Who has shaken your faith in your friends? When will one of them do what I have done, what I am ready to do? Has your mother told you that she has borrowed money from me to pay her debts, because she did not doubt—"

He stopped. Bice had sprung up, pale, with flashing eyes.

"That is not true!" she cried.

"Is it not? Ask her."

She looked at him as if she would pierce his soul. Alas, it is not always the most innocent souls which bear such looks without faltering! Her own eyes fell. "I will pay it," she said in a low voice.

"That is folly."

"I will pay it," she repeated, this time angrily.

"Do so," he said after a moment's pause. And then he added, "but remember this. If your mother had had from me a hundred times as much she would not have done me as much harm as you will do me if you throw me over."

Was it true? Had she indeed worked all this evil? Would it not be easier to yield as she had meant to do that morning? He was so persistent, he would not give her up. She hesitated, and then, strong and clear, Phillis's words came back—"Do not marry him if you do not love him." She looked him full in the face. "Let me pass," she said, "I can give you no other answer." He had read something of the struggle, and was bitterly disappointed, though his determined will gave up nothing of his intention.

"If you write to Clive, it had better be without delay," he said.

"I'll write to-morrow morning." And then she turned and put out her hand. "Thank you for letting me write, Oliver."

"I dare not advise you to build upon it, but you can try," he said. "Yes, by all means try."

The next morning, as Bice was passing through the hall, she met Trent.

"If you have any letters for the early post," he said, "I will take them, I am going into Florence."

"Oh, thank you very much. I had meant to send little 'Tista."

"'Tista is wanted for the vintage, and is not an over-safe messenger. Is this all?"

"All. Thank you again. That letter is a weight off my mind. I am sure he will answer it."

"I fancy not, but, as I said, one can but try. Nothing more? Rest in the garden, Bice, and do not go again to the vineyards. You look tired and pale. Such walks as yesterday do you no good."

"Rest!" she repeated impatiently. "You talk as if one could turn all the thoughts out of one's head whenever one liked. That might be rest."

"I wish you would let me do your thinking for you."

He spoke tenderly, and she turned suddenly and looked at him. He could not understand her look, which was at once inquiring and reproachful, and, indeed, at this time all her thoughts were in a tangle. Doubts, suspicions, generous impulses, womanly pride, womanly fears, seemed to shake her very soul, and drive it on one side and the other. Sometimes she felt as if she had not a friend in the world, as if the only haven open to her was one she loathed. Even with Phillis it was all a strange inexplicable problem. Phillis had brought her sharpest pangs, yet attracted her irresistibly. Phillis, too, was unhappy, of that she was certain; yet something about her, something which Bice felt without being able to explain, gave her a sense of rest and confidence. It was as if she had an anchor which must keep her from the tossing of such storms as were driving poor Bice here and there. Vague thoughts came floating about her, half prayers, half resolutions, feeble and fluttering, yet real and therefore not in vain.

Chapter Ten.

Sans Partir Adieu!

Miss Cartwright was really ill. And of all who loved and cared for her, there was not one who showed more affection than Cartouche. They had thought that he was only a puppy, that nothing in the world was so much to him as a run by the Arno or a frolic in the Cascine woods, but now, when his mistress was ill, he could not be coaxed to either the one or the other. He watched at her door, and, if he could get the chance, crept into her room, and looked at her with questioning, loving eyes. Once when the doctor came to her bed, to his alarm there rose up a black form from the other side, growling angrily, and bent on resolute defence of his mistress. And another time they found that he had dragged together a heap of her shoes and slippers, over which he was keeping watch and ward. Phillis was a great deal with her, Miss Cartwright evidently liking the girl's companionship, and watching her as she sat at the window with wistful interest.

"My dear," she said suddenly one day, "this stupid illness of mine mustn't interfere with Jack's happiness. Remember, the wedding was to be at Florence, and, perhaps, if it had not been for me, it would all have been settled by this time."

Phillis turned away her head as she answered—

"I don't think it can be so soon as you fancy."

"But why?" Miss Cartwright persisted. "On my account? Come, my dear, tell me exactly whether that has not been on your mind and Jack's."

"He has not spoken about it," said the girl with an effort. "Indeed, dear Miss Cartwright—"

"Call me Aunt Mary, my dear."

"It can't be yet."

Miss Cartwright said no more, she was hardly equal to any sustained conversation, but she took an opportunity later in the day to tell Jack that Phillis should go out for a walk. "Take her to the Uffizi," she said; "and, Jack—"

"Yes."

"Don't give me the sorrow of feeling that I am a hindrance. Let me hear that your marriage day is fixed."

As she spoke he noticed with a pang how much she was altered, and with a sudden movement stooped down and kissed her.

"I would do anything in the world that could please you," he said.

She held him fast with her feeble hands.

"My dear, she is worth much more than *that*," she said eagerly. "But I don't think you yet know how much, and I am sometimes afraid she will never let you know."

"What do you mean?" he said, startled. But he could not get her to explain.

She had put into words what he had avoided forming into a definite idea. In his heart he knew that he ought to have spoken to Phillis about their wedding day, but it was so much more to his inclination that matters should go on as they had been going, that he had refused to think about the future. He had been out once or twice to the villa, and though Oliver was on guard, and though Bice showed the same reserve, it interested him to break through it, as he had once or twice succeeded in doing, and he was beginning to take a dangerous pleasure in thwarting Oliver. However, he had spoken quite truly when he told his aunt that he would do anything in the world to give her pleasure, and he had no intention of avoiding the conversation with Phillis, only looking forward to it somewhat ruefully, as leading matters to a point which he would have preferred to regard for some while yet in the distance.

She was quite ready to go to the Uffizi when he suggested it, but asked to go round by the Duomo and Giotto's tower. The day was not very bright, but there was a still grave beauty about it. They went under the frowning walls of the Strozzi into the old market with its narrow, dirty, picturesque, unchanged alleys. Even when great bundles of yellow and scarlet tulips, fresh from the fields, and splendid in the glory of their colours, lie tossed upon the ground, or when myriads of lilies of the valley are gathered into fragrant sheaves, this old market of Florence is not a place in which you can linger without some offence to eye or ear. And yet joy, too, were it only for these things, or for the sweet Madonna with her lilies which Luca della Robbia set up with faithful reverence for the buyers and sellers below. But in autumn days flowers do not deck Florence with the bounty of spring or summer. Vegetables there are in plenty—cucumbers, and scarlet tomatoes, and crisp white lettuces; and as for the fruits, they are heaped in great piles; melons—striped, smooth, small, large—lie under cool green leaves; rosy peaches, figs, purple and green, wild strawberries, grapes of every shade of delicious colour, brighten the old stones; but a certain grace has fled with the flowers, and Florence is not quite herself.

And yet on that day it was difficult to think that anything was wanting, so tender were the lights, so soft the shadows, into and out of which—with here and there a rosy or a golden glow as a stronger gleam struck the marbles—rose the Duomo and the Shepherd's bell-tower. Phillis lingered there a little, lingered looking at the gates of the Baptistery, at Giotto's sculptures, at the little oratory of the Bigallo on the other side.

"There is so much, and it is all so close together!" she said, drawing a deep breath.

But, indeed, the wonder of Florence lies in her perpetual youth. She is old, and yet no touch of age seems to have passed over her. All around are the memories of past ages, but they are alive and present, and time scarcely seems to separate you from them. It would not surprise you to see Giotto standing under his tower, to meet Dante turning towards his house, Savonarola passing to the preaching, Romola—as real as any—hurrying back to old Bardi. Our past grows mouldy, whereas here it keeps life, and colour, and reality. Is it that we are always trying to escape from it?

The Uffizi was rather empty. There were plenty of copyists, most of all, as usual, round the great Fra Angelico, with its praising angels, in the passage, but otherwise strangers were few. Jack, who had a craze for Botticelli, would not let Phillis rest until he had taken her to the Judith in the room next the Tribune. She comes towards you more lightly than Judith would have done after the deed, but the strong purpose, the self-forgetfulness of the face, are wonderful; and as the yellow morning light catches the grey blue of her dress, she looks far beyond you, and beyond what you are ever likely to see. Presently from her lips will come the cry of deliverance, "Open, open now the gates!" and all Bethulia will press round to see and hear. Jack, who had learnt Botticelli from Ruskin, was full of enthusiasm, and dragged Phillis off to the Calumny, the Fortitude. He made her sit down in a corner where she could see the last-named well, and then a thought struck him.

"Your face isn't unlike Sandro's favourite type, Phillis," he said, looking at her critically.

She coloured slightly as she smiled.

"Except for the far-away look, this Fortitude hardly seems to me to be one of that type."

"You have that far-away look occasionally: you sometimes meet me with it. What are you thinking about?—our future?"

"Of the future, perhaps."

"Ours, then."

Phillis was silent. The Fortitude seemed to gaze at her with sympathetic eyes. Jack went on gravely and a little awkwardly.

"It is time we settled something, don't you think so?"

"Yes," she said in a very low voice.

"My aunt is exceedingly anxious that we should not delay on account of her illness, and I don't see that we need. We are both resolved that our wedding shall be as quiet and simple as possible, and really it will be a relief to her mind rather than an anxiety. Therefore, dear, only one thing remains—to fix the day."

He did not look at Phillis as he spoke, and two people who glanced into the room thought the pair were a brother and sister bent on enjoying pictures which nobody in his senses could admire. Phillis said after a momentary pause—

"I am afraid that is not all."

"Trousseau, and that sort of thing? But surely it can wait for England?"

"Something of more consequence," and he noticed a tremor in her voice. "Jack," she went on, "you and I have always been good friends. I hope that will go on; I don't think I could bear to believe that anything could come between us in that. But for the other matter, dear, it has been a mistake, and I thank God that there is yet time to set it right. We are good friends always, remember, but we can be nothing more. I was wrong to consent, and my uncle was wrong to press it, as I think now he did; but he did it for the best, and, as I said, it can be set right."

"Phillis!"

She put up her hand.

"Hush! Spare me any reproaches or entreaties, Jack. If I have done wrong, I will take all the blame, and do my best to set matters right I hesitated for a time because I thought of Hetherton, but I feel almost sure that if I write to my aunt and explain how this is entirely my own doing, Mr Thornton's sense of justice will prevail, and that you will not suffer. But even should it be otherwise, we dare not make that the first consideration, dare we? I am certain that would be your decision."

"About Hetherton, yes," said Ibbetson, rising and standing by her chair with much agitation. "But I don't understand you, Phillis! Have you changed or I? What have I done to bring you to such a conclusion? You can't be thinking of all that your words imply. Are you offended with me?"

Her eyes, clear and steadfast, answered him, though her voice was shaken.

"Not offended. Offence could hardly dome between us. But don't you see, we should not be happy together, we could not marry."

"You could not be happy with me. That is what I must understand you to mean," he said with some bitterness. "And I don't know what I have done that you should change your opinion, if, indeed, you ever loved me."

If she ever loved him! What but love, tender and true, could have nerved her to the anguish of this moment, of all the moments that were coming! Not love him! She sighed, she had not thought her task would be so hard.

"We all make mistakes at times," she said, without answering his reproach, which, indeed, pricked his own conscience as he uttered it. "Let us be thankful, Jack, that this isn't irreparable."

"But why—why will you have it to be a mistake?" he asked doggedly.

"I leave that to you to answer," she said gravely, and he suddenly felt in her a womanly dignity of which he had not before been conscious. "I don't myself think that any good is to be gained by entering into explanations. You know in your heart that what I say is best for us both."

"I know nothing of the sort," he exclaimed; and indeed at this moment he would not acknowledge to himself that it was best. He had not wished to hurry on their marriage, but that was a different matter from giving up Phillis. And he could not help feeling that it was possible she might carry out her determination. But yesterday he would have smiled at the idea that he could not influence her in any direction he pleased. He had never understood her, and shyness had seemed to him such a marked feature in her character, that he had looked upon her as one who would be always willing to follow where others led, without attempting to exercise an independent judgment. In her words to-day, still more perhaps in her manner, there was a quiet resolution which for ever upset these preconceived ideas. This was no shy unformed girl, but a woman strong in her self-respect and self-control. "Phillis," he said, and there was greater warmth in his tone than he had ever shown her before, "for pity's sake don't let a vague fancy separate us. If you say nothing definite, how can I defend myself?"

He half expected her to answer that she did not accuse him; but she did not, although she seemed to ponder over his words.

"It is not a vague fancy," she said presently, and she spoke very quietly and sadly; "it is a conviction, which you will by-and-by acknowledge yourself."

"But—it is impossible—you don't really mean that it is all over between us? What reason can we give the Leytons—my uncle?"

"I will explain to both."

He walked away from her to the other side of the room, standing staring at a picture of Signorelli's without seeing it. She sat where he had left her, feeling as if she could not move, as if her own hands had wrecked her peace, as if for the moment she would give all she had to undo what she had done. And it was not over yet, though her strength failed as he left her side. He came back quickly.

"Have you really considered the bearings of the case? Hetherton, for instance?"

"I am very sorry for you," she said faintly. "How sorry I cannot say. But there is no one nearer. I think Mr Thornton must retract his words when he hears that this has been my doing."

"But what will be your own position?" Jack said with a certain effort.

She looked at him in bewilderment for a minute; then, as his meaning flashed on her, started to her feet. The tears sprang into her eyes, her voice trembled, but all her strength had come back.

"I have not deserved *that*," she said vehemently. No, indeed. In this great crash of hope of happiness which she had brought about, Hetherton might go without so much as a thought. It was a hundred times more to Ibbetson, who salved the soreness of his independence with the idea that he was indifferent, but who could scarcely enter into the trouble, his words had caused her. Had he, then, thought so meanly of her as to suppose that Hetherton had weighed? Oh, well that she had spoken, at whatever cost of pain! She began to walk away quickly through the rooms, and he, who had been startled out of another misconception, followed, feeling himself awkwardly placed as he did so. He kept close behind, but did not join her until they were near the bottom of the great staircase, and then she had recovered her composure, and made some indifferent remark about asking for letters at the post-office opposite. If you wish to change a conversation in Florence, there are plenty of sights and sounds which will effect your purpose. They chose a packet of the little photographs which are spread out under the arcades, turned as usual to look at the flower-like tower of the Palazzo Vecchio, and stared in at the windows of the mosaic workers. When they reached the Old Bridge a soldier's funeral was crossing it, and the people crowding. The regiment marched, the sun shone out for a moment on flashing steel and on young grave faces; behind came a group of the black and hooded Brothers of Mercy carrying lighted torches. They were all walking quickly, and the Old Bridge formed a strange mediaeval framework to the procession.

Ibbetson and Phillis dreaded silence too much not to make valiant efforts to avoid it all the way home by the Lung' Arno. It seemed to her that her forces were expended, and he was thinking uneasily of what she had said. His good things had dropped so readily upon him all his life long, that although she did not know it, nothing stimulated him like difficulty, and she had already gained a new value in his eyes, and moved him to a greater appreciation. But he was also annoyed and a little ashamed. Did she really mean that she was rejecting him? When they reached Casa Giulia he paused at the door.

"Phillis," he said in a low voice, "you said more than you meant just now, didn't you?"

She might have answered that it had cost her too much to say what she did to allow of her falling into such an error, and the pleading which he put into his voice made this appeal a fresh anguish. But she steadied herself to answer quietly—

"I mean it all. Indeed, it is best."

"If you will not consent to our marriage taking place as soon as was intended, you don't at all events wish that everything should be at an end between us?"

"Are things ever at an end in this world?" she said, with a sad little smile. "But I do wish that all should be at an end so far that you—that we should be absolutely free."

"Am I to go away?" he asked petulantly. It seemed as if in this conversation their usual parts were reversed, and perhaps she read in it a sign that her decision was right. But now she hesitated. For herself she would rather he had gone, but there was Miss Cartwright, there was Bice. She said—

"I don't see how you can. And as we are always to be friends, there is no need."

He said no more. He opened the door for her to go in, betook himself to the garden, and was as cross for the rest of the day as it was in his nature to be.

Chapter Eleven.

What a Woman will Do.

In the villa Bice was suffering the dreariness of suspense, for Clive did not answer her letter, into which she had poured a heart full of longing. At first she was positive, in spite of the delay, that it was only a delay and no more. Once she turned sharply upon Oliver.

"You are certain that you posted the letter?"

"I was particularly careful of it, because I knew it was of consequence to you," he answered, looking full in her face.

"Then of course there is some good reason for our not hearing, and I dare say something will come in a day or two."

But nothing did come. The days went on, the girl's heart sank lower and lower in spite of her resolute words. If Clive bore that appeal in silence, things must be bad indeed, and perhaps there was but one way out of them.

Yet she did not yield. Oliver tried all the persuasions he could think of, and could not be sure that he had gained one step. She avoided him when she could, but if he forced her to listen to him, listened coldly, and answered that she must hear from Clive. He began to feel as if the puppets he was playing with were turning to flesh and blood avengers in his hands. She was asking for proof, and if she sought for it much more persistently, what might not start up in its place? He was tormented by jealousies, not only of Jack, who came up once or twice, and seemed moody and out of spirits, but of young Moroni, who made no secret of his devotion. Bice was kinder to him than she had ever been before, and the poor lad, not knowing that she used him as a defence against another, had his head pretty well turned. Oliver was man enough of the world to read her motives, but if he had seen them written in large letters, he would not have felt easy. He hated the young fellow with his smiles, his sudden pathetic melancholies, his sweet Italian, which he could not understand. It seemed to him that they had a hundred interests in common, from each of which he was shut out. Out on the terrace, late at night, Giovanni would sit thrumming his guitar, the girls would sing. Trent had no part to play in it all. Another time he would find Bice and Kitty sitting on the edge of the water tank, Moroni in a fig tree below them, tossing the ripe fruit into their laps, old Andrea, half hidden by leaves, munching away at a little distance. Oliver, when he came up, seemed to have no place or welcome, except perhaps from Kitty. He would ask himself angrily, why he lingered? what fascination there was for him in this proud, wilful girl? Yet, as he asked the question, he knew quite well that one glance of her beautiful eyes was enough to bind him to her side. He felt no remorse at the deception he was practising, or the pain he inflicted; neither pain nor deception seemed to him worth weighing for a moment against his determination to win her. What he did feel was annoyance at having to leave again with his work yet undone. It was necessary that he should return to England, and all his strong will as yet had failed to bind Bice, as he had never doubted she would by this time have been bound.

What then? Before he could return, would John Ibbetson have flung over his love and turned to Beatrice? Would young Moroni have touched the girl's heart by his foolish youth, his sentimental songs? Would his own crooked dealings about Clive come to light when he was not present to turn the truth into a lie? Trent set his teeth savagely as he thought of these chances which must all be dared, since go he must.

He did his best to provide against them. He threw out hints, which he knew would make their mark upon Bice's impulsive, generous little soul, of Phillis Grey's desolate position in the world, and of her love for the man she was to marry. Moroni was an Italian, and when he was not present he did not really fear him. As for Clive, he had a long talk with Bice, in which he avoided pressing his suit, and so managed to reawaken some of her gratitude. Never had he been nearer winning her than he was that day. He was kind, sympathetic, wise. He advised her strongly not again to press upon Clive, or even so much as allude to, her knowledge of his difficulties. If she did it, he asked her to send the letter to him, that he might be aware of her writing and act upon it. But he implored her for the present to leave the matter absolutely in his hands, since interference might make it very difficult for him to act; while left alone, he had the strongest hopes of arranging everything. He led her to suppose that it was for this he was going home; and he very skilfully managed alike to abstain from hinting at any reward, and yet to leave upon her mind an impression that he really considered her to have pledged herself. He let it be fully understood that he should return, if not before they moved to Rome in November, at any rate so as to join them there.

And having taken these precautions, which, to his unquiet spirit, seemed miserably inadequate, he very reluctantly departed.

Bice expected to find his going a great relief. She was disappointed because an immediate lightness of spirit was not the result. What else—when she knew he was going to do his utmost for Clive—should make her listless and languid? Why did all that was going on at the *podere* seem utterly uninteresting and dry? Giovanni, who used to look daggers at the English signore, came over full of rejoicing that he was got rid of, full of plans and ideas for pleasant festivities; but for all the good that the young fellow got out of his deliverance, Oliver might have stayed on, for Bice could not be roused to any excitement, and indeed scarcely gave him a word in answer, though the simple and honest lad deserved better treatment; and every now and then she hated herself when she saw the pain which gathered in his eyes.

That was a time of which she could never bear to think in later days; and yet, poor child, there was a struggle, a contest going on, of which better people need not have been ashamed. She felt hurt and shamefaced in her own eyes, but she was loyal to the impulse which, had led her to Phillis, to the kiss which had passed between them. Jack's manner, or an intuitive quickness, or newly-awakened perceptions of her own, somehow made her aware that things were not quite right between them. As for him, he was at that point which sometimes comes in a man's life, when a very little thing might turn him either way. He was dazzled and attracted by the girl's rare beauty, piqued by Phillis's rejection, and yet something made him seem nearer to Phillis than ever he had been before. It is possible that with a little effort Bice might have turned the scale, but she never made it; rather more than once her grave, clear eyes had looked at him with a sort of reproach.

Miss Cartwright was better, though far from strong. She had grown so fond of Phillis that they feared the effect upon her of hearing that the engagement was off; but she listened in silence, scarcely alluding to it after the first, but, if

possible, more tender than ever both to Phillis and to Jack. It pained her so greatly when Miss Preston said some sharp words about Jack's conduct, that her friend was startled into silence; and as she clung to Phillis, and needed her kind and patient nursing, it fell out that Phillis was at the house as much as ever, and, to all outward seeming, things went on just as they had gone before.

If this caused a great strain upon the girl, no one was likely to notice it. Mrs Leyton had found pleasant friends in Florence, and though very good-natured in all she said to Phillis on the matter of her engagement, was equally taken up with fifty other things, and content to let all the fifty and one go their own way so long as they did not clash with her comfort. Phillis herself had never been taught to consider her own feelings as paramount, or she might have been tempted to fly. As it was, she looked forward to Rome with eagerness as a place of escape, and then heard to her dismay that the doctor had pronounced Florence too cold for Miss Cartwright to remain the winter, and that she was to follow them to Rome as soon as she could bear the journey. Surely Jack at least would return to England! But this he had evidently no intention of doing.

Mr Thornton's letters took the line of disbelief. He ignored the fact that the engagement was broken, advising them to get over their small misunderstandings as quickly as possible, if they wished their friends to credit them with any grains of good sense. There was a kind of rough and ready philosophy about his letters under which Jack winced, while he did his best to keep Phillis from reading them. Jack was greatly interested in Phillis at this time, although he was hurt and annoyed with her. The fact was, she was so kind and unassuming that it was generally taken for granted that she would never fail at a pinch, and Mr Thornton's indignation at the letters she had written to her aunt was as great as if his quietest horse had kicked him over. "*She* object! *She* be the one to give herself airs! Don't let me hear any more of this nonsense, Harriet! Write and tell her to hold her tongue and be thankful." And, indeed, although it was not acknowledged so roughly even to himself, Ibbetson, too, could not quite get over his wonder. The young fellow was not conceited enough to believe that any girl in the world would have him, but Phillis—to whom he had been accustomed all his life—he was unprepared to hear her say that they would not be happy together! She had grown to have a more separate existence since that assertion than she ever had in his eyes before. He was not sorry to be at liberty, but he was certainly annoyed that she should also have desired to claim her own.

The Leytons were to go slowly to Rome, by Perugia and Assisi, but early November arrived before they started, and two or three days before setting off, Phillis surprised them by asking Miss Preston to drive with her to Villa Carlina. She wanted to wish them good-bye, she said, and though some one suggested they would soon meet at Rome, she persisted.

"And may I not come, too?" said Jack, when he put them into the carriage.

"Not to-day," Phillis said, smiling; "we are going for a gossip, and you would be very much in the way. But Cartouche is breaking his heart for a hunt among the canes, and that is the best thing that you and he can do this afternoon."

"A dog, indeed!" he said, turning away with some pretended indignation.

And then they began to make their way up towards the villa. It was a grey and windy day, and every now and then the wind blew a misty rain full in their faces, and turned all the grey olive trees into a shivering whiteness of underleaf. The vineyards were stripped and bare. A poor little kid, which had lost its mother, leapt on a bit of desolate rock and bleated piteously. Miss Preston blamed the climate of Italy, as if England were unacquainted with rain or mist. A great deal of rain had fallen, so that the road between the white walls as they climbed higher up was washed as if by a torrent, and a number of loose stones had been brought down. Before they quite reached the gate of the villa, they came upon a little crowd, in the midst of which stood Bice, pouring indignant reproaches upon the driver of an ox-cart and upon two or three men and boys who stood by looking ashamed and downcast. One of the poor oxen had fallen, and instead of unfastening the cart and relieving the creature of the yoke which pressed it to the ground, they had set to work to belabour it about its head, using oaths and curses plentifully at the same time. Unluckily for them, the young padrona was within hearing, and as it was well-known among the *contadini* that nothing made her so angry as ill-usage of the animals, there was great dismay in their hearts.

"*Cara signorina!*" one of them began humbly, but she stopped him at once with flashing eyes.

"I go to the *podere* myself this very day, and see that you do no more work there," she exclaimed vehemently. "You can go back at once, for little 'Tista shall take these poor beasts. If you have no shame as men for your cruelty, at least you shall find another farm for yourselves."

Phillis could almost have smiled at the abashed looks of the men before the young indignant princess, whose sway no one seemed to dispute. The girl herself showed no discomposure at being found in this character. She gave her orders to 'Tista, directed that time should be given to the trembling creature to recover itself, and then, still pale with anger, came towards the carriage.

"When they are cruel like that, I hate the Italians," she said, without any other explanation, as she put out her hand.

"There should be a society formed," Miss Preston suggested eagerly. "Let me put down your names, and I will see about it to-morrow. A society for the protection of animals—the idea is admirable."

"Oh, societies! There may be one for anything I know," said the girl wearily. "There is no law behind it, that is the drawback. Are you come to spend the day? That is kind of you."

But Phillis explained it was only an hour they had come to spend. "And when we have seen Mrs Masters, will you let Kitty show Miss Preston the great cellars where you store your wine? she does not feel quite satisfied about the vintage yet."

It was not difficult for Miss Grey to find some further excuse for getting Bice alone. She had not seen the upper storey

of the house, where there were great bare-looking bedrooms and sitting-rooms, a studio, laundries, all sorts of places. The girl's room had a wonderful carved marble bas-relief over the fireplace, and a charming ceiling, bright and fantastic, but otherwise all the furniture was old and the greater part shabby. Phillis glanced at it with little attention; there was something she wanted to say, and she was not quick at turning a conversation to a desired point. It was Bice who unconsciously led to it. "When we are in Rome," she had said, and then she looked quickly at Phillis—"But then you will be married?" she said in a low voice.

Phillis thought she was prepared, and yet at the words the colour rushed up to the roots of her hair.

"That is at an end," she said very hurriedly. "We are not going to marry. It was settled before anyone had thought enough about it, and thinking has made us change our minds. Forget that you ever heard that it was to be."

How fast her heart beat! How stiffly the syllables seemed to issue from her mouth. And yet she had meant to tell her quietly and calmly, to use quite different words. There was a silence in which the wind drove the loose branch of some creeper against the window, and in which Bice looked at Phillis.

She looked and smiled. Strange to say, at this moment she was the most composed of the two, and Phillis was deeply mortified that it should be so. But all that Bice said was—

"That is a pity. But I don't suppose I shall be able to forget."

"It is not a pity if it saves either of us from unhappiness," said Phillis, with much earnestness.

"Oh, I hope you will never be unhappy. It is so very miserable," Bice said, dropping her hands with a little gesture of despair.

Her change of expression seemed to put them again into their right positions. Phillis, who had been annoyed at her own agitation and at the incredulous manner of the other girl, felt her pity, her sympathy growing up again as warm as ever. If Bice and Jack loved each other, as was surely the case, then she would not shrink. She smiled in her turn, but looked steadily out of the window.

"There are many sorts of unhappiness," she said gently. "Some come so quietly that we have time to prepare and almost change their nature. And others are like sharp and sudden storms which seem to sweep us away, but are soon over, and then the skies are as smiling again as ever."

"They are all hateful, whether they are of one sort or another," said Bice in the same tone. "I never believed the books which said they were anything else, and I think you have been reading those books."

"No," said Phillis firmly, "I don't believe they are all hateful. And it is something different from books which you and I shall have to teach us that."

"What?"

"Never mind, you will tell me one of these days. Now shall we go down, and will you order the little carriage?"

As they went out, two or three bronzed men were standing outside the door. Andrea had come up his steps and was haranguing them, but when they saw Beatrice they started forward and poured out a torrent of words. Phillis could not understand the rapid patois, but there were tears in their eyes, and they were evidently imploring, entreating. Bice listened coldly; once or twice she said something at which they redoubled their protestations. When finally she yielded, one of them, the chief spokesman, stepped forward, caught her hand, and kissed it fervently. It was like a scene of another age, Phillis thought, the young girl and the men watching her as if she had been a queen.

"I think perhaps they will behave better to the oxen for a little while," Bice said, as they went away in delight.

"How much they care for you!"

"They care for the work, too; it is of great consequence in these bad times. But they are very faithful and affectionate, poor fellows!"

Miss Preston shook her head. She told Phillis as she drove home that Bice's weakness in forgiving the *contadini* had convinced her that no woman should enter on the prerogative of her rights before the age of thirty years, when it might be considered that her judgment would be matured, and Phillis, who was pale and rather silent, did not attempt to contradict her. Miss Preston having her own views about Jack's conduct very strongly outlined, glanced at her.

"Nothing can be worse for those two young girls than the sort of undisciplined life they lead, with a mother absolutely without energy or character," she said decidedly. "If I had remained here I might have been of some service to them, if one ever *can* be of service to wilful girls. But in these days it is almost hopeless."

"Bice is most lovable," said Phillis eagerly. "I don't think it has spoilt her one bit. Besides, what can be more simple than their life?"

"Oh, simple, I dare say!" Miss Preston said darkly. "You have had very little experience of the world, my dear."

"I suppose so," said Phillis smiling. "When people say that, one never knows what to answer. When does the experience come, I wonder; and what makes the world? Is it anything very different from what one lives in every day?"

Miss Preston found it difficult to define, and looked shocked.

"You will know better one day," she said, falling back on a generality. But Phillis would not be baffled.

"Will it help one to understand, do you think, and not bring new puzzles?" she asked, still smiling. "It seems to me now, as if every experience brought something strange instead of making the old clearer."

Miss Preston looked at her helplessly, and then put her head out of window.

"I never saw such a climate!" she exclaimed angrily. "Raining when we started, and now quite fine. I am sure I trust we may find more consistent weather in Rome."

Chapter Twelve.

"One and One, with a Shadowy Third."

If Florence has not forgotten her past, Rome has kept hers yet more faithfully, or rather has had a mightier one to keep. It is no longer the life of a few centuries back in which you move, Guelf and Ghibelline flaunting their battlements in your face; artist, sculptor, poet, working their lives out for the beautiful and ungrateful city—but an older age. The stones of the Republic are before your eyes, the road of triumph is under your feet. There, in the Forum, the great twin brethren watered their horses after the battle; hard by the martyrs were given to the lions. Look where you will, there is something which, as you recognise it, brings a thrill to your heart, stirs an interest deeper than Florence can excite, and binds you to Rome for ever. No other city in the world resembles her. In Egypt you are taken back yet further; in Athens, memories of scarcely smaller interest cluster round the golden stones; but they have only their past, while Rome is alive, acting, carrying on her history, many-sided; appealing to the present, to the future—stern, grey, sunshiny, brilliant, all at once.

Something of this sort had been said by one of a little party of people who were strolling about the Palatine Hill one December afternoon, and Mrs Leyton opposed it altogether on behalf of Florence.

"As to age, it is merely a comparative matter," she announced. "I don't feel very aged myself, but I heard a chit at the table-d'hôte yesterday speak of somebody as 'quite old, oh, about thirty.' It all depends upon the point from which you look at it. And I do think it is a shame to run down that beautiful Florence, about which you all pretended to be so enthusiastic when you were there, because some of these old stones of Rome have been set up for a few hundred years longer."

Jack Ibbetson, who had been reconnoitring, came back.

"Run—hide yourselves—be quick!" he said anxiously. "Miss Preston is coming this way with a victim."

"It is Phillis who must be hidden then. I believe you and I have taught her to avoid us, but I am getting vexed with Phillis for the patience with which she listens to long archaeological discussions which don't interest her in the least."

"But they do," protested Phillis, laughing. "Nonsense, my dear. It is your amiability and not your intellect which is brought into play. Now I consider amiability on such occasions an absolute wrong to your fellow-creatures—I do, indeed. All isn't gold that glitters, and even your virtues are not quite such unmixed blessings as I should like to find them. I hope you appreciate the sting of my remark."

"It is taken out by your charity in crediting virtues which don't exist. But if only you would listen to poor Miss Preston, you would discover that she has a great deal of really curious information to give you."

"I like my ignorance a great deal better, thank you. There she goes. I see the last flutter of that steel-grey robe disappearing behind the aloes. Mr Ibbetson, you may come out and talk freely. How does dear Miss Cartwright get on in Rome? Is it true that the Masters came yesterday?"

"I believe so—yes," said Jack shortly. He felt an odd sort of shrinking from Bice's name when Phillis was present, and yet Phillis had herself constantly led to the subject. Mrs Leyton, who could not bear displeasing people, and saw he was unwilling to speak, skilfully dropped the topic.

"Then they will join us in some of this sight-seeing, which weighs like lead on my conscience," she said lightly. "Poor Harry makes a Moloch of his sketching, and I am sure the things which have to be seen are quite as serious for me. When I have done them all, I shall begin to enjoy Rome; but I give notice, good people, not till then."

Phillis laughed without contradicting her, or asserting a different opinion. Phillis herself, if there were any difference in her, had grown more silent and more reserved in these last few weeks, going about a good deal alone, though never unwilling to join the others in their plans. She and the Leytons were at a hotel; Miss Cartwright had taken apartments in the Via della Croce for the sake of Cartouche, who could not be expected to conform to hotel existence. Jack Ibbetson spent a great deal of his time with the Leytons. Phillis did not know how to escape from this life, which was full at once of sweetness and pain, pain sometimes almost unendurable. She rather sought other friends, and there were a brother and sister at the hotel whom she liked and who often joined them. They had expected the Peningtons to meet them at the Palatine, but they did not come, and by-and-by they all strolled down towards the Coliseum. A carriage overtook them, jolting over the Via Sacra, and somebody called out and waved. It was Bice.

"How pretty Miss Masters looked!" said Mrs Leyton, glancing a little curiously at Jack.

"We shall find them at the Coliseum," said her husband, and he was right.

If Bice was looking pretty, she was changed, changed even since they had left Florence. Her eyes were bright and large, but they had dark lines under them; the round cheek had lost something of its sweet young curve; a pathetic appeal every now and then touched you in her voice. But she had not lost her decision. It was she who had brought Mrs Masters and Kitty. She was eager, interested, wanting to know everything, only Phillis could answer half her questions. Mrs Masters went back before long and sat in the carriage, the others climbed hither and thither, under the great arches, tier above tier. It is like climbing centuries and ages to mount those great steps, worn by many feet. The sun beats down upon them all, untempered now by the silken awning which used to stretch across the vast expanse. Where the Vestal Virgins sat, delicate plants spring from between the stones, maiden hair waves softly in remembrance. And as you go up, and the great area discloses itself, its greatness, its might, its majesty, its silence, will touch you, if you let them, with an awful power. Rome lies before you, clothed in purple and regal shadows; the Campagna stretches away towards surrounding hills; black cypresses point; all about you the solemn arches frame some picture which belongs to the world's history; all about you the lights float, golden, rose, flashing into dark corners, and marked out by keen shadows.

Phillis stole away by herself, but she found that Bice soon followed her, and as if she were seeking occasion for saying something. And, indeed, she was too impetuous long to keep back anything she had to say. She caught Phillis's hand and dragged her to a great block of travertine, where they were out of hearing of the others, and from which they could see. Santa Maria Maggiore glowing in the sunlight, and roofs stretching away into blue distance.

"Sit there," she said imperatively. "Oh, I have wanted to see you! I am very, very miserable."

"What has happened?"

People's sympathy is as different as people are themselves. Phillis's was very delicate and gentle—it seemed to ask for nothing, and yet to give just what was wanted. Tones and looks had more to do with it than words. Bice lifted her heavy wistful eyes to hers with satisfaction.

"Nothing has happened," she said, "and that is the worst part of it all, don't you think? If only one could set up one's trouble before one, quite distinct and alive, there would be a chance of fighting it, of coming to the end somehow."

She clenched her little hand as she spoke, and a fire came into her eyes.

"Perhaps," said Phillis, smiling and looking at the beautiful face, "it is better for most of us that our anxieties don't take quite such a definite shape. Suppose they should be too strong for us?"

"Then there would be an end that way."

Phillis changed her tone.

"I don't think we are wise in wishing troubles to be stronger than they are," she said gravely. "As it is, I fancy they are as much as we can manage."

"I don't mind fighting; it is the waiting," said Bice with a little perverseness. "Why are women expected to be able to endure? Is it because they have the hardest work and the least credit always?"

"You can tell me something more as to what is making you unhappy," said Phillis, evading the question. "Has your brother himself written to you?"

"Yes, he has."

"And are things going on no better?"

"You shall see for yourself," said the girl with a sudden resolve. And she produced a letter from her pocket. "The first part is nothing," she said, leaning on her hand and looking over Phillis's shoulder. "There, begin there."

"Trent has been awfully useful to me," the letter said. "I don't know how ever I should have got through without him. It's not much use trying to explain, particularly to anyone who doesn't know the sort of life one has to live here; and I suppose a good lot of fellows buy their experience much in the same way as I've bought it, but that doesn't prevent one's seeing when one has made a fool of oneself. I expected by this time I should have been able to do something for old Kitty and you all. Better luck soon; I don't owe any money to a soul except Trent. You'll be glad to hear he has got it all into his own hands, and, of course, I feel pounds more comfortable. By the way, he says he has done it for you, and that I may tell you so."

"Well?" said Bice, taking back the letter.

Phillis was considering. The letter was boyish and inexperienced, but there was a tone about it which did not seem to her that of a young fellow who had entered on a course of crime, and her distrust of Oliver Trent had never abated. Yet what could she say? She had no real grounds for her opinion. She could not utter any word of warning which should touch Clive in his security. Yet with this conviction of hers growing in her heart, it would be impossible for a woman of Phillis's nature not to do something or other by-and-by. She contented herself at present by saying—

"Poor fellow! No doubt he has been imprudent." Bice started. She had been thinking of herself rather than Clive, and considering the weight of those words which sounded to her almost like a threat. What was it that Oliver had done for her of which he desired her to be reminded?

"Imprudent, yes! Weak and wicked too," she said impatiently. "He does not care or even remember that others have

to suffer besides himself.”

“Perhaps he does not know.”

“Oh, that is impossible. Oliver, at least, would have spoken plainly. And has he not had my letter?” Her voice quivered a little as she went on. “Phillis—I don’t know—I think I could do something dreadful for people if they wanted it, but then it is hard, isn’t it, if they don’t take any notice? Perhaps one shouldn’t care about that, but I do. If Clive would only say straight out, ‘I have done something bad, but I know you’ll not give me up,’ and then if he said ‘God bless you, Bice,’ afterwards, why—one could bear—bear anything.”

“Bice,” said Phillis, looking at her.

“What?”

“You haven’t told me all.”

“Not quite,” she said reluctantly. “I don’t like telling, or even thinking; but you know I am very miserable.”

“Has Mr Trent got you to promise?”

“How could I help it?” she said, drooping her head. “He did so much. It was like a network all round. Even mamma, poor mamma, she is so poor, you know, and he was kind—but I had things, I did manage that.” She had mechanically raised her hand to her throat as she spoke, and Phillis noticed that a slender gold chain which she generally wore was gone, and that she had neither earrings nor any bit of jewellery about her. “I couldn’t do anything for Clive, it was like a horrible nightmare, and what would have become of him but for Oliver? When this last letter came, another came too from Oliver, telling me a great deal. It did not seem worth while to make so much fuss about oneself, and so—I wrote and promised.” The tone in which she said those last words told much, and perhaps Phillis had herself had experience of that state of mind. She bent over and kissed her.

“Oh, my dear,” she said brokenly, “but you shouldn’t, you shouldn’t have done it!”

“It is done,” said the girl, clasping her hands round her knees, and looking out towards the old basilica with its domes. But Phillis saw there were tears in her eyes.

“Write and undo it,” she urged.

“No; I wouldn’t be so ungrateful for worlds. And at any rate it seems as if it would make him happy.” Phillis felt no satisfaction at this prospect. She was full of pity, yet almost angry with this young creature who was throwing away her own happiness, and, alas! other people’s too. Was this to be the end of what Phillis herself had done?—was no good to come out of her own pain? She hushed the cry of her heart almost angrily. “He did not love me, he did not love me,” she said to herself, “and this makes no difference. Only I hoped he would have been happy.”

Perhaps Bice felt that she could bear no more, for she jumped up.

“I have not heard their voices for a long while,” she said. “They can’t have gone without us! Or suppose we find the great iron door at the bottom shut?”

“Oh, there’s a bell. We shall see some one.”

Down on a lower tier they found Jack waiting. He explained that Mrs Leyton and Kitty had driven back with Mrs Masters, Captain Leyton was sketching the Arch of Constantine.

“And I am to see you home, if you’ll allow me. Are you cold? It’s not the most prudent thing in the world to sit about in the Coliseum, with all that water below you.”

“No, it was very foolish,” said Phillis, looking with compunction at Bice’s pale face. “Are you sure you are not chilled? Let us set off at once.”

“But you yourself?” said Jack, in a low voice.

Something in his tone made her flush crimson, and then she hated herself for having done so. “As if I had not already suffered enough for such foolish imaginings!” she thought reproachfully.

It was an odd sort of walk home for all of them, and would have been more uncomfortable but that the things around gave ready subjects for conversation. After the Arch of Titus and the Forum there are dirty, shelving, picturesque streets, noble fronts of old temples half buried in the earth, curiosity shops full of ancient and begrimed lamps of all graceful forms, of which, if you look long enough, you may one day light upon the manufactory. Grey oxen come stumbling along over the slippery lava pavement; very likely a Capuchin monk, brown and dirty, vanishes round a corner; the streets fall away for Adrian’s forum and the great pillar, and close up again until you come to the piazza of the Apostoli. It was there the Capponis lived with whom the Masters were staying. The palazzo was not so large or imposing as its neighbours; such as it was it was too big for its owners’ fortunes, and they let half of it to some English, consoling themselves by preserving a separate entrance and cordially despising their rich tenants. Phillis thought it looked very grey and gloomy as Bice stood for a moment in the entrance, and yet the girl’s loveliness struck them both. Perhaps it was partly the delightful charm of youth, and its contrast with the grim buildings; perhaps it was that the talk with Phillis, or the walk home, had brought a rosy flush into her cheeks, a bright light into her eyes. For the moment she was like the Hebe Jack had discovered on the hillside behind Florence.

But, for all that, he would not have spoken of her to Phillis unless Phillis had begun the subject, having an uneasy

consciousness that here lay the key to the mystery of his rejection. The way in which this rejection haunted him astonished himself. He allowed that he had been piqued, but there is little doubt that he fancied the pique would have spent itself, and left him free; instead of which he could not shake off the vexation and the annoyance. As often as not he was angry with Phillis, and, but that he was a gentleman, would have shown it. As it was, he often perplexed her, and such a *tête-à-tête* as they were having now she avoided simply from the pain it caused herself. She was one of those people who try to do what is right with a brave disregard for the pain which may be a necessary part, but she did not go out of her way to court it. Only to-day she had a purpose, and it must be carried out in the few narrow and crowded streets which lay between them and the Condotti.

"If I were a man," she said thoughtfully, "I should like to do something for that poor child."

"A man," repeated Jack. "Is it man in the abstract, or any particular man who is needed?"

"Well, he must be particular because he must be ready to take some trouble, and when the trouble is taken he must have wits to use its results, otherwise he might be as abstract as you please."

"Is it this wretched brother who has come to the fore again?"

"I have a theory that he is not so wretched as we take for granted. I dare say he has been foolish."

"Oh, that's an epidemic we have all gone through," said Ibbetson; and Phillis felt suddenly hot, though nothing was further from his thoughts than an allusion to their engagement. She said hurriedly—

"The evidence of anything worse is very vague. That Mr Trent never enters into details, he gives mysterious hints, and impresses them all with an idea of his own great efforts, but that is all."

"The tone in which you say 'that Mr Trent' speaks volumes for your opinion," said Jack laughing. "But didn't you tell me she had written?"

"Yes. Still—Mr Trent posted the letter."

Jack gave a low whistle.

"You are coming it rather strong in your suspicions, Phillis," he said doubtfully. "What motive could he have? It would take a big one."

"He wishes to marry her," said Phillis, looking straight before her.

"But she does not like him?"

Jack put the question with evident eagerness. They had just turned into that open space which the Fountain of Trevi seems to fill with the glad rush of its waters. Clear streams leap from twenty different points; there is a confusion, a harmony, a most invigorating freshness in the silvery flashes. Phillis stood still for a moment, looking at them with her hand on a low wall which the spray had wetted. It seemed to her as if his question meant something quite different, as if he would have said, "Does she not like me a little?"—as if her hand must open the door between two hearts. Alas! but was there not a third which she herself was shutting out? She did not hesitate, but she was conscious of a feeling that it was hard on her that this, too, should be left for her to do. And what of Bice's last confidence? As she turned and looked at Jack, did he guess what faithfulness, what kindness were shining in those clear brown eyes?

"I am sure she does not like him," she said. "But I fear—"

"What?"

"I fear that he is using unfair means to bind her to him."

"But what can be done?" he asked as they walked on again. "Suppose, for instance, that I became the particular man to whom you alluded, what should you do if you were in my place? We have arrived at a complete labyrinth of suppositions, but still—supposing?"

"I should go to England, and trace the matter out."

"Very direct and decided, Phillis," said Jack with a smile. Christian names had, of course, been used between them all their lives, and it would have been impossible to break off the custom; but still, as if by common consent, they did not use them more often than was necessary, and it seemed to Phillis as if he need not have brought hers in now, still less lingered slightly upon it. "Well—it's hard to send me out of Rome, but if the fellow is what you take him to be, there would be a certain pleasure in baffling him, and one could but try."

"Yes, I think so," she said quietly. There was no need for her to thank him for what must be a grateful task, and she did not attempt it. Nor would she ask him questions as to his going. Perhaps Ibbetson expected something of one sort or the other, but the bells of Sant' Andrea began to clash in their brick belfry overhead, and the Peningtons came rushing out of a side street from which they had caught a glimpse of Phillis. Miss Penington was small, plump and bright-eyed; her brother a clergyman of thirty, short-sighted, energetic, and quick in all his movements, with a sweet kind smile. As they all walked together through the Piazza di Spagna by the pretty jewellers' shops towards the Alemagna, Phillis would have been very much astonished had any one told her that Jack, whose natural disposition was certainly peaceable, felt a far stronger aversion to Mr Penington than to Oliver Trent, against whom he was going to open a campaign.

Chapter Thirteen.

In the Vatican.

As Phillis passed out from the table-d'hôte at the Alemagna that evening, the porter put a note into her hand.

"Get me what information you can," it said, "*address, name of firm, and anything you think useful. And, for pity's sake don't let my aunt and Cartouche be completely flattened by that woman in my absence.*"

The next morning a note went to the Via della Croce.

"*The information is simply wonderful. The firm is 'Thornton and Hay.' I do think it is the oddest coincidence!*"

For "Thornton," the senior of the two great ironmasters, was Peter Thornton of Hetherton Court, of whom mention has been made; and, under the circumstances, Phillis's astonishment was not to be wondered at. Quite a fire of notes passed between the two streets that morning. The next was to this effect:

"*Very queer, indeed. If I were you I would say nothing of this to his sister. Where are you going to-day?*"

An answer came back.

"*To the Vatican with the Peningtons. I send you an order in case you like to bring the Masters—*"

Mr Penington was an excellent cicerone. His information was trustworthy, and he had that pleasant way of imparting it which never gives you the impression of mounting a pedestal and declaiming. Phillis thought her afternoon delightful, and it seemed as if he thought the same, for he claimed her interest eagerly. They were in the hall of the Muses standing before the beautiful and stern Thalia, who sits with a garland of ivy leaves on her head, looking out disdainfully at the world's follies, when Mr Penington touched Phillis.

"The most lovely girl imaginable has just come in," he said; "you must really get a good view of her."

It was Bice, of course. She was walking listlessly before her companions, and scarcely troubling herself to glance at the statues; but she brightened at seeing Phillis, and seemed relieved to join her. Phillis would have liked to tell her what errand was taking Jack to England, but she could not venture to do so, and indeed Mr Penington, who had no intention of allowing his companion's interest to wander, managed to claim her whole attention. No one noticed the indignant glances which Jack threw at him. Phillis would have been the last to conceive that he could be annoyed at another engrossing her, and perhaps he himself would have scarcely allowed that Bice's beautiful face could have less attraction for him than Phillis's brown eyes. As it was, he was thoroughly angry at what he liked to think of as Phillis's fickleness, and by way of retaliation devoted himself with all his might to Bice. It seems sometimes as if the world was made up of cross-purposes, when we see the mistakes, the unintentional wounds that are inflicted. People observe things which never existed, and shut their eyes to what lies plain before them, and long afterwards, perhaps, look back with a sigh at their own work. What should we do, all of us, if we were left with nothing better than to make the best we could of our tangles!

Poor Bice! All sorts of fancies went rushing through her heart that afternoon, as Jack strolled along by her side as he had done in the first days of their acquaintance—passionate longings and regrets, wonder and impatience. How had Phillis and he been separated, how had Oliver and she come together? Why did Jack talk kindly, and ask questions as if he cared? For the girl was not deceived, only troubled, and there was a bitter revolt in her heart against her fate, sometimes a yearning for Jack's sympathy, sometimes a fierce suspicion that all this time he might have read her secret and despised her. She was not in a mood to look at the white statues, it made her shiver to see them by her side, cold and changeless, and she would not pretend an interest she did not feel. When they came to a great brazier, full of grey or glowing embers, she stretched out her little hands to the warmth, while Ibbetson glanced at her with unmistakable admiration in his eyes.

"When first I knew you, I could not picture you in anything but a white dress," he said in a leisurely tone.

"Don't talk of it," and she shuddered. "If ever one wants warmth and colour it is in a sculpture gallery. I wouldn't come here in white on the hottest day of the year." She was looking before her as she spoke with that fixed mechanical gaze with which people look at something they do not really see. Suddenly she started and caught Jack's arm. "Oh, look, look!" she cried in a terrified undertone.

He could feel her fingers trembling on his arm, and instinctively laid his own hand upon them with a strong firm clasp. The touch brought her to herself, for she withdrew her hand instantly, colouring crimson as she did so, but not removing her eyes from the object which had alarmed her. Ibbetson turned hastily to look where they were fixed.

"What was it? What frightened you?" he asked gently, looking at her again, for nothing that he could see accounted for her evident terror.

She drew a deep breath.

"Who is that man standing with his back towards us on the right?" she said in a quick low voice. "There, do you see?"

"I see, but it's no one I know. Whom do you take him for?"

"Are you sure you don't know him? I begin to think now that I was mistaken," she said with such evident relief that Ibbetson smiled.

"I hope you are not generally so shocked at seeing an acquaintance unexpectedly? Would you like to come a little closer and make sure of the matter?"

"Yes—I think so," she said with some hesitation. "But not too near."

"Oh, we'll beware of the ghost," said Jack confidently and kindly. He was still feeling the clinging touch of those little fingers on his arm, and there was a warm impulse of kindness towards her stirring in his heart, as well as a little curiosity as to what likeness had so moved her. She stood still before they had gone many yards.

"No, no, it is not," she said hurriedly, "I see quite well now. It was very foolish of me."

"Better look in his face and get the idea quite out of your head," persisted Ibbetson. "Otherwise those sorts of notions are apt to prove uncomfortable."

She did not resist. They passed the gentleman and saw his full face, but beyond saying that she did not know how she could have been so mistaken, she did not attempt to explain her terror, and no resemblance to Mr Trent struck Jack so as to give him the clue.

Still, real or fancied, the alarm had evidently shaken the girl. She said she would go back to Mrs Masters, who had placed her camp-stool near a brazier, and remained calmly indifferent to the art treasures about her, so long as she could keep warm and avoid fatigue.

"Don't let me detain you from the others," Bice said, when they had reached her mother.

"The others don't want me," answered Jack in a voice which had some irritation in it. "That fellow Penington is at it, speechifying away like mad."

"Oh, do you mean he isn't nice?" asked Bice so innocently that the young man laughed in spite of himself.

"I don't know that there's much harm in him," he allowed, "but I dislike to have guide-book information crammed down my throat second-hand. Never mind them. Do you know that I am going away?"

"No."

Though she hated herself, she felt the colour leaving her face. And she could not ask when or where.

"But I am. I am off to London."

"Do you come back here?"

"Well, I hope so, certainly. The only thing likely to stand in the way is a lawsuit in which they sought my services, and I don't mind confiding to you that the odds are rather against that supposition."

More than one person had certain fancies of theirs confirmed that afternoon. One went and came like the dull tick of a great clock in Phillis Grey's brain as she sat in her bedroom late at night. "He—loves—her,—he—loves—her," was what it said with persistent effort. She had sent him away, and though no one suspected it of her, her heart was sometimes nearly breaking.

Chapter Fourteen.

Fog.

The change from Italy to London in the month of December, of all months in the year, is somewhat gloomy. It struck Ibbetson the more that he was greeted the morning after his arrival by a dense yellow fog, which came down chimneys and into people's throats in the persistent manner with which we are all familiar, but which is dolefully depressing to foreigners. Jack had somewhat of the feeling of a foreigner himself as the gas was turned on to enable him to eat his breakfast in his lodgings—not having as yet effected the counterbalance of comfort versus climate, which a well-brought up and constitutional Englishman derives from his Club and his *Times*. That would come later in the day. Meanwhile, the fog was the reverse of cheerful, his lodging looked grimy, and his thoughts went flying back to the blue skies of Italy, and to people he had left there.

What was Phillis doing, for instance, and why should he care to know? the young fellow thought, pushing his fingers through his crisp curly hair. Probably at that moment making plans for some excursions with those confounded Peningtons. What detestable bores people were who dragged others about in that ridiculous way, here, there, and everywhere, and how extraordinary it was that others should be found to submit! Here was he himself come on a wild goose errand, if ever there were such a thing in the world, to look after a youngster, who from all accounts had rapidly developed into a scoundrel, and without the smallest idea what he was to do when he had got hold of him. Good heavens, what an idiot he had been! The only point on which he could fall back with satisfaction was that if he could do anything it would be a possible release for Bice, of whom he thought with great interest and compassion. Only on her account, he assured himself, had he undertaken the quixotic enterprise on the threshold of which he had arrived. Distinctly, only on her account.

He put himself into a hansom on the strength of this conviction, and drove to Clive's lodgings out in the Kensington direction. As he expected, the lad had gone to the City, but he heard the hour at which he was likely to return, and left a card with an explanatory line, saying that he would look in that evening. Then he went to his chambers and began gathering up those odds and ends of life which so soon seem to detach themselves from us if for a moment we

lay them down, and yet have a latent power of reproach when we meet them. There had been a little property of the first Lady Ibbetson's which her husband had made over to her son, on the occasion of his own second marriage, so that Jack had enough to live upon without troubling his head as to his profession. And then the idea of his marriage and the visions of Hetherington had somehow taken away the spur to work. This was at an end. In the foggy dinginess of his chambers he began to try to pull together some floating strands of ambition which had never had much more substance in them than a cobweb-like texture, and which now eluded his grasp. His nature was pre-eminently social. He could not group his dreams round a central and solitary self. He wanted someone else to stimulate him with sympathy or fellow-interest. And, as he stood listlessly turning over a bundle of papers—why did the roar of London suddenly change to the rush of water, the splash of silver streams? Whose were those brown and steadfast eyes which he saw again looking into his—?

An exclamation escaped his lips. Then he turned up the gas, and sat down doggedly with the papers on his knees, and two or three big books by his side. His work might not be worth much, but he felt as if it served as a barricade against thoughts which were worthless.

He did not go out to Kensington again until half past six or thereabouts, and as he rattled along through the muddy streets, he was the more convinced that his errand was not an agreeable one, and that it would require delicate handling. A good deal must depend upon his first impression of Clive. If this were favourable, well and good; and yet Jack was vaguely conscious that he had no great insight into character, and was apt to see no more than people were disposed to show him.

"Mr Masters?" Yes, Mr Masters was at home, and a slipshod girl conducted him into a small room on the ground floor, smelling strongly of smoke, and brightly lit. A tall young man, who was sitting over the fire, came forward with a little shy awkwardness, which at once recalled Kitty to Ibbetson, and muttered something about being sorry he should have had the trouble of calling twice. Jack had an easy kindliness of manner which generally put people at their ease, but this young fellow was as undoubtedly awkward as he was thin and dark, and though evidently interested in hearing news of his family, it did not seem as if it would be within the bounds of possibility to get him to talk freely. Jack, himself, conscious that he was receiving very little that was definite in the way of those first impressions from which he had hoped so much, could hardly help smiling at his own discomfiture. Except the smoke, there was nothing in the room or about Clive himself to assist him in discoveries, and yet he had not come all the way from Rome for nothing.

"There's another link between us," he said pleasantly. "One of your heads, Mr Thornton, is an uncle of mine."

"We don't see much of him down at the office."

"No, perhaps not. But I suspect he looks sharply into things. Don't you feel him in the background?"

"I haven't much to do with the heads," said the young fellow, looking uncomfortable.

"Something pinches there," said Ibbetson inwardly, with his suspicions confirmed. Aloud he said, laughing, "I'm not in Mr Thornton's best books at this present moment, but I might be able to give you an introduction—where do you go at Christmas?"

"Nowhere. I stay here."

"Gloomy work, isn't it?" said Jack, compassionately.

"It doesn't matter. I'd rather stop on here," said Clive, kicking a piece of coal.

"Is your cousin in London—I mean Mr Trent?"

"Oliver Trent?" glancing up in surprise. "Do you know him? Oh, you met him at the villa, I suppose. Yes, he is. At least I believe so. He and old—he and Mr Thornton are very thick."

"He!"

"Didn't you know it?"

"Not I. But perhaps that's not to be wondered at. Still—"

There was a pause while Ibbetson was musing on this information. He was conscious that it aroused a vague uneasiness in his mind, and yet, what should make him uneasy? Phillis's suspicions had not really touched him, and the half dislike which he at one time felt towards Trent had been as fleeting as other emotions of the same date. But there always remains the possibility that emotions may be revived.

Clive volunteered the next remark.

"I never knew such a fellow as Oliver for knowing people. You can't mention anybody but he can tell you all about them. And he seems to find out anything he pleases."

It was the nearest approach to confidence that he had shown, and Jack followed it up with a plunge.

"I tell you what it is, Masters," he said, looking hard at the fire so that Clive might not feel himself stared at, "your cousin has said something to your mother and sisters which has made them very uneasy about you. If he'd said more, it mightn't have been so bad for them, but they know so little that they are fretting their lives out," pursued Ibbetson with a bold disregard for the truth which should certainly have been limited here by the third person singular. "I dare say you think I've no business to come poking my fingers into what doesn't concern me, indeed to

tell you the truth I'm of the same opinion myself. But I'm here because a friend of theirs for whom I've a regard is under the impression they've got an exaggerated idea of what is amiss, and thinks you might put things straighter. There! and I hope I've not made a bungle of it," he continued mentally, feeling as if the pause which followed lasted five minutes at the very least.

"I don't see what Oliver can have said," said the young fellow a little sullenly. "I've followed his advice pretty closely."

"Well," Jack said slowly, "I suppose you'd hardly be disposed to take an outside opinion?"

"Yours, you mean?"

His manner was not very pleasant, but Jack acknowledged that it was scarcely to be expected it should be different, and so far he had been unable to trace any symptom of fear as of one who held a guilty secret. He began to have a stronger conviction of his innocence himself.

"Yes, I meant mine. One moment—I mean, of course, only on their account."

"Oliver is all the world with them," said Clive uneasily, "at least if one may trust half the messages he brings back."

"Why on earth don't you write direct instead of trusting to messages?"

"Direct? Why of course I do," said Clive staring blankly.

"Well, openly then. Telling them of any—difficulties you may be in."

"I can't see the good of worrying them about all the particulars when one has made a fool of oneself, but they know the outcome of it."

Clive said this frankly and without hesitation. Jack became more and more doubtful how he was to go on. Even if you believe a fellow-man, you may be offering him the worst insult in your power by telling him so.

"They fancy they don't know, at any rate," he said rather lamely.

"Not know! Why, haven't they had Oliver out there? There was nothing to prevent their getting it all out of him. In fact, he told me he had explained everything."

"He certainly left them with the impression that there were circumstances you didn't wish made known." The young man started to his feet and flushed angrily red.

"I?"

"Yes."

"There is nothing whatever. Nothing to conceal from them," he added in a lower tone.

"Then a false impression has undoubtedly been given, and I advise you to set it right. By the way, when Miss Capponi wrote to ask the question, why didn't you explain?"

"Bice has never asked anything of the sort?" said Clive angrily, and yet uneasily.

"Are you certain? Just reflect. Last October it was."

"I tell you she has never done anything of the sort. Why on earth should she?"

Jack got up and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I dare say it sounds queer to you, but I give you my word, I'm not asking from idle curiosity. Your sister *did* write to you last October. Look here, can you make up your mind to tell me your actual trouble? You owe money, I dare say. Much?"

"Much to me," Clive said reluctantly. "I don't know what you'd call it. Fifty pounds."

"And to whom?"

"Oh, it's all in Trent's hands now. That's one blessing."

"Is that all the difficulty?" said Ibbetson. And this time he faced round and looked full at the other. Clive looked at him too, though distrustfully.

"No," he said slowly. "But what there is besides, matters to no one."

"No trouble with the firm?"

Jack's eyes were on him still, and he saw that he hesitated. But he said "No" again. Then he broke out more eagerly.

"I can't explain it to you, for Oliver wouldn't like it, and I'm under tremendous obligations to him, there's nothing wrong, only I've met with very bad luck."

"Nothing wrong?"

"No. That I'll swear."

"Well," said Ibbetson, "perhaps I can't expect you to say more to me. But at any rate your mother and sisters deserve all your confidence. Write to them fully."

"Oliver said it only bothered them, and that he would explain."

"He has made a mistake or two in the matter, it seems to me," said Ibbetson with so much concentrated anger in the tone that Clive looked at him in surprise. But he recovered himself quickly and put out his hand, "You'll write, that's understood. I'm going down to Hetherton, and will see you again when I come back."

The interview had only been partly satisfactory. He felt sure that Clive had neither forged a cheque nor committed any other crime, and therefore Trent's black insinuations deserved all that Phillis had thought of them. At the same time there was a depression about the young fellow which seemed to show that he was under some darker cloud than a debt of fifty pounds to a cousin. The more he thought of it, the more this conviction grew on him. Perhaps at Hetherton a light would be thrown upon it.

Before he had any chance of getting a hansom, he had to walk for some distance, and a thick wetting rain was falling. Lights were flashing and rolling through the fog, the noise of wheels, the cry of newsmen, were the only distinct sounds which reached him out of that mighty roar which London sends forth day and night. Damp and prosaic enough it all was; a beggar stretched forth a bony hand, the repulsiveness of face and figure unclothed by the picturesqueness which in the South might have softened its hideousness. Yet, as Jack splashed along, something within him seemed to leap into life as if in answer to a trumpet call. After all, it was his own country. He was young, strong, work had in it more of a joy than a burden. He felt as if he had been living of late in a fool's paradise of dreams, where he was of no good to himself or to anyone else, except, perhaps, to kind Miss Cartwright. He had rather prided himself upon an absence of ambition. But a consciousness of strength and a desire to use it seemed to awaken that evening, and, although he did not own it, probably a wish that others—at any rate one other—should see that he, too, could *do*, awoke at the same time. Hetherton had gone from him, but he felt as if other Hethertons lay beckoning to him from a blue distance, and though he smiled at his own airy castles, they had the power of enabling him to face the prospect of the actual place with perfect cheerfulness. He refused the first hansom that offered itself, feeling as if the walk home among all those other workers who were passing, coming and going, was a sort of pledge of brotherhood with them—given to himself. And he resolved to run down to Hetherton to see what he could find out about Trent and Clive.

Chapter Fifteen.

Jack Expresses an Opinion.

It was afternoon the next day before he left London, and past dark when he reached the Hetherton station. But the day had been fairly fine, and there was nothing in the evening to prevent his walking the two or three miles which lay between the station and the house, while his portmanteau was to come after him in the carrier's cart. He lingered a little, especially when he had crossed the sandy common and got down among the sturdy Scotch firs, so that, what with listening to the rustling of the wind in their tops, and the brawling of the swollen river, as he passed in at the lodge he heard the little clock striking seven, the dinner hour at the Court.

Jack was a favourite with all the servants, and the old butler bustled out from the dining-room directly he heard who had arrived, and sent a young footman off with orders about the room.

"You'll like to wash your hands, Mr John, and I'll let master know you're come."

"Anyone dining here, Jones?"

"Only one gentleman, sir."

There was no time for more. Jack went up the broad stairs, two or three at a time, and coming down more leisurely, walked into the dining-room and found himself face to face with Mr and Mrs Thornton and—Oliver Trent.

Jack would have been more discomposed had he not heard of this acquaintanceship from Clive, but as it was, the meeting annoyed him, and he did not trouble himself to conceal the feeling. Oliver was prepared, and wore a passive countenance. Mr Thornton, who liked Jack as well as, and his own will very much better than, he liked anybody, was divided between welcome and displeasure.

"Upon my word, Jack, upon my word, you take us by surprise. Come for Christmas, eh? Well, fortunately a visitor more or less does not make much difference to Mrs Thornton, and your room is no doubt ready. But a carriage should have met you if you had acquainted us. How did you come?"

"I walked from the station, and my things were put into old Brook's cart."

He knew that Mr Thornton hated old Brook's cart, and there was partly a mischievous desire to tease him, and partly a wish to show Oliver Trent that he held very lightly the grandeur and riches of the Court.

Mrs Thornton interposed. She was always interposing with kindly attempts to smooth down her husband, and an utter want of tact which made the smoothing produce the contrary effect.

"How did you leave Phillis?" she said.

"Why did you leave her? would be more to the purpose," snorted Mr Thornton, under his breath.

"She was very well," said Jack, quietly helping himself to cucumber. "And as to why I came, it was on a little matter of business, and partly to look after a protégé or cousin of yours, Mr Trent, unless I'm mistaken—Clive Masters."

Oliver Trent's face could not turn pale, but it changed to an indescribable shade of colour which answered the same purpose, and gave Ibbetson a moment of delight.

"Masters?" repeated Mr Thornton. "Isn't that the clerk you were speaking of?"

"I presume it is," said Trent, recovering himself with an effort, "although I am at a loss to conceive how my interest for him and Mr Ibbetson's should run in an identical line?"

"And I am afraid I cannot enlighten you," said Jack. "Perhaps they don't. At any rate I can only answer for my own."

There was a little silence. Oliver Trent had no desire to force explanations, and Mr Thornton looked at the young fellow with a feeling which was partly pride and partly exasperation. He could never think that he impressed Jack as he would have liked to impress him, but the oddest part was that in his heart he envied his imperturbability, and the ease of manner to which he had never attained. Not that he was not a gentleman by birth. He was a new man in Surrey, but the Thorntons were a good old family, and he had a right to good manners and good breeding; perhaps it was that very fact which made him sore over the consciousness that he had neither. Money had been his aim in life, and he had an exaggerated respect for its value, but his pleasure in it was a good deal marred by his having sufficient acuteness to perceive when others held it in small account, and he could neither forgive them, nor in his heart of hearts help respecting them for their indifference. He got more dislike than was really his due. To Jack, both as man and boy, he had indeed been very kind, and yet Jack sometimes almost detested him. At this moment as he looked across the table, sparkling with silver and valuable glass, he wondered how Phillis had ever endured her life, and yet more how she had lived it and still preserved that simplicity and quiet self-possession to which his eyes had lately seemed to open. Mr Thornton, with his bald head, insignificant features, and pompous manner, looked to him more vulgar than ever. Evidently Oliver Trent was a favourite. Ibbetson said no more about Clive, but set himself with something like amusement to watch Trent's skilful treatment of his host. He deferred to him on all subjects, but not in any manner which should give the suspicion of open flattery, rather expressing at first a difference of opinion, and gradually allowing himself to be as it were convinced by Mr Thornton's arguments. He showed, also, a delicate appreciation of wealth. Neither dinner nor wines were lost upon him, but his praise was discriminating, and implied reserve. Jack felt as if he were the spectator of some admirably played game of skill, the more so that Oliver took no pains to ingratiate himself with him, rather treating his comparative youth as something to be looked upon with condescension which was not without contempt.

The evening passed heavily. Mrs Thornton wished to pet Jack, and was always irritating her husband, so that at last she got up with a sigh and went off to bed. Mr Thornton himself crossed his legs, leaned his head back against the crimson satin chair and fell asleep; Jack laid down the *Times* which he had been studying deeply, and walked towards Oliver Trent.

"As we have met here," he said, "will you give me five minutes' conversation in the next room?"

"Conversation? Oh, certainly."

A heavy portière separated the rooms; that which they now entered, less gorgeous in itself, and less glaringly lit, was one in which Phillis often sat; her piano was in a corner, and a sudden remembrance struck Jack of the evening when she had been at the window, and had gone out to him at his request. A dark flush rose to his forehead at the recollection; how changed were his thoughts of her since then, and yet by the strange irony of fate, or more truly by his own folly, then she was his, and now they were separated—for ever? Oliver Trent, watchful and composed, threw himself into a great chair; Ibbetson stood with his back to the fire. Moved by these thoughts, he was less at his ease than he had been throughout the evening, but it was he who had asked for the conversation, and he who had first to speak.

"I saw young Masters last night," he began.

"So I gathered. Did you find your interview worth the trouble it had cost you?"

"You mean a journey from Rome? I think so."

"Indeed! Your mission then may be considered fortunate."

Trent's soft voice was touched with scorn, perhaps a little more strongly than he would have permitted had it been under perfect control, but Jack took no notice. He repeated, "I think so. I believe I shall now be able to remove some misunderstandings which have been causing his family considerable anxiety and pain. You will allow me to add that it strikes me as a pity that you ever suffered the misunderstandings to exist."

"I certainly shall not allow you to add anything which implies that you have the right to interfere with what relates to the private concerns of my own family," said Trent hotly.

"I am afraid the veto, if it rested in your hands, would be applied too late," said Jack with a cool scorn which stung the older man. "My advice has been already given." And then he made a step forward on the rug, and a sudden fire flashed into his eyes which few persons had ever seen there. "You are in my uncle's house as his guest, and that, Mr Trent, prevents me from speaking as plainly as I might otherwise do. But it does not hinder my thinking, and I leave you to imagine what is my opinion of a man who has suffered three helpless women, in a foreign land, to endure all the anguish of believing that their son and brother had sunk into a villain when a word from him would have lifted the

load from their hearts. Suffered, did I say? Rather himself raised the suspicion in their hearts, and nursed it there."

The contempt in the young man's tone was unmistakable. When Trent answered, it was as if he struggled to use the same weapons and could not bring them to bear.

"May I enquire from whom you have gathered these remarkable facts?"

"From those who were interested," replied Jack after a momentary pause. He did not wish to bring in Bice's name, but Oliver understood whom he meant, and became almost livid. He started up.

"And it is you who venture to bring such scandalous accusations—you, whose conduct in Florence was so unworthy the name of gentleman that if Mr Thornton, with his high and honourable character, was acquainted with it, he would not, I believe, tolerate you in his house! I repudiate your charge. It is false. If my cousins mistook my warnings, it is not my fault. The word you have used never passed my lips—"

Jack interrupted him.

"It could not. But you implied it."

"Implied!"

"Yes. To women who were terrified at shadows—and no wonder. What did they know about possibilities or proofs?"

"Until you enlightened them," said Oliver with a sneer. "Pray, Mr Ibbetson, do you habitually indulge in romances of this description?"

Jack treated this speech with lofty indifference.

"I have said my say, and there's an end of it I suppose," he said, turning to the fire, and pushing a log with his foot. He went on speaking with his back turned to Trent. "I intended to let you know my opinion, and have done so; as for the others who are mixed up in the matter, they can form their own as they please."

"I have something of my own for you to listen to, though," Trent answered, recovering his coolness. "Your opinions are of too small importance for me to treat this impertinence as it perhaps deserves. Probably it arises from pique, and I may afford to pity it. But if we come to opinions I can give you my own hot and strong. I should like to hear what any honourable man would say of a gentleman who, engaged to one lady, not only flung away her affections, but deliberately insulted her by trying to gain those of another who was already pledged. Eh, Mr Ibbetson? Is this cock-and-bull story your last hope?"

There was enough truth in this speech for it to sting, and Jack felt an instinctive conviction that it was spoken for an auditor, and that if he looked round he should see Mr Thornton standing in the doorway. There he actually was, and the anger and perplexity in his red face were so ludicrously strong, that Jack's anger was choked in an inclination to laugh.

"What is that you say, Trent? Be good enough to repeat it," he said, coming forward and waving back the chair which Jack pushed forward.

"It is a private matter between your nephew and myself," said Trent, as if reluctantly.

"Private? Nonsense. You alluded to an affair in which I am as much interested as anyone. I knew there was something of which I had not been informed. Both of you were aware I was within hearing, so now I insist upon hearing properly. Well, sir?"

The last interrogation was addressed loudly to Jack, who was leaning against the chimney-piece in an easy attitude which seemed like a personal affront to his uncle. He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Mr Trent was speaking, sir, not I."

"Do you suppose I require to be told *that*? Mr Trent was speaking, and he was saying things which you should be ashamed of anyone having the power of saying," said Mr Thornton, angrily.

"Excuse me. Not of any one. The force of an accusation altogether depends upon who makes it," said Jack, with a haughty look at the other.

"If you will allow me, Mr Thornton," said Trent rising, "I will wish you good-night. Your nephew would naturally prefer to offer his explanations alone with you. I exceedingly regret my own rashness of speech."

"Stop, sir!" said Mr Thornton, bringing down his closed fist on his knees with a thump. "I manage matters in my own house in my own way. Let me hear what you have to say, and let me hear what he has to say, and then I shall know something of where we all are."

"You must make allowances for my feeling sore," said Oliver, still apologetically, "as the other lady to whom I alluded is my promised wife."

"Now is that the truth or a lie?" reflected Ibbetson. "If it's the truth I had better have left the matter alone."

"Do you mean that he tried to make her jilt you, while he himself jilted Phillis Grey?" demanded Mr Thornton strongly. All Jack's indifference was shaken. He stepped forward, drawing himself up to his full height, and his face was resolute and stern.

"I see no use in dragging Miss Grey's name into this discussion," he said, with a determination which impressed his uncle in spite of himself; "but since you and Mr Trent have done so, you will be good enough to understand that the facts have not been correctly represented. At the time of which he speaks, he was certainly not engaged to Miss Capponi, and as for my acting towards Miss Grey as you suppose, though I am perhaps a fool, I am not such an utter fool as that would prove me. That is sufficient for to-night, I think. Good-night, Uncle Peter," and he marched out of the room, with his head rather high, and without a glance at Oliver.

No one stopped him; his uncle would have liked to have done so, but was not sure that in his present mood he would have attended to his wishes. Mr Thornton looked after the young fellow with an anger that was partly envy. Trent got up.

"I regret this very much," he said in his soft tone. "He made an uncalled-for attack upon me, and I lost my temper and retaliated, without knowing that you were present."

"Didn't you see me?" said Mr Thornton simply. "Well, what you said explained a good deal. I never believed Phillis would have set all my wishes aside." Then, as Trent remained silent, he went on—"However, they both of them know the alternative. When I have made up my mind I don't change."

"No, you have an enviable force of determination. I believe it to be the secret of your success."

"No doubt, no doubt," said Mr Thornton, rising also, and shaking himself as if he would have thus got rid of a lingering compunction. "I'm a plain man, and I keep to my word. None of your shilly-shallying for me, and that Master Jack will learn, in spite of his confounded airs. Good-night, Trent."

Chapter Sixteen.

"The Hand of Douglas is his Own."

Jack took care to come down late to breakfast the next morning, having no inclination to partake of it with Oliver Trent, and feeling sure that Trent would respect the punctuality which reigned at Hetherton. He had cold fare in consequence himself, though the old butler did what he could, and when it was finished, he received a message to the effect that Mr Thornton was waiting for him in the small room where he sometimes transacted business. He was a little sorry to find Mrs Thornton also there, for, although her aim was always to make peace, the result where her husband was concerned was almost invariably of an opposite nature, all her married years having failed to teach her the management of his temper. She was fonder of Jack than of Phillis, and defended him wildly, in a manner which was most exasperating to an irritable man. Jack saw at a glance as he entered that some passage at arms had already taken place, for she was sitting upright, injured and tearful, while his uncle with a very red face poked the fire furiously.

"Very sorry to disturb you so early," he said, brandishing the poker, and looking hard at a timepiece, "we poor working men are obliged to descend to such insignificant details of life as punctuality. Of course with you it is different."

"I don't know about that," said Jack, good-humouredly, "I'm afraid you're trying to chaff me. But you ought to allow I'm not often so late."

"That is what I told your uncle," broke in Mrs Thornton with eagerness. "I am sure there are so many young men who come here who are so much worse—"

"Much fiddlesticks!" growled her husband. "What are those young idiots to me? However, you never can do anything that's not perfect, so, of course I give in. I suppose I am to be told this morning that all this Italian business is just as it should be."

"We are both sorry that you should be disappointed," Jack said quietly, "but—"

"Disappointed! The disappointment will be on your side you will find!"

"Excuse me, I had not finished my sentence. I was going to say that grateful as I am for your kindness, this is a matter in which I could not allow anyone to dictate to me."

"Oh, very well, sir, very well. You must go your own way. I shall not attempt to interfere. Only you will quite understand that neither you nor Phillis have anything more to look for from my hands."

Mrs Thornton broke in appealingly. "My dear Peter! Now do not be so hasty. You know how sorry you often are when it is too late."

"Will you hold your tongue?" said her husband, glaring at her.

"You don't really mean it," she went on disregarding, "you know you don't. Jack has been about the place ever since we came here twelve years ago, and he was a nice little boy in a short jacket—"

"*Will* you be quiet?"

"No, I won't. If nobody else is here to speak, I shall tell you what I think of it. There is nobody so near you as Jack. As to all this business, you know very well that it is no one's fault but Phillis's, she said so herself in her letters, and I do

say it is a shame that the poor boy should suffer—”

Mr Thornton was in a red heat of passion. Jack said abruptly.

“No, that is not the case. Whatever blame there is—and I suppose there always is blame, first or last, in a broken engagement—rests entirely with me. It will be very unjust, Uncle Peter, if you visit my sins on poor Phillis. I tell you honestly that I liked the thought of Hetherton at first, I dare say I should like it still; but it was a mistake of yours, I think, though no doubt you meant it kindly, to mix up the two things together, and it makes it uncommonly hard upon one of the two, don’t you see? Set it right with Phillis, and I shall take my disinheriting without grumbling.”

Phillis was Mr Thornton’s favourite as Jack was his wife’s, and this speech of Jack’s smoothed him down a little. But he shook his head obstinately.

“Whatever I may be, I’m not a weather-cock. I made up my mind deliberately, and I’m not going to change it for any boy or girl fancies. Marry Phillis, and you and she and your heirs after you shall have Hetherton, and plenty to keep it on. Don’t marry her, and I shall find another successor. That’s all. You can’t have it more plainly.”

“Oh, it’s plain enough,” said Jack with some bitterness, walking over to the window. What he thought was that it placed a wider gulf than ever between them. For he could not think that she cared about Hetherton, and he knew he did—to a certain degree; and how could he come near her again with this condition hanging over them? “Well,” he said, turning back to the fire, “then there’s no more to be said, except that I still hope you will alter your determination. I wanted a word with you about young Masters.”

“What of him?”

“Is he doing well?”

“Just the reverse. We should have sent him off by this time if it had not been for my very good friend Mr Trent,” said Mr Thornton, pressing up his under lip and looking defiantly at his nephew.

“What are his sins?”

“Perhaps you don’t think so much of them in your set. We business men have an antiquated idea that it is dishonourable to give a promissory note when you have no means of meeting it when due.”

“I am sure Jack would never be dishonourable,” murmured Mrs Thornton.

“Ah—” said Jack musingly. “Then the money was not forthcoming?”

“Certainly not.”

“And you heard of it?”

“I was informed by Mr Trent, who being interested in the young scamp—”

“His cousin,” put in Jack.

“His cousin!” Mr Thornton looked astonished for a moment. “Well, then, his cousin—very generously paid the money and got the note into his own hands. He acted throughout in the manner I should have expected from him, came to me at once, asked my advice, and begged me, if I felt it a possibility, to give the lad another chance. After consideration I consented. Pray have you anything to say against all this?”

“Not to-day,” Ibbetson answered quietly.

“Not to-day!” repeated his uncle. “Perhaps you intend setting yourself up as the young man’s champion against his best friend. And I tell you what, Jack. You seemed to me to be trying to pick a quarrel with Mr Trent last night. Don’t let me see anything of the sort again. You will be good enough to behave to him as my friend.”

“Not as mine, at all events,” said Jack, smiling as he reflected that his uncle treated him with as much authority as if, instead of disinheriting, he had just invested him with all his worldly goods.

“And why not?” demanded Mr Thornton.

“That I cannot explain at present. Never mind, Uncle Peter, we shan’t clash. I’m going up to town by the next train, and shall be out of the way.”

Mr Thornton’s face fell. In spite of all that had passed, he was very much disappointed. He thought Jack, who seldom gave in to him and never lost his temper, and who was therefore a very pleasant companion, would have spent Christmas with them. Under present circumstances he could not condescend to ask him to stay, but he would have liked his wife to do so in private, instead of exclaiming—

“There, Peter, I told you so! Now you have driven him away. Your uncle didn’t mean it, my dear boy, though I don’t think you are right about that nice Mr Trent.”

“I haven’t said anything, have I?”

“Well, I suppose it means something when you decline to meet him as a friend.”

“The hand of Douglas is his own,” quoted Jack. “I am very sorry, but I can’t do otherwise. And I must be off at once,

if I am to catch the train.”

“You can have the carriage,” said Mr Thornton gruffly.

“No, thank you, the morning is so fine, I prefer to walk.”

“Stop a moment. Then you are not going out again to Rome?”

“Not unless I am obliged to do so. I shall spend Christmas with my father, and then come up for real hard work. Good-bye; good-bye, Aunt Harriet.”

“Hard work!” repeated Mr Thornton with scorn, as the door closed. And yet he was feeling a reluctant admiration for the straightforwardness with which the young fellow had behaved. If he had been left alone he would probably have relented, but his wife, with the best intentions in the world, immediately rubbed him up the wrong way.

“Of course you don’t mean it, Peter,” she said anxiously.

Perhaps nothing irritates a man so much as being told that he does not mean what he has just proclaimed with some emphasis as his intention. He faced round—

“Don’t I? I mean every word of it. I gave them both fair notice.”

“Then I do think it is a shame. And there will be nobody we care for to come after us. I don’t believe you will be able to think of anyone at all.”

Mr Thornton was immediately possessed with a desire to prove his prescience.

“Pooh!” he said, “you don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not by any means sure that it’s not a good thing for the property that this has happened. Jack treats it all too lightly, as if money were got together in a week. I should prefer some one who would take my name, and go on carefully building up as I have done. Such a man as Trent, for instance. Highly principled, and thoroughly trustworthy, I don’t know such another. If it hadn’t been for him I should never have known the rights of this business.”

Mr Thornton banged the door to emphasise his last sentence, and then frowned, hearing Jack whistling as he ran down the steps. With the frown on his face he went in pursuit of Mr Trent.

“Look here, Trent,” he began, “that young clerk’s business was plain enough, I suppose?”

“Quite so,” said Trent steadily. “Your nephew has been talking of him? He seems to have taken an unaccountable prejudice against me, but I am sure I wish his efforts could prove the poor boy blameless. I have done my best in that direction, and failed. From his being a connection of my own, and from an especial cause of interest, I am peculiarly desirous for it. Nothing else could have led me to appeal to your kindness as I have done, and I assure you I cannot be sufficiently grateful.”

“Never mind that,” said Mr Thornton with a wave of the hand.

“Excuse me, it is impossible to forget it. I can take credit for nothing but entire frankness in the matter. Dismissal would have been ruin, and with most men dismissal must have resulted; but I could not have allowed you to remain in the dark, and your kindness in the matter may be the saving of the unhappy boy.”

“What can Jack know about him?” asked Mr Thornton.

“Probably some distorted account of the matter has reached him,” Trent replied calmly. “Unfortunately, as I said, your nephew is prejudiced against me. Does his opinion affect you? Because, if so, you must allow me to insist upon Masters’s dismissal.”

“Affect me? Certainly not,” said Mr Thornton, swelling. “I am not likely to be influenced in my opinions by Master Jack. Besides, he seemed to take his part.”

“You may be sure that I am keeping an eye upon him,” said Trent, not noticing these words. “If I see anything at all unsatisfactory, your interests will at all times be paramount to every other consideration. Have you seen the paper? I was wishing particularly to hear your opinion on last night’s news.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Pursuit.

Jack had an hour in which to think over his plan of operations as he went flying up to London in the express. The day was bright and frosty, the sky lightly flecked with clouds, the trees beautiful with the lights on their trunks, with the delicate web-work of their branches clear against the blue, with ivy hanging here and there brave and green. Every little pool of water showed a deep steely blue. Red berries brightened the hedges, and at the stations there were bundles of glossy holly and mistletoe, tied up for the London markets, hampers thrust into the train, a general air of approaching good cheer. It was next to impossible not to feel some exhilaration, actual or reflected.

And yet his own position was not very enviable just now. He had lost Phillis, he had lost Hetherington, and he had an awkward affair on his hands for which, except in the moments when his easy-going nature was roused to an active dislike of Trent—and these moments quickly exhausted themselves—he felt a strong distaste. He meant to carry it

through, because Phillis had set her heart upon it, but he had nothing of the detective in him, and at no time found any satisfaction in proving a fellow-creature a sinner. So that, although the remembrance of Bice's wistful eyes stirred him, and he was aware that it would be cowardly to leave friendless Clive under the shadow which had been thrown over him, he yet would have been glad to have kept Oliver Trent's share in the matter in the background. It was partly laziness, partly a general good-will. As he was swept along by the train, past field and copse, and commons, he tried to think of some possible means by which justice and mercy might both be satisfied, but, as is generally the case, found it hard to keep the balance true. Perhaps he would not have minded so greatly if he had not found Trent domiciled at Hetherton. He knew nothing, it is true, of that last idea of Mr Thornton's, but he saw that he was on a very friendly footing there, and hated the notion of being the one to push him out. The consequence of all these misgivings was that when he reached Waterloo Station he had not made up his mind as to any more definite course of action than that he would go out to Kensington again in the evening, and get Clive to speak more freely.

When he found himself there, after some hours of work in his chambers, he was told that Mr Masters had not come in. He went for a stretch along Kensington High Street as far as Holland House, where the trees stood up dark against the grey dusk, and then came back to receive the same answer. The girl, with a dirty apron thrown over her arm, was too much taken up with staring at the visitor, to be communicative.

"Can you tell me at all whether Mr Masters is likely to be in soon?" asked Ibbetson.

"No, sir, I couldn't."

"Is he generally back by this time?"

"Sometimes he is, and sometimes he isn't. Mostly he is," she added with the jerk of an after-thought.

"I'll go in and wait, I think. No, I won't," he said finally, feeling a strong dislike to anything which looked like invading Clive's secrets, whatever they might be. After a little deliberation he left his card with a few pencilled words on it to say that he would call at the city office next day, in order to appoint a meeting, and went back to his lodgings.

He found himself thinking a good deal that night of Hetherton and Oliver Trent. His presence there was unlikely to bode any good to Jack's interests, and yet that very conviction made him dislike to be the one to expose him, if exposure should be needed. But calmer reflection made him believe this to be impossible. There might be some error, or possibly an exaggerated putting forward of his own services, such as should impress Bice, but of anything worse, Jack in the kindness of his heart, which always reasserted itself, after he had been stirred to anger, was disposed to acquit him. Yet it was difficult to reconcile the small bits of information which as yet were all he had succeeded in picking up with each other, and he fell asleep with the determination to induce Clive to speak more clearly, now that chance had disclosed to him this business of the promissory note.

The following morning he was at the office in good time. Of course he was well-known there, and there had been days when Mr Thornton dreamed of his taking to this city life—a dream which never got any nearer to its fulfilment, but which always could be remembered as a grievance. Old Davis, the senior clerk, was fetched in a moment. Ibbetson was beginning to explain his errand, when Davis interrupted him.

"Walk this way, if you please, sir," he said, "and we shall have the place to ourselves."

"What a den it is, to be sure!" said Jack, looking round the dreary little room, with its drearier fittings. "Davis, do you mean to tell me you don't sometimes feel disposed to hang yourself?"

"Bless my soul, sir, why?"

"Why, for want of anything more lively to do. And this is what that unfortunate Masters has to grind at!" continued Jack in an audible soliloquy. Davis caught at the name.

"The fact is, Mr Ibbetson," he said, looking grave, "we're in great perplexity about Mr Masters."

"What's happened?"

"He hasn't turned up to-day at all."

"Ill, I suppose," said Jack.

"Well, sir, not at his lodgings. I sent a boy off and I find he has not been there since leaving this at the usual hour yesterday. Then he was in good health, to all appearance. I can't help fearing there's something wrong."

"Good Heavens, Davis, what can be wrong?" said Ibbetson hastily.

"The young man has not been himself for some time, and perhaps that makes me nervous," said the old man with a deliberation which tried his companion's patience. "Besides, if you know him, Mr John, you are aware that there has been an unpleasantness about a money matter. It always is love or money with those young fellows. He got into debt, borrowed from one of those rascally money-lenders, giving him a promissory note, and when the time came had nothing to meet it. I believe it was a small sum, and it's not such an uncommon story, but a bad one to get to the ears of the principals, and somehow or other, I'm sure I don't know how, that is what happened here."

"Ah, I see," said Ibbetson.

"The consequence is that they have looked coldly on him ever since, and you'll understand, Mr John, that others who would not be shocked on their own account will follow the heads, if only to curry favour. I've been quite surprised, I declare, to see how many know it. And I can't help feeling sorry for the poor lad, wrong as he has been, for he seems

to take it to heart terribly.”

“Does he say anything for himself?”

“Well, he has a cock-and-a-bull sort of story,” said old Davis, putting his head on one side. “He was sent down to Birmingham on business the week the note became due, and he says he gave the money to a man he trusted to pay it up for him, and that the man has made off or something, for he can find no trace of him. Very unlikely, I am afraid. Mr Trent did all he could in the matter, paid the money, and made it a personal favour to Mr Thornton to keep Mr Masters on, but I feared how it would be when I saw how much had leaked out. I’m sorry, too, for I liked him.”

Jack walked to the dingy window and looked out.

“Have you no sort of idea where he has gone, if he has gone, as I see you believe?”

“Yes,” said the clerk confidently. “I think he has gone to Liverpool.”

“Why?”

“They all go there, that’s one reason. And then I know he has been asking questions in and out about Liverpool of one of the others. I feel pretty sure he has America in his head.”

“Now, Davis, you can do me a favour,” said Jack, coming back suddenly. “We’re close on Christmas. Make some excuse about his absence to-day—put it on me if you like—and, give me a chance of getting hold of him. I shall go down to Liverpool at once. And, mind you, it’s my opinion he will turn out not to blame in that money business.”

“But, Mr John, how can I!”

“Nonsense, man, you haven’t been here five-and-twenty years for nothing. I’ll telegraph back, and be responsible to my uncle,” added Jack with a half laugh. “Hey, boy, call a cab.”

He left Davis standing bewildered, drove to his lodgings, crammed what he wanted into a portmanteau, and dashed off to the station, luckily catching a fast train. On his way he had plenty of time for reflection on the increasing oddity of his position. There seemed so little to connect him with Clive, that it was absolutely comical to realise that Clive had brought him to England, excited him to various warlike passages entirely opposed to his usual temperament, and was now drawing him off on what was likely to prove a fool’s errand. “I hope Phillis at least will appreciate my efforts,” thought Jack, with a laugh. It was she, not Bice, who presented herself to his mind as the motive power for his present energy, her influence always keeping its full strength when they were apart, while Bice’s faded, seeming to depend upon presence, and probably the fascination of her beauty. And yet Jack’s kind heart was enlisted by this time on behalf of the young fellow, who, he could not but believe, was in some strange way a victim.

While he was in London, there had seemed a chance of finding Clive at Liverpool, but when in the darkness and bitter cold of a December evening he stood on the Liverpool platform, the chance seemed to run down at once until it looked like an impossibility. The police were his only hope, and he drove at once to a police station in order to put them on the track, experiencing the usual relief in finding how ordinary—however doubtful—a matter he seemed to be engaged upon. A superintendent put a few questions, gave a few instructions, and then delivered his opinion. Always supposing that the young man had come there at all—in which case America was tolerably certain to be his aim—it was of course quite possible that he had got off that day, but not likely. In the first place he was a stranger and would not know how to set to work, and would be shy of asking advice—a good thing, too, put in the superintendent. It would be necessary for him to dispose of, or change his clothes, as money for others would probably be wanting. Also he would have to ship himself. At some seasons this might be a difficulty: but Christmas was not a bad time for him to have chosen, as men did not like sailing just then, and therefore hands were scarce. There was a chance, and not a slight one, that he might go on board that very night, and if he meant to hide, there might be difficulties in getting him away. That the superintendent could not pronounce upon. But his own opinion inclined to the more hopeful view that he would not sail till the next day. Ibbetson was not sorry to be advised to leave the inquiries absolutely in their hands for that evening, only promising to be ready at an early hour the next morning in case he was called upon to accompany them.

The call came when he was sound asleep, and a message was joined to it to the effect that he was begged to lose no time. Accordingly he was quickly downstairs, and found a policeman waiting at the door of the hotel.

In the damp chill of the early morning—very damp and very chill it was—it was almost a matter of course that things should look yet more hopeless than they had looked the night before. Night appeals to the imagination and works her wonders easily, while morning is coldly prosaic and depressing. A little rain had fallen, lights were still flashing about, shining on wet stones, on which bales and barrels lay heaped; and of the great forest of masts in the river, only those near at hand were beginning to loom out of the mist. Jack’s conductor walking briskly along, and quite unaffected by atmospheric influences, told him that they had found that one vessel was to sail that day, and that the gentleman was not on board.

“And that’s all?” said Jack, disappointed.

“That’s all, sir, at present. She has been closely watched, and if he joins her it will be soon, and you can’t miss him.”

“Keep out of sight,” said Ibbetson, “and if he does turn up, settle with the captain and come to the hotel.”

They had reached the wharf where the vessel lay, and Ibbetson sat down on a barrel. His watch did not last long. A young light figure came running, carrying a bundle, and leaping over a coil of rope which lay in the way, and Jack, more from precaution than any actual conviction that this was Clive, stopped him. It was the young fellow’s start

which first assured him, but recognition did not at once dawn in Clive's eyes. When it did, he turned pale.

"You here!" he stammered.

"And just in time," was Jack's cheerful answer. "I never did anything half so neatly in my life before. My dear fellow, don't be looking round to see how you can give me the slip. The most inveterate of bores never stuck to you as closely as I shall stick."

"Mr Ibbetson," said Clive imploringly, "let me go. It's my best chance, it is indeed—don't be so hard on me as to take it away. Somehow or other everything has got into a mess here, and over there," and as he spoke he pointed towards that shadowy world out of which the masts were beginning to stretch themselves, "I may do better."

"You will do better here," said Jack.

"No, you don't know."

"Yes. I do know—quite enough. Come along," he added, drawing him away, and anxious that the policeman should not become visible. "If there is a mess, the more reason you should be here to set things right;" and seeing Clive was still reluctant, he added more gravely, "Look here, Masters. If, when we've gone into the matter and tried to put it straight, it seems as if America would be your best chance after all, I give you my word I'll help you to go there in a straightforward fashion, better than this. Now we'll get back your clothes. Are they sold?"

"Most of them."

"Let's hunt them up again, then. You lead on, for I know nothing of the place."

"But how on earth did you come here?" asked Clive, beginning to find time for astonishment.

"Well, I heard from old Davis—I must telegraph to him, by the bye—and came down last night, made a few inquiries, and hearing the Queen of the Ocean was to sail, kept an eye upon her."

It sounded so simple in Jack's cheery voice, that Clive, who had fancied he had arranged so as to baffle all pursuit, listened with a blank conviction of powerlessness.

"My coming away didn't matter much," he muttered.

"Except to yourself," said Ibbetson quietly. "Hallo, is this the street?"

Clive was silent through all the transactions which followed, but when, restored to his own garments, he and Ibbetson had nearly reached the hotel, he said suddenly,—

"I don't know how much or how little you know, but you may as well hear the right facts."

"Not till we've breakfasted," said Jack with decision. "This early rising has a wonderful effect upon the appetite. Breakfast first, afterwards your story if you like, and then we'll go up by the 11:30 train."

Chapter Eighteen.

Clive.

Clive's shyness and depression made it no easy matter to get at the facts, even when he had begun to tell them. He was cast down by this failure of what he had set his heart upon, slow to believe that he was trusted, and on his side suspicious of the other man's intentions, until Jack grew angry. It is difficult for those who all their life long have been accustomed to have unhesitating credit given to their word, to understand the doubts, the fears of those less fortunate in trust, though perhaps not less deserving of it. And yet as Clive sat in the coffee room, with his elbows on the table, his misery was so apparent that Jack resolved to do his best to pull him through. He worked his questions patiently backwards and forwards.

"All that's clear enough," he said, leaning back and clasping his hands round his knee. "You owed a little money, and that means of escape—though destruction would be the better word—always *is* placed conveniently near at hand. Don't tell me any more about that part of the business. The other half is the most important. You had scraped together the money, principal and interest?"

"Every penny," said Clive looking up quickly. "How could you manage that?"

"I'm sure I hardly know," he said with a half laugh. Then he added, with more confidence than he had yet shown—"You wouldn't understand my shifts. I sold some things, and the rest I got out of myself somehow. I wonder now I didn't break down."

"I expect you did," muttered Ibbetson, glancing at the hollow cheeks, and reflecting that this foolish attempt at escape was probably the outcome of broken-down nerves resulting from a life of semi-starvation. And Trent had looked on pitilessly! Clive went on with his story in a dull voice, making no attempt to appeal to his hearer's sympathies:

"I was sent down to Birmingham a day or two before it became due, and I left the money with a man I knew—Smith. I didn't hear anything, but I never doubted its being all right till I got back and found that he had bolted and that the money had never been paid. From that day to this I haven't heard a word of him. I dare say you don't believe me."

"But I do," said Ibbetson impatiently. "My dear fellow, for pity's sake, pluck up a little spirit! Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"Nobody does, that's all."

"Well, we'll make them. Now, why don't you trace this man?"

"I can't."

"How have you tried?"

"I went to his lodgings of course, and made no end of a row. There they said that he went out one day—the day after I left, it must have been—with a bag, and has never come back. I've been there again and again and never got anything new. Then, you see, I can't afford detectives and all that sort of thing—"

"They'll soon get hold of him," said Ibbetson, looking at his watch.

"No, they won't, for Oliver Trent was awfully good, and undertook to set them to work."

"And paid the money for you besides?"

"The fifty pounds? Yes. I owe it to him, and if you'd let me go, I'd have paid it back one of these days."

"Then I can't see why you shouldn't have stopped on and worked steadily. I don't suppose he'd have pressed you."

"I would, if I'd only thought he believed me. But he didn't, not a bit more than the rest of them. It takes all the spirit out of a fellow. And now, they'll taunt me about this—I tell you, Mr Ibbetson, it's no use. I can't face it all again."

"Nonsense," said Jack sharply. "Don't let your troubles drive you into being a coward. It seems to me, though I don't pretend to preach, that there are one or two things you might have remembered, Masters, which would have tided you over. Not face it? Face it, and clear it up."

"That's very fine to say," groaned Clive.

"Well, we'll see. It's time now to be off. And remember as to this affair, if you keep your own counsel, nobody but Davis need know anything about it. It's a pity you haven't made more of a friend of old Davis."

When they reached London, Ibbetson took his companion to his own lodgings. He had intended to have gone down to his father's for Christmas, but that was out of the question if he was to follow up Clive's affairs, and indeed the hurrying events of the last few days made him glad of some hours of leisure. Two letters were waiting for him—one, a kind, warm, rather shy letter from his stepmother, which he tossed more impatiently aside than it deserved; the other from Miss Cartwright. This he read eagerly. Excepting herself, they were all well, she said; the weather mild, Rome not yet full. She was a good deal confined to the house, but sometimes was able to take a drive on the Pincio, and when this was the case nothing would tempt Cartouche away from accompanying her, though she was sure he found it very dull to be shut into a carriage, and certainly presented a comical appearance, for the people stared at him with great astonishment. For Cartouche's sake, she almost wished they had not gone to Rome. Phillis was much with her. She was well, and found the Peningtons comfortable acquaintances, keen on seeing what they could, and apparently delighted to have Phillis with them. Of course that made it more pleasant for her. There was a good deal more of the same sort in the letter, gentle loving little remarks falling here and there, and leaving no sting.

No sting? Jack extracted something very like one from the innocent words. Was this man going to make love to Phillis? He read the letter over and over again, each time with increasing dissatisfaction. Yet what was it to him? Were they not separated? Did he even love her? He was not sure. He only hated Mr Penington, and indulged in some expression of his feelings.

Altogether it was an odd sort of Christmas Day which followed. He had a strange unreasonable impression as if he were shut out of the homes which were his by right; thoroughly unreasonable when it came to be sifted, since it was very certain that there was not one at which he would not have been welcome. Perhaps he nursed this notion, to account for the cloud which seemed to have grown up since he read his Roman letter with all Miss Cartwright's kind messages, but the impression of banishment and disgrace ever after haunted his remembrance of the day.

In the afternoon he took Clive to the lodgings of the man who had absconded, asking some questions by the way; the lad seldom opening his heart sufficiently to speak without being questioned. Yet every now and then Jack caught a glimpse which showed him he was not ungrateful.

"Was Smith a steady fellow?" he asked. "Did he seem in want of money?"

"Oh, he wanted money, of course. Most of my friends do," said Clive with a laugh. "But he was steady enough. The last man in the world I should have expected to serve me so. This is the street."

"Well, keep well out of sight," directed Jack. "We'll see if I can't make an impression on the landlady."

He found her voluble over her wrongs—"To have gone off quite unexpected without by your leave or with your leave, and not a word of notice, nor to have heard nothing from that day to this, and the rent owing, and—"

"It seems strange to me that he did not take his things," hazarded Jack.

The woman gave him a quick glance.

"Things! There was little enough he had. He took his carpet bag, and in that there was everything he had of value, that you may be sure of, and me such a loser and quite unsuspecting; and as for the bits he left behind, well, sir, if you wish for an inventory, there's a bootjack and a clothes-brush, and—"

"Never mind the things," said Ibbetson pleasantly. "I quite understand, as you say, that they're not likely to be worth much. It's Mr Smith himself that I'm anxious to find. Don't you think he mentioned where he was going, and that it may have slipped your memory?"

"Oh, my memory is good enough I'm not of that age to be growing forgetful," said the woman with a toss of her head. But she was evidently mollified.

"That's exactly what I should have thought, only I couldn't make it out; for I am sure when I go away for a day or two I always tell my landlady, and Mr Smith would probably have valued you sufficiently to do the same, so that I should have expected him to say something."

"Well, sir, he *did* mention a name."

"I was certain he would. But I dare say you naturally thought, when he didn't make his appearance the next day or afterwards, that it was only intended to put you on a wrong scent?"

"Well, I don't deny it. And you see, sir, they came bothering me so with questions, one young gentleman in particular, I'm sure fit to tear the place down; and there's so many unpleasant things as happens on the papers, and my sister Mrs Walker, says she, 'Mary Jane, don't you go mixing yourself up with you don't know what,' and another gentleman as come, he as good as said the same."

"Yes, I can quite understand," said Ibbetson quietly. But he was really a good deal startled. "This other gentleman, I think I know him, tall, with a reddish face, and a soft voice?"

"Yes, sir," said the woman, staring.

"Then you mentioned the name to him?"

"Well, I did. And he advised me, very serious like, not to let it out, particularly not to the young gentleman. There were unpleasantnesses about, and I might get into a good deal of trouble—that's what he said, in his very words."

Jack was reflecting how much Trent had paid by way of impressing his advice. He took out a sovereign, and saw that she saw it.

"There's no chance of that any longer, I give you my word," he said. "I'm afraid the name of the place won't go far towards finding him, but I should like to have it."

She hesitated. Ibbetson kicked a stone under his feet.

"You're sure I shan't get into trouble?"

"Certain."

"You don't look like one to deceive. Well, it was Worthing, as he spoke of."

"Any street?"

"No, only somewhere near a church. But that gentleman couldn't find him there."

"Thank you. That doesn't at all signify. I'm very much obliged to you, and I hope, after taking up your time, you'll allow me to offer you this very small remuneration."

Jack said it with his finest manner, and the woman was delighted—more even with the manner than the sovereign. Then he rejoined Clive, who was waiting for him.

Chapter Nineteen.

Ending in Three Notes.

Worthing has by this time pushed itself forward towards the van, but a very short time ago it was a sleepy little place, made up of rows of small houses, or villas planted in gardens, neater, trimmer, and more flowery than you could easily find elsewhere. The turf was fine delicate stuff from the neighbouring downs, in which an intruding daisy or dandelion scarcely dared to show its head; it required a long and patient search to find a morsel of groundsel for a bird; the tiniest gardens were full of trim surprises—you went up mounds and round corners, and came upon little ponds in which lived two gold fish, or found a miniature Alpine settlement in a corner which was almost a labyrinth. It was then chiefly inhabited by middle-aged maiden ladies, kind good people, who were a good deal under bondage to their servants, and their servants' meals, and every now and then were startled by some terrible discovery of finding a trusted butler or gardener tipsy, as they often were. A good deal of not unkindly gossip was talked, and wafts of a stronger kind floating down from London, with some great family which would come for quiet and retirement, caused little shocks to thrill through the community. The houses were all neatly painted and shuttered, the red brick pavement daintily clean, but even in winter there was a curious languor in the air, so that Ibbetson walking from the station felt an immediate discouragement as to the result of his errand.

George Smith. Why do people not ticket themselves more clearly in the midst of the thronging crowds of life? he was thinking, with a little unreasonable vexation. How many George Smiths might there not be even in this little feminine place? He went down to the post-office, stepping on the brick pavement with the rueful conviction that he should not have done so without first scraping his boots; and inclined to apologise for the prints he left behind him. The very post-office struck him with awe: the letters were in neat little bundles, an old lady in a pink cap looked sternly at him through her spectacles; Ibbetson had a ridiculous feeling that he would be a marked man for the rest of the day.

Smiths. The list very soon became lengthy. Marine Parade, Ambrose Place, Church Street, Broadwater, Seaview Cottage, Belle Vue House, Esplanade—the old lady would have nothing to do with Christian names, or whether men or women dwelt in these homes. “There may be a gentleman among them,” was all she would say, with a cautious regard to her duty of keeping up an imaginary balance in the society of Worthing. Old ladies generally at once succumbed to Jack, but this one proved an exception. As he went out she asked him to be kind enough to shut the door behind him.

At the end of three hours Jack was no nearer his object than when he arrived, and was conscious that he was already regarded in Worthing with the deepest suspicion. He had found it so unpleasant to knock vaguely at doors and inquire what persons of the name of Smith lived within, that he had once or twice put the question to boys or tradespeople whom he had seen outside, and the consequence was that rumours began to float about the town, which, having always been as ready to catch rumours as a cobweb is to catch flies, laid hold with great avidity of the idea that a gang of burglars was calling at its innocent houses, with designs upon the plate. Jack could not understand why he should be stared at by little knots of people, even when he tried quite a new quarter, but the consciousness of lively comment which we cannot hear is always embarrassing, and if it half amused it half nettled him, so that he was not sorry to turn into the hotel for luncheon. He took the waiter into his confidence, but that personage was not suggestive. That there were a good many Smiths about in the world, could hardly be said to throw a helpful light; Ibbetson was disinclined to appeal to the police, and the solitary specimen he saw looked as if he had been chosen for size rather than wits. He pulled himself together, resisted a growing inclination to take a nap, and set off once more on his search.

Near a church had sounded promising, but it was not very easy, he found, to get far away from one of the two. Once or twice he fancied he had hold of a clue, and followed it up perseveringly till it came to nothing, as was invariably the case. And at last he found himself very near the close of a short winter’s afternoon, with no name left on his list except one at Broadwater. Jack was not one of those people who have an unlimited store of energy, and he looked with some disgust at the road which lay stretching away before him, flat, muddy, and uninteresting. That chalky country wants the rich colouring of summer to put a little beauty into its life. Then, when the wind ripples across the great corn-fields, and the larks are singing all above, and the clouds throw swift velvety shadows upon the softly swelling downs, and the pink dog roses clamber over the hedges, it is a pleasant pastoral country along which you may wander for hours, and strike upon picturesque old windmills, and quaint little village churches nestling under the downs—but in grey winter, not much charm is left. Ibbetson went doggedly along, neither looking left or right. He began to think of Rome, which, indeed, was never far from his thoughts. Absence from Phillis had shown him more and more how much nearer she had been to him always than he had fancied, but surely a hundred times more now that she was lost. His own folly seemed absolutely inexplicable. As a gloom began to creep over the distance, he pictured her perhaps standing on the Pincio watching the wonders of the sunset, the golden glow, the grave and glorious purple of the domes, lying softly rounded against the sky; the pale stretch of distance which, sweeping onward towards the sea, before it reaches it seems to gain something of its immensity; the pines of Monte Mario, the shadows of the darkening streets. Was she perhaps leaning against the balustrade, over the violet-beds below? And if so, who was with her? Phillis was not a person to gaze carelessly at such a scene; and to gaze at it with another who is conscious of its power, is sometimes the beginning of a life-long sympathy. Afterwards we look back at what has so much impressed us, and our friend is there too, has become a part of it for ever. Jack thought out this point moodily. If it had been Mr Penington instead of Oliver Trent whose misdealings he had been trying to bring to light, it is possible he would have walked more briskly towards the low church tower which he saw before him. As it was, he was haunted by the doubt, should he not go back to Rome? It would be easy enough. Nothing kept him from it except that new energy which seemed to impel him towards work. He was not really ambitious. What had stirred him was a strong feeling that his idle life was unworthy of himself and her—nay, perhaps more of himself than of her. For when a man who believes that he is a responsible being is once roused to face his idleness, it is apt to become a nightmare under which he can no longer remain quiet Ibbetson longed to go, but he knew very well that he must stay.

There is a pretty village green at Broadwater, and old trees cluster round the church. Coming out of the churchyard was the sexton, and to him Jack addressed the question which he had learned to vary, although only for his own satisfaction. The old man looked at him doubtfully.

“There’s a many Smiths about,” he said, striking at once on the waiter’s truism. “I’m a Smith myself. Might it be something to his advantage, or the other way, that was a bringing you?”

“For his advantage, I hope,” Ibbetson said smiling. “But you are not the man. George Smith, about five-and-twenty, fallow, with black hair.”

“Ah! Comes from London?”

Jack looked at him eagerly. “Is he here after all?” he said quickly. “Come, that’s good news at last.”

“What makes you so keen about it?” asked the old man curiously. “Well, it don’t matter to me. Them that he’s with won’t be very ready for you to see him or to thank me for telling you where to find him, but Elias Brooks shouldn’t have tried to make mischief between me and the vicar, this very day, too. I said I’d be even with him, and I will. There, sir, that’s the cottage, hard by. George Smith is lodging there, has been there for weeks, ill, and if they tell you to the contrary, you needn’t believe them. I said I’d be even with him. Thank you, sir. Don’t you listen to nothing they tell you.”

Jack walked through a little garden to Elias Brooks' door, and knocked twice. He could see the old sexton hobbling away, unwilling perhaps to be pointed out as guide, but still furtively watching. At the second knock the door was partially opened, and a stout bullet-headed man appeared.

"I wish to speak to Mr George Smith," said Ibbetson, placing himself so near the door that it could not be closed.

"No one of that name here," said the man in a surly tone.

"Yes, he is here," Jack said quietly. "Perhaps he is called by another name, but Mr Trent has seen him."

"Are you come from him?"

"No. But I know that Mr Smith is in your house, and I mean to see him. I suppose you would prefer my doing it quietly to calling in the police?"

Nothing could have been more cool or determined than his manner, and Elias was evidently uncomfortable.

"I don't know who your Mr Trent may be," he growled, "nor Smith neither. There's an invalid gentleman here by the name of James, and he don't want no visitors."

"Which is it to be? Will you admit me, or shall I send for the police?" asked Jack, unheeding.

"I tell you he's ill."

"Well, choose for yourself."

With an oath the man flung open the door and called to his wife—

"Here's a gentleman forcing his way in to see Mr James. Take him up, take him up. I ain't a going to have a row here to please the doctor, nor nobody. I dare say it'll kill him, but that ain't my affair."

Jack, glancing at the pale cowed woman, did not put the question he intended, as he followed her up the stairs. At the top she struck a light. "The poor gentleman has been sadly ill," she said tremulously. "And is still in bed?"

"Oh yes, sir."

She went to the side of the bed as she spoke, and pulled back a curtain. Ibbetson almost started at the gaunt, death-stricken face which met his view. He said quietly: "I must apologise for disturbing you, Mr Smith, and I am very sorry to see you so ill."

"Better now, thank you."

"I have come from London on purpose to ask you a question, and have had no end of difficulty in finding you out. I come from Clive Masters."

"Poor old Clive! He didn't think when we parted it would be so long before I saw him again. I just came down to these lodgings to get a breath of fresh air from Saturday to Monday, and here I've been ever since. I did rather wonder that Clive had never sent or written."

"He did not know where you were."

Smith shook his head feebly.

"Oh yes, he knew. I had one visitor from him, his cousin, Mr Trent. He came after the fifty pounds which had been left in my hands. You see, for a long time I was quite unconscious, so of course it gave Masters a good deal of anxiety. But it was no fault of mine."

He stopped, gasping for breath.

"Did Mr Trent get the fifty pounds?" asked Jack. "Of course. Didn't Masters tell you?" Smith said in some surprise. The woman had crept downstairs again, they could hear her husband's grumbling tones and her faint replies. Jack stood looking with some perplexity at the wasted frame, wondering how much he ought to tell. He decided to tell him all.

"He did not so much as know it himself," he said quietly. "From some motive or other, Mr Trent has advanced him the money but has never told him that it was his own, and received from you."

Smith stared at him. He passed his thin hand across his forehead, lifting the lank hair. "I don't understand," he said. Jack left his words to reach his comprehension without repeating them. "That can't be so," Smith said presently, "because Clive knew he had only to apply to me."

"He had no address."

"He could get it."

"No. That is just what he could not do. Mr Smith," said Jack abruptly, "from all I can hear there has been no fault whatever on your side, and you could have done nothing. Mr Trent has chosen to keep your whereabouts concealed, and to get things into his own hands. But the upshot is that Clive has been miserable, has tried to make a bolt for America, and that I came down here to-day on the strength of a clue which we drew out of your London landlady yesterday."

"But the money is gone!" said Smith in a hoarse voice. "He must have done it only to give Clive a lesson—don't you think so?"

"Perhaps," Ibbetson said laconically.

"And he won't deny that I gave it?"

"I think not. At any rate I shall know, and so will Clive, and—no, I don't think he will deny."

Smith sank back with a sigh of relief. Jack was standing gazing thoughtfully into the dark corners of the room, lit only by a single candle. "Do they look after you well, here?" he asked.

"Yes, fairly enough. I've nothing to complain of. Though I've thought it odd that no one should come to see me."

"Perhaps Clive will get a day soon. And you might change to a pleasanter situation. I shall say good-bye now, and I shall take good news to Clive."

"Did he suppose I'd gone off?" Smith asked with a touch of amusement, as the other shook hands. Downstairs the man took no notice as Ibbetson passed through the little passage, but as the wife opened the door Jack said with emphasis,—

"Let your husband understand that other friends of Mr Smith will be here to see him very shortly. And remember that if he is well looked after, you will not be the worse for it. All will depend upon that point."

It was dark and very cold when he got outside, and he went swinging along to the station at a great pace. On his way up in the train he wrote three notes which he posted as soon as he reached London. One was to Davis:—

"Set Mr Masters right at the office with anyone whom it concerns. It is a fact that he gave the money to another man to pay in, and this other was seized with illness. I have seen him to-day. See that Mr Masters is thoroughly cleared."

He hesitated longer over his second note. Finally he wrote:—

"My dear Uncle,—Until I see you, I must ask you to take for granted the fact that young Masters has not been guilty of the conduct attributed to him. I have taken the trouble to go thoroughly into the matter, and can prove it beyond a doubt. I am writing by this post to Mr Trent. If he should have left Hetherton, will you kindly forward the letter."

Over his third he did not hesitate at all:—

"Mr Ibbetson presents his compliments to Mr Trent, and having this day had an interview with Mr George Smith and learnt from him that the fifty pounds entrusted to his care by Mr Masters was paid by him to Mr Trent as Mr Masters's representative, Mr Ibbetson requests an explanation of this fact as well as of certain statements which have been circulated by Mr Trent to Mr Masters's prejudice."

He wrote this rapidly, but he looked at it with dissatisfaction, reflecting that it was almost impossible to give vent to your indignation in the third person. And then he began to think of Mr Penington.

Chapter Twenty.

Who will Live at the Vicarage?

Perhaps few evil-doers are marked down as such with so little personal eagerness and satisfaction as was Oliver Trent by Jack or Clive, who, indeed, necessarily took only a passive part. There was nothing in Jack's nature congenial to the task, and his only wish being to set Clive on his legs again, as soon as there was a good prospect of this labour being accomplished, he cared nothing at all for bringing down punishment on Trent.

Clive's own feeling, when he heard the news, was rather shocked and bewildered than in any way revengeful. His cousin having been a sort of good genius in his eyes, the one successful man of the family, the friend who had placed him where he was, and to whom he believed himself indebted for all that had been done either to shield him or to push him on, the revelation which Ibbetson brought was beyond his comprehension. All the new hopes which had been excited in his mind really turned round a central desire that Trent should recognise that he had spoken the truth and not disgraced his family. And now that Trent himself should be the one on whom disgrace and shame should fall! It was more than his mind could grasp.

Neither, think as he would, was he helped by seeing any imaginable motive for his conduct. If he could have found it he might possibly have acquiesced in what had happened, as something for which Trent—the adviser—had reasons, and believed that he would also soon have had reasons for clearing it up. Clive's faith was shaken, but it was not yet absolutely gone, from the very difficulties of understanding why on earth Trent should have acted as he had apparently acted. Jack had muttered something about having him in his power, but that seemed ludicrous while Clive could trace no advantages to result. Jack himself, indeed, was not half so clear about it as Phillis, whose womanly intuition had leapt to a conclusion not far from the truth; and when he found out something of the young fellow's perplexities as to his cousin, he respected the feeling and abstained from much comment. He supposed that it would be necessary to see Trent, perhaps in Clive's presence, and that then certain home truths would require expression, but for so long as they could be postponed, he was not at all unwilling to postpone them. Meanwhile there was a real satisfaction in seeing how Clive brightened under this lifting off of his troubles. He held himself straighter, and altogether had a more open and hopeful appearance. Ibbetson felt no anxiety in leaving him, and went down to his father's for a few days. There a letter followed him from Mr Thornton, very concise and formal, taking no notice of his

remarks about Clive, but alluding to his own regret at losing his good friend Mr Trent, who, he grieved to say, had received letters the morning before which induced him at once to start for Rome.

Jack crumpled the letter in his hand and shoved it into his pocket.

"Bad news?" asked his father. "Here's bad news for me at any rate. What do you think, Arabella? Carter finds that horse he wrote about as likely to suit me to a T, has just been picked up. It's uncommonly annoying. Do you think your uncle has anything that would do for me, Jack?"

"I don't know," said Jack, "I haven't seen his stables lately."

"You seem to me making a mull of matters with your uncle," said his father, pouring out his coffee from a peculiar machine of his own. "I have never interfered, for I think his manners are insufferable, but if you don't object to them you might have done better, I should say."

"Well, I don't know," said Jack brightly. "I dare say I should think so if I were you; but being myself, I don't exactly see what I could have done."

"Couldn't you marry that girl?"

Jack flushed.

"She didn't care to marry me," he said stiffly. "Whew!" said his father, lifting his eyebrows. "Not enough money, I suppose?"

"I doubt that influencing her," said Jack, in the same tone.

"Well, you'd better look out, for I hear there's a man of the name of Trent a good deal at Hetherton, and your uncle swears by him. It's quite certain we never get any luck in our family."

This was a statement which, with Lady Ibbetson sitting by, who might have been supposed by outsiders to have brought her husband a good deal of the sort of luck to which he alluded, could only be received in silence. Jack finished his breakfast and took himself off to the smoking-room. Trent seemed to haunt him, and he had an uneasy feeling of not knowing how much or how little to say. Then he remembered Bice, and began to wonder whether this sudden departure of Trent's was an energetic effort on his part to forestall disclosures, or at any rate to soften their force. If what he had said was true, and the two were engaged, he might be able to enlist her feelings in his favour. Jack had desired Clive to write, but was not very sure that he had yet done so. Now he promptly made up his mind to write himself to Phillis.

The letter was not easy to him. When he had written before, they were engaged to be man and wife, and he remembered, with a pang, the feeling of dissatisfaction with which he had laid down her little missive from Bologna. It had seemed to him as if nothing in it went below the surface, unconscious as he chose to be that it was he who had kept her there, he who had chilled and disappointed her. Well, he was punished now, he thought gloomily, and the shy brown eyes seemed to be looking at him with sad pity. He had lost Phillis, and he had lost Hetherton. He knew his uncle, with all his foibles, was a just man, and fond of Phillis, so that he had little doubt that after his solemn assurance that he alone was to blame, he would provide liberally for Phillis, though not to the extent of making her his heiress. The estate might perhaps be reserved for Oliver Trent, if Jack kept silence. Jack was not sufficiently superior to mortal weaknesses to find that reflection pleasant. But it would have been easier to endure, or, at any rate, so he thought at this moment, if he could have shifted the cause of its doing on any shoulders but his own. He made a wry face as he acknowledged his own absolute folly. He would thankfully now have thrown away his old prospects of Hetherton for the hope of winning Phillis, but it was far from soothing to remember that he had flung both to the winds. First he had listened too easily, then repented too hastily, then had found out too late what he might have known from the very first. It seemed to him as if he could never reproach another man with folly. And he had a distracting consciousness as he wrote—stopping every now and then, jumping up to poke the fire or do something which might by some good chance assist his expressions—that although it was Phillis, and nobody but Phillis, who had sent him on his errand, she would believe nothing but that Bice's deliverance had been the actual spur. It made it, as has been said, difficult for him to write. He did not like to paint Trent's conduct in too black colours, lest it might seem it was his object to effect a break between him and Bice. Yet it was quite clear to him that the break ought to be effected, if only it could be done by other hands than his, and he grew vexed that he had not assured himself that Clive would speak out and to the purpose. His sentences read coldly, because he wished to treat all that part, which was his only excuse for writing, in a business-like manner. Phillis, thinking to shield him, and feeling sure it would be broken, had not told him of the actual tie existing between Bice and Oliver Trent, and he guarded his words about them both with an evident restraint. It was a great relief to him when at last his letter was finished and placed in the letter-bag, and then he half smiled to find that his thoughts had wandered to a calculation of the number of days that must pass before he would receive an answer.

His stepmother met him in the hall. She had an uneasy manner which Jack hated and called mincing, but a good heart underneath, to which he persistently blinded himself. When a kindly-natured person does get hold of a prejudice, you may be sure he will take a firmer grasp than one less amiable. Perhaps there is a secret satisfaction in finding himself able to dislike someone heartily, or perhaps it is so unlike himself that he is instinctively convinced that excellent reasons must exist to justify him. Jack had never been able to forgive Lady Ibbetson for marrying his father, although he knew quite well that she made his home as happy as he would allow her to make it, which was a reservation not likely to be removed. And this sense of his own injustice did not render him more friendly towards her. With the best intentions in the world, all she did seemed to rub him the wrong way. Naturally, she had changed the old furniture at Elmsleigh, but unfortunately the change was not justified by the results; for taste, being an artistic feeling, is as subject to failure as other points in which our ideal is beyond our powers of execution, and is by no means that simple intuition which people like to imagine it. Conservative Jack had been much disgusted by the

shifting and embellishment of chairs and tables he found on his arrival had taken place, and which she, poor misguided woman, had pointed out to him with pleasure as improvements. He had the grace to keep his opinions to himself, but for almost the first time in his life it seemed as if his father's spirit of opposition had been roused in him, and Lady Ibbetson sighed, after one wistful glance in his face. She was almost timidly desirous to please him, and never showed at her best in his presence, finding a not unnatural difficulty in understanding him. Now she spoke with evident effort:

"Your father tells me you are going back to town to-morrow. Is that really a necessity? It is so long since you have been here, and this has been such a very short visit. I had hoped you would have stayed over Tuesday, and that we might have had some people to meet you on that day."

"Thank you," said Jack shortly, "I can't afford any longer time." Mentally he was thinking, "Where on earth does the woman get her gowns?"

"You are working very hard, then?" she ventured to say.

"Well, it's necessary."

She hesitated, looked round, and said in a low voice—

"I hope you will not think what I am saying interfering,—perhaps I might not have spoken, but that your father alluded to—to it at breakfast. It is your engagement I mean."

Jack drew himself up, and she went on hurriedly—"Pray do not think I am asking questions from curiosity. But sometimes pecuniary difficulties cause a great deal of unhappiness and—and I thought I would venture to say that if this were the case—"

"It is not, indeed."

"Ah!" She looked at him with wistful disappointment. "Then I must not say any more. It has always seemed to me a most grievous thing, that money should unnecessarily play such an important part in these matters, and I should have been very sorry if it had been allowed to do so with you."

Jack was touched—it was impossible not to feel that she was speaking from her heart—though he was no less stiffly determined to accept nothing at her hands. Nevertheless, she brightened at his tone, for he spoke warmly:

"I am exceedingly obliged to you. Money has not made any difficulty here. And as to my working harder than I have done, it is more from shame for past idleness than from ambition for the future, I am afraid."

"Jack," said his father, coming in at the door with a little girl clinging to each hand, "will you ride over to Whitcote this morning?"

"Whitcote? Yes," said Jack, wondering; for Sir John seldom made these early expeditions.

"Hastings wants me to look at the schools. There's a new Vicar coming in, and things have to be put straight. Time, too."

"Jack," said little May, possessing herself of his hand, "tell us about Cartouche. Does he *always* jump out of the window when you go back?"

"And does he beg? Carlo begs," this from Effie. "Poor Cartouche!" said Jack, "I'm afraid he is wanting in all accomplishments."

"Accomplishments means music and drawing," said May, with a stare. "Dogs don't do their scales."

"Don't tease, children," said Lady Ibbetson. It was one of the things in which she and her step-son were at cross-purposes, for he was fond of children, and she always nervously afraid that they annoyed him. She carried them away now unwillingly, looking back and calling to Jack that he had promised to come into the school-room.

It was not until they were close on Whitcote that he asked his father who the new Vicar was.

"He's called Penington, I hear," said Sir John, pulling up his cob to look at a field of springing wheat. "Don't know the name, but Hastings speaks uncommonly well of him."

"I met a man of that name in Rome. He had a sister with him."

"That's he. Hastings said he had gone abroad for two or three months' rest before beginning work again. And I dare say he would have a sister. I hear he's a likely man to many. There's the Vicarage: you can see the chimneys; it's been uncommonly improved and made into really a nice place. Hallo, here comes Miss Ward. You recollect the Miss Wards, cousins of Mrs Hastings, and living in that little cottage half a mile on?"

A kindly, intelligent faced woman greeted them. "Sir John, you are the very person I wished to see. *Do* you know of a horse?"

"Another horse, Miss Ward?"

"Another! I should think so. That last great thing wouldn't go at all. How d'ye do, Mr Ibbetson? I didn't see it was you. But really, Sir John, we are in a pretty condition; reduced to the butcher's mare to take, us to the station, and when we want to cut a dash among our neighbours, to the most extraordinary affair from Hedsworth. Do be neighbourly

and look in at our stables. You'll find three waiting to be looked at, and they've all something against them. One has curby hocks, I know—whatever that may mean."

"It means a strong objection."

"Well, the other alternatives are age and nobility of appearance, and youth and snobbishness. I am inclined to youth; the habit of requiring to be shot is very serious."

"I'll give my opinion at any rate," said Sir John laughing, "and so shall Jack. By the way, he has just come from Rome, and seems to have met your Mr Penington there—"

"Has he, really? Mr Penington is our other subject just now; he and the horses form a sort of conversational see-saw. Very charming, is he not, Mr Ibbetson? But you need not tell me if he is not, for we all agree in placing him on a pinnacle of merit, in order that we may have the excitement of gradually deposing him. Otherwise, I might whisper to you that we are already—just a little—hurt."

"Why?"

"Well, we considered—and justly, I think—that coming here unmarried, we had a right to the excitement of choosing him a wife. But in a letter from his sister to Mrs Hastings, who is, you know, her old friend, she seems to hint that he is taking it on his own shoulders."

"Oh, ho! Any names mentioned? Perhaps Jack may know her, too."

"No, no, not so bad as that. Still it is bad, I own. You'll look at those horses then, won't you?"

"To be sure. How was it you weren't at the Grange on Friday?"

"I was making up my accounts. I always think that is only a decent tribute to the departing year. Remember me to Lady Ibbetson, and do try to consider that horse a treasure."

Sir John, who liked the Wards, went on talking of the way women were taken in about horses, Jack meanwhile riding along without hearing many of his father's words. So it had come to this, for he could not doubt that Phillis was the one to whom Miss Penington alluded. There was the pretty Vicarage to his left, standing picturesquely among trees, a pleasant homelike place, such as he could well imagine she would love. He thought of her, brought there by that man, going in and out of the gate on her kindly errands, waiting, perhaps, in the porch to welcome him—Well, what could he say? He had had his chance and had thrown it away. Since he had loved her, he had understood very clearly what she had found wanting in his love before. Now it seemed to him as if it had been an insult. He felt no hope. He had had his chance and had thrown it away.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Return.

Jack kept his intention, and went up to London the next day. He had made up his mind absolutely that he would not go back to Rome, having a new sort of feeling born within him, that after all that had happened he had no right to haunt Phillis with the persistency he had shown of late. It no longer seemed to him fair. He thought that the most manly course would be to leave her alone at any rate until this winter were past. Then, if she were still unwon, he might be able to speak to her of a love which she might at last recognise as steadfast. How could she be expected as yet to trust him? But he got into a habit about this time of brooding on the picture he had seen as he rode through Whitcote with his father—the pretty homely Vicarage, the creepers growing up to the chimneys, the green turf, the rooks' nests in the old trees. And always—that was the worst—there stood a woman's figure at the door, a woman whose eyes were fastened on the gate, as if she were waiting happily for some one.

Still, a good deal of credit was due to him for the way in which he fought against these not very cheerful thoughts, so as to escape from the morbid dejection which might have made his life, and that of others, miserable. Work is an excellent refuge, as everybody says: probably because it is an axiom which is seldom taken on trust, and therefore comes freshly to each person in the form of an individual discovery. Jack worked hard, and liked it. Clive was another refuge; he needed a great deal of cheering and keeping up, his own struggle not having had the effect of putting life into him. He was shy and sensitive, and many people would have thought uninteresting, but Ibbetson wanted a personal interest about him just at this time, and had a feeling as if here were a slender link with Phillis. He sometimes laughed at his own efforts to prop up Clive, and yet he did it vigorously. The props were of many kinds—getting him to take school work in an East-end district on Sundays, he began to think would turn out one of the most effectual.

A disappointment which Jack felt very keenly at this time, was the receiving no answer to his letter to Phillis. He had made sure she would write, and, though he even told himself that he was prepared for what she might tell him, there was a horrible blank in the silence, which seemed almost worse. He invented reasons for her silence with really remarkable ingenuity, but the one which seemed most probable was, that she did not wish to enter on the subject of her own prospects with him. When Clive came to see him or he went to see Clive, the conversation revolved curiously round one or two centres.

"Well, how are you getting on?" Jack would ask with great cheerfulness.

"Oh, I don't know." This with much depression. "Nonsense. What are you out of heart about? Davis sticks by you, I'm sure."

"Yes, he's a very good old chap. But what's a fellow to do when the heads are against him?"

"Why do you think they are?"

"Well, Thornton was up yesterday, and I could see by the way he looked at me."

"What rubbish, Clive! You go steadily on, and never mind looks."

"Don't you think it matters?" more hopefully.

"Not a brass farthing. Have you heard from your people at Rome?"

"Yes, I got a letter from Kitty last night."

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing particular. Oliver's there. I say, there *must* be something he could explain if one saw him. He couldn't have the brass!"

"Does Miss Masters mention anyone else?"

"No, I don't think she does."

"Not—the Leytons?"

"Didn't notice it. Are you going down to Worthing again?"

"Yes, I am. To-morrow perhaps," said with gloom on Ibbetson's part.

The visit to Worthing, when it did take place, had one or two results. For Jack found Smith so unmistakably worse that he went to the point of getting him to sign a declaration in the presence of one or two witnesses, as to that matter of the fifty pounds. And this being done, he had a conversation with the man Elias Brooks, also in the presence of a witness, so that he felt himself in a better position to meet Oliver Trent should it ever be necessary. But as yet he had made no sign.

One day Ibbetson had another visitor in his chambers, Mrs Thornton. How she had got there was the first wonder in his mind; for she was a very helpless person, seldom going to the point of originating even an idea.

"My dear, and your chimney been smoking! How can you live here!" was her greeting.

"It's not a bad chimney when the wind isn't from the north," said Jack, wheeling forward a chair, and flinging the end of his cigar into the fire. "But you ought to have told me you were coming. It's *very* good of you, Aunt Harriet."

"I told no one," said Mrs Thornton, with a placid air of triumph at her own achievements, "not even your uncle Peter. But, my dear Jack, I am quite miserable about you."

"How can I help it?" Jack replied gravely. He knew what she meant, and would not pretend not to understand her.

"Oh, I do so wish you would go straight out and marry Phillis, before this dreadful man gets hold of her! Really, it is too provoking."

There was a pause.

"What have you heard? Has Phillis written?" asked Jack in his quietest tone.

"Not Phillis. And that is vexing your uncle, too. He says everything is concealed from him. Mr Trent wrote and told him."

Jack muttered something not complimentary to Mr Trent. Then he said aloud:

"You need not believe everything *he* says. However, I can't say, I know nothing. Phillis will not conceal anything from you, you may be sure."

"But why don't you do something quickly? I really can't tell you all my fears. Your uncle seems so put out and so dissatisfied, I really doubt whether it would not be too late if you two were to marry even now. He doesn't seem to know his own mind. Perhaps he might come round if you went and did it," she added, as if it were a matter to be settled easily by some such proceeding as walking across the street.

"You forget—there's the other man," said Jack, finding it impossible not to smile. "Listen, Aunt Harriet, if it's any consolation to you, I'm quite aware I've been a fool. But I give you my word that Hetherton is a very secondary consideration."

"Well, I shall tell your uncle," she said, looking doubtfully at him.

"That I have been a fool? But then you must go on about Hetherton."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Then leave it alone; it's the safest way, take my word for it. I know it's all your kindness for me, but there are so

many old proverbs haunting me about making one's bed, and sowing and reaping, that I feel sure they amount to a general verdict that I must be left to my fate. Thank you all the same for trying to ward it off."

Each of these rumours which reached Jack—although he sometimes told himself that they were too indefinite to be heeded—did actually give him a sharp pang, and seemed to leave his heart heavier than before. He refused invitations, and did his best to absorb himself in his profession, setting to work with a dogged determination to push on, rather than any exhilaration of hope. Still there was a certain satisfaction in his labour, and at least a more manly purpose in his life. And so January dragged its short days out of the darkness, sometimes barely succeeding in the effort, and February followed, and to Ibbetson every day was long in its monotony, and yet, looking back, they might all have passed like lightning.

At least that was what it seemed to him one gloomy afternoon when he stood with a telegram in his hand which had just been given to him, and which he had opened carelessly, without any foreboding of the thrill of pain in store. It was from Rome. Miss Cartwright was very ill—would he come at once. The words startled him the more that he felt with keen self-reproach how other interests had pushed her out of his thoughts. There are tender and strong affections so close and so unailing that they are like the air we breathe, and become almost as much a matter of course. And now Jack remembered with a pang that of late he had written but briefly to his aunt, and that except from a general longing to hear news from Rome he had not noticed that her own letters had become few and short. He pulled out her last from his pocket; the feeble writing smote him to the heart, and he impatiently gave his orders, sent off a hurried note to Clive, and found himself at the station at least twenty minutes before the time for starting.

He travelled as fast as he could, and happily there were no unusual or vexatious delays. But at its best the journey is one which, when a pressing anxiety goads on the traveller, seems as if it would never end. It drags you along past Chambery, and pretty Aix lying under its hills, lingers hopelessly at Modane, and then goes clambering slowly up to the land of snows, before it will take you into the land of sunshine. Afterwards you sweep down to Turin and the vast Lombardy plains, and going towards Florence, creep again into a belt of mountains honey-combed with tunnels, where the gorges in February are just awaking to the first promises of spring, and by-and-by see the twinkling lights of cheery Pistoija, and then the brighter ones of Florence. Jack, leaning out, thought of other evenings, when those lights had shone in the beautiful Val d'Arno. He stopped there now for a few hours' rest, and the place seemed laden with memories which yet were younger than it was easy to believe. It was a warm night; even already the air was touched with sweet flowery scents, and all the carnival people were flashing about, making the place merry with their laughter.

His journey began again early the next morning, and in the afternoon he reached Rome. Who does not know that approach? As the train passed through the golden brown campagna the sun was setting; no words can describe the rich glow which tinged the mountains: too rich for lilac, too delicate and warm for purple, it seemed the very embodiment of colour, and where on the highest points the snow of winter yet rested, it was on fire with rosy lights; while Tiber, rolling sluggishly through the Sabine meadows, gave back the soft reflections as faithfully and placidly as though he were only a quiet country stream, untouched by history, and untainted by blood.

Ibbetson was not long in driving from the station to the house in the Via della Croce. At the station he caught sight of a familiar face, though he had a little difficulty in recalling that it belonged to young Giovanni Moroni. He would not linger to speak to him, though he had always liked the young fellow, for the nearer he drew to the end of his journey the more acute became his anxieties, and the more annoying every small delay. He rattled quickly down the hill by the Costanzi, and along the streets which lead to the Spanish Place, and then into his own particular street. Nothing was to be gained by looking at the outside of the house, and some hidden fear kept him from questioning the old porter, who lived in a little glass room and mended shoes. Miss Cartwright's rooms were high; a dark dirty staircase went up, up. He lingered for a moment at the window half way, which looked upon picturesque and irregular backs of houses; women were peeping out, creepers hanging, there were the usual converging lines of a network of wires, up and down which swing the brass pitchers, that fill themselves where the fresh water pours out from the lion's head below; at one small square window a little owl was sitting, blinking solemnly at the world. It all seemed just as he had left it, and gave him a momentary unreasonable relief. But at the top of the stairs stood some one watching and waiting. It was Phillis, and she put out her hands with a cry of thankfulness.

"You are come!" she said. "We heard wheels, but scarcely thought it possible you could be here so soon."

"How is she? Not worse?"

"She is very ill—very. I am afraid it would be false comfort if I told you there was any improvement, but the pain has gone off, and her one wish was to see you again. This waiting has been terrible. It was pleurisy. We wrote to tell you, but she grew suddenly worse."

"And you have been with her?"

"How could I leave her?"

Her lips quivered. She was shaken and upset with the nursing, perhaps, too, with the feeling that he was coming, and with other things which had risen up. They stood face to face with each other, these two, for a minute, utterly silent, before Phillis said hurriedly—

"I must tell her that you are here. Will you come into the little anteroom and wait until she is ready?"

In the anteroom were two or three doors; one led into the salon, another into Miss Cartwright's bedroom. At this second a black object was crouched, which at sound of Jack's voice reared itself up, and came eagerly towards him.

"Yes," said Phillis, answering the young man's look with a sad little smile, "Cartouche is the most faithful of watchers, poor fellow! At first he lay under her bed, but that worried her, and she asked that he might be sent out. And since

then, strange as it seems, he has never attempted to go into the room, but has taken up his position here."

She signed to Jack to stay where he was, and passed through the curtained door. He stood with his eyes fixed upon it, feeling that pause of solemn expectation with which we wait when we know that we are to enter on an awful Presence, awful both for its strangeness and its nearness. All sounds intensify themselves in such a waiting: it seemed to him that a hundred things were going on; he heard the distant cry of the water-sellers, the roll of wheels, the laughter of the crowd, a fly buzzing at the window. Cartouche gave a low whine, and went back to his station, sitting against the door with bent attentive head. No one came. At last a woman bustled into the room, and lit a small brass lamp with four wicks branching out on different sides and slender chains hanging. Then she, too, paused and listened.

"The poor Signora!" she said to Jack, clasping her hands. "It is near the end. And we all loved her. Eh, and look at the dog! It is strange."

Just at that moment Phillis opened the door and signed to Jack.

"Her weakness is so great," she said in a whisper, "that the very joy of your coming is almost more than she can bear. But she will not wait."

No. He understood why she would put nothing off when he saw the white changed face, lit up as it was with happiness as he knelt down and kissed her. "My boy!" was all she said at first, but lay holding his hand and smiling now and then. Miss Preston, who had been standing at the window, went softly out, crying. Phillis only paused to tell Jack that one of them would be in the anteroom, before she followed her. Those two were left behind—two, and the shadowy Presence.

"You're not in pain, Aunt Mary?" said Jack brokenly. "Not now. It has quite gone now. God has been so good all through, and He has brought you back."

"I came at once, but I wish I could have heard before."

"Yes, my dear, I know, I know. I hope it was not selfish to want you, but you always were my boy. And, Jack—"

"Yes, Aunt Mary?"

Speech was very difficult, but she struggled with it, and he put his ear down near her face—

"—You have never known her—Phillis. And I was foolish and urged it. Now I see that I was wrong—we can't tell what is best, can we?—only I think—I pray you two may have whatever is best for you both. I think you will. God knows—and I have prayed—"

The words died away, but she made a sign to him not to call anyone, and lay in peaceful waiting, every now and then touching his face or hair with a feeble yet caressing hand. In that waiting the room darkened, the little lamp glimmered in the shadows, a strange hush seemed to have fallen. Presently Winter came in, looked at her, went out and brought the others. She smiled at them, and whispered something which they made out with difficulty. It was "Cartouche." Phillis brought him, a little anxious lest he might show any wild demonstrations of delight. She need not have feared. He came eagerly in, put his paws upon the bed, and licked his mistress's hand. Then he dropped down, looked wistfully at the faces round, as if he wanted reassurance from them, and finding none, he turned quickly, ran to the door, pushed it open, and settled himself in his old position of intent watchfulness.

Afterwards they none of them knew how these long hours had passed, but at the time there was the usual mixture of the awful and the commonplace. Our thoughts cannot remain long on heights; they wander down, concerning themselves with the oddest things, and causing us sharp pangs of self-reproach, for what, after all, is no more than a law of our being. Once there came a ring of the bell, and Winter went out and brought in a little note for Phillis. When she had read it, standing at the table by the lamp, she laid it down and came back to the bedside. Jack had to go to the table presently to get something that was wanted, and his eye was caught by the clear bold signature—"Arthur Penington." He hated himself for having seen it, but there it was.

The doctor came and went, Cartouche walking growling behind him to the top of the stairs. The streets grew more silent; the occasional cry of the masquers, the carnival laughter, died away; and still they all watched, and still the feeble breathing was audible in the quiet of the room, with now and then a word. It was not until a pale gleam of light had grown into the sky above the hills of Tivoli, touching the broad flank of Soracte, and showing Michael the Archangel guarding the great city from his castle, that the last word faltered on her lips, and the hand which had moved feebly towards Jack lay still and cold in his warm clasp.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Once More, No.

Tired as he was with his quick journey and with the hurrying emotions of the past night, Jack was too restless to stay in the house. He called Cartouche, and the dog, after a little hesitation, went with him, though without any of his usual excitement. He kept close at Ibbetson's heels, from which nothing drew him, and walked along with his tail depressed, and his whole appearance spiritless. Jack's own heart was very heavy. The kind, gentle woman had been like a mother to him, and a hundred remembrances of her unselfishness came thronging. He was vexed with himself for having left her, for having neglected to write as often as she liked—for many things of which he knew very well she had kept no record, nor so much as blamed him in her heart. Those tender cancellings are the sharpest

reproaches of all, when Death has laid his finger on the page.

Then, as he walked on, his mind wandered off to the speculations from which who can be free, when one who has been near to them passes away from their reach? Could she still see him? What was the actual separation between them? What infinite mysteries had already been made known to her? Jack had no fixed aim, but he thought he would go on to the English cemetery and choose the place where she was so soon to lie. He did not know the exact way, and found himself by San Gregorio: the bell was tolling, and he went up the broad steps. There is a little chapel connected with it, one of a group of three, in which he remembered having long ago seen a quire of angels painted by Guido, which had haunted him. He found the sacristan, and went with him across a little untidy picturesque garden, sweet with violets, and gay with great irises, purple and white. The chapel is very bare and like a barn, but at one end is the beautiful fresco; the white wings seem to clash, the blissful faces glow down upon you—over what might be the battlements of heaven—with a purity and grace which are rare in Guido. Jack paid the sacristan to let him stay there by himself for a little while; he was glad he had come, thankful to have had this quiet and peaceful hour with the praising angels above and the sweet scent of spring violets stealing through the door. Then, as he came out and stood on the steps of San Gregorio, the full glory of the sun was shining on that stately and beautiful view which stretches before the church. Feathery clouds dappled the blue of the sky, tender and yet deep: golden and ruddy lights fell on the convent which crowns the ridge of the Palatine, the convent whose nuns pray patiently on the spot where emperors held their revels; up against the buildings two palms stood proudly; the great arches of Nero and Severus were black with shadows; here and there an almond blossomed, rosy red, and all the light cloud of trees below was touched with the mysterious and indescribable promise of the spring.

Jack walked slowly back, and Cartouche followed sadly behind him. There was something in the dog's mute sympathy very grateful to the man, piteous though it was to see the wistful questioning of his eyes. They went home through little back streets, to avoid the crowded thoroughfares where all Rome was making her carnival holiday. It does not penetrate much into those crooked and picturesque byeways, and, indeed the day was as yet too early for great attempts at gaiety. All about the Forum was quite undisturbed, the beautiful pillars stood in quiet beauty, while the sun played in golden lights upon their stone, and the Capitol looked down upon them from its prouder height.

When he reached the Via della Croce he found, as he might have expected without allowing it to cause him a sharp disappointment, that Phillis had left it, and had gone back to the hotel. It was not possible for him to follow her until quite late in the day. Miss Preston, who, it might have been imagined, would have liked to have kept matters in her own hands, was so subdued and full of grief, as to be quite helpless and unable even to offer a suggestion. She had been rather disposed to blame Miss Cartwright for not throwing off her invalid habits when first she came to Rome, and now reproached herself bitterly. Indeed it seemed as if the sweetness of that death had touched and softened all; Winter went quietly about on tip-toe, with oddly gentle movements. As for Cartouche, who could tell what was passing in his mind? How much did he know? This much they all noticed, that having watched patiently for so many hours in the anteroom, he would not now go near it. He buried himself in a corner of the kitchen, and only came out or took food when Jack went there and coaxed him.

Necessarily, every arrangement fell on Ibbetson, and it was necessary they should be made with a promptitude which at such a time seems almost inhuman. They occupied him all the day, so that, as has been said, it was quite late before he was able to follow Phillis to the hotel.

She was alone when he was shown up, sitting, in the dusk, near the wood fire. He had longed all day for this moment, and came in quickly, with a sudden delight at finding her there by herself. Something in her manner checked him instantly. It was nothing upon which he could seize, and it was perfectly gentle, but he felt that, in some way or other, it recalled to him the change in their position, which in his eagerness he had seemed to forget. And it vexed him the more because the night before certain vague thoughts had almost taken the form of hope. She was sitting with her back to the fading light; he could not see the expression of her eyes, nor much more than a pale face, the outline of a slender figure, the hands clasped on her lap. Every now and then as she gave him the details of his aunt's illness, or repeated some tender message, her voice faltered, but she carefully avoided the least allusion to her own feelings, and he was certain that she intended him to feel that the barrier between them remained unmoved. A chill restraint crept over them both. Once, when his words took a somewhat warmer and more personal form as he thanked her for all she had done, she interrupted him, although still quite gently:

"Do you know," she said, "that I have been very glad to have had this talk with you without the others being here? There are many things one can't talk of before friends, however kind they are. But they may come back at any moment now, and I have a great many things to say. So don't let us waste our time." Jack muttered something about the others. She did not seem to hear him, but went on hurriedly:

"You ought to know how things are going on with the Masters. I'm afraid it is not very satisfactory. Has anyone told you that Mr Trent is still here?"

"Still? Well, certainly I did think that circumstances would have ousted him by this time."

She gave him a quick, inquiring glance.

"I thought your letter would have been strong enough to do it. But—please excuse me—did you speak plainly enough? I couldn't help having a feeling that you were making the best of his conduct, and—and it almost seems a pity," said Phillis, provoked at her own lame ending. She had thought she knew exactly what to say.

"Didn't I speak out?"

"Well, it is certain that man can twist everything to suit his purpose, even his own misdeeds."

"Yes," assented Jack quietly. "He has a wonderful strength of plausibility."

"And he has managed to persuade Bice—I don't know what he hasn't persuaded them all—that it was a mistake about the fifty pounds, and that though now he no longer doubts that Clive paid it, the man never repaid it to him. Somehow or other he has made her believe that he has acted straightforwardly, and has suffered for it. And, myself, I can't help fearing that there are some other complications, and that he has that foolish Mrs Masters in his power. But now that you are here, things will be put straight, I hope."

"Yes. I suppose there will have to be a blow up," said Jack, not very cheerfully.

There was a curious thrill—was it pity or reluctance?—in her voice when she went on rapidly:

"I blame myself for something. I ought to have told you before you went away that Bice was engaged to Mr Trent. I believe I thought something would be sure to happen to put an end to it."

"I heard it from Trent himself. And it still goes on?"

"Yes. The marriage is to be at Easter—or was." If there had been a clearer light in the room, Jack might have read something in Phillis's face, some hidden pain, some struggle with herself which might have disarmed him. As it was, he was hurt by her persistent belief in his caring for Bice. He said in a hard and strained voice, which she interpreted as pain from her own point of view—

"Here is a budget of news, indeed! It seems one should be a villain if one desires to succeed successfully."

Phillis only thought of the pain in his voice. She leant forward and said with eagerness—

"But of course you will not allow her to be sacrificed?"

"I? Why not? I suppose she knows what she is about—most women do," he said with gloom. But the next moment he turned towards her. "Really, I can't tell what she wishes, but I'll tell you what I'll do. She shall hear the precise facts as fairly as I can put them, without exaggeration. After that she must judge for herself. A woman ought to have some sort of notion what the man is like whom she intends to marry, unless, indeed, she cares for him so much that she is content to be blind. In that case—"

He stopped. Phillis repeated quickly:

"In that case—"

"Hadn't she better remain undeceived?"

She sighed. It seemed to her that he made her task very difficult.

"Well, at any rate, let her judge fairly," she said. "Yes, that's due to her." He leant his arms on the table, and began pulling some cyclamen out of a great bunch. "*Viole pазze*," he went on; "Rome seems to have as many flowers as Florence. By the way, do you remember hearing me speak of a young Moroni who used to be a good deal at the villa? He came in my train yesterday from Florence."

"Did he?" said Phillis absently. The constraint between them seemed to increase; they might have been strangers. Her effort had been greater than she knew, and she felt more sad and weary than before Jack came in, while something told her that the hardest part was to come. Jack himself went on playing with the poor cyclamen, no less uncomfortable than she. He wanted to say something about Hetherton, and did not know how to begin. Phillis relieved him of the difficulty. "Tell me something about Aunt Harriet, please," she said. "It is an age since she wrote. Of course you saw her while you were in England?"

"Yes. I went to Hetherton at once, and to my amazement found that fellow Trent spending his Christmas there. Did you know he was so thick with them?"

"I? No. They hardly write to me," said she, with a forlorn sense of loneliness. "But they were well, weren't they?"

"My uncle was horribly cut up by—by your determination, Phillis."

"I was afraid he might be sorry."

She knew that what she dreaded was coming, and her heart beat wildly; but she said the words quite calmly, and as if they related to someone else. Jack crushed a flower in his hand, and leant forward.

"*She* was sorry, too," he said in a low voice. "Can't you think differently? I know I was the one to blame, but can't you let me—"

She interrupted him with a hasty gesture.

"That subject is at an end between us; pray do not return to it."

But that it was so unlike her, he could have sworn he detected a slight accent of scorn in her voice.

"Well, Phillis," he said, getting up, "I daren't do it, if you forbid me. I don't suppose I've gone the way to work to make you believe what I want to say. Perhaps I'd better have held my tongue, as I intended. It was the seeing you with her, I suppose, and thinking that perhaps—however, if it is as you say, and the subject must be at an end, will you give me a kiss, Phillis, before we part?"

She covered her face with her hands, and drew back quickly and without a word to soften the gesture.

"Not?" said Jack, in the same slow tone. "Well, don't fear. Whatever I am, I won't be a bore. I understand fully all that you mean—all. It was you, remember, who promised we should always be friends—There, don't be afraid, I am going. Good-bye. God bless you, Phillis."

But long after he had gone she kept her face covered—perhaps because she was trying to shut out even the remembrance of what had past, perhaps because she feared her own impulses. For as the door shut, she had felt as if her very senses went out in a wild cry to him to come back. *Not?* If he had but known how hard that moment was, how it was against herself that she shrank with the movement which had wounded him, how she had fought with the longing that his request called up! If she had kissed him she could have fought no longer, she must have flung down her arms. Why not? Why not? For the first time this persistent question seemed to have gained strength, and she set herself to answer it reasonably. Why not?

She went back to the early days of their engagement. Its romance had come to her very quietly, and untroubled by fears or doubts. Jack had always been her hero from the time when he had embodied one by one all that her storybooks offered in that line. She used to listen triumphantly to the school exploits which he poured into her fascinated ears. She could have no greater delight than to go with him to feed the rabbits, or the wild-fowl on the lake. He filled a far more important part in her life than she did in his, and so, though the gladness was great, she felt neither surprise nor misgivings when he asked her to marry him. Her inexperience was even greater than her youthfulness; she loved him, and it was both natural and sweet that he should love her.

But when, little by little, she understood that his feeling was of a very different nature from hers, an uneasy shame that she should have been so lightly won added a sting to her sorrow.

Jack had not been mistaken in fancying that there was a touch of scorn in her voice when he made that last appeal. The scorn, however, was directed rather against herself than him. She knew so well why he had made it. She had been expecting it all the time. She had always had a presentiment that Miss Cartwright, who loved her very dearly, would say something to her nephew which would bear this sort of fruit, and his speaking only assured her that her dread was well founded. If Jack had but known it, he had chosen the worst possible moment for his appeal. Did he think that she was going to make another mistake? And Mr Thornton too—as he had almost admitted—had probably spoken very strongly, and had no doubt weighted his words with threats about the future of Hetherton. Phillis started up and walked to the window, locking her hands together as she walked, but there was not the slightest hesitation hidden behind the movement. Though she loved Jack so well that she thought it would almost break her heart to see him shut out from Hetherton, she would never suffer herself to become its price.

For Jack did not love her, of that she felt sure. He pitied her, perhaps; liked her, possibly; reproached himself, she did not doubt; but these were only shadows with which she would never again content herself.

Somebody else loved her, or so she had begun to fear, and it was curious that her clear judgment failed as she thought of Mr Penington. For she was wondering whether she should ever marry him. He was very good, and kind, and clever, and—

"In the dark, my poor Phillis?" said a cheerful voice. "And all alone? I am afraid it was very inhuman of us to leave you. Come, confess, haven't you been thinking so? At any rate, somebody else was almost rude to me about it. I felt quite horrid."

"I've not been alone," said Phillis, thinking as she spoke that her own voice sounded curiously odd and unsteady. "Mr Ibbetson only went away a few minutes ago. I almost wonder you did not meet him."

"I thought I caught sight of a coat like his. I will say for him that his coats are well cut. However, his companionship can hardly have been cheerful."

"We had a good deal to talk about," said Phillis, gravely.

"Of course, my poor dear. But I think it is very hard so much has fallen on you. And do tell me, for I am dying to know —"

"What?"

"Did he ask a great many questions about the Masters? Has he seen any of them yet?"

"No."

"No? Are you sure? Well, I suppose he could hardly hurry there at once, but I'm much mistaken if he waits long, and then what will be the next act in the play? Will poor Mr Trent receive his dismissal? Now, Phillis, it's too dark to see you, but I know exactly how you're looking. I can't help it; I shall always say that Mr Ibbetson has behaved abominably. There was no one to call him out, for Harry could never have been brought to comprehend that was part of his duty. But I must speak."

"Don't blame him to-day, at any rate," said Phillis in a low voice that was full of pain.

"Is he so much cut up? Well, poor fellow, I really am sorry for him, though I pity Cartouche more. And you, too, my dear. You have had a terrible time of it while we have all been going on in a most shamefully selfish way. Not Mr Penington. I must do him the justice to say that I don't think you've been out of his thoughts for a minute. And how nice he is! Oh, dear, there's the table-d'hôte bell! You'll not go down, of course? No, I told Giuseppe so as I passed. But you won't mind Mr Penington coming up afterwards? He wanted to so very much that I hadn't the heart to refuse him. Besides, he is very understanding and won't tease you; you needn't even try to talk, for he has a whole heap of Etruscan tomb things from Corneto, and wants Harry to take us all there. I shan't go. I know exactly what it's like,

one of those horrid dirty little places where one can only eat the middles of things.”

She lit the candles and went away, leaving Phillis just where she had found her, so that the girl’s thoughts, which this conversation had hardly broken in upon, rapidly shaped themselves again in the same form. She would have told herself that Miss Cartwright made the centre, and perhaps she did, but round that centre, with its tender and gentle recollections, how many other fancies grouped themselves.

And somehow or other that evening the question, which she had not yet answered to her own satisfaction, became more persistent. Mr Penington, whom she had not seen for a day or two, was radiant with the delight of being near her again, and his pleasure sent a sort of answering glow into her own heart. It was impossible for her to remain untouched by the kind thoughtfulness with which he contrived to shield and leave her in peace, or by the swiftness with which he seemed to anticipate her wishes. Gradually he drew her out of her silence into an interest in the curious things he had got together, and to promise to go to the Etruscan Museum, in the Vatican to see the collection of cottage tombs, the curious little vessels like miniature hats which were dug out of an ancient burying place in the Campagna.

“You shall go when you like,” he said eagerly.

Mrs Leyton, who was very warmly on Mr Penington’s side, looked at her husband and smiled. She had noticed something different in Phillis’s manner that night, a more passive acquiescence, perhaps, from which she augured well. Really liking her, she would have been glad that the Roman winter should end in this satisfactory fashion, and was prepared even to go through the catacombs, if Mr Penington proposed it, though she hated anything underground. Mr Penington had learnt exactly the things which Phillis liked.

“I have come round to your thinking about Titian’s picture in the Borghese,” he said to her in a low voice, when the others were talking; “I think it is the best thing in all the gallery.”

“In all Rome, I think,” said Phillis brightening. “I care for it so much that it quite hints me to hear people abuse it.”

“Are you talking of the Sacred and Profane Love?” asked Mrs Leyton, chiming in. “Mr Ibbetson could not make out which was which, don’t you remember? I can’t say it spoke very well for his artistic feeling.”

Somehow or other this little speech had a different effect from what was intended: it hurt Phillis, and though Mr Penington did not know much about Jack’s position with her, he was watching her and saw that she was vexed. He said quietly—

“That is not a very uncommon mistake at first sight, indeed, you may find it immortalised in print. But at every fresh visit the marvellous beauty comes out. Very likely the name is altogether imaginary. Vanity and Modesty would do as well for it as for Da Vinci’s picture in the Sciarra. You must come and see that one day, soon, Miss Grey; I can get an order.”

“You can get everything, I believe,” said Phillis with a smile.

He said quickly, so that only she could hear—

“I like you to say so—I shall take it as an omen;” and he then turned away, and talked for the rest of the evening to Mrs Leyton. Phillis leaned back in a kind of dream, thinking that friendship was pleasant and soothing, and wishing that others would be content with it. But they would not. And if—if only she could make up her mind to marry him, not only could she save him—this was what she thought—from the pangs of disappointment, but her own unrest might perhaps be hushed into—contentment.

And yet she would not marry Jack without an equal love. Certainly Phillis could lay no claim to be what is called a consistent character.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Brought to Bay.

And so Miss Cartwright was laid in that peaceful cemetery at Rome where the sweet violets clamber over the graves, and the cypresses grow tall against the blue sky, throwing shadows alike on the Christian resting-place, and on the tomb of the old republican, who had himself enclosed in a pyramid of marble. They were obliged to shut Cartouche into a room from which there was no possible exit, or the dog would have forced his way after them; and indeed, after they came back, Jack could hardly endure the questioning look of his eyes. As for Miss Preston, she could not pet him enough. She asked Jack with tears in her eyes whether he would let her take him back to Florence, where she meant to return at once, not caring to remain in Rome; but Jack would not part with the dog. For a week or two longer he intended to stay on in the house in the Via della Croce, for there were certain arrangements to make which made it necessary for him to be in Rome; then he thought he would go back to his work in London, and if the prospect looked a little forlorn, he told himself that he must get used to it, and put his shoulder to the wheel. All his aunt’s property had come to him, but this winter had also brought him a contempt of idleness, and it did not in any way modify his plans for his future life. He had seen Mrs Leyton, and something, which she purposely let drop, had confirmed his impression that Phillis was lost to him. He could not quite give up hope, but told himself that time only could answer his doubts, and meanwhile thought with some reluctance of the task which must be undertaken before Phillis would feel satisfied that Bice knew how Oliver Trent had really acted.

Two days after the funeral, three people were standing in a room in the Palazzo Capponi, the windows of which

looked into a square courtyard, round which ran a covered way, and which for its centre had a slender fountain, with camellias growing round it. The room itself was certainly ugly. The proportions were fine, and some good pictures hung on the walls, but the panels, doors, and ceiling were painted heavily and in bad taste, while the furniture was hideously covered with yellow satin. In the furthest window, an old Italian servant with a brown and wrinkled face sat knitting, and turning her back to the three, who were Bice, Trent, and young Moroni. It was to this last that Bice was talking eagerly in his own language, paying no attention to Trent's looks of annoyance. At this moment the servant brought in a card.

"It is Mr Ibbetson," said Bice, after a moment's pause. "Yes; of course we are at home to him."

If her colour rose a little, Trent did not see it. He had expected this meeting, but no preparation could subdue the feeling of dismay which seized him. He said sharply,—

"I hope you will not be anything of the sort. You ought not to admit him."

"Do you suppose I will allow you to dictate to me?" she said, looking at Trent with flashing eyes.

"Your mother is not here," he said, biting his lips.

"There is Brigitta—"

The servant had retired into the anteroom; Bice was moving towards him, when Trent placed himself before her.

"Listen to reason," he said beseechingly. "I tell you I can't promise to keep my temper with this man."

"And what do I care!" she retorted. "Are you afraid of him? I don't suppose he comes to see you, and so if you like you can go away. Certainly I shall receive him."

The girl had changed in some way or other. Her beauty was, if possible, more remarkable than ever, so large were her eyes, and so curved the lines of her mouth, but instead of the frank and open manner which had been as simple as that of a child, there was noticeable a touch of hard recklessness, of defiance which was almost like despair. Young Moroni, standing by, had also changed. He had grown older, and now looked from one to the other, understanding nothing of the words, but aware that something was amiss, and ready at a sign from Bice to fling himself upon the other man. He, poor fellow, was feeling as if all his old hopes had come to an end. Trent was very pale, but had recovered his coolness. He said scornfully,—

"No, I am not quite such a fool. I imagine the meeting will be less agreeable for him than for me, on the whole. But these knight-errants of yours, my dear Bice, should learn to conduct themselves less offensively when they meddle with what does not concern them. Pray, is this other also to take part in the coming interview?"

"He will not be the wiser," said the girl indifferently. Her anger seemed to have died out, and she said a few careless words to Moroni, who brightened, nodded, and took a newspaper with him into a recess where he was half hidden by a heavy yellow curtain. Then she walked to the door and threw it open. "Ask the English gentleman to come in," she said to the servant who was waiting, and came back to the middle of the room, flinging a triumphant and haughty glance at Trent.

As for him in these moments he had rapidly reviewed his position. Ever since he had heard of Ibbetson's sudden arrival in Rome, he had known that this meeting must in all probability take place, and had prepared for it, thinking carefully over his chances, so that it did not take him by surprise, although he had had a faint hope of inducing Bice to refuse to see him. He had played a bold game, calculating that interest and the hope of regaining his uncle's favour would keep Ibbetson in England, and managing to persuade Bice that he was misjudged from having really befriended Clive. What was she to think! Clive's own letters almost took his part; she had already promised, and was sick at heart, while her strong will failed in spite of its bold front. Trent had worked warily with her, and had all but won. But at this moment, though this flashed through his mind, and though he was well aware how perilous was his position and how much depended on his own coolness and audacity, he felt despairingly that he was not cool. He loved this girl so passionately that it irritated him almost beyond endurance to feel that the man he looked upon as his rival was eagerly welcomed by her in the face of his expressed wish. No dread of possible consequences fell upon him so painfully as this fact.

As for Bice her heart was beating fast, she did not know what she felt. When Jack came in she was standing alone in the middle of the room with all its heavy adornments. Somehow they only seemed to add to her beauty, which struck him as freshly as ever. He greeted her kindly, and exchanged a stiff bow with Trent.

"We have been so shocked and grieved," she said with eagerness. "I shall always feel as if she were the kindest person I have ever known."

"Thank you," Jack replied gravely. "I, for one, have good reason to say so."

"Did she suffer very much?"

"At first. By the time I saw her it was more weakness than pain."

"And you were in time? We have heard very few particulars."

"Yes. I arrived the afternoon before."

He was sitting next Bice on a sofa. Trent had flung himself on a chair, and taken up a book, but he was keenly on the watch. Bice, whose contemptuous mood had passed, looked at him nervously.

"I thought that when you left Rome you intended to come back again? Why did you stay all that time in England?" she asked in a hesitating voice.

"I did intend to return when I left, but circumstances are sometimes too strong for intentions," said Jack, feeling a comical conviction that he was growing sententious. Pope's line flashed through his mind: "And mark the point where sense and dulness meet."

"I hope the sense is equal to the dulness," he thought.

"And you saw Clive?"

She glanced at Oliver again as she put the question, but this time her looks were defiant. She thought that Ibbetson had gathered a false impression of what Trent had done; at the same time she took a certain pleasure in introducing a subject which would perhaps irritate Trent. He at once accepted the challenge, laying down the book and saying in his soft tones:

"You need hardly put that question, Bice; Mr Ibbetson not only saw Clive, but, as you know, made discoveries so new and startling, that if they had not had the misfortune to place me in a very unenviable light, I should really have been disposed to congratulate him upon their extraordinary ingenuity."

"You would be giving me more credit than I deserve," Jack replied calmly. "My discoveries were so far from ingenious that I might have wondered at their results if I had not remembered an old saying."

"Pray allow us to benefit."

"You may go by different roads, and yet reach the same end."

Jack was getting irate at what he considered insolence, though he was ready to spare him if Bice made any sign.

"Most oracular. May I ask whether the application is intended for my use?" said Trent without any change of countenance. But Ibbetson noticed that his hand which was resting on the arm of the chair, grasped it closely. He bent forward and answered,—

"Certainly I have no wish to be your fellow-traveller."

Bice, who had been glancing doubtfully from one to the other, interposed.

"You are not quite fair on Mr Trent. Has it ever been explained to you? Oh, then, it is no wonder. He was deceived as well as poor Clive by that wicked man."

"Was he?"

"Yes, indeed. What a friend for Clive to choose! Do you think he will be more careful now? Because, if not, I am sure he will be ruined."

"He has had a lesson, of course."

"And it was all through you that the man was found out. Imagine his telling you that he had repaid the money! I suppose he is too ill to be punished?"

"He is dead," Ibbetson answered briefly.

"Dead!" she looked questioningly at him; something which he could not shut out of his manner, gave her suspicions. She said with her old imperativeness, "Why do you speak in such little sentences? Are you hiding something, or are you offended? Don't you know that we can never, never, thank you enough?"

"You don't include me in your 'we,' I hope," said Trent with a sharp change of voice.

"Certainly personal relations need not be discussed between us," replied Jack haughtily. "May I ask how the history of the money continues after reaching this point?"

"If it were not for this lady, I might decline to answer your questions," said Trent in the same tone. "She being present, and considering herself under obligations to you, I will inform you that it does not continue at all. It ends with Mr Smith."

"Who is dead?"

"Who is dead."

Surely there was some triumph in his voice.

"And therefore beyond the possibility of being called as a witness."

"That may be your way of looking at the case. From my view I should say that he was beyond the possibility of being called to account for dishonesty."

"Take care, Mr Trent," returned Jack gravely. Oliver glanced swiftly at him, something in his face giving him a thrill of uneasiness. Then he looked at Bice; her eyes were fixed eagerly, inquiringly upon him, the breath came quickly through her parted lips as she leaned forward. The sight of these two, sitting side by side, maddened him.

"May I be permitted to ask to what your warning relates?" he said with an attempt at scorn.

"Certainly. Do you wish me to enter into particulars now, or would you prefer them to be given in private?" Before Trent said "Now," he rapidly reviewed his chances. If he could have had a hope that Ibbetson would not tell all to Bice, he would have chosen a private interview, but he felt certain that sooner or later she would be informed, and, therefore, determined to meet the charge boldly. Besides, he could see she would not be put off. And after all, was not his word as good any day as that wretched Smith's. He said, "Now," briefly.

"Then, to put it in the fewest possible words, I may tell you that, although Smith is dead, I have in my possession such strong and clear evidence of his having paid you the money, that there would not be the smallest difficulty in proving it in a court of law."

"Perhaps a receipt," sneered Trent.

"No. But a deposition, taken when he knew himself dying, and signed in the presence of the clergyman and another witness."

"Your court of law would require a little stronger evidence than this document, however interesting, Mr Ibbetson."

He still spoke without flinching.

"Oh, they would have it. The chain is very complete. There would be the evidence of the London landlady that she had furnished you with Smith's address and refused it to others by your advice. That of Clive that you denied all knowledge of it. And lastly that of the Broadwater lodging-house keeper that you saw Smith there on such a day. What took you there?"

"What's that to you?" asked Trent firmly. But he was livid. Then suddenly changing his tone he turned imploringly to Bice, whose eyes were still fixed upon him, though she had drawn her hands tightly against her chest, and was shrinking backwards. "Bice! You at least will not believe this ridiculous slander. You and I both know that Clive would not listen to advice. I was very uneasy about him—for your sake, remember—could I have done him any harm? Perhaps I had better have treated him more openly, better for myself certainly it would have been, but I thought he would grow desperate, and lose all self-respect if I let him know that I knew his story to be false. It was for that reason that I never told him I had traced Smith. For Smith utterly denied it to me then. I believe now that he was lying, as, according to Mr Ibbetson, he has lied about me, but at the time I took his word for his statement. And then I lent Clive the money, calling it lending, but never intending to take it from him, only feeling that the effort of repaying it would make more impression than words. You understand this, Bice?"

She did not answer his appeal. A mute horror seemed to have seized her. Ibbetson looked at him with more pity than she did, and bent his eyes on the ground as he went on.

"Finally, there is the man Elias Brooks."

"What of him?" said Trent hoarsely.

"It is never safe to buy silence, because speech will always be ready for a higher bidder. Indeed, I doubt if you knew what most required hushing up. He was interested in your interview with Smith, and is prepared to repeat the greater part of it."

"Confound you and him together," said Trent, springing up. "Are these your tools? And you believe him?"

"Yes I do; because the corroboration is exact."

"I shall expect satisfaction for these insults, Mr Ibbetson." Oliver's voice was choked.

"Not really, I think," Jack said coolly.

"Stop!" interrupted Bice. She stood up, trembling so much that she had to rest her hand on the sofa. Trent's eyes fell before hers which seemed to blaze with the fire of her indignation. She tried to speak, but the words would not come. "Go away, go!" she said at last with a shudder.

He made a step towards her.

"Bice, my darling, hear me!"

"You could treat Clive like that!"

"Let me explain—"

"Not a word," she interrupted. She spoke in a strained high voice, but words had come back to her. "You have deceived me from first to last. I have never loved you, but I thought you were good to Clive. Every day of my life I will thank God that He has saved me from becoming your wife. Do you hear? Now go."

The scorn, the sweeping indignation of her voice startled them all. Brigitta looked round; Moroni, whom Jack had not seen until that moment, came hurriedly forward, and stood looking from one to another. Trent caught her hand.

"Take care!" he said in a sharp whisper; then, as she shook him off with such a vehement movement as that with which she would have flung some reptile from her, he went on desperately, "Are you mad? I have borne a great deal, but I cannot bear everything. Have you forgotten that there are other ties between us besides those which you are so

ready to cast off? Perhaps you wish your mother to be ruined. How is she to pay her debts?"

She had drawn herself to her full height, her face was very pale, her eyes seemed as if he must wither up before them. Then she laughed.

"That is well, that is very, very well; I think it is the only thing that was wanted," she said, letting her words drop one by one. "Mr Ibbetson, Giovanni, will you come and hear Mr Trent's last appeal, and my answer."

Jack, who had turned away from a scene that pained him, and had been standing at the window, looking out at the court with its fountain, its camellias, and the rain splashing on its great paving stones, came back unwillingly. Moroni, hearing his name, though he understood nothing more, hastened forward and stood at Bice's side, with a ready purpose in his eyes to do anything she could ask.

"Not now," said Trent, drawing back.

"Yes, now," she asserted. "Do you suppose I will ever look at your face again? Listen, then, both of you. We owe him money, and he threatens me with it—*He!* He supposes that even a prison would not be preferable to being his wife!"

As all the passion of her Italian nature leapt forth, the scorn in her voice might have swept him away before it, but that his own rage was ungovernable. He said with a sneer:—

"Oh, I imagine you have taken care to arrange for something better than a prison. Pray, is this a preconcerted scene, and is Mr Ibbetson to pay your debts and marry you?"

Jack made a step forward, then he stopped himself by a strong effort. Trent had fallen beneath his punishment, he would not even speak to him; he turned to Bice and said with great gentleness:—

"I am very sorry you should have been exposed to this man's gross insults, although they cannot touch you. Will you go to your room and leave him to me?"

"Signorina, what is it? what has he done?" asked Moroni, seizing her hands.

But the girl was speechless. Her eyes dilated, she was deadly pale, and looked like one who had received a heavy blow. Ibbetson, who was very much grieved, said a few words in Italian to Moroni.

"But it is impossible! Does he dare to reproach you—you! because your mother owes him some money! It should have been a great honour to him to have been so happy as to do her a little service. Signorina, *carina*," cried the young fellow, with passionate entreaty in his voice, "I am rich, all that I have is yours!" His face was glowing, he pressed her hands to his lips; in the eagerness of his devotion he seemed to have forgotten that any others were in the room. "Only suffer me to act for you, I beseech of you!"

Trent came forward once more, and though his voice shook it had regained its old softness:—

"Bice!"

She turned away her head.

"I spoke hastily. Say one word."

She remained silent, and Ibbetson turned sharply round.

"You had better go," he said, in a low voice. "Why?" asked Trent, eyeing him sullenly,—

"I should think you could answer the question for yourself; perhaps before you find yourself kicked out."

"Well, that spectacle is hardly pleasant for you or for me," said Oliver, pointing to Moroni, who stood close to Bice as if he were her champion; "and so I leave you with greater satisfaction than might have been the case. But you have not heard the last of me, Mr Ibbetson."

He walked out of the room slowly, and except, perhaps, for the pallor of his face, no one would have guessed that he was a disgraced and disappointed man. There was a moment's silence between them all when he had lifted the curtain and passed out, nothing breaking it except the patter of the rain on the stones of the courtyard, the click-click of old Brigitta's needles, and the distant clang of some church bell. Moroni clenched his hands, and muttered something under his breath. Jack stood looking after Trent, uncertain what to do himself, whether to go or stay. He was roused from his thoughts by Bice's voice:—

"Is he gone?"

"Yes; he is gone," said Jack, coming back, and speaking gravely. "I'm afraid this has been a very trying interview for you. Perhaps I ought to have managed that you should have been spared. And yet—"

"No, no," she said faintly. "You have nothing to reproach yourself with. It was better that it should have been like this; it was necessary. And you must not think that it is the sort of grief you would perhaps expect—is it very wicked to feel as I do, as if a burden were lifted off my life? Because I do feel it already in spite of his threats."

"I am sure I don't wonder," said Ibbetson kindly, "I only wonder—"

"That I ever promised to marry him? Phillis would never have done so, I know, but then—I am not so brave as Phillis. And I always believed he was very good to Clive, and then he persuaded me that what he had done had been

misrepresented, and I thought it was from something I had said; and so—”

“Signorina, do not shut me out any longer, talk in our own language,” said young Moroni impatiently.

The girl smiled; a sad little smile it was. “Poor Giovanni, whether you hear little or much, you believe always that I am right, don’t you?”

“*Altro*, I know it, signorina!”

She looked wistfully at him for a moment. Then she put out a hand to him and to Jack, with a simple confiding impulse which touched them both. “Good-bye, dear friends,” she said softly in Italian, “try always to think as kindly.”

As the heavy curtain fell behind her, Moroni turned impetuously to Ibbetson.

“Now, signore,” he said, “I must hear more.”

“Wait a moment,” said Jack. “Is it because you love her?”

“Do I not? And I mean to win her. He is dismissed, is he not? Let me hear it all, I beseech you, I burn with impatience. I will walk back with you, and then I shall hasten to her mother. What is this about the money? Shall I not call out that Trent?”

Chapter Twenty Four.

Which will Succeed?

Moroni did not call out Trent but took some other measures which were vigorous and a good deal more sensible. But it was a proof of curious and dogged perseverance in the man, that, although baffled, Trent did not give up all hope. He had played a desperate game, in which he told himself—and truly enough, as far as it went—that he had been led on from risk to risk, and so far as his wrong-doing had been a mistake, he bitterly regretted it. Bitterly, for his love for Bice was an absorbing passion, and he would not yet suffer himself to own that she was lost for ever.

His hope lay in Mrs Masters. First and last he had lent her a good deal of money, looking to it as another means of gaining a power over the girl. For he measured Bice’s strength and weakness accurately, knowing that she would resist obstinately and, after all, give way in a moment if she could spare a tear to those she loved. Impulse, as yet, was almost paramount with her; what Trent was ignorant of, or forgot to take into account, was the effect produced upon her by the steady influence of such a life as that of Phillis, in which a higher law ruled.

Trent lost no time. He knew that Mrs Masters had been teased by Kitty into taking her to the Capitol, and he at once followed them there. Everything looked grey and dreary, and unlike Rome; the pepper trees and mimosas by the Capitol steps hung dank, the poor wolf had slunk sullenly into his den, even the majestic and unmoved serenity of Marcus Aurelius, as the rain beat down upon him, dangerously approached the ridiculous. An old woman held out her hand, “*Un soldo, per pietà, signore, un soldo.*” Trent flung her a dozen soldi, having a feeling that he could not afford to lose the blessing of a beggar.

Mrs Masters and Kitty had gone to the side where the bronze wolf is preserved, and he was long in finding them. Mrs Masters—always provided with a camp-stool—was in her usual condition of repose, letting her daughter look about as she liked, so that nothing could have been more desirable for Trent. Any other woman might have noticed the unusual dull pallor of his face, as he leaned against a pedestal by her side, but observation was growing more and more an unknown exercise to her, and she made no more than her ordinary remarks about heat or cold and the like, when he joined her. He did not trouble himself to answer them, but said abruptly:—

“Have you any idea how much money I have let you have?”

“Not much,” she said placidly. It had seemed to her part of the arrangement to which belonged Bice’s engagement, and she expected Trent to look upon it in the same light.

“Well, you had better understand. It is over two hundred pounds.”

For a moment she was a little startled, “I don’t really think it can be so much,” she said. “But, to be sure, I have a very poor head for business.”

“And do you know,” he went on without regarding, “that Bice has been listening to that young—fool, Ibbetson, and has been talked into throwing me over?”

He spoke in a low savage voice, which had in it so much concentrated bitterness that it frightened her. She looked up at him with a vaguely terrified expression.

“What do you mean?” she said. “She is going to marry you, isn’t she?”

“No,” he said in the same tone. “Can’t you understand plain English? I tell you he has been getting hold of her with his cock-and-bull stories about Clive, and this is the end of it.”

He had no dislike to Mrs Masters, and yet at that moment it gave him a fierce satisfaction to see that she was trembling. It seemed like an assurance that Bice was still in his power. And, indeed, one time of her life had taught her so thoroughly the language of threats that she had no difficulty in realising that he meant something by asking

her about the money. She said imploringly:—

“But it is not my fault, Oliver. You must know that I have always taken your part with Bice, and that I cannot help it if she has one of these headstrong fits upon her.”

“Perhaps not. But I don’t mean to put up with them quietly. Choose for yourself. Can you repay me the money?”

“Oh, of course I cannot, you know I cannot! And you promised me that when you were married you would not ask for repayment.”

“Well? And I abide by that promise. But do you think me fool enough to lose everything? Keep your side of the compact and I keep mine.”

She looked at him helplessly. Her mind was not quick at resources, and Trent’s will always seemed to oppose a blank high wall when she wished to escape. Kitty came up with some remark. When she had left them again, her mother said slowly:—

“I can’t force Bice.”

“You can work upon her. If you succeed, I give you my word, the money shall be absolutely yours.” He was leaning forward and speaking earnestly, and a dull hope came into her face.

“Perhaps I can. And you will be kind?”

“I will be very kind—to success.”

Then he walked away after Kitty, who was his warm admirer and supporter, and took pains to make himself more than usually pleasant to her, before he confided what had past. Painted in his own colours it looked very different from the actual fact, and Kitty, flattered and pleased, scarcely needed persuasion. When he went back to Mrs Masters, he felt convinced that he had a chance of at least getting himself heard by Bice, who was only to be reached by those she loved, and once heard, his indomitable perseverance assured him that he could explain everything.

Somebody else was plotting and planning that day. Moroni, all the chivalry of whose nature had risen up in answer to what Ibbetson had told him, though that was not much, was dashing about here and there, looking pale and determined, and unlike the days of the guitar. Jack was very good-natured, and sincerely anxious that he should succeed, his liking and esteem for the young fellow having grown rapidly that day. But even Jack grew a little weary of giving advice, when, for the third time, Moroni came rushing up his stairs.

“My dear friend,” cried the young fellow, wringing his hands, “what should I do without you? I ask you twenty thousand pardons, I am an impertinent, an intruder, but—will you only answer me one question, and I go?”

Ibbetson, who had had to answer some dozens already, nodded good-humouredly.

“Do you really think I should delay pressing my suit? If she were altogether Italian I should know what to do, but she is partly English; she loves England, it is not impossible that I might shock her. You, too, are English. Advise me.”

He was trembling with eagerness, and thrusting his hands into his hair. Ibbetson leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and said:—

“I wouldn’t be too abrupt. She will want a little breathing time after this affair. See Mrs Masters if you like, and for the rest go quietly to work.”

Moroni listened as eagerly as if he had not already had the advice again and again, nodded once or twice and jumped up.

“Enough! I shall go at once and see if her mother is returned. *Addio*, best of friends.” But at the door he came back: “You would really wait?”

“My dear fellow, I’m no prophet. I only say what I should do if I were in your shoes.”

“I shall do it. Ah, a thought strikes me! That is your dog, is it not? And she likes him, I have heard her speak of him—will you lend him to me? It would be so good to give her pleasure.”

Jack gave a laughing leave, but Cartouche refused all enticements. When the eager young fellow, with his hope and enthusiasm, had at last rushed out, Cartouche walked across the room and rested his black head on his master’s knee; looking in his face with the odd questioning that touched them all. “You and I are left pretty much to each other, old fellow, eh?” said Jack, pulling the shaggy locks; “and we miss her, too, don’t we? Well, we’ll hold together, and stick to each other, and, perhaps, the sooner we get away from here the better it may be for us both.” Then he began to imagine that future which turned a dreary side towards him at that time; Phillis in the vicarage at Whitcote, himself obliged every now and then to be at Elmsleigh to meet her, to meet the man whose wife she was. More than once in their last interview Phillis had hurt him as she had never done before; her shrinking reluctance to grant him that one request of his, had given him his sharpest pang, and his thoughts had gone back to it again and again. He was impatient with himself for his own folly, and stood up and shook himself, as if by that means he could get rid of it. Miss Preston and Winter had both gone, the porter’s wife kept his rooms, and his food was sent from a *trattoria*. Hardly ever had he been oppressed with such a sense of loneliness in the world, and somehow he was sure that Cartouche shared the oppression. The sooner he could get back to London the better, and he made a rapid calculation, and decided that in five days he might leave Rome. If, before then, he came across Phillis, well and good; but he told himself dejectedly that he must not try to see her alone, where another repulse would only pain them

both. Friends they might be in time, but it is not a relationship which succeeds very easily to that of lovers, in spite of the fine words talked about it, or even the finer thoughts thought.

Moroni, meanwhile, went like a whirlwind to the Palazzo Capponi, and stormed Mrs Masters in the very yellow room where he had already been that day. Other people might have found it difficult to introduce the subject, but his simplicity and his eagerness saw no difficulties. He kissed her hand, and held it in his own while he said:—

“Dear signora, I have the greatest favour to ask. By what I hope may be a fortunate incident, I was in this room to-day, and saw the signorina act like a heroine. The Signor Trent is of your family, I believe, so I say nothing, I abstain to speak of him, if I did however, I do not; as I say, I abstain. But I gathered that—he being of your family—you had done him the great honour to permit him to be your banker. I am right, am I not?”

Poor Mrs Masters, who was unaccustomed to have her monetary transactions looked upon in this light, stared helplessly at him. She was feeling the pressure of Trent’s heavy hand, and dreading her interview with Bice, which might, she knew, turn out a failure. And if so, where would she be? But Moroni was afraid he had offended her.

“You think I have no right,” he said, with a gesture of despair. “Ah, forgive me, but remember, are we not of your oldest friends? Who will you permit to be of some little use, when inconveniences occur, but us? If I cannot speak of that man, it is impossible for me to express myself as I would, but I entreat you to leave it in my hands, to let me settle everything with him. Oh, I will be patient because he is your countryman. And the money shall come from you, you may trust me.”

Was this the favour he was asking? She could scarcely believe that she heard rightly, and that her perplexities could meet with such a gentle end. No scruples were likely to weigh with her. She sank into an arm-chair with a sigh of relief.

“Would you really do me this kindness, Giovanni? Oliver Trent has behaved cruelly, for I did not know I had to repay the two hundred; but he is angry with Bice and vents it upon me. It is very hard on me. But have you the money?”

“Listen, dear signora. I came here hoping to gain your consent to address myself to the signorina Beatrice. My father loves me, he is rich, he consents. I find her tied to this man. Imagine, if you can, my despair. But now I shall hope again, with your permission, I shall have every hope.”

“Oh, you have my permission,” said Mrs Masters, slowly. “But if she will not—”

“Do you think she will not? Do not say so, I implore you!”

“She is incomprehensible,” said her mother, with a sigh. “And then, perhaps, I shall have all this scene with the money over again—”

Moroni stared at her, grew pale and drew himself up with a grand air they had never seen in him.

“Signora, I am one of the Moroni,” he said proudly, “and I have asked two favours at your hands.”

She looked at him in wonder. Was this Bice’s boy-admirer, at whom they had sometimes laughed? It touched and shamed her.

“You are very good, my Giovanni; very good,” she said. “I hope poor Bice will have the blessing of so good a husband, if she really has made up her mind not to marry Oliver. Poor Bice! Perhaps she has thought too much of me and of others—and as for this you wish to do, I cannot thank you enough—”

“Say no more,” said the young man, radiant, and seizing her hand again in his fervour. “You have granted me permission, now I shall go to work very carefully. But you will never let her know of the favour you have given me, she would think it too presumptuous. Within an hour the money shall be here. How kind you have been to me, dear signora!”

The secret was one which Mrs Masters determined to keep.

When she went into Bice’s room, she found her pacing up and down, flushed and feverish.

“So you have seen that man,” the girl began vehemently; “Mamma, for pity’s sake say nothing about him. Kitty has gone away crying because I will not listen. I shall go mad, I believe—I cannot even tell you what he has done. Ask Mr Ibbetson. Only I will not marry him, whatever you owe him; are human beings to be sold like that in these days? Let us go back, I will work, I will—”

“My dear, you are so impetuous! do not wish you to marry him.”

Bice paused in her rapid movements.

“And the money?” She asked the question breathlessly.

“The money will be paid to-day.”

The change in her face seemed to light the very room. She flung her arms round her mother’s neck, tears were running down her face. “It is for joy,” she sobbed. “Do you mean that we are free, that he can do nothing more?” But after this she made none of the inquiries which her mother dreaded; sitting quietly, and looking out of the window, and every now and then drawing a long breath, as if a burden were lifted from her.

That evening a great bouquet came for the Signorina Capponi.

The next morning, as Moroni was again going to choose the best flowers he could find for his lady, Trent passed by him on his way to the station. He looked like what he was; a man who had aimed for an object and had lost it. Of Moroni he took no notice; it was Ibbetson to whom he attributed his defeat. But Moroni in the joy of his heart, bought a magnificent peacock made entirely of flowers, at which the Roman world had been staring for an hour or two, and gave orders for its being sent to Palazzo Capponi. And Jack, when he was called upon for advice that day, thought Giovanni's views as to proceeding slowly were a good deal modified. At any rate, he saw Bice.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Father Tiber.

The carnival had ended and Lent begun with days of heavy and unusual rain. People who were bent upon sight-seeing were obliged to fall back upon the galleries and studios, and these were so dark that the general gloom seemed to have also affected them. One day, five or six people were wandering through Vertunni's beautiful rooms. There are hangings of strange colours, damasks, tapestries, draperies over the doors, priceless bits of glass or bronze, out of the midst of which rich and soft surroundings the pictures glow. Sometimes it is Italy—the gloom of the Pontine marshes, the light of Paestum. Sometimes you lose yourself in a sea-mist were a boat floats between sky and earth; sometimes meet with Egypt's dusky radiance, or the sweep of the sand on the desert...

Mrs Leyton was in her element, she went on from room to room, dragging her husband and the Peningtons after her. She wished Phillis to marry Mr Penington, but it would have annoyed her very much if she had absorbed him, which was quite another thing. And Phillis preferred to linger behind with Bice, who wandered restlessly from picture to picture. She touched one of the broad and deeply carved black frames with a slender finger, and went on with what she had been saying:—

“Did you ever know what it was to have a ton-weight lifted off you? But you needn't answer. To get my sort of ton you must pull it on yourself, and you couldn't do that. You would never have more than a pound at most. Only now the feeling is so delightful that it is almost worth all the past unhappiness to have got it. Everything seems different, even you!”

Phillis was looking at her curiously. Was not some hope added to this feeling of relief? The girl, who had told Phillis all her story, went on:—

“But do you know that I have been afraid to ask questions. How has it all been managed? Who can have set us free? Poor mamma never could raise the money, that I know, and therefore somebody has done it, and I dare not make her tell me. What do you think?”

What could Phillis say? No doubt rested in her own mind as to who it was had paid the debt, and set the girl free from the last links of that miserable bondage.

Jack had told her something of the scene which had taken place at the Palazzo Capponi, and had found it impossible to restrain a certain satisfaction and triumph over its conclusion. Phillis held her own opinion that it was he to whom the finishing touch was due, but it was not an opinion which she would have suggested to Bice for worlds. She turned her back to look at some Indian hanging of wonderful texture, hoping that she might not be asked that question again. But Bice intended to have an answer.

“Why don't you speak?” she said quickly. “What are you thinking about? Not?”

She paused as if expecting some continuation of this “not.” Phillis, however, took no notice. If Bice guessed she could not help it, but she would not suggest the name which seemed to her ridiculously palpable. There was a little pause in which they could hear Mrs Leyton's laugh in the next room. When Bice began to speak again it was in a slow strained voice.

“Did you really suppose it was Mr Ibbetson?” she demanded, “and did you really think that I should take it from him? I tell you I know as well as if he stood before us, and swore it, that he would not have dared to offer me such an insult, and sooner than accept it I would—I would almost marry Oliver Trent.”

Phillis was astonished. Perhaps she had not credited the girl with so much delicacy of feeling, perhaps she thought that of all men, Jack was the one from whom Bice would have been the most ready to accept an obligation.

“I beg your pardon,” she said with great meekness. “It really was Mr Ibbetson of whom I had thought, because he had already shown great interest—”

She stopped. Bice finished the sentence very calmly.

“In Clive, yes. He was very good to Clive. Very good indeed.”

Phillis was staring at her. “Clive! He didn't know Clive when he went to England. Don't you know that he went on purpose to see him? Has he never so much as told you? He went to see him, but he went on your account.”

While she spoke the girl's face had flushed a soft and delicate colour, but she still kept her eyes fixed upon Phillis. And when Phillis had ended she said:—“No, I don't know it, and I don't believe it. If Mr Ibbetson went on our account, it was because you asked him. Did you not ask him?”

"I told him," Phillis said, a little bewildered at this view of the matter which had never before presented itself to her. Bice looked at her wistfully and smiled.

"Yes, you told him. Are you blind, Phillis? Don't you see that the one thing which Mr Ibbetson cares about is to do something to please you?"

It was Phillis's turn to colour, and she would have attempted some disclaimer, but that the rest of the party came back to the room, and Mrs Leyton made a prompt attack upon them.

"You are disgracefully idle, you two! Come, acknowledge that I am the most consistent sight-seer of our party. However much I protest beforehand, when I am dragged to anything I *do* it."

"I did not imagine that you were ever dragged anywhere, Mrs Leyton," said Mr Penington, smiling. "I should have called you a very cheerful conductor. However, I agree with you that it would be a pity for Miss Grey to miss those Egyptian pictures. Won't you come and see them?" he said, addressing her.

"Not now, thank you," said Phillis hurriedly. He looked disappointed, and she was sorry; but Bice's words were in her ears, she could scarcely think of anything else. Vague doubts had haunted her since her last interview with Jack; she had been really ashamed to own their presence to herself, but now to have them put into words by another brought a delicious thrill of happiness.

"Well, good people," said Mrs Leyton, "if this is finished, will you be kind enough to inform me what we are to do with ourselves? It is so early in the day that hours upon hours remain on my conscience. Make a suggestion, everybody, please, and then we can choose."

"I must go home," said Bice. "Suppose you come with me?"

"Suppose we go and look at the Tiber?" suggested Mr Penington. "Do you know that there are serious fears of an inundation? At any rate I can assure you that it is worth seeing. The old stream swings along with a force absolutely amazing, and if you are not afraid of the rain, it would not take long to get as far as the Ripetta. There you would get a first-rate view."

He addressed Mrs Leyton, but he looked at Phillis. Captain Leyton, who was peering into a picture, turned round briskly.

"That's the thing to do, of course. Why didn't we think of it? Come along."

"Well, perhaps it is nice," said his wife doubtfully. "But we must call at the hotel and get waterproofs."

"Nothing easier."

"And I won't be led into any danger, mind."

Bice still persisted that she must go back, indeed she was sufficiently Italian to think with horror of walking in the rain. At the foot of the stairs young Moroni was waiting, rather to everybody's astonishment; but he only said simply that he had heard the Signorina Capponi was here, and had come to see if he could be of any use.

"What does he expect to do?" Bice whispered to Phillis. But she was smiling.

The four ladies drove to the Alemagna, while the gentlemen walked, and then Bice went home alone, and the others fitted themselves out for their little expedition. Just as they came down, ready to start, Jack Ibbetson, with Cartouche at his heels, turned into the entrance passage.

"The Tiber is rising," he said eagerly. "West tells me the sight out by the Ponte Molle is very striking. It struck me some of you might like to go there."

"Well, yes," said Captain Leyton, pulling his whiskers. "We *were* going to the Ripetta, but I don't know—suppose we make a bolder push. What do you say, Miss Penington?"

"I think it would be much nicer," she said with great emphasis.

"Then we'll do it."

"You'll come?" said Jack, turning quickly to Phillis.

It seemed to her afterwards as if she had been swept away by some impetuous force in his voice or manner. Was it the vibration of those words which she still heard, "Are you so blind? Don't you see that the one thing he cares for is to please you?" Was it true—at last?

But the arrangement did not at all please Mrs Leyton. She said in an injured tone:—

"I think you are excessively disagreeable. You know I can't walk all that way."

"We can drive some distance."

"Oh, I daresay! I should have miles to tramp. And I had made up my mind to go to the Ripetta. Mr Penington, do you intend to desert me, also?" What could he say? He said "No," with a good deal of disappointment in the word. For the last few days it had seemed impossible to get any special sight or hearing of Phillis, and he had made this opportunity with the hope of speaking some words on which it seemed to him that the happiness of his life depended.

It was hard to lose it. But Mrs Leyton had no intention of letting him go with them.

"No, I thought not," she said cheerfully. "And I'm not sure that it isn't a good plan to separate. One can see things better. We'll meet by and by, and tell our experiences, if there is anything left of you, after this mad proceeding. But I predict we shall have the best of it."

"That's all right, then," said Captain Leyton cheerfully. "Penington will take you, wife, and we four will start at once. Are you ready, good people?—thick boots, wraps, umbrellas?"

They would not consent so much as to be driven to the Porta del Popolo, and, indeed, the rain was no longer falling with the persistent force of the last few days. The sky was still heavy with leaden-looking clouds, but they were thinner, and in some places so far rent asunder that a glimmering brightness showed behind them. Coming along the Babuino was a picturesque file of donkeys of various ages, led by bronzed men in long blue cloaks; a contadina, also in a blue dress, and a little child, walked by their side. Presently they met other processions; goats, ox-carts piled high with household goods; the poor oxen came stumbling and sliding along over the slippery stones, the people looked dejected, they were straggling in from the campagna, escaping from the threatened inundation. Jack spoke to one woman and asked a question. "*Mariaccia, che tempo!*" she exclaimed, holding up her hands. "Already much has been swept away. If it goes on, we shall be ruined." The Via Flaminia was full of these fugitives, but they could not tell them much.

And as yet they saw nothing of the river.

Ordinarily, indeed, they must have reached the Ponte Molle itself before they would catch a glimpse of the yellow waters, and the tears sprang into Phillis's eyes as she remembered how about a month before she had driven out there with Miss Cartwright, and had stopped on the bridge to look at the loveliness of the view. Then, under a blue sky, even Tiber himself had caught all sorts of fair and delicate reflections; that indescribable golden brown which takes the place of green in a Roman landscape, lay on the banks and on the stretching campagna; a little watch-tower rose on a low hill above the river, and all along the line of distance ran a line of mountains flushed with tender lights of rosy lilac, and crowned with snow. It was very unlike that day. For now the mountains were blotted out by the darkness of grey mist, and if for a moment this was lifted up, it was only a shadowy gloom which grew out of the greyness; and before they reached the bridge, they could see the angry and tawny waters rolling towards them, at the very top of the confining banks—nay, here and there they had already forced a gap and spread themselves in a turbid sheet over the short grass. People were standing on the bridge, pointing; but not many, the greater number had something to do, some danger to avert. For those who looked, the sight could hardly be forgotten. A fierce purpose seemed to possess the dark mass of rushing water which rolled with incredible swiftness beneath the bridge, and every now and then there swirled past a scarcely distinguishable heap of something which the old river had already seized upon for his prey—branches of trees, bundles of maize, a struggling sheep, the spoil of some little farm, the torn ribs of a boat. Something in the vagueness of these objects, in the suddenness with which they were swept into and out of sight, in the triumphant might of the swollen river, had a horrible fascination for the lookers-on. What might not meet their eye next? They bent over the parapet and looked down; Cartouche sprang upon it and whined uneasily.

"Some houses must have been washed away, fry the last thing was a chair," said Miss Penington.

"I can't stand this," said Jack, straightening himself. "Whatever came down, we couldn't possibly do any good here. I shall go further down the river. There are one or two places where if anything living were swept, it might be caught and held. At any rate it won't look quite so desperate as it does from the bridge. Leyton, you will see them home."

"No, no," said Phillis with great eagerness. "That is quite impossible. Do you suppose that we should let you go alone? Of course we will all go. I shall be giddy if I look at this much longer."

And though she was generally the most considerate of companions, she did not once ask Miss Penington her wishes in the matter. Captain Leyton looked doubtful.

"I don't know what sort of a path there may be," he said.

"But I do," said Jack with a happy smile. "If you'll really come, I can take you quite safely; the rain has stopped. Will you and Miss Penington go in front and I'll direct you."

"I should have thought the shortest plan would have been for you to go in front yourself," said Captain Leyton; but he fell into Jack's arrangement, being the most good-natured of men.

"You have thick shoes, I hope?" said Jack to Phillis, as they followed.

"Look!" And she held up a pretty foot well protected. Phillis's spirits were rising every moment, in spite of the wild scene all about them. The path was very wet and rough; once or twice he put out his hand to help her. Perhaps the little action brought back to her mind another rough road when he had helped, not her, but Bice, for she said suddenly, "I want to ask you a question; but you needn't answer it unless you like."

"That is very considerate," said he smiling.

"Do you know the end of Mrs Masters's debts?"

"Yes, I do. That is, I know they've been paid. Do you expect this to be the end?"

"Oh, well, for the present. But who paid them?" He hesitated. "I don't believe it's a secret," he said presently, "but of course it's not a thing to be talked about." Then he suddenly turned and looked down into her face. "Did you really

suppose it was I?"

"Why not?" she persisted. "Why not you as well as another?"

"I think I shall avail myself of your means of escape, and refuse to answer the question," said Jack with gravity. "I can't afford to lose my one opportunity of being considered a *preux chevalier*."

"But, Jack!"

"But, Phillis!"

"Was it really not you?"

He did not answer her for a moment. Their path led them so close to the sweeping current of the river, already brimming over and tearing at the canes which bordered it, that he was seized with a fear that he had been mistaken in the strength of the banks, and had, perhaps, brought his companions into danger. But a short recollection assured him that they were safe. He pointed out an oozy bog to Phillis that she might avoid it, and then said:—

"I don't think that Miss Capponi shares your misconception."

"No, she does not," said Phillis frankly. "But she doesn't know where the money came from."

"Does she not?" Jack lifted his eyebrows with a little incredulity. "Then I really think I ought to give you a hint to be used for her special benefit. But it seems to me that the blindness of the world is one of its chief wonders. Why, Phillis, can't you see that young Moroni would think all he had well thrown away if he could get her?"

"Young Moroni! I fancied that was quite a hopeless devotion."

"Not so hopeless now, I imagine. He had hard work to bring his father to his way of thinking, then he came here and found Trent to the fore; but now—"

"When did he make you this confidant?" asked Phillis quickly.

"On the day of the great blow up: I acted as interpreter, and then had to hear all his hopes and fears. And I wish him full success."

Jack had leapt across a little running stream, and held out his hand to Phillis, looking into her eyes as he did so. What did he read there? What new happiness trembled in their brown depths, what deep and tender faithfulness did he discover? Was this the moment at last for which he had longed and hoped?

"Ibbetson! Ibbetson, for Heaven's sake, what's that?"

The cry came from Captain Leyton, who was running back and pointing eagerly towards the river. "Where?" shouted Jack, eager in his turn.

"There! Caught by that great tree."

There is a point where the higher part of the bank juts out a little towards the river. Ordinarily this does not reach or interfere with the course of the water, only breaking into the line of pebbly reaches and of almost a thicket of bushes between them. But now the rage and fulness of the river swept high above bushes and reaches, and rushed along the inner bank which yet formed a barricade to its force, so that this little outpost was exposed to the full fury of the stream. Already it had been so battered and weakened, that more than half had been washed away, but still it formed a little natural breakwater, and, as the current apparently set in its direction, it followed that some of those things, which Tiber had relentlessly wrenched from the land, now and then caught on its point and lingered for perhaps a minute or two before they were again whirled away to their doom. But now a larger object had been driven against it, and was making a more obstinate resistance. A great uprooted tree, tossed wildly along by the turbulent stream, had probably been swept against this barrier with such force as to become partially embedded in it. For the moment it remained there, and its long network of boughs, broken and battered as they were, stretched themselves out across the waters with what looked like despairing efforts against its destroyer. They could not last. The tawny river leapt and foamed, seizing branch and twig, and tearing them off with a violence which was rapidly undermining the little promontory itself, and would soon sweep it and all that clung to it away. Meanwhile the branches caught at other spoil, wisps of poor drowned hay wrapped themselves round them, a contadino's hat with the gay ribbons all dank and draggled was tossed on to a splintered bough; and Captain Leyton and his companion, watching the strange medley and the signs of ruined homestead which the flood was sweeping down, had seen another object which struck them with horror, and made them cry out to Jack.

For caught in its narrow end by the branches into which it had been jammed, with the other end swung violently from side to side by the yellow surging waves which claimed their prey, was a wooden cradle; and although they could not be sure—owing to the tossing unrest of the waters—whether it was or was not empty, it seemed to them, every now and then, as though they caught sight of a little dark head, a darker shadow under the shadow of the cover. Jack was on the alert in a moment.

"We must get hold of it somehow."

"If we can," said Captain Leyton doubtfully. "But think of the force of that current!"

Jack nodded, but by this time was already standing without coat or boots on the spot where the little promontory curved out from the bank.

They all knew something of the danger. At his quietest Tiber is no ordinary river, very rarely do you see a boat upon his surface, and the ferries have ropes stretched across, by which to bear up against the slow but mighty force of the old river.

And now he had done all this mischief higher up, and was within an ace of flooding Rome. What could live in those sweeping and turbulent eddies?

“For Heaven’s sake don’t be so mad, Ibbetson!” said Captain Leyton, laying a hand on his arm. “It’s hopeless to attempt to save the poor little beggar—utterly hopeless! If anything could be done, I wouldn’t say a word, but this is only throwing away life. Don’t, my dear fellow, don’t!”

Miss Penington broke into terrified appeals. Phillis, pale as death, was standing by Jack’s side, looking into his face, but not attempting to dissuade him. Perhaps he did not hear Captain Leyton; he was looking coolly and thoughtfully at the river as if to take in all the chances. A wave dashed up over their feet. Then he suddenly stooped down and kissed Phillis, held her, and gazed into her eyes for a moment. “God bless you, Phillis,” he said. Afterwards he did not look back.

For a few steps he walked along the top of the bank, sinking each instant into its yielding surface, until, as the water swept over it more and more, he let himself down by its inner side, and half swimming, half clinging, gained a little ground, though slowly. This was the easiest part of all, but one danger at least was as great here as elsewhere. Every instant added to the insecurity of the bank. Every moment it seemed almost a miracle that it should be left. So terrific, indeed, was the force of the current that it swept Ibbetson backwards and forwards against it like a battering ram, and these very blows were an additional peril. Still he was able to battle on, those on the bank watching with agonising anxiety; Cartouche running backwards and forwards, whining uneasily, looking in their faces, looking at the water.

“He has reached the tree,” Captain Leyton said in a breathless whisper.

It was the second stage. With it began the worst dangers of all, those of the undercurrents which naturally the bank had checked. He was obliged now to trust altogether to swimming, using the boughs as a support. Without them he must inevitably have been swept away, but their help was of the most frail and treacherous nature—tossed by the waters, swayed to and fro, twisted off and whirled into the centre of the flood, at any moment liable to be altogether detached from the bank, or with it to share a common destruction. Jack did not know it, but his face was bleeding from the twigs which whipped continually against it. Still the cradle was there, so near that it almost seemed to those on shore that he could have reached it, ignorant as they were of the terrible forces against which he was battling, or worst of all, of the feeling each moment that he must be sucked under in a resistless eddy.

Were they moments or hours that passed? Phillis, on the shore, fell down on her knees and held up her hands, but never for an instant did her eyes let go that spot in the yellow waters where he was fighting for life. Presently Captain Leyton drew a long breath, and spoke again.

“He has got the cradle. He is pushing it back.”

Then there was silence, that strained, intense silence, which is almost awful in its weight. Inch by inch, as it were, and only inch by inch, he came towards them, bruised, bleeding, hampered with the cradle. Once or twice it seemed as if he had disappeared. And, at last, just as he reached the point where the bank—by this time yet feebler—began, they heard—with an agony which to Phillis in her helplessness was like that of death—his cry for help.

That moment Captain Leyton was in the water. How he got there he never knew, but before him there was another friend at least as faithful. Cartouche, at his master’s cry, had plunged in, and, swimming bravely, had seized the cradle and turned back to land. With a tremendous struggle he managed to bring it to the spot where Phillis was standing, disregarding the water which washed up round her, and when she had lifted it out, the brave dog turned round and fought his way again to his master.

Help was indeed needed, for Jack’s failure did not altogether arise from exhaustion, but from, if possible, a more serious cause. His foot had become entangled in some of the small submerged branches, and not having sufficient strength to extricate himself, he could only manage to keep himself afloat by clutching at a bough. But the support was too slender to avail him long, against the dreadful power of the undercurrents, even if the tree itself were not—as would surely be the case in a few minutes—swept down the stream. Captain Leyton, although he had bravely plunged in, was too inexperienced a swimmer to give any help, indeed his own situation was full of danger before he had so much as reached the tree, and only by clutching at some projection in the bank with the despair of a drowning man could he keep his head above water.

But Cartouche? Through the tossing waters the dog, with a faithfulness which never faltered, struggled slowly back to his master. Beaten by the waves, with safety close behind within his reach, he needed no call to keep him resolute to his purpose. To Jack, with the river hissing in his ears, with the angry dash of foam blinding his eyes, the sight of that black and curly head coming steadily towards him seemed to give hope and power once more. As the dog reached him he bent his head down, and Cartouche by a great effort licked his face. Then Jack called all his failing strength together; the tree itself swayed violently, he felt that he was free. Free, but could he reach the shore? The horror of that frightful imprisonment was so strong, that he dared not trust to the help of the branches, and the struggle was almost superhuman. Cartouche swam close to him, swam round him, more than once when he thought he must give up, the gaze of those faithful eyes, the touch of the dog’s body, brought back the hope which had all but deserted him—and now, he had just cleared the roots of the tree, was just venturing in towards the bank, when, caught in some tremendous eddy, the tree swung completely round, and with its bare branches tossing wildly upwards, the old river whirled away its prey in triumph.

A few moments sooner and Jack must have been drawn into the whirlpool. He had just escaped it, was just able to

reach Captain Leyton, to give him help, to let the river, more merciful at the last, fling him where even a woman's hands could succour. The two men were saved; when Jack opened his eyes, the woman he loved was bending over him, her eyes looked into his with an unutterable gladness. God had given him back, and with his life had given him Phillis.

But Cartouche?

He had been a little behind his master; a bough had struck him down as it swept round, a fierce current drew him under, a moment did it all. The faithfulness which never once had failed him, had not failed him now; Jack was safe, but Cartouche had died in the saving.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Only a Dog.

Only a dog. Other people said this afterwards, but not one of those who stood by the river, looking sadly where he had been carried away. Only a dog, indeed, and yet without his aid three of their number might never have been given back to those who loved them. Down Phillis's face the tears were raining.

"Is it hopeless?" she said.

"Quite hopeless," Jack replied in a dull and shaken voice. "I would give—well it's no use talking about what I would give—"

And then they turned away. It was indeed necessary that the two men, in their chilled and dripping state, should get home as quickly as possible. And what of the little waif whose rescue had cost them so much? Phillis stooped down, and lifted her from the cradle which had been an ark, and in which she was sleeping as soundly as on her mother's breast.

"I will carry her," said the girl with a sob.

As they walked—silent and moved with many feelings—along the bank which would lead them back to the road, the sinking sun, which had been hidden for many days, broke out from behind a drifting mass of clouds, and flooded the whole scene with a sudden golden glory. The angry and turbid waters were transfigured by its radiance; here and there where they had spread themselves in desolating tracts, all the brilliance of the heavens seemed to be given back; and Rome herself, unmoved by the violence of the flood, lay in dark imperial purples against the western sky. They all looked silently and hurried on.

When they reached the road, other people had collected who stared in amazement at the strange figures, at the rescued baby. More than one had seen the cradle carried down under the bridge, but had never thought of possible deliverance. Now there were willing feet enough to start off after the cradle, to run in the opposite direction in order to get tidings of what little farm had been swept away. And fortunately one or two carriages had driven out from Rome, the owners of which almost contested the honour of taking the little party back. It was a strange drive. Joy and sorrow at times are almost inextricably interwoven. Phillis, with the baby's dark and curly head pressed tightly against her, sat and looked at Jack, who was, indeed, given back to her from the dead, and all over the broken clouds golden lights were radiating, and flashing down upon a watery world. The little pools in the road reflected some of the brightness, the roofs were shining, the rain drops gleamed on the trees, it was like enchantment, so suddenly had all this opal light grown out of the gloom. And yet, not so far away, a mother was running wildly by the river, crying out for her lost baby; and, far down, men, with long poles trying to snatch some of his spoil from Tiber, touched a black and floating object, and let it go with a push—"only a dog," was what they said, "and dead."

Two nights afterwards some of those who had been dining at the table-d'hôte went out into the Piazza di Spagna. There was an eclipse, or something which gave them the excuse for coming into the solemn and wonderful darkness, lit by tremulous stars, and musical with the constant cool splash of the fountain. Carriages were flying backwards and forwards, people lounging about, but they did not interfere much with the beauty or the quiet. The group of friends broke into little knots, two stood a little way up the Spanish steps, and leaned against the parapet. One of them, a man, was saying:—

"Do not be afraid. These disappointments may sadden, but they do not wreck our lives. You have given me memories to cherish for ever, although this is a good-bye we are saying; yes, good-bye, and God bless you, my dear. Susan and I are going off to-morrow; there is south Italy to see, it would never do for us, you know, to go home and to have nothing to report of Vesuvius and Pompeii."

She was crying softly, she felt the kind pressure of his hand, she did not know that he had moved away because another figure was running up the steps. "Phillis!" said Jack in a low voice.

And then she turned and laid her head upon his shoulder.

"Oh, it is hard, hard!" she said. "Jack, must there always be pain with one's deepest happiness!"

He did not quite understand, but perhaps he guessed enough, and he was very gentle with her. For indeed it seemed as if the joy of their life had come to them through death and sorrow of heart. Is it not so often? Will it not be so to the very end?

Presently he began to talk about the baby; the mother had been found the very day of the flood, and had walked and run all the way into Rome, almost mad with the bliss of the tidings. And Jack had been out to the spot where the little

farm had stood, and had seen all the desolation and ruin, and was going to make his thank-offering and Phillis's, take the form of a new building. Over the door there would be carved the figure of a dog, with a date.

Before this was done there were two weddings in Rome. Bice and young Count Moroni were married first, and two or three days after, Phillis Grey and John Ibbetson. It was one of those bright Easter days when Rome breaks into delicious harmonies of spring; when the banksia roses fling themselves over the walls like foam, and delicate plants spring out of the mighty brickwork, and the sky is one unbroken depth of blue, and the sun shines on the fountain of Trevi, on the falling waters which came rushing out, on the pigeons which fly backwards and forwards, and perch themselves on Neptune's head. The wedding was very quiet. Scarcely half a dozen people were in the Church, and in an hour or two Jack and Phillis were to start for Florence on their way to Venice. But before this Phillis had a wish which naturally was to be gratified. They must drive to the Ponte Molle and see the spot where Cartouche had died for his master.

On their way Jack put into her hands a letter from his uncle, written with some triumph, but little cordiality.

"Oliver Trent!" repeated Phillis, as she came to a sentence with his name.

"Oliver Thornton, perhaps, one of these days," said Jack, folding the letter and putting it back in his pocket. "Who knows? I'm sure I don't. But if so, I hope Hetherton will disagree with him."

Phillis, who rather disliked the name of Hetherton, said quickly:—

"We will not begrudge it to him."

"Yes, I shall," persisted Jack, "because I object to successful villainy, and to being disappointed of my moral." But seeing that Phillis looked at him wistfully, he drew her closer to him. "My darling, do you suppose Hetherton seems anything to me now?"

They had not much time to spare, and walked quickly from the bridge along the river side. So changed was it from that other day, that it might, so Phillis thought, have been another stream. Instead of wild anger there was only a stately sweep in the slowly moving water, and though some marks of past turbulence might be here and there visible on the banks, they were not many, and under the warm sun all the green bordering was springing into glad life once more.

But, though where it had been was now dry land, the little bank was gone. Phillis grew pale and clung to Jack when she saw this, she could not speak except by that mute gesture, and he answered it mutely, too. For there where Cartouche had died and he had been given back to life and her, he kissed his wife, and held her in his arms.

Do people forget as quickly as we commonly believe? Outward marks and signs of remembrance die away, it is true, others fill the vacant places, and we look into smiling faces and say "he or she is forgotten—it is the way of the world." But, after all, what do we know? Do not our own memories often startle us? At all sorts of strange times, with a silent foot-fall inaudible to any but ourselves, they come warm, and strong, and living. We do not forget so easily, nor perhaps shall we be forgotten so soon as we all think. God gave good gifts to this husband and wife, and the crown of happy love, but both of them remembered and kept their memories sacred in their hearts. And a peasant woman in a southern country has taught her children to love animals and be good to them, for one of them, she says, was once saved by a dog. The children listen, thrilled by the familiar story. "*Eccolo!*" cries a girl, pointing, and they all turn and look up where, over the door, is the carved figure of a dog, with a date.

The End.

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