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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE ***

C.R. Coleridge

"Hugh Crichton's Romance"

Part 1, Chapter I.

Hugh's Story.

"The light that never was on sea or land."

Part 1, Chapter II.

Violante.

Elle était pâle et pourtant rose,
Petite, avec de grands cheveux,
Elle disait souvent, "Je n'ose,"
Et ne disait jamais, "Je veux."

The sunshine of a summer evening was bathing Civita Bella with an intensity of beauty rare even in that fair Italian town. When the shadows are sharp, and the lights clear, and the sky a serene and perfect blue, even fustian and broadcloth have a sort of picturesqueness, slates and bricks show unexpected colours, and chance tree tops tell with effect even in London squares and suburbs. Then harsh tints harmonise and homely faces look fair, while fair ones catch the eye more quickly; every flower basket in the streets shows whiter pinks and redder roses than those which were passed unseen in yesterday's rain, the street gutters catch a sparkle of distant streamlets, and the street children at their play group into pictures. For the sun is a great enchanter, and nothing in nature but sad human hearts can resist his brightness. Civita Bella needed no adventitious aid to enhance its beauty. The fretted spires and carved balconies, quaint gables and decorated walls, were the inheritance of centuries of successful art, and their varied hues were only harmonised by the years that had passed since some master spirit had given them to the world, or since they had grown up in obedience to the inspiring influence of an art-loving generation. Down a side street, apart from the chief centres of modern life, stood an old ducal palace. The very name of its princely owners had long ago faded out of the land, and no one alive bore on his shield the strange devices carved over its portico. It lay asleep in the sunshine, lifting its broken pinnacles and mutilated carvings to the blue sky, still beautiful with the pathetic beauty of "the days that are no more."

The old palace was let in flats, and on one of the upper stories flower-pots and muslin curtains peeped gaily out of the dim, broken marbles with a kind of pleasant incongruity, like a child in a convent.

Within the muslin curtains was a long, spacious room, with inlaid floor and coloured walls, with a broad band of bas-reliefs round the top leading the eye to the carved and painted ceiling above. There was very little furniture, a grand piano being the most conspicuous object, and the lofty windows were shaded by Venetian blinds; but round the farthest, which was partly open, were grouped a few chairs and tables, with an unmistakable attempt to give an air of modern, not to say English, comfort to one part of the vast, half-inhabited chamber.

A brown-faced, shrewd-eyed Italian woman, with gold pins in her grey hair and gold beads round her neck, and a young lady in an ordinary muslin dress, were standing together contemplating and criticising a young girl who stood in front of them, dressed in the costume of an Italian peasant. That is to say, she wore a short skirt and a white bodice, but the skirt was of rose-coloured silk, the bodice of fine cambric; her tiny hat was more coquettish than correct in detail, and the little hands playing with the cross round her neck had surely never toiled for their daily bread. Yet she looked a little tired and a little sad, and her companions were noticing her appearance with the gravity that pertains to a matter of business.

"I think that will do," said the young lady, in a clear, decided voice. "She looks very pretty."

"Oh, bella—bellissima!" said the old Italian woman, clapping her hands. "But when is not la signorina charming?"

"It does not alter her much. Violante, does it inspire you?"

"I think it is very pretty; and you know, Rosa, I shall be rouged, and perhaps my eyes will be painted if they don't show enough," said Violante, simply.

"You don't mind that?" said Rosa, curiously.

"No!" with a half-surprised look in the soft pathetic eyes; "I am glad. Then father will not see when I am pale. It will be hidden."

"Oh, my child, you will not look pale then. So, Zerlina, you want another bow on your apron; and then this great dress is off one's mind. We must let father look at you."

"Do you think he will say I look handsome enough?" said Violante, anxiously.

Rosa laughed. "I don't know what he may say, but I am sure of what he will think. And besides, he is not the public. Thank you, Maddalena, we need not keep you now." And, as the old woman departed, Rosa took the little muslin apron and began to sew a bright bow on it; while Violante stood by her side, manifestly afraid of injuring her costume by sitting down in it. She looked very pretty, as her sister had said, but her anxious, serious look was little in accordance with her gay stage costume.

"You see," said Rosa, as she pinched up her loops of ribbon, "we have a great many friends. All the members of the singing-class will go, so you will not feel that you are acting to strangers."

"I think Madame Tollemache will go," said Violante.

"Of course, and her son, and Emily, and they will take Mr Crichton."

A sudden brightness came over the girl's soft eyes and lips, as she stood behind her sister's chair.

"Rosa, mia," she said, "you understand about England. What is it il signor—ah, I cannot say his name—does in his own country?"

"Violante, you talk a great deal of English, why cannot you learn how to call people's names? Crichton; Spencer Crichton."

"He should not have two hard names," said Violante, with a little pout. "I would rather call him il signor Hugo."

"Well, as you like," said Rosa, laughing. "And he lives in a beautiful palazzo, with trees and a river?"

"Does he?" said Rosa, "I should doubt it exceedingly. I dare say he has a very nice house. There are no palaces, Violante, in England, except for bishops, and for the Queen; certainly not for bankers."

"And what is a banker?"

"Well," said Rosa, a little puzzled in her turn; "he takes care of people's money for them; it is a profession."

"And he is not noble?"

"No; but as he has this country-seat, I suppose he has a position somewhat equivalent to what we mean here by noble. You can't understand it, dear; it is all different. Mr Crichton works very hard, no doubt, in his own country, and I suppose his long holiday will soon be over."

Violante started, and as she stood behind her sister's chair, she hid her face for a moment in her hands.

"But his brother is coming—his brother, who so loves art," she said, after a pause.

"Ah, yes; then I daresay they will go home together. But you will have this artistic gentleman to look at you on Tuesday; and we must take care and please your chief admirer before all."

"Shall I please him?" said the girl, with a smile shy and yet half-confident.

"I hope so. Signor Vasari's opinion is of importance." Violante's face fell, as if it were not the manager of the Civita Bella opera-house whose opinion she had thought of such consequence, but she did not speak till a hasty step sounded on the stair without.

"That is father!"

"Yes! Here, the apron is ready; tie it on. Oh, my darling, do not look so frightened; you will spoil it all!"

Violante crept close to her sister and took her hand; her bosom heaved, her mouth trembled. Manifestly either the result of the inspection was of supreme importance, or she greatly feared the inspector.

Rosa kissed her, and, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder, put her away, and Violante stood with her gay fantastic dress, a strange contrast to the timid, uneasy face of the wearer.

“Ah ha, Mademoiselle Mattei! So; very pretty, very pretty. But no; this is fit for a drawing-room. She might go and drink tea with Madame Tollemache at the Consulate; she might wear it on a Sunday to church.”

“Oh, father, I am sure I could not!” cried Violante, scandalised.

Signor Mattei stood with his head on one side, contemplating her with critical attention, and stroking his long grizzled beard the while. “She will be effaced by the footlights and the distance! More ribbons, Rosa; more braid, more chains, more gilding. A knot there, a bow *there*; here a streamer, here some—some effect!”

“But, father, Zerlina was only a peasant girl,” said Violante, timidly.

“Tut-tut, what do you know about it?” he said, shortly. “A peasant girl! She is the sublimated essence of the coquetry and the charm of a thousand peasant girls; and till you see that, you silly child, you will never be her worthy representative!”

“I understand, father,” interposed Rosa, hastily. “It is soon done. Will you go and take the dress off, Violante?”

But as Violante moved, there was the sound of another arrival, and Maddalena announced “Il signor Inglese.”

“Stay, child,” cried Signor Mattei, as Violante was escaping in haste. She paused with a start which might have been caused by the sudden sound of her father’s voice, for he let his sentences fall much as if he were cracking a nut. “Stop! I have no objection to give the world a tiny sip of the future cup of joy! What, how will you face the public on Tuesday, if you are afraid of one Englishman, uneducated, a child in Art?”

The little *cantatrice* of seventeen stood flushing and quivering as if only one atom of that terrible public were enough to fill her with dread. But perhaps her father’s eye was more terrible than the stranger’s, for she stood still, a spot of gaudy colour in the centre of the great bare room, yet shrinking like a little wild animal in the strange new cage, where it looks in vain for its safe shady hole amid cool ferns and moss.

Rosa came forward and shook hands with the new comer, saying, in English, “How do you do, Mr Crichton? You find us very busy.”

“I hope I am not in the way. I came for one moment to ask if I might bring my brother to the singing-class to-morrow. He is very fond of music.”

The speaker had a pleasant voice and accent, spite of a slight formality of address, and although he carried himself with what Signor Mattei called “English stiffness,” there was also an English air of health and strength about his tall figure. The lack of colour and vivacity in his fair grave features prevented their regularity of form from striking a casual observer, just as a want of variety in their expression caused people to say that Hugh Spencer Crichton had no expression at all. But spite of all detractors, he looked handsome, sensible, and well bred, and none of his present companions had ever had reason to say that he was grave because their society bored him, formal because he was too proud to be familiar, or silent because he was too unsympathetic to have anything to say. Such remarks had sometimes been made upon him, but it is always well to see people for the first time under favourable circumstances, and so we first see Hugh Crichton in the old Italian palace, enjoying a private view of the future *prima donna* in her stage dress.

“We shall be delighted to see your brother, signor,” said the musician, “as your brother, and, I understand, as a distinguished patron of our beloved art.”

“He would much enjoy being so considered,” said Hugh, with a half smile; and then, to Violante, “Is that the great dress, signorina?”

“It is only a rehearsal for it,” said Rosa, as Violante only answered by a blush.

“No doubt it is all it should be,” said Hugh.

It was not a very complimentary speech, and Hugh offered no opinion as to the details of the dress. It were hard to say if he admired it. But Violante looked up at him and spoke.

“They don’t think it fine enough,” she said.

Hugh gave here a quick sudden glance, and a smile as if in sympathy either with the words or the tremulous voice that uttered them. Then he said something both commonplace and extravagant about painting the lily, which satisfied Signor Mattei, and astonished Rosa, who thought him a sensible young man, and, saying he was bound to meet his brother, he rather hastily took his leave.

Violante went into her own room and gladly took off Zerlina’s dress, for it was hot and heavy, and her shabby old muslin was far more comfortable. She pulled her soft hair out of the two long plaits into which Rosa had arranged it, and let it fall about her shoulders, and then she went to the window and looked out at the deep dazzling blue. She could see little else from the high casement but the carving of the little balcony round it, a long wreath of rich naturalistic foliage among which nestled a dove, with one of its wings broken. Violante’s pet creepers twined their green tendrils in and out among their marble likenesses, a crimson passion flower lay close to its white image, and sometimes a real pigeon lighted on the balcony and caressed the broken one with its wings. Violante encouraged the pigeons with crumbs and sweet noises, and trained her creepers round her own dove, making stories for it in a fanciful childish fashion, she would go and sing her songs to it, and treat it like a favourite doll. But she took no heed of it now, she gazed past it at the sky as if she saw a vision. She was not thinking of the brilliant dreaded future that lay before her, not consciously thinking of the scene just past. She was only feeling to her very finger tips the spell of one glance and smile. Poor Violante!

Part 1, Chapter III.

Mr Spencer Crichton.

"Just in time to be too late."

Hugh Crichton walked away from the musician's apartments towards the railway station, where he had promised to meet his brother. His tweed suit and large white umbrella were objects as incongruous with the picturesque scene around him as the somewhat similar figure often introduced into the foreground of photographs of buildings or mountains; but his thoughts, possibly, were less unworthy of the soft and lovely land in which he found himself, were less taken up with the home news which he expected to receive than perhaps they should have been.

Hugh was scarcely eight and twenty, but the responsibilities of more advanced life had early descended on him, and he owed his present long holiday to a fall from his horse, from the effects of which, truth to tell, he had some time since entirely recovered. But busy men do not often reach Italy, and his friend, the English consul, was about to leave Civita Bella for a more lucrative appointment, and why should not Hugh see as much as possible, when he would never have another chance? "Never have another chance." Those words echoed in Hugh's ears and bore for him more than one meaning.

Some thirty years before, the Bank of Oxley, a large town not very far from London, with the old red-brick house belonging to it, had descended to a young James Spencer, who thenceforth held one of the best positions in the neighbourhood. For Oxley was a town of considerable importance, and the Spencers had been bankers there for generations, and had intermarried with half the families round. Nevertheless, when Miss Crichton, sole heiress of Redhurst House, refused Sir William Ribstone to marry Mr Spencer, it was said by her friends that she might have looked higher, and by his relations that no name, however aristocratic, should have been allowed to supersede the old Spencer, with all its honourable and respected associations. But Lily Crichton laughed and said that Sir William's father had drunk himself to death, and had been known to throw a beef steak at the late Lady Ribstone, and she was afraid that the practices might be hereditary. Mr Spencer smiled and said that he hoped his friends would find Spencer Crichton as safe a name as Spencer had been before it, he would not refuse his wife's estate because this condition was attached to it, and he could come into the Bank every day from Redhurst. And so, in Redhurst House, Mr and Mrs Spencer lived and loved each other, and their two sons, Hugh and James were born; while in course of time the banker's younger brother died, and his three children, Arthur, Frederica, and George, were transferred to their uncle's guardianship, and a little cousin of his wife's, Marion or Mysie Crofton, was left with her eight thousand pounds in the same kind and efficient care.

These boys and girls, all grew up together in the careless freedom of so-called brother and sisterhood, till the sudden death of the father clouded their happiness, and, in the absence of near relations, left all these various guardianships to his wife and to his son Hugh.

It was a great honour for a young man of twenty-five to be so trusted, and a great burden; but Hugh was sensible and steady, his cousin Arthur was already nearly of age, and his mother, whose elastic spirits soon recovered more or less from the shock of grief, was, of course, practically responsible for the girls. Hugh's own career at Rugby and at Oxford had been unexceptionable: he had no intention of making his office a sinecure. Conscientious and inflexible both in opinion and action, it would have been strange indeed if at twenty-five he had not been also rather hard and dictatorial; but the mischievous effects of these qualities was much modified by a certain clearness of judgment and power of understanding his own position and that of others which almost seemed to stand him in the stead of skilful tact, or even of gentle charity. He was really just, and, therefore, he saw difficulties as well as duties, and knew exactly where it would be foolish to strain an authority which he was too young to support, where it was wise to take the advice of others, and where it was necessary to depend on himself. He was often lenient in his judgment of others' actions; but then he thought that there was not much to be expected of most people, and he was seldom made angry, because other people's folly did not signify much as long as he was perfectly sure that he was acting rightly himself. If a man did do wrong he was a coward if he would not own it, even to a child. And so Hugh on the rare occasions when he was cross or unjust, invariably begged pardon. But he did not care at all whether he was forgiven. He had done his part, and if the other side cherished anger, that was their own look out.

The ownership of the bank had descended to him, and he lived with his mother and helped her to manage the Redhurst property, which would some day be his own, fulfilling all his various offices with much credit to himself, and, on the whole, much advantage to other people. For if he thought most of what was due to himself, his view of his own duty included great attention to the interests of others, even to self-sacrifice on their behalf. Indeed, as his cousin Arthur said, "although the old saying might have been parodied with regard to Hugh, that—

"Though he never *did* a cruel thing, He never *said* a kind one."

"Neither did he ever say anything unkind, so they might all be thankful. Most likely old Hugh thought them all prodigies if they could only see into his heart."

"You never were more mistaken in your life, Arthur," said Hugh with perfect truth and much coolness.

"Now, why won't you take the credit of having some fine feelings to repress?" said Arthur, who was often guilty of trying to get a rise out of Hugh for the benefit of the younger ones.

But Hugh was so unmoved that he did not even reply that he did not care about credit.

"You'll get a scratch some day, Arthur," said James, who nearest in age to Hugh, and exempt from his authority might say what he pleased.

"Oh no, he won't," said Hugh, with a not unpleasant smile. "At least, if he does, I shall be much ashamed of myself."

"What?" said Arthur, "I should respect myself for ever if I could put Hugh in a rage."

"People should never be in a rage," said Hugh—"they should control themselves."

"If they can," said Arthur, conscious of the minor triumph of having caused Hugh to be very sententious.

Hugh was silent. It is one thing to have a theory of life, and quite another to mould your character and tame your passions into accordance with it. Years before, when Hugh was at Oxford and James had just left school for a public office; they, in the curious repetition and reversal of human events, had come across a certain Miss Ribstone, the daughter of their mother's old admirer, to whose many charms Hugh, then scarcely twenty, fell a victim. For one whole long vacation he had ridden, danced, talked fun and sentiment with her, until the whole thing had been put an end to by the announcement of her engagement to—somebody else. Then Hugh's pride and self-control proved weak defences against the sudden shock, and he met the girl and her half-saucy, half-sentimental demand for congratulations with such passionate reproaches as she never forgot. Probably she deserved them, but the mortification of having so betrayed himself, almost killed regret in Hugh's bosom. "It was not my fault, I was not to blame," he said to his brother. "I should have remembered that," and as he spoke he made a holocaust of all the notes and flowers and ribbons he had hitherto cherished.

"Dear me," said sentimental James, "what a pity, I keep dozens of them."

"I'll never have another," said Hugh.

The incident was only remembered as "Hugh's old flirtation with Nelly Ribstone," but Hugh forswore fine ladies and folly, and never forgot that he had once lost all control of his own words and actions. But all that was long ago when he had been a mere boy, not a shadow of sentiment hung over the recollection of it, and Hugh awaited his brother's arrival at Civita Bella with a certain self-consciousness and desire to appear specially pleased to see him, which perhaps he had not experienced since his relations had been wont to wonder "what Hugh *could* be doing *again* at Ribstone House." He had not left himself much time to wait, for as he came up to the station, a slender little man in a velvet coat, with a conspicuously long, silky light brown beard, advanced to meet him.

"Ah, Hugh, there you are yourself."

"How d'ye do, Jem? I never knew the train so punctual. I thought I'd ten minutes to spare. I'm so glad you have got your holiday."

James Spencer would have been a much handsomer man than his brother if he had not been on so small a scale; as it was, the delicacy of his features, and the fairness of his complexion, gave him something of a finicking aspect; which was not diminished by the evident pains taken with his dress, hair, and beard; which were arranged with a view to the picturesque, rather trying to the patience of an ordinary observer. But on a close inspection, he had a good-tempered and kindly expression, which showed that he combined appreciation of other things and people with admiration for himself. And though he was very fond of talking Bohemianism, he went to his office every morning, and to church every Sunday with the regularity of a Philistine.

"Well, you look uncommonly jolly," he said. "The Mum was afraid that as you had made so few expeditions, your back was not strong yet."

Hugh despised excuses, so we will not suppose that this ready-made one offered him any temptation as he answered—

"Oh no; I was quite well a week after I got here. There is plenty to see here, I assure you."

"I believe you," said James ecstatically. "Were ever such colours and such a sky? Look there," seizing his brother's arm, "there's a girl in a red petticoat—under that arch in the shadow—white on her head—oh!"

"You will have to get used to girls under archways in red petticoats," returned Hugh.

"How were they all at Oxley?"

"Oh, very well; the mother was groaning after you. She said she couldn't get the fences mended, and Jones' cow had eaten the geraniums. Oh, and she wants to have a garden-party."

"Well," said Hugh, "what should hinder her having a dozen if she likes?"

"She can't do it without you."

"Isn't Arthur there?"

"Arthur? yes. But it isn't worth while asking the Miss Clintons to meet Arthur."

"I should think that chattering Katie Clinton was just the girl he would admire."

"Should you?" said Jem, rather meaningly. "However, Hugh, when are you coming home?"

"As soon as you do."

"I have only a fortnight."

"Then we can go back together. That church is considered very fine. Look at the spire."

James looked with undisguised and genuine delight at the fair proportions and exquisite colouring of the building before him, and after various half-finished and inarticulate expressions of delight, exclaimed: "It's intoxicating! Can't we go in?"

"Not now. Mrs Tollemache will be waiting for us. There are a dozen such churches, besides the cathedral, and there's an old amphitheatre, at least the remains of one."

"Perish Oxley and its garden-parties in the ruins of its new town-hall and its detestable station," cried James, mock-heroically, and striking an attitude.

"Then there's a very good opera," said Hugh—"and oh, wouldn't the great singing-class be in your line to-morrow."

"What singing-class?"

"Why, there's a certain Signor Mattei here. He is first violin in the opera orchestra, and a very fine musician. I believe he followed music entirely from choice in the first instance."

"Then I respect him," said James. "What could he do better?"

"Exactly. I thought you would say so. Well, he has a great singing-class—more, I suppose, what would be called a choral society."

"Yes," said Jem; "I belong to the Gipsy Singers, and to Lady Newington's Glee Society, and sometimes I run down to help the choir of that church at Richmond. I took you there once."

"Well, Signor Mattei's class is the popular one here. Tollemache takes his little sister, and having nothing better to do, I joined it. To-morrow is the last of the course, so you can go if you like."

"I should like it immensely. Quite a new line for you though."

"I don't see why I should not sing as well as you or Arthur. I mean why I should not attempt it: of course I am no musician," said Hugh, who had rather a morbid horror of boasting.

"No," said Jem, "I have a theory that people's lives are divided by too sharp lines. They should run into each other. Let each give something out, and each will get light and warmth and colour. Nobody knows how much there is in other people's worlds till they get a peep at them. I should like to teach everybody something of what was most antipathetic to them, and show everyone a little of the society to which he was *not* born, whatever that may be."

"There's a great deal in what you say," said Hugh, so meekly that Jem, on whose theories the sledge hammer of practice was commonly wont to fall, was quite astonished.

"Why, how mild and mellow Italian sunshine is making you. You're a case in point. We shall have you getting that precious town-hall painted in fresco, and giving a concert in it, at which you'll sing the first solo!"

And James burst into a hearty laugh, in which Hugh joined more joyously and freely than was often his wont. "Don't you be surprised whatever I do," he said. "See if I can't catch some Italian sunshine and bring it home to Oxley! But here we are, come in, and you'll see Mrs Tollemache." James followed his brother; but an expression of unmitigated astonishment came over his face.

"Hallo! there's something up," he ejaculated under his breath. "*Is* it Miss Tollemache?"

Part 1, Chapter IV.

The Singing-Class.

> The little maiden cometh,
> She cometh shy and slow,
> I ween she seeth through her lids
> They drop adown so low.
> She blusheth red, as if she said
> The name she only thought.

"So you mean to accompany our party, Mr James Crichton, to the singing-class? I am very glad that you should go," said Mrs Tollemache.

"Yes, for you will see Violante!" cried her daughter, Emily.

Mrs Tollemache was a little gentle lady, who, spite of several years of widowhood, spent in keeping house for her son in Civita Bella, always looked as if she were ready for an English country Sunday, with her soft grey dresses and white ribbons, slightly unfashionable, not very well made, and yet unmistakably lady-like, just as the diffidence and unreadiness of her manner did not detract in the least from its good breeding. Her daughter was a tall girl of sixteen, with bright, straight falling hair, and a rosy face, simple and honest, though her frank, fearless manners, and capacity for conversation, indicated a young lady who had seen something of the world. Her brother, the consul, many years her elder, represented English diplomacy in a pleasant, cheery, if not very deep or astute fashion to the benighted

foreigners by whom he was surrounded.

“And who is Violante?” asked James.

“Violante,” said Mr Tollemache, “is the rising star of Civita Bella.”

“Violante,” said Emily, “is the dearest, sweetest, most beautiful creature in the world!”

“Violante,” said Mrs Tollemache, “is a very sweet young person, whose mother I knew something of formerly, and whose sister gives Emily music and Italian lessons.”

“She is Signor Mattei’s daughter?” said Hugh.

“I will tell you all about her, Mr Crichton,” said Emily. “Signorina Rosa—that’s her sister—brings her to talk Italian with me. But some time ago they found out that she had a wonderful voice, and so she is to go on the stage. She is to make her first appearance next Tuesday, as Zerlina in ‘Don Giovanni;’ but the odd thing is that she hates it, she is so shy. Fancy hating it, I wish I had the chance!”

“Emily, my dear!” ejaculated her mother. “A couple of nights will rub off all that,” said Mr Tollemache, “even if it is genuine.”

“Genuine!” cried Emily. “For shame, Charles. She cannot help it, and even singing in the class has not cured her. It is quite true, isn’t it, Mr Crichton?” turning to Hugh.

Hugh paused for a moment, and—Jem could hardly believe his eyes—blushed, as he answered decidedly, “Yes, but she is more afraid of her father than of the public.”

“Dear me,” said James, “this sounds very interesting. And she is a beauty, too, Hugh?”

“I don’t know if you would consider her so. I do, undoubtedly!” said Hugh, with a sort of desperate gravity.

“Very unlikely acquaintance for old Hugh,” thought James. “See if I submit to any more criticisms about my mixed society. Is she very young?” he said aloud.

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs Tollemache. “You see, the circumstances are altogether peculiar. These two sisters are most excellent girls, and knowing their antecedents, and having them here as occasional companions for Emily, I could not, I cannot suppose that anything would ever accrue to cause me to repent the arrangement.”

There was a peculiar emphasis in Mrs Tollemache’s manner of making this remark, and it was accompanied by a little blush and nervous movement of her knitting needles.

“It must be a very pleasant kind of place,” said James, wondering if Charles Tollemache found this young songstress too bewitching.

“Yes, but perhaps it is not altogether inopportune that our leaving Civita Bella should coincide with Violante’s *début*. Things will be altered now, and I shall wish Emily to have more regular instruction.”

“Mamma, I shall love Violante as long as ever I live,” said Emily, “and I should not care if she sang at fifty operas.”

“You must go to school, Emmy,” said her brother, “and attend to the three R’s with twopence extra for manners.”

“I shall not mind if you will send me to that nice school Mr Crichton was talking about, where the governess is nearly as young as I am,” said Emily.

“Not quite,” said Hugh, laughing. “I only told you Miss Venning had a young sister.”

“I shall ask Mr Spencer Crichton about it,” said Mrs Tollemache.

“Have you been telling them about Oxley Manor?” said James. “I am sure Flossy Venning *is* the governess, whatever she may be called. You would make friends with our girls, Miss Tollemache?”

“Yes, I should like that. But now I want to show you my friend, and if we don’t make haste we shall be late,” said Emily, as she ran out of the room.

The little party of English took their way through the quaint and richly coloured streets of the Italian city to Signor Mattei’s apartments, and James could not repress his exclamations of delight at every patch of colour, every deep full shadow, and every graceful outline that met his eye. Emily pointed out the various lions, and asked questions in her turn about the England which was but a dim memory of her childhood, her bright English face gaining perhaps something of an added charm from its fair foreign setting, and itself giving just the last touch of piquante contrast to her companion’s sense of delightful novelty.

Young ladies never came amiss to James, and in the intervals of his raptures he amused himself by drawing out Emily’s ideas of English society derived from much and earnest study of such novels and tales as Mrs Tollemache allowed her to peruse, and which had evidently rendered Sunday-school teachings, parsonages, riding in the park, picnics, sportsmen, smoke, and rain, as great a jumble of picturesque confusion as Italian palaces and *prima donnas* might be to James. Such a state of mind entertained him, and while Hugh walked silently beside Mr Tollemache, he persuaded her to express her admiration of “The Daisy Chain” and “Dr Thorne,” her fervent wish to resemble the heroines of the former book; her rather more faintly expressed supposition that English country squires were like Frank Gresham; her desire to be kind to little girls in straw hats, and old women in red cloaks—though Mr Crichton

says he never saw an old woman in a red cloak—and her evident belief that benevolent rectors, honest cottagers, and useful young ladies, were plenty as blackberries in the England that was a land of romance for her. “How delightful it would be to know such!”

“I am afraid you will be disappointed, Miss Tollemache,” said James. “Our lives in England are very commonplace, and the real Frank Greshams are rather stupid fellows, who wear muddy boots, care for little but riding and shooting, and are out of doors all day.”

“But that seems so manly,” said Emily, with a romantic vision of heather and mists, mountains and dashing streams, floating before her imagination.

“Well,” said James, “I suppose the romance is in people’s hearts, and anything may be picturesque if you can get the right point of view, and see it in the right light, and the truest artists are those who have the quickest insight, and the widest sympathies. But your dazzling beauty in this Palace of Art that we are approaching seems more like romance to me.”

“Violante?” said Emily, to whom the first part of his speech had been an enigma. “Oh, there is nothing romantic about her. She’s just a *cantatrice*, you know, but she is a clear little thing, and I love her.”

As Emily spoke they were mounting the great marble staircase that led to Signor Mattei’s apartments, and presently entered the long room, now arranged for the convenience of the musical performance that was about to take place. James looked round at the painted walls and delicate carvings, faded and injured, yet still soft and harmonious. This was a wonderful enchanted palace; where was the fairy princess? He was presented to Signor Mattei, who, in very good English, expressed his pleasure at seeing him there, and found him a place. Rosa came and offered him a copy of the music that they were going to sing, and as his companions took their seats, and the performance began, he had leisure to study, not his score, but the motley scene around him.

Signor Mattei was a tall striking man, with a long grizzled beard, a narrow face with a high forehead and ardent enthusiastic eyes. His long slender fingers looked as if they would have been at home on any instrument, and indeed he was a first-rate violinist as well as an admirable musician, and as he stood before the class conducting and teaching, he seemed pervaded by his art from top to toe, and though James could not follow his rapid vehement Italian, he perceived that no imperfection escaped him. Hugh’s hint that he might have held a different position but for his youthful musical enthusiasm seemed credible enough in sight of his refined features and fervid eyes.

He was a very popular teacher, and the class was a large one. Three or four English girls like Emily Tollemache attended it, whose fair rosiness and bad singing were alike conspicuous. Several slim, dark, demure Italian signorinas, with downcast eyes, shy or passionate, under charge evidently of elder ladies, were to be seen. Some looked like teachers, and the professional air of some caused James to guess that they were being prepared for the stage, or perhaps, their education already finished, were assisting the class with their voices. The men were mostly young teachers or singers, except Hugh and Mr Tollemache, and an enthusiastic English curate, music-mad, who was taking a holiday in Italy.

But where was the most beautiful creature in the world? James looked for her in vain. She was Italian, she was going to sing on the stage, she was a wonder of beauty. Which could she be?

A handsome girl, with splendid black eyes and crisp black hair, who was standing at the end of the sopranos and singing with a clear fine voice, suggested herself to James as the most likely person. Certainly she was very handsome, but she did not look a bit shy; however, Tollemache had insinuated a suspicion that shyness was interesting. She looked frank and bright, bold enough to face a crowd. Very picturesque, she knew that pomegranates became her. A model for any artist; but rather an unlikely friend for Miss Tollemache, and a very unlikely here James’ thoughts suddenly pulled themselves up with a start. “What an absurd fellow old Hugh is!” he mused. “Some one has been chaffing him about these classes, and he stands on his dignity until anyone would imagine—but *that* girl, oh dear, no!”

Suddenly there was a pause for the solo. Emily looked at James and nodded. Hugh gazed intently at his score. The dark beauty sat down, and a girl in grey, with a coral necklace, came forward and stood in front, alone. She stood in the full stream of the dusty evening sunlight, and James thought,—

“Why, this is no beauty, they are mad!”

She was tall rather than otherwise, and very slim. Her soft misty hair was twisted loosely about her head, and fell partly on her neck; it was of so dull a shade of brown that the sunshine whitened it instead of turning it to gold. Her skin was fair for an Italian, and now pale even to the lips. Her eyes were large, dark, and soft, and in them there dwelt an expression of terror that marred whatever beauty they might otherwise have possessed. She did not blush and bridle with a not unbecoming shyness, but she looked, as the saying goes, frightened to death.

“Poor little thing, what a shame to make her sing!” thought James, “but she is no beauty at all.”

And yet, what was it? Was it the fall of her hair, the curve of her cheek, or the piteous setting of her mouth, that made him look again and again as she began to sing?

James really loved music, and the sweet birdlike notes entranced him. It seemed the perfection of voice and execution, and the tones were full of power and pathos. She stood quite still with her hands before her—for she had no music—little child-like hands, and she never smiled or used her eyes, hardly moved her head, the voice seemed produced without effort, and she made no attempt to add to its effect. When it ceased there was an outburst of applause; she looked towards her father, and at a sign from him made the ordinary elaborate curtsey of a public singer; but still with never a smile. Then she went back to her place, and as she passed Hugh he whispered a word.

She hung down her head and passed on, but her face changed as by magic, and then James knew that she was beautiful.

She did not sing again, her father was very chary of her voice, and she did not come forward when the music was over, though Signor Mattei hoped “il signor” had been pleased, and Emily lingered, spite of her brother’s sign to her to make haste.

“Indeed,” said James, “I have been delighted; one does not often hear a voice like your daughter’s.”

“Her voice is good,” said the father, “but she does not give it a chance; she has no notion what study was in my day.”

“Oh, father!” said Rosa Mattei, as these words were evidently intended to reach the ears of Violante, who was standing at a little distance. “She does practise, but she is so soon tired. My sister is only seventeen,” she added to James; “and her voice is not come to its full strength yet.”

“She must not over-strain it—it is so beautiful,” said James, while Emily echoed—

“Oh, it is lovely! oh, cara Violante, come here and let us tell you how beautifully you sang.”

“Violante!” said her father; and she came towards them, while James on a nearer view saw how lovely were the curves of cheek and throat, and how delicate the outline of the still white features. With a view to hearing her speak, he thanked her for her song, and said—

“I suppose I need not ask you if you are fond of music?”

Violante cast down her eyes, blushed, and stammered out under her breath,—

“Yes, Signor, thank you;” while her father said, “My daughter is very glad to have given you pleasure, and very grateful to those who are kind enough to express it. You must excuse her, Signor, she is not used to strangers.”

The poor child looked ready to sink into the earth beneath this public notice of her bad manners. Hugh looked so stern and fierce that, had he asked the question, she might well have feared to answer him; but Emily broke the awkward silence by saying eagerly -

“You will come and give me my lesson to-morrow, Signorina Rosa? Will Violante come too?”

“I am afraid,” said Rosa, “that she will be too busy.”

“Ah, well, I shall see her if she does not see me, next Tuesday. Good-bye, Violante. Good-bye, Signorina.”

“Why!” exclaimed James, as they emerged into the street, “That poor girl looked frightened to death.”

“Oh,” said Emily, “she is always frightened before strangers. How ever she will sing on Tuesday I cannot think; but what do you think of her, Mr Crichton?”

“I think she is very pretty,” said James, rather dryly.

“A pretty little simpleton,” said Mr Tollemache: “but a month or two’s experience will make all the difference. It is to be hoped her father will take care of her. But I believe she has an admirer—the manager of the operatic company here—so I suppose she may be considered very fortunate. Her voice is valuable, and she will be very handsome.”

James nodded assent, but something in the thought of the young childish girl with her shy solemn face and frightened eyes touched him.

“It’s rather a case of ‘Heaven sending almonds to those who have no teeth,’ isn’t it?” he said. “Poor little thing!”

“Oh, the almonds will taste sweet enough, I daresay,” said Mr Tollemache. “If not, they must be swallowed, somehow.”

“Well,” said Emily, “on Tuesday we shall see how she gets on.”

Part 1, Chapter V.

The Mattei Family.

> Then joining hands to little hands
> Would bid them cling together,
> For there is no friend like a sister
> In calm or stormy weather.

“Violante! Will you never learn common-sense? Your want of manners will give perpetual offence. And let me tell you, English people of influence are not patrons to be despised. It is always well for a *prima donna* to have irreproachable private friends. If ever we should go to England, and the Signora Tollemache would notice you, it would be a great advantage; and not amiss that those young men should report well of you.”

“Oh, father!”

"Why! They see your name announced. They say, 'Ah, Mademoiselle Mattei! We knew her in Italy—pretty—fine voice. My friend, you should go and see her.' They take a bouquet and applaud you; and you become the fashion. You should be grateful, and show it. But you—you are a musical box! You sing like a statue, like a wax-doll. Ah, where is your fire and your expression? You have no soul—you have no soul!"

"Father, I did try."

"Oh, I have no patience! Where is my music? I have a private lesson. Go and practise, child, and study your part better;" and off whisked Signor Mattei in a great hurry, and a much disturbed temper.

Such scenes had been frequent ever since one unlucky day, two years ago, when the great opera manager, Signor Vasari, had heard Violante sing, and had told her father that she promised to have the sweetest soprano in Italy, and he must educate her for the stage, where she would make her fortune. And the owner of this sweet soprano was so timid that her music-master made her tremble, and possessed so little dramatic power that she could scarcely give a song its adequate expression, and was lost when she attempted to act a part. But the music is all important in Italy, and the middle course of concerts and oratorios did not there lie open to her. Her father hoped that her voice and her beauty would carry off her bad acting, and that perpetual scolding would cure her fears, since he gloried in her talent, and much needed her gains.

He was, as has been said, fairly well born and well educated, and had chosen music as his profession. When quite young he had gone to England, where he played the violin in London orchestras, and gave private lessons on the piano. In England he fell in with a young lady, the daughter of a clergyman, who was governess in the family of Mr Tollemache's uncle, where Signor Mattei taught. Rose Grey was unmistakably a lady, a quiet fair-faced girl, with her share of talent and originality and a passion for music. She fell in love with the handsome enthusiastic Italian, and, having no prospects and no friends to object, she married him. They lived for some time in England, where Rosa was born, and finally returned to Italy. The world went fairly well with them, but they were not without debts and difficulties, and when Rosa grew up, and Madame Mattei's brother, now a London solicitor, wrote to offer her a year or two's schooling in England, the proposal was gladly accepted, since she had no voice and could not be made useful at home. Rosa went to England, went to school, taught Italian and music, and learnt the usual branches of education, spent her holidays with her uncle, and finally helped to educate her cousins, till, three years before our story opens, her mother died, and Rosa came home to take care of the little Violante, a girl of fourteen. Rosa was then twenty-two, entirely English in manner, accent, and appearance, with pretty brown hair, a sensible face, bright hazel eyes, full of force and character, grave manners, a sweet smile, and a strong will of her own which she was not afraid to enforce if necessary. She had a warm heart, too, with nothing much just then to fill it. She almost idolised the little sister, who clung to her, sobbing out, "Oh Mamma mia!" and from that day forward guarded, petted, and, it must be confessed, spoiled her.

Violante was delicate and sensitive, with a certain Italian fervour of temperament beneath her timidity, which expended itself in the warmest affection for her sister. She was more Italian than Rosa in appearance, and though she spoke fluent English, and they used either language when together, her low sweet tones were unmistakably foreign. Her musical education was so pressed on her and took up so much of her time that she learnt little else, and at seventeen was sadly ignorant of much which she ought to have known.

The two sisters belonged to their mother's Church, which unfortunately had the practical effect of their belonging to none at all. When Rosa went to England she did as others did, but it was not her lot to come across anyone of sufficient depth to influence her practical self-reliant temper, and, though a very good and conscientious girl, her education had made her indifferent to the outward duties of religion. She thought that she did her duty by Violante when she prevented her from attending Roman Catholic services unless the music was very fine, and heard her read a chapter in the Bible on Sunday, while the rest of the day was spent as usual. Madame Mattei had never had health or opportunity to attend English services, and the two girls only went occasionally; though lately, under Mrs Tollemache's influence, they had been a little more conscious of their nationality and the duties involved in it. Rosa impressed Violante with a strong sense of the necessity of doing right, and believed that circumstances absolved her from attending to anything further. Violante was of a different mould, and when she saw beautiful ritual and devout worshippers she felt sad, she did not know why.

Rosa was well aware that she could not protect Violante from the approaching ordeal of her first appearance, and knew too of debts that rendered it necessary; but she interposed between her sister and many a reproof, and tried by her alternate coaxing, sympathy, and argument to diminish the girl's dread of the future that lay before her. Violante had made fewer complaints of late, and Rosa hoped that she was becoming more reconciled to the inevitable.

On the present occasion Rosa's pleasant cheerful voice was heard talking to Maddalena, who, besides doing all their housework, took Violante to her lessons and rehearsals when Rosa was busy, the latter retaining her English habit of walking alone. She reentered the room as her father quitted it, and began to divest it of its concert-room air, to put away music-stands and books, and to give once more a look of English comfort to the further end of it, where Violante had thrown herself into a big chintz-covered chair, turning her face towards the cushion, when Rosa said,—

"Well dear, you were very successful to-day. I never heard you in better voice."

"I wish—I wish I had no voice at all."

"Violante! That is really quite wrong. You should not despise such a glorious gift."

"It only makes me wretched. Oh, what shall I do!"

Now Rosa had resolved against weak-minded sympathy, and had made up her mind that her sister must not, at this last moment, be permitted to flinch, so, though the hidden face and despairing attitude went to her heart, she replied briskly,—

“Do? Win a dozen bouquets and bring the house down. What a silly child you are, Violante!”

Violante lifted her head, astonished at the shadow of a reproof from Rosa, who little guessed at the tumult of feeling that was making the poor child’s heart beat so terribly.

“You angry, too, Rosa!” she said, for reproaches never made Violante angry, only miserable.

“Angry, my darling, no,” exclaimed Rosa. “I only want you to take heart and courage. My child, don’t cry so dreadfully. What is it, did father scold you?”

Violante crept into the warm comforting embrace, and, laying her head on Rosa’s shoulder, wept so bitterly that her sister could only think how to soothe her; till Violante’s sobs grew quieter and she put up her quivering lips to be kissed, while Rosa smoothed back her hair and began to try the effect of argument.

“You see, darling, father is so anxious. When Tuesday is over and he sees how successful you are, he will be delighted. And you will feel quite differently. Just think of the pleasure of seeing everyone hanging on your voice, and of hearing the applause, and seeing the bouquets thrown at you!” (Violante shivered.) “Oh! it would be worth living for.”

“Oh, Rosa mia, if the voice was yours!”

“Ah, if—But, darling, I shall be as much pleased to see your triumph as if it were mine.”

“But if I fail—and my bad acting—”

“You won’t fail. And as for the acting, you will act much better when you are less nervous. People will care for your voice and your beauty—they won’t be hard on you.”

“Rosa, you are so different, you cannot understand. I should not mind so much about failing if it did not vex father. It is doing it at all. When I stand up to sing it is as if all the eyes turned me cold and sick, and my own eyes get dizzy so that I cannot see, and if they applaud—even here at the class—it is like the waves of the sea, and I cannot sleep at night for thinking of it.”

“You don’t know how pleasant the real applause will be,” said Rosa, feeling as if she were telling a snowdrop to hold up its head, for the sun was so pleasant to stare at. What could she say to the child, who had no vanity and no ambition—nothing but a loving heart.

“You will like to please me and father?”

“Yes,” said Violante, “but if I should cry, father would—would—”

“Oh, nonsense, you won’t cry.”

“If father would let me—I would rather teach singing all day!”

“But you know you could not make nearly so much money in that way. And father wants the money, Violante, indeed he does.”

“Oh yes—I know it must be done—I will not make a fuss.”

“That’s a good child. And you will not have to sing only to strangers. Think how kind the Tollemaches are to us, how pleased they will be with you.”

Violante flushed to her very finger tips, and Rosa felt her heart throb.

“They will not like me *then*,” she murmured.

“Not like you, what can you mean? Why should they not like you?”

“English people don’t like actresses.”

“Well, but you don’t suppose Mrs Tollemache has any prejudice of that sort?”

“She would not like Emily to do it.”

“Emily! Of course not. Young ladies like Emily don’t sing in public. She would not be a governess or do anything to get her living. But they would think it quite right for you. Why, you will have Mr Crichton and his brother to throw bouquets at you!”

“Yes!” exclaimed Violante, with sudden passion. “He will throw bouquets at *me*. He will ‘tell his friends I am pretty,’ and he will think—”

“He? Mr Crichton? Violante, what can it matter to you what he thinks?”

Violante shrank away from her sister, and covered her face with her hands.

“Violante,” cried Rosa, too anxious to pick her words, “don’t tell me you have been so silly as to think about him—that you have let yourself care for him.”

“Oh—I do—I do, with all my heart,” cried Violante, with all the fervour of her Italian nature, speaking from her shining eyes and parted lips.

“What has he said to you—what has he done? He has not made love to you—child—surely.”

“I don’t know,” murmured Violante.

“Oh, I must have been mad—what have I been doing to let this go on?” cried Rosa, starting up and walking about in her agitation, while Violante cowered, frightened, into the great chair, but with a certain self-assertion in her heart, too.

“Now,” said Rosa, recovering prudence, and sitting down on the arm of the chair, “you see, I have not taken care of my pretty sister. Tell me all about it.”

“You are not angry with me, Rosa?”

“Angry, my little one,” said Rosa, while tears, rare in her eyes, fell on her cheeks—“no, only angry with myself. Now, tell me what it is; how long have you felt in this way? What has he said to you?”

“All, how can I tell? He looks at me—he gives me flowers—he speaks to my heart,” said Violante with downcast eyes, but lips that smiled and needed no sympathy in their satisfaction.

“Don’t be silly,” said poor Rosa, irritated both by the smile and the sentiment. “Is that all?”

“He told me of his home—he said we should be friends—he asked me for a rose, and kissed my hand for it—he said he thought it was Italian fashion.”

“Oh, Violante, why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Oh,” with a funny little air of superiority, “one does not think of telling.”

Rosa pressed Violante tight in her arms, and set her lips hard, and when she spoke it was very low and steadily.

“My child, you know how I love you, that I only think how to make you happy. Mr Crichton had no right to play with you so; but it was my fault for letting you be thrown in his way. Young men will do those things, just to amuse themselves.”

“Some will.”

“*Some*?” said Rosa bitterly. “You little foreign girl—he would think of you just as of a pretty flower, to please him for a time, and then he will go home and leave you to repent that you have ever known him!”

“Never—never,” cried Violante, clasping her hands. “Never—if my heart should break.”

Rosa stamped her foot, and hot, cruel tears, that burnt as they fell, half choked her.

“I dare say he has never thought that you would take what he said seriously. If he likes you, he could not marry you—he must marry some English girl of his own rank. You must put him out of your head, and I must take better care of you.”

Violante’s views of the future were scarcely so definite as these words implied, but she shivered, and a chill fell on her spirits.

“Now,” said Rosa, “I believe Signor Vasari does really care for you.”

“Signor Vasari! I hate him!” cried Violante. “Rosa, I will be good—I will act—I will sing—but I will not hear of Signor Vasari. If he kissed me, I would kill him!”

“For shame, Violante, that is a very improper way of speaking. Oh, my child, will you promise me to be good?”

Violante did not answer. Was there a secret rebellion in the heart that had always given Rosa back love for love?

“Violante mia—you don’t think me unkind to you?”

Violante looked up and smiled, and taking Rosa’s face between her two little hands, covered it with sweet, fond kisses.

“Rosa, carissima mia, shall you do anything?”

“No,” said Rosa, considering. “I think not. If you will be a good child, and steady—now father will be coming back.”

“Oh, you will not tell him?”

“No, no—certainly not; but you have not practised.”

“I could not sing a note!”

“No, not now,” said Rosa steadily. “You must drink some coffee, and go and lie down for a little. And then you must bathe your eyes, and put up your hair, and come and sing for as long as father wishes.”

Violante obeyed, and Rosa having administered the coffee, and seen that no more tears were likely to result from solitude, left her to rest, and came back to await her father and consider the situation. She did not like the look of it at all. Violante was a good, obedient child, who tried to do as she was told, and had no power to rebel against fate. But she knew nothing of self-conquest or of self-control, and when she was unhappy had no thought but to cling to Rosa, and cry till she was comforted; while under all her timidity lay the power of a certain fervour of feeling against which she had never dreamed of struggling. Sweet and humble, innocent and tender, yet with a most passionate nature, how could she contend with feelings which were more

> "Than would bear
> Of daily life the wear and tear,"

how endure the pangs of disappointment, added to the strain of an uncongenial life?

"I think she will break her heart," thought Rosa to herself. But then arose the consolatory thought that a life which seemed attractive to herself could not be so painful to her sister, and the probability that Violante's feeling for her lover had not gone beyond the region of sentimental fancy.

Rosa, being naturally of a sanguine temperament, inclined to the latter opinion, and rose up smiling as her father came in.

"Well, and where is Violante—has she practised yet?" demanded Signor Mattei.

"No, father; she was too tired, she will come directly and sing for as long as you like."

"The child is possessed," muttered Signor Mattei.

"Now, father," said Rosa, in a tone rather too decided to be quite filial, "you must leave Violante to me. I will manage her, and take care that she sings her best on Tuesday. But if she is scolded and frightened, she will break down. I know she will."

"Well, figlia mia," said Signor Mattei, somewhat meekly, for Rosa was the domestic authority, and was at that moment chopping up an excellent salad for him, and pouring on abundance of oil with her own hands. "But it is hard that my daughter should be such a little fool."

"So it is," said Rosa laughing, "but she will be good now. Now then, Violante," opening the bedroom door.

There lay Violante, her sweet round lips smiling, her soft eyes serene, her own fears and Rosa's warnings driven into the back-ground by the excitement of her confession, and by the thought of how Hugh had thanked her for her song.

She threw her arms round Rosa with a hearty, girlish embrace, quite different from the despairing clinging of an hour before.

"Yes, I am coming. My hair? Oh, father likes it so," brushing it out into its native ripples. "There, my red ribbon. Now I will be buona—buonissima figlia." And she ran into the sitting-room and up to her father, pausing with a full, sweeping curtsey.

"Grazie—mille grazie—signore e signori," she said. "Is that right, padre mio?"

And her father, seeing her with her floating hair, her eyes and cheeks bright with the excitement that was making her heart beat like a bird in its cage, might well exclaim—"Child, you might bring the house down if you would. Come and kiss me, and go and sing 'Batti batti,' before you have your supper."

Part 1, Chapter VI.

Il Don Giovanni.

> Oh, the lute,
> For that wondrous song were mute,
> And the bird would do her part,
> Falter, fail and break her heart—
> Break her heart and furl her wings,
> On the inexpressive strings.

> "My dearest Hugh,—
> "I write at once to tell you our good news. The class lists are out, and Arthur has got a second. I am sure he deserves it, for he has worked splendidly, and I always thought he would do well. I hope his success will not alter his wishes with regard to the bank where your dear father so much wished to see him take a place; but the life may seem rather hum-drum, and Arthur is naturally much flattered at all the things that have been said to him at Oxford. The girls are delighted. I am so glad you are enjoying yourself, but how much time you have spent at Civita Bella! When do you think of returning? I am going to give some parties as a sort of introduction for Mysie. The Clintons are coming. I don't know if *you* admire Katie Clinton; she is a *very* nice girl, and she is thought a beauty. That fence by the oak copse is in a sad state; do you think James Jennings ought to mend it? We have a very good hay crop. I have had a rapturous letter from Jem, but you say less about your delights. I wish you would choose a present for me for each of the girls from Italy, and I should like to give Arthur something on his success, but I dare say he would rather choose some books for himself.

"Ever my dearest boy,—
"Your loving mother,—
"L. Spencer Crichton."
Redhurst House, Oxley.

This letter was brought to Hugh Crichton as he was dressing for the performance of "Don Giovanni," at which "Mademoiselle Mattei" was to make her first appearance before the public of Civita Bella. The Tollemaches were full of interest in her success; and Hugh and James had selected the bouquets which were to be thrown to her, with both the ladies to help them, and Hugh's choice of white and scented flowers was declared by Emily to be remarkably appropriate to Violante.

The pleasant commonplace letter came like a breath of fresh, sharp wind from Oxley into the midst of the soft Italian air, good in itself, may be, but incongruous. Arthur's success? Hugh was gratified; but not immoderately so, and it crossed his mind to think "What a fuss every one will make! But he shall have his way about the bank; it is not fair to tie any one down to other men's wishes. Katie Clinton! If the mother only knew!" If his mother had only known how his heart beat and his face burnt with excitement at the crisis in one little foreign girl's life, if she knew how far Redhurst seemed away to him! If she knew that he had fallen entirely in love with Violante Mattei! Would she ever know? And Hugh, perhaps for the first time, saw that question and all it implied looming in the distance. Was it to be "all for love and the world well lost?" Would the world be lost? What did he mean to do? Hugh knew quite well what he would have advised Jem to do under similar circumstances. It was a foolish, unsuitable thing, likely to make every one unhappy, it—. "I must sing, but I am frightened, Signor Hugo."

"Will she be so frightened to-night? She said she liked stephanotis. I wonder if they can see on the stage where a bouquet comes from! I have not seen her for days. We should all be at sixes and sevens. Well, there's no time now for consideration; but this letter has given me a shake, and I'll play neither with her nor myself," and Hugh took up his bouquet, and resolved for the moment to do the one thing possible to him—look at and think of Violante.

The house was full, but the Tollemaches had taken care to secure good places. Emily was full of excitement, proud of having a private interest in the public singer, and eagerly wondering how Violante felt then. Jem discoursed to her on the various great stars whom he had seen fulfilling Zerlina's part, nothing loth to show his acquaintance with little scraps of their history, and with some of the technicalities of their profession, for Jem was great in private and semi-public theatricals and concerts, and was much amused and interested by what he had seen and heard of Mademoiselle Mattei.

Hugh sat leaning forward on the front of the box, and during the two first scenes he kept his eyes fixed on the stage as if he had never seen an opera before, and though he was not continuously attending, he never all his life long heard a note of the music without recalling that little Italian opera-house, with its dim lights and imperfect scenery, its true sweet singers, and the throb of excitement and expectation as the third scene in which Zerlina makes her first appearance opened.

"There she is!" cried Emily, and there was nothing more in the theatre for Hugh but one little terrified face. Ah, so terrified, so white, he knew, under all its rouge, with eyes that saw nothing and looked through the carefully practised smiles as if longing and appealing for the help no one could give her. Hugh felt a wild desire to jump down and snatch her in his arms, stop the music, drive away all those fantastic figures—anything, rather than that she should suffer such fear. What right had anyone to applaud her, to look at her—ah! she was going to sing!

She sang; and after a few faint notes the exquisite quality of her voice asserted itself, and, with her look of extreme youth and shyness, excited an interest that made the audience lenient to the stiffness of her gestures and the gravity and formality of what should have been coquettish dalliance between the peasant and the noble lover.

The notes were true and pure as those of a bird; but in their beautiful inflexions was no human passion, no varieties of meaning. Her face was lovely; but it did not image Zerlina's affectionateness, vanity, triumph, and hesitation, her mischievous delight in the new admirer, and her lingering concern for the old one; it spoke nothing to the audience, and to Hugh only Violante's fear and pain. But the music was perfect, and Violante, with her gay dress and mournful eyes, was a sweet sight to look on; so she was well received enough, and Hugh, as he saw her mouth quiver, thought that the noisy plaudits would make her cry.

"Oh, doesn't she look just as sweet as ever?" cried Emily.

"She looks just the same as ever; she has no notion of her part," said Mr Tollemache, "but the voice is first-rate."

"She would be a study for a picture, 'The Unwilling Actress,'" said Jem. "What say you, Hugh?"

"Oh; it is a great success—it is very good," said Hugh vaguely; but his face was crimson, and he felt as if he could scarcely breathe.

The piece went on, and when the famous songs were heard in those perfect tones, when it was only necessary for her to stand and sing instead of to act, her voice and her youth and her beauty gained the day, there was a storm of applause, and a shower of bouquets fell at her feet. Hugh flung his white one, and Don Giovanni took it up and put it in her hand. Then suddenly the eyes lit up, the face was radiant, and the real passion which she had no power to assume or to mimic seemed to change her being.

"By Jove, she *is* lovely!" cried Jem. The next moment she had hidden her face in the flowers, and her next notes were so faltering that they were hardly heard. Hugh felt a fury of impatience as the public interest turned to the other heroines of the piece, and yet he had time to watch Violante as she stood motionless and weary, forgetting the bye-play that should have kept her in view while she remained silent. Hugh did not think that she saw him; he could not catch her eye, and felt angrily jealous of the stage lovers.

"Now's the trial," said Mr Tollemache. "Let us see how she will make a fool of Masetto." Masetto was a fine actor as well as a good singer, and the part of Don Giovanni was played by Signor Vasari, the manager of the company himself. Even Hugh, preoccupied as he was, could not but perceive that Zerlina gave them few chances of making a point.

"I feel just as if it was Violante herself who was unhappy," said Emily. "She looks as if Signor Mattei had been scolding her."

Hugh, at any rate, felt as if it were Violante whom Don Giovanni was persecuting, and was utterly carried away by the excitement of the scene, till, just as the wild dance came to a climax, and Zerlina's screams for help were heard, his brother touched his arm. Hugh started, and came suddenly to himself. James was gazing decorously at the stage. Hugh was conscious of having been so entirely absorbed as not to know how he might have betrayed his excitement. Of course he was in a rage with Jem for noticing it, but he sat back in his place and became aware that his hand trembled as he tried to put up his opera glasses, and that he had been biting his lip hard. He saw very little of the concluding scenes, and could not have told afterwards whether Don Giovanni died repentant or met the reward of his deeds. Even when the curtain dropped and Mademoiselle Mattei was led forward, to receive perhaps more bouquets and more "bravas" than she deserved, he felt a dull cold sense of disenchantment, though he clapped and shouted with the rest.

"It is all very well," said Mr Tollemache, as he cloaked his mother; "her extreme youth and her voice attract for the present, but she is too bad an actress for permanent success."

"She hasn't the physical strength for it," said Jem; "her voice will go."

"It is to be hoped Vasari will marry her," said Mr Tollemache.

"It is a very pretty opera," said Hugh; "and I thought Donna Elvira had a fine voice."

"The theatre was very hot," said Mr Tollemache, when they reached home; "has it made your head ache, Mr Crichton?"

"No, thank you, but I'll go to bed, I think. I don't care for a smoke, Jem, to-night."

"Jem," said Mr Tollemache, as they parted after a desultory discussion of Violante, the opera, the Matteis, and the chances of Violante's voice being profitable to Signor Vasari, "if you and Hugh care to go on and see a bit more of Italy, to push on to Rome, for instance, for the few days you have left, you mustn't stand on ceremony with me."

"Thank you," said James. "I'll see what Hugh says; I should like to see the—the Vatican, immensely."

Part 1, Chapter VII.

Brotherly Counsel.

"They were dangerous guides, the feelings—"

James Crichton had a certain taste for peculiarity, and anything unexpected and eccentric attracted him as much as it repels many other people. He piqued himself on his liberality, and had friends and acquaintances in many grades of society, to whom he behaved with perfectly genuine freedom and equality. He also loved everything that the word "Bohemian" implies to those classes who use it entirely *ab extra*. His mother's vision of Jem's daily life was a confused mixture of shabby velveteen, ale in queer mugs, colours which she was told to admire but thought hideous, mingled with musical instruments of all descriptions. He teased her to ask the Oxley photographer to dinner, and perpetually shocked her by revealing the social standing of acquaintances, whom he spoke of in terms of the greatest enthusiasm, till her dread was that he would marry some of "the sweet girls and perfect ladies" who supported their families by their own exertions in ways, which, though doubtless genteel, were not exactly aristocratic. She would have expected him to fall a victim to Violante at once.

But people do not always act in the way that is expected of them, and Mrs Crichton would have been saved much uneasiness had she known that Jem's affections, so far as they were developed, were placed on the daughter of an Archdeacon, who dressed at once fashionably and quietly, did her hair in accordance with custom and not art, was such a lady that no one ever called her lady-like, and so exactly what she ought to have been that no one would have ventured to say she was dull. Jem had a great many flirtations, but if ever a vision of the wife that years hence might reward his devotion to his work at the Foreign Office, crossed his mind that vision bore the form of Miss Helen Hayward. It takes a great deal of theory and very strong opinions to contend in practice with the instincts to which people are born; but instincts have less chance where feeling and passion rise up to do battle with them.

James looked into Hugh's dazzled absent eyes as they stood at his room door on their return from the opera, and felt that it was a bad moment for trying to bring him to reason; but the awkwardness of taking his elder brother to task in cold blood on the following morning made him seek for a conversation at once. So he followed him into his room and began:—

"Did you hear what Tollemache said about going to Rome?"

"Rome? No; do you want to go there?"

"Why, yes! Of course. Who doesn't?"

"I don't," said Hugh quietly.

"No; but isn't it a pity to miss the opportunity? In short, Hugh,—I say,—you know, aren't you coming it rather strong in that quarter?" said Jem, who was so astonished at the novel position in which he found himself that he plunged into his task of Mentor at once. "In short, suppose it was Arthur, you know, what should you say?"

"I should say exactly what you want to say to me," said Hugh, and made a little pause. "If I do this thing," he went on, looking straight before him, "it will, I know, cause a great deal of vexation for the moment."

"It's not that; but it could not possibly answer, Hugh, you can't be such a fool. Go away and take time to reflect; no one is more reasonable than you."

Hugh roused himself as if with an effort, and, sitting down on the edge of his bed, looked up at his brother and prepared for the contest. "I will tell you all you are going to say," he said. "This young lady—for she *is* a lady, Jem, and the daughter of a lady—is half a foreigner; she is only seventeen, she has no money, she has hardly any education, she has sung in public, on compulsion, and much against her will. If I marry her—"

"You will break mamma's heart," said Jem, going back in his vexation to his childish mode of speech.

"No, I shall not. She won't like it, of course, but she'll come round to it. Of course some women would not, but she would never make the worst of a thing. There's an end of her plans for me, what else is there to matter?"

"No one would visit her," muttered Jem, who had often inveighed at the folly of social prejudice.

"Oh, yes, they would, if my mother received her. It would be a bad match, of course, but not so bad as that when all the circumstances were explained."

"You seem to have considered it all."

"Did you suppose I should do it without considering? I'm not the man, James, not to see all these difficulties; I am not going to take a leap in the dark."

"It's just as bad if you leap over a precipice in the light!"

Hugh was silent. It was perhaps owing to his clear sense of what was due to everyone, and to his power of seeing both sides of a question, that he was not offended by his brother's displeasure. What else could James say? He himself, as he had told him, could say it all, had said it, did say it still. And what could he answer? That, though a broken heart was a form of speech, his would in future be a broken life without Violante was a statement that he could not bring himself to make, and which James would not have believed. "Of course I can give her up," he thought; "but if I do shall I ever live my life whole and perfect again? Is it not in me to be to her what I never have been, never could be, to anyone else?"

Hugh was a self-conscious person, as well as a conscientious one; he was not very young, and thus it will be perceived that he knew well what he was about. He was enough himself to wonder at himself; but in these sweet holiday weeks something had possessed him beyond his own control. He could fly from it, but he could not conquer it.

"Well," he said, as James continued his arguments, "grant that I should forget her, what should I be worth then? how much of myself should I have lost!"

"Anyone might say that about any temptation of the sort," said Jem.

"And truly. But—'halt or maimed,' you know, Jem. There are times when we must pay the price. You can't say this is a case in point."

"But how about the girl?" said Jem. "Have you involved yourself with her?"

"No," said Hugh, and then added: "Not intentionally."

"Ah!" said Jem, with a whistle. He was surprised to perceive that the argument of Violante's probable disappointment had not been the first to be put forward by Hugh. His brother had argued out the question of right and wrong for himself first, though now he eagerly took up this point.

"I think she *does* like me," he said, in a much more lover-like manner; "and her father tyrannises over her, poor child: she hates her profession; she would never want to hear of it again."

"Well, and how did it all come about?" To this question James did not obtain a direct answer; but after about half-an-hour of explanation, description, and rapture, he said:

"Well, Hugh, you *are* in for it, and no mistake. I'm sorry for you. And, pray, what do you intend to do?"

"I wish to act as considerately as possible to everyone," said Hugh. "I shall go home and tell my mother myself—"

"Without engaging yourself to Violante?"

"I shall do nothing in a hurry; but you cannot suppose that it needs spoken words to bind me now."

"But I say," said James suddenly, "did not some one say she was engaged to the manager?"

“That is not true,” said Hugh, colouring up; “she cannot endure him.”

“Oh!” said James, dryly. “All things considered, I wonder you did not speak before to-night.”

“I should not have expected *you* to take that view,” returned his brother.

“Well, she’s none the worse for it, of course; but, still, when it comes to one’s wife, you see, Hugh, there are advantages in plain sailing.”

“Look here, James,” cried Hugh, starting up, “we have talked long enough; I’ll take care of my mother, but I love Violante, and I believe she loves me, and our lives shall not be spoilt for anyone’s scruples. Do you suppose *I* don’t know my own mind? do you think *I* should act in a hurry, and repent of it afterwards? I would give her up now if I thought it right. It might be right in some cases, but this stands apart from ordinary rules—”

“I *think* I’ve heard that remark before,” James could not resist interposing.

“Very likely. In my case it is true. Not answer? It *shall* answer! Do you think I shall ever be afraid of the consequences of my actions?”

Hugh had the advantage of definite purpose and strong feeling. He spoke low, but his whole face lighted up as he, usually scrupulously self-distrustful in his speech, uttered this mighty boast. James, fluent and enthusiastic as he was, had for the moment nothing to say. He meant well; but his objections were vague and inconsistent with much of his own conduct. Hugh had the better of him, and reduced him to looking dissatisfied and cross.

“Well, if you will make a fool of yourself,” he muttered, “I’ll say good night.”

“Good night!” said Hugh, coming out of the clouds. “You were quite right to say your say, Jem.”

James was a very good-tempered person, but this was a little more than he could stand.

“Some day you may wish you had listened to it,” he said. “If you had seen as much of girls as I have, you would know there was nothing extraordinary in being extra silly and sentimental. Good heavens! I might have been married a dozen times over if I’d been so heroic over every little flirtation.”

Not being a woman, Hugh left the last word to his brother. He had no particular respect for Jem’s opinion, and did not care at all whether he approved of his choice or not. He believed that he could make his mother content with it; and his mother’s contentment would silence all active opposition of the outer world. His boy and girl cousins had no right to a remark: he supposed he could put up with Arthur’s nonsense. Here he took the flower out of his coat, and thought that the scent of stephanotis would always remind him of Violante. And then he went and leaned out of his window in the soft starlit southern night, and wondered if Violante was dreaming of her success or of him.

How strange it was that to him, of all people, should have come this wonderful and poetical experience! Hugh was not aware that the beauty of the scene, the clearness of the sky, the delicate shadowy spires and pinnacles that stood out soft and clear against it, the light of the stars, the breath of the south, in any way influenced him; he would have laughed even then at a description of a lover looking at the stars and thinking of his lady. It never occurred to him to call to mind any song or poem that put into words such commonplace romance. For the place, the circumstances, Violante herself, the flower in his hand, the notes yet ringing in his ears, appealed to a simplicity of sentiment any school-girl might have shared with him. Yet real honest feeling might give for once reality to these hackneyed images, just as it could as easily have dispensed with them altogether.

Part 1, Chapter VIII.

White Flowers.

“True love
Lives among the false loves, knowing
Just their peace and strife;
Bears the self-same look, but always
Has an inner life.

“Tell me, then, do you dare offer
This true love to me?
Neither you nor I can answer:
We must—wait and see!”

The fearful ordeal was over; the first night had come and gone, and the earth had not opened to swallow Violante up; the disgraceful tears had been successfully controlled; and through all the fear and confusion, the dread of the audience and of her fellow-actors, the physical discomfort of the noise and the heat, had penetrated a little thrill of pleasure; and for one moment, when all the “Bravas” seemed to ring with Hugh’s voice, and his sweet white bouquet fell at her feet, the excitement was not all pain. But, painful or joyful, it was far too intense for so delicate a creature to bear; and tears, sleeplessness, and excessive exhaustion, were its natural result. Both Rosa and her father were so much relieved that no break-down had taken place that, though both were fully capable of criticising her performance, they rejoiced as if it had been an absolute success; and even the tender sister could not believe but that the pleasure must have predominated over the pain. So poor Violante dried her tears as fast as she could, conscious of being too silly a child even for Rosa’s sympathy, and not daring to say that the worst terror of all was

Signor Vasari's commendation. She had no need to suffer from Masetto's, who declared with indignation that it was impossible to execute scenes of passion and sentiment with so irresponsive a soprano. On the Wednesday another opera was to be given; on the Thursday "Don Giovanni" would be repeated, and then there loomed before Violante the dreadful impossible archness of the playful heroine of "Il Barbiere." Surely, when she came back from the rehearsal on Wednesday, some one would come to hear how she had fared! There was no one. Even Emily Tollemache neither came nor wrote. So he only wanted to throw bouquets at her!

"Oh, I hate the flowers! I hate their very smell," sobbed poor Violante to herself; but she did not throw them away; and when, on Thursday night, as the opera proceeded, no white bouquet fell, her spirit died utterly within her, and then rose in passionate despair. She could not bear her troubles—this poor child—for one day; but, weak and soft as she was, it was no mere tender sentiment that gave her face a sort of power and thrilled her voice with a new energy.

When the curtain rose on the performers after the opera was over, a great white bridal-looking bouquet fell at Violante's feet. Don Giovanni, impelled perhaps by various jealousies of the favour shown to the little débutante, picked it up and gave it to Donna Elvira, who graciously curtseyed thanks. Zerlina started; she could see no one; and the curtain fell.

"Mademoiselle, I think those are my flowers."

Donna Elvira burst out laughing and pointed the bouquet scornfully at Zerlina.

"Eccola—Brava, brava! Mademoiselle learns quickly. She wants other ladies' bouquets, not content with her own!"

"Mademoiselle's thoughts are elsewhere than on the stage," sneered Masetto.

"All—it is a love token! Is it il Signor Inglese? Ah, ha, ha!"

Violante, in an agony of shame at her own folly, with burning cheeks and beating heart, shrank away without a word; but when she reached home and could hide her face on Rosa's shoulder, her first words were—

"Oh, my flowers, my flowers!" and when Rosa understood the story she could give no adequate consolation.

"Oh, child—child!" she cried at last, "do not sob and cry in this way. Who ever cured their troubles so? Now I will not have it. Perhaps he did not throw the flowers after all! Lie down and go to sleep."

Violante endeavoured to obey; she put the damp tumbled hair off her face, and lay down and closed her eyes. "But he did throw them," she thought to herself; but she did not say so to Rosa, for her sorrow was beginning to give the child a stand-point of her own.

Hugh, meanwhile, was the victim of circumstances. Mrs Tollemache had planned an excursion, which carried them off early on the morning after the first opera, and from which they did not return till late in the evening of the second day. Hugh was annoyed; but he knew that he should have other opportunities of seeing Violante, and he could not escape without more commotion than was expedient. So he went and enjoyed himself all the more, because the excitement of his whole nature made him more than usually open to enjoyment. Hugh had never thought scenery so beautiful or sights so interesting; he was ready to be amused by every trifling incident of their trip. *He* knew that Violante would be there when he came back; while *she*, poor child, knew nothing. But he managed to look in at the end of the opera and throw his bouquet; and on the next day he thought no one could have objected to his making a visit of enquiry, particularly as most likely Violante would not be at home. James's remarks had not been without their effect, in so far as they increased his desire to act with the greatest possible tact and caution; and he much wished to secure his mother's consent, certainly before any public disturbance took place, and even, if possible, before actually engaging himself to Violante, and this for her sake. He had no dreams of hiding himself from the world with her: he could do no other than follow his profession, and live with his wife in the midst of his friends. In short, Hugh wished to eat his cake and have it—to do a wild, foolish, utterly romantic thing, and yet sacrifice no conventional or real advantage. And he had quite sense enough to know that conventional advantages *were* real in this case, and quite confidence enough in himself to believe that, he, in his wisdom, could succeed in doing what most other men had failed in attempting.

"There shall be no secrecy and no quarrelling," he thought; "and yet I will judge for myself."

However, this evening, politeness would have prompted a call on Signor Mattei had Violante never existed; and as Jem had promised to take some drive with the Tollemaches it was not worth while to ask for his company; so he asked if Signor Mattei was at home. "No—il signor was out."

"La signorina Rosa?"

"Out too, she was giving a lesson—ah, it was only English people who went out in such a sun. What a pity! Even Mademoiselle Mattei (Maddalena proudly gave Violante the French title by which she was known to the public) was not there; she was tired with the rehearsals; she was lying down. Would il signor wait? They would be in soon." Hugh thought that he would wait. This was not the first time that he had seen Maddalena.

Hugh came into the great shady room, where the Venetian blinds were down and the light was green and cool. Only one window was open—a little one at the end facing east—and on its ledge stood a great bowl of flaming flowers, the blue sky and a distant marble pinnacle, fretted and pierced, behind them; a girl in an old white dress on the low cushioned bench beneath—Violante's delicate face and floating hair clear against the sky. There were red flowers and blue flowers in the great china bowl, but white ones in Violante's little hands; and as Hugh's foot fell on the old scratched inlaid work of the floor she held them to her lips. Then the foot-fall sounded, and she turned her head and

sprang up with such a start that down fell flowers, red, white, and blue, with the china bowl in one common ruin. In another moment Hugh and Violante, both laughing and exclaiming, were picking them up, and Hugh was pursuing the bowl as it rolled along the polished floor.

“No harm done,” he said, as he brought it back, “it is not broken.”

“Oh, I am so glad! Father is so fond of it. Oh, how wet the cushion is!”

“Hang it out of window,” said Hugh, as he pulled it off the seat. “I don’t want it. And there,” taking it from the chair, “is another one for you.”

And Hugh sat down on the vacant half of the window-seat; and, replacing the bowl on the ledge, began to arrange the wet flowers in it. Violante sat down also; and, shaking the drops from the roses and oleanders, held them to him one by one.

She felt quite happy; past and future had floated away from her. She did not think of saying anything; the flowers were enough.

“I don’t think I understand much about arranging flowers,” said Hugh.

“They were dying, or I should not have taken them to pieces,” said she, with a glance at the white bouquet.

“You had a *white* bouquet?”

“Oh—I had so many—this beautiful one—all roses,” said Violante, trying, in her heightened spirits, this elementary piece of coquetting.

“Too many to count?”

“Oh, yes—quite too many. There were three red ones and this—all colours—and *one* white.”

She looked at Hugh, seized with a sudden fear. Perhaps he had not thrown the white one, after all!

“Your trophies, Mademoiselle Mattei. Were you very proud of them as you were counting the spoils?” said the equally foolish Hugh, as he thought: “Of course, she *does* care for it, after all.”

Violante blushed intensely and her lips quivered.

“I like the *flowers*,” she said.

“And the applause?” said Hugh, jealously. “Don’t you know you had a great triumph? We shall all boast of your acquaintance.” Violante bent her head low, her lashes heavy and wet.

“Still, you don’t like it,” cried Hugh; and suddenly the tones were tender. “Does it still frighten you so much, Violante?”

“Oh yes—so much!”

“Ah, I saw you were frightened. It was Violante, not Zerlina, that I was looking at.”

“Yes, that’s the worst of it.”

“The worst of it?”

“I never act enough, they say. I can only sing.”

“Well, what more would anyone have? You sing like an angel. And Violante is much better worth looking at than Zerlina, any day.”

“Ah,” said Violante, more brightly, “but you would not think so if you were Signor Rubini.”

“What—Masetto—shouldn’t I?”

“He said,” continued Violante, with penitence, “that he would rather act with a wax-doll, and—and that I show off my own voice and do not think of his. But I cannot help it, indeed.”

“What an insolent scoundrel! You shall—why do you ever act with him again?”

“Oh, but it is a great honour! I ought to please him if I could. But I don’t know how.”

The sorrowful, contrite tones, and the droop of her lip were almost more than Hugh could bear. James had told him that it would be cruel to make this poor little child unhappy by the uncertainties of an engagement that could not be immediately-fulfilled. Would she be any happier if he left her to cry over her bad acting, and to be criticised by Italian singers? He was coming to a resolution, but for a moment he held it back.

“Give yourself airs,” he said. “Say you’ll never sing again if they find fault with you! See what they will say then.”

“I?” said Violante, opening round eyes of amazement. “How could I?”

“All,” said Hugh, with growing excitement, “but one of these days you will say, ‘*I* will not act with Signor Rubini!’ We

are going home, you know, when I come back—”

He paused, and Violante turned cold and sick, as when the eyes of the whole theatre were fixed upon her. He was going away! Hugh started up and walked away from her for a moment; then he came back and stood before her, and spoke.

“No, you cannot say that. I will tell you what to say. Say you have promised to be my wife, my darling; and it does not matter if you act well or ill. Listen to me one moment. Signorina, I love you; though I cannot tell you so in persuasive words. If you will trust me for a little while, I will come back and bring my mother, who will welcome you and love you. Can you care for me, Violante?”

Hugh, scrupulous and self-conscious, wasted many words. He had said within himself that he would show more deference to Violante than he would have thought necessary to a princess; that with his first words he would make it plain, both that there were difficulties, and that he would overcome them. There was a suppressed fire in the eyes generally so quiet, and a sort of courtliness in the manners that were sometimes so stiff, a deference that would soon be tender, an earnestness just held back from passionate force.

Violante heard but three words: “I love you.” Shy as she was, she was utterly trustful, and was too innocent and too fervent for any pretence of coyness.

“Do you love me, Violante?”

“Oh, yes!” and she let him take her in his arms, while her tears fell with the soft relief of having found a comforter. She was won, this little southern Juliet, won—ah, how easily!—and Hugh vowed to himself that he would justify her innocent trust, and give her all she knew not how to demand.

“You are not frightened now, my child?”

“Oh, no!”

“Let me look and see;” and, as Hugh drew away the veiling fingers, she did not shrink from the kiss that came in their stead.

“What will father say?” murmured she presently.

Now, it would have suited Hugh better could he have left Signor Mattei in ignorance until he had settled the affair with his own people; but he was too generous to involve Violante in the toils of a secret. Never should she be tempted by him to one doubtful action. So he answered—

“That I will soon find out; and to do so, my darling, I must go.”

And so, with many tender words, and with a wonderful delight in his own love as well as in the sweet child who had awakened it, Hugh took his leave for the present; and she, who was conscious of no delight but ill him, watched him for a moment, then came and turned the old lock of the door, which he suddenly found so perplexing; so that, as he went away, he saw her standing in the dim, lofty corridor, with the sunlight shining halo-wise behind her hair, and the still brighter aureole of his passionate fancy glorifying her innocent face.

Part 2, Chapter IX.

Contrasts.

> “There’s none so sure to pay his debt.
> As wet to dry, and dry to wet.”

Part 2, Chapter X.

The Time of Roses.

> “When all the world was young, lad,
> And all the trees were green.”

While the bright southern sunshine was filling the old palace with its rays; and while, beneath the blue Italian sky, Hugh Crichton was arranging Violante’s flowers; the same fair summer weather was making life enchanting in the English county where Oxley lay. Instead of deep, unbroken azure, see a paler tint, with fleecy, snowy clouds; and, for the fretwork and the imagery, the marble, and the alabaster of Civita Bella, broad, green, low-lying meadows, where dog-roses tossed in the hedges, and dog-daisies and buttercups were falling beneath the scythe; a slow, sleepy canal, with here and there a bright-painted boat; and, on the low hill side, the clustering white villas and modern streets, surmounted, not by innumerable pinnacles and domes, but by one tall, grey spire.

Oxley was a large, flourishing town, some forty miles from London—next to the county town in dignity, and before it in size and enterprise. It could boast no architecture and no antiquities, save a handsome church—neither very old nor very new—and some tumble-down, red-tiled, dirty streets, sloping down from the back of the town to the canal—unless, indeed, like some of its townsmen, you counted the Corinthian façade of the railway station, the Gothic gables of the new Town-Hall, or the sober eighteenth-century squareness of the Oxley Bank. These two latter public

buildings opened on to a broad, sunny market-place; from which started a clean, white, sunny road, which led past villas, nursery gardens, meadows, and bits of furzy, heathery waste, all the way to Redhurst, and was the old coach-road from the county town to London.

Along this road were the prettiest residences, the gayest little conservatories, the most flowery lilacs, laburnums, and acacias of suburban Oxley. Here was the "best neighbourhood," and here, on the clean, gravelled footway, the nursery-maids and children went to walk on fine mornings; ladies and little dogs paid calls of an afternoon; and groups of slim, long-haired girls came out to attend classes at Oxley Manor, the famous Young Ladies' School. The Manor House lay back from the road behind high, substantial, red-brick walls, with mossy crevices, and bushy ivy peeping over the top; showing beyond, garden trees, walnuts, acacias, and horse-chestnuts, surrounding the big, substantial house, where, from the small-paned windows, peeped now and then a girl's face.

There was no better school in the country than the Miss Vennings' at Oxley Manor; and it was considered a great privilege for the girls of Oxley that certain classes there were opened to them; and a still greater that Miss Spencer and Miss Crofton were allowed to attend regularly as day scholars. But these young ladies did not come from Redhurst by the road. There was a pretty, quiet path through the meadows—half-way between the public road and the towing-path by the canal—that led here through a bit of copsewood famous for primroses, there across a sunny, open meadow; now over a low, wooden stile, then between high hedges, full of brambles, honey-suckles, and roses; till the hedges grew neater and closer, and terminated in the high red wall of the Manor kitchen-garden, from which opened a little green gate. On the other side of the road was a paddock, with a shallow pond where ducks flourished, and where, on the opposite bank, an old pollard willow threw its slender branches across the muddy water.

On that sunny afternoon a sunnier spot could hardly have been found than the narrow path under the wall; and yet here lingered two figures: a girl, who had poised herself on the end of a great garden-roller, and a young man who leaned against the white railing of the pond beside her. She was a graceful little lady, small and soft-faced; with brown hair, shining and neat, round rosy lips, and clear, steady eyes of a hazel tint. Her white dress was elaborately trimmed with handsome embroidery, and all her blue ribbons were fresh and smart, as if they had no need to see sunny days enough to dim their brightness. There was a bag of books at her feet, and her pretty eyes were cast down towards them; and her pink cheeks were flushed with considerable, yet not excessive, embarrassment.

"But, Arthur," she said, with a clear, distinct, and yet soft utterance, "but, Arthur, I think we ought to consider about it a great deal."

"I have never considered it at all," said Arthur Spencer.

He was a tall young man, slight and graceful; with—spite of his second class and his cultivated expression—a sort of happy-go-lucky air, that seemed hardly to have outgrown the right to his old appellation of a "very pretty boy," earned by his bright colour, dark hair, with a picturesque wave in it, and black-lashed eyes, of that distinct shade of grey which cannot be mistaken for blue or hazel. He was an elegant, rather handsome young man at three-and-twenty, with a light-hearted, self-reliant manner that might have been careless and even conceited had a less earnest and genuine affection looked out from his bright eyes at the pretty creature beside him. Arthur thought himself clever, good-looking, rather a fine fellow in his way; but what did he not think of Mysie Crofton?

"There's nothing *new* in it; is there, Mysie?" he continued, as he took her prettily-gloved hand, with the freedom of old intercourse, just touched with something sweeter. "Nothing new. We were always the friends of the family, and it *must* have come to this soon."

"Yes," said Mysie, simply; "but I thought—I thought—those things never *did* come to anything."

"You thought? Ah, Mysie, I have my answer now: You thought, you little worldly-minded thing, that first love was all humbug, eh? Well, we'll be an instance to the contrary."

Mysie blushed.

"I'm sure," she said, "you were always telling me about young ladies."

"But I always told you about them, Mysie! And now I could not go on any longer without having it out. *I* knew it; and *you* knew it—oh, yes, you did; and Aunt Lily was beginning to find out."

"But there's Hugh?"

"Ah, Hugh. I daresay he won't quite like it; those things are not in his line. But he is too good to make foolish objections. To be sure, there is one he may fairly make."

"What's that?" said Mysie, frightened.

"Your fortune, Mysie; and when I think of it, it half frightens me."

"I don't think it is so very much," said Mysie.

"It is enough to give you a right to all this," said Arthur, touching her pretty dress; "and if I thought I could not give it you, I would be silent. But, Mysie, I have not much of my own; but I think I have earned the right to say I have a good chance of success in any career I might choose; and there is always the Bank. I know I cannot marry you now, Mysie, my darling," he continued, with a sort of frank, eager deference; "and if anyone you like better comes by I will never hold you to your promise. But in the meantime are we the worse for acknowledging that which has existed so long—so long? Oh, Mysie, I don't know how to make love to you. I think it's all made, but you are part of myself. I could have no life without you. I cannot imagine myself *not* loving you, not looking to have you one day for my own."

If Mysie was a little slow to answer, it was not because she could imagine her life without Arthur. All this was only the right name for that which had always been. They *were* Arthur and Mysie; and they would be Arthur and Mysie to the end of the chapter.

“Yes,” she said, “that’s quite true. It just is. But I’ll try and be a great deal better to you than ever I have been. It ought to be like ‘John Anderson.’”

Mysie had ideas, and was not afraid to express them. She used nice, pretty language, and when a thought struck her she would say it out in a way sometimes formal, but always genuine and sweet.

“John Anderson?” said Arthur—not that he did not know.

And Mysie repeated the sweetest of all sweet love-songs, the one fulfilment in the midst of so much longing desire.

As Arthur heard her gentle, fearless voice, and saw her clear eyes raised to his own, as she repeated, without fear or falter:

> “And sleep thegither at the foot,
> John Anderson, my jo,”

a great awe came over him.

“Oh, Mysie, my love, my darling, may God grant it! For nothing in life could ever come between us.”

And with this hope, that in its intensity was almost fear, he drew her towards him, and gave her his first *lover’s* kiss. She was silent; and then, recovering herself, said, in a different tone:

“And I don’t think it will be inconvenient to have a little money!”

The revulsion of ideas made Arthur laugh.

“Worldly wisdom!” he exclaimed; then suddenly sprang up from the other end of the roller as a tall handsome lady, in a garden hat, came out of the green gate.

“Miss Crofton!”

“I—I was only taking Mysie to school, Miss Venning,” said Arthur; while Mysie, pink and fluttered, picked up her books and hurried off up the path.

Miss Venning was a stately, blue-eyed woman of forty or thereabouts; with a fair, fresh complexion, and a manner that twenty-years of school-keeping had rendered somewhat condescending, as if the world consisted of pupils to be at once governed and encouraged; while her blue eyes had a certain look of enquiry in them, as if she was in the habit of passing judgment on those who came before her. But, that the judgment would be just and kind, the handsome face gave every promise; and, perhaps, the scales might even drop a little in favour of a kind of culprit that did not often come before her. Besides, if Arthur Spencer had brought the girls to school once within her recollection, he had done so fifty times.

But Arthur did not give time for this awful monosyllable to frame itself into an objection.

“Miss Venning,” he said, persuasively, “I’m doing no harm. I daresay you have often thought of it before; it couldn’t be helped, you see, any longer.”

“Arthur,” said Miss Venning, in a deep, full voice, somewhat appalling to hear, “if you had anything particular to say to Miss Crofton, you have ample opportunities without following her here.”

Arthur did not look much discomfited. Perhaps there was the slightest turn in the formidable voice that showed that the humour of the situation was not quite lost on the speaker.

He blushed, and then said, with a straightforwardness that few ladies would have resisted:

“Miss Venning, I want to have Mysie for my wife, if my aunt and Hugh will consent to our engagement. I don’t know when we began to think of it, but I suppose to-day it—well—came to a head.”

“And what does Mysie say?” said Miss Venning, still judicial, but interested. She considered Arthur Spencer a very promising young man.

“Mysie sees no objection, Miss Venning. I didn’t mean to take a liberty, I’m sure, with the sacred precincts of the Manor House; but, since it has happened so, I do wish you would let me consult you.”

Whether this appeal was the result of a delicate tact, or of the overflowing happiness that longed for sympathy, it caused Miss Venning to walk along the path beside him, saying:

“Well?”

“Well,” said Arthur, “you see how it is with us; and we have our lives before us, and there is time for me to make myself worthy of Mysie’s money—I’ll not say of herself,” he added, with a little softening of his confident voice.

“Well?” said Miss Venning again, with a yet deeper intonation.

“I have not hitherto made up my mind as to my profession,” said Arthur. “I hardly looked beyond the examination; but the Bank has always been my destination, and you know my uncle’s kindness marked out my career there long ago.”

“And haven’t you any further ambition?” said Miss Venning, who thought young men ought to push themselves.

“Why,” said Arthur, “I don’t like teaching, in which career my degree would be of most use to me; and the bar is very slow work. Hugh really wants help; and, in short, Miss Venning, when life is so crowded and the world so over-full I think if a man has the good luck to have a line marked out for him he ought to stick to it, unless his tastes point very decidedly the other way. Besides, I like Oxley. And I think,” he added, laughing and colouring, “I should say this under *any* circumstances. But if not, one must take life as a whole, you know.”

Miss Venning thought Oxley Bank rather a flat ending to so creditable a career as Arthur’s had been; but then, on the other hand, it was eminently safe and respectable, and, with this early marriage, would effectually “keep him out of mischief.”

“But what will your cousin say?” she asked.

“Why, I’m afraid he’ll think it his duty to object a little. But Hugh is such a good fellow, and has always been so thoroughly kind to me, and is so fair in judgment, that I am sure he will own I have as good a right to try for the prize as anyone else. It’s very odd that he has never looked out for himself. But, dear me! he would be so awfully particular!”

“Well, Arthur,” said Miss Venning, “I approve of young men marrying. It’s far more necessary for them than for girls.”

“One couldn’t well manage it without a girl,” murmured Arthur.

“So that,” said Miss Venning, “it’s well young women have different opinions on the subject. Go home, and take the responsibility off my shoulders by telling your aunt at once.”

“I’ll never do it in your garden again, Miss Venning,” cried Arthur, as he left her with a very hearty shake of the hand.

Certainly life lay fair before and behind Arthur Spencer. He was clever, with the technical skill needed for the attainment of his scholastic honours more developed than the general power behind it. That is to say, all his brains—and they were good ones—had been given to the composition of Greek and Latin, and to the acquirement of the knowledge necessary to the attainment of a good degree. He was naturally active, and industrious; and ambition and conscience had both urged him to do well the work that nature had made easy to him. He had won plenty of praise, which he liked exceedingly; and plenty of popularity, which came so naturally that he was hardly conscious of it. But he had hitherto taken life outside the schools very much for granted; thought Hugh infallible on matters of business, and James an oracle in matters of art. Indeed, Arthur’s power of appreciation was one of his best points. Unlike many of her sons, he loved and believed in Oxford—perhaps because he had given her his best and she had well repaid him; and, while there, his time and thoughts had been fully occupied with the work before him. At once affectionate and self-reliant, he took readily to the independence that circumstances indicated, and at a very early age took good care of himself. And, though there was no one in his boyhood to bestow on him exclusive affection, his warm heart gave out enough to all to make his kindly home a happy and sunny one. For Arthur liked most people. It had been said with some truth that one person was much the same as another to him, he “got on” so well with all. It would be praising the gay untried boy far too highly to say that he had a spirit of universal charity; but he did possess a sort of loving-kindness, a gift in whose soil the greatest of all graces might grow; an entire absence of depreciating ill-nature.

But Arthur himself had long known that for him the human race was divided into two parts—Mysie and other people.

Part 2, Chapter XI.

Oxley Manor.

> “Oh, so many, many, many maidens!”

Under the great walnut-tree on the lawn the three Miss Vennings were assembled in consultation. The Manor House possessed one of the most enchanting gardens that the past has ever handed down to the present. High walls shutting it in safe, on winch grew jessamine and wisteria and sweet old-fashioned roses; a narrow path running round the lawn, and leading away into vistas of shrubbery; while on the soft turf grew beautiful trees, and, in especial, an immense walnut. Miss Venning sat on a garden-bench communicating to her sisters the important event that had just electrified her maidenly precincts.

“It *was* very inconsiderate of Arthur to select our garden-roller for the purpose,” said Miss Clarissa, the second of the trio.

“Why, Clarissa? You don’t suppose people settle the exact spot beforehand!” said Miss Florence, the third.

Miss Florence, as she now aspired to be called, had been little Flossy not many years back; and the thick bright hair of fairest flaxen—“Flossy’s tow,” as her sisters called it—now twisted round her head, had not so very long ago hung down her back in all its native lustre. She was a tall girl of twenty, with a fine open face, handsome in form, and coloured with a pink—“as pink as pink ribbon,” Clarissa said—bright enough to allow for a little fading as the years went by; and her blue eyes were full of thought and energy. Young as she was, everyone knew that she was a much greater power in the house than Miss Clarissa, and was hardly second to Miss Venning herself. All the girls obeyed

her; she was full of life and force to the very tips of her strong, slender fingers; could learn better than the girls, teach better than the governesses, thought school-keeping a vocation and not a drudgery, and spent her half-holidays in the parish; was never ill, never tired, and never unhappy; and possessed such a store of spirits and energy that—to quote again from Clarissa—if Flossy was not marked out for misfortune Nature had wasted a great deal of good stuff in the making of her.

Flossy was Miss Venning's darling, and need never have corrected an exercise nor set a sum if she had not been so minded; but she had replied to the offer of freedom with scorn and contempt: "Did sister think she should be happier for being idle?" and set to work with all her might and main to "enlarge the minds and improve the tone" of her sister's pupils, introducing new studies, new authors, and new ideas; talking over Miss Venning—or sometimes, perhaps, talking her down—with an equal amount of self-confidence and self-devotion.

In Miss Clarissa's girlish days no such possibility of freedom had been offered to her. Nine or ten years ago, during the long illness of their mother, and while the brothers who filled up the wide gaps between the three sisters had been yet unsettled in life, the circumstances of the school had required more personal exertion; and when Clarissa was at the end of her teens she had been too busy—teaching all the English, that the resident governess might be French—to consider if it was desirable for the pupils to read Thackeray or to learn Latin and Euclid. Clarissa was a good girl and did her duty; but now, at eight and twenty, she felt as if life might have offered her something more than school-keeping. She told Flossy that she should like to marry a Duke and drink chocolate out of Sèvres china—and the scandalised Flossy perceived neither the twinkle of the sleepy blue eyes nor the wistful fall of the well-curved mouth, the delicate prettiness of which gave to the small curly-haired Clarissa a look of youth which neither the absence of Sèvres china nor the presence of young ladies had hitherto impaired. Flossy's eyes were always wide open and rarely twinkled, though they often laughed.

They brightened into a laugh now, as she repeated her remark—

"You don't suppose, Clarissa, that people settle the exact spot beforehand!"

"Really, Flossy, my experience is limited; but, as Mary says, as Arthur lives in the house with Mysie, I think he might have managed matters at home."

"Oh, but," said Flossy, "now he has sister on his side, you see."

"Yes, Mary; you're in the scrape," said Clarissa.

"Really, my dear, I don't see that at all. I am not responsible for Miss Crofton now, beyond her German and music lessons."

"I suppose she might do much better," said Clarissa.

"She couldn't do better," said Florence, decidedly, in her full rich voice. Will it quite detract from Flossy's character for feminine softness if it be owned that she spoke rather loud? "Arthur has very good prospects, and is the very nicest young man I know."

"Dear me! Flossy," said Clarissa. "I thought you considered matrimony a mistake."

"By no means," emphatically returned Flossy; "when everything is suitable and people are fond of each other. I don't think I shall ever wish to marry anyone myself; and how anyone can say life is wanting in interest I can't conceive; but I should never be so absurd as to lay down general principles. That is where people fall into error. And besides," she concluded heartily, "anyone could see dear little Mysie was fond of Arthur, and I am so glad she will be happy!"

"Well, there are more words than hers and Arthur's to that," said Clarissa.

"Mrs Crichton never objects to anything," said Flossy; "and as for Mr Crichton, surely he won't be so horrid."

"Well, *I* could not help it," said Miss Venning.

"No," returned Flossy; "and as Mysie is not exactly a girl it doesn't signify."

Mysie was eighteen and a week; but Flossy used the term "girl" in a strictly technical sense.

"Dear me!" she continued, "my class will be waiting for me." And as she ran into the house Miss Venning looked after her.

"I think young men have very strange tastes," she said.

"Because *Flossy* has no lovers?" said Clarissa, with a slight emphasis.

"Well, I am sure I do not want her to have any," returned Miss Venning, with a smile at her sisterly partiality.

"Dear me, no, Mary! Flossy won't be fit for a lover for five years at least. She has all the world to reform first!"

Miss Venning laughed as she went to tend her beautiful roses, and Clarissa, left alone, wandered on till she sat down under an acacia tree. She threw herself back on the soft turf, and gazed up at the sky through its veil of delicate dancing foliage, while she caught the fast-falling white blossoms in her hand. It was a childish attitude and a childish action; but it may have been absently done, for she was still smiling at the joke of the surprised lovers. At last the smile trembled and ceased, and she hid her face on the mossy turf. Lying there on the grass, with her little slim figure and curly head, she looked like a girl escaped from school, fretting over her tasks or dreaming of fairy princes.

But Miss Clarissa was twenty-eight, and a schoolmistress; and had tasks to set instead of to learn, and no lovers to dream of, past, present, or future. So she soon sat upright, brushed off the acacia blossoms, and went into the house to get ready for tea.

Meanwhile, Flossy had taken her way to the long sunny school-room, where sat some twelve or fifteen girls reading Wilhelm Tell with the German governess—all, save one or two, evincing in tone, look, or manner a conviction that German and hot afternoons were incompatible elements. There was a little brightening as Miss Florence paused on her way to the dining-room, where her own class of younger ones were preparing their lessons. Mysie sat with her clear eyes fixed on her book, her soft round face pinker than usual, her little figure very still, her pencil in her hand. Was she taking notes of the lesson?

"Have you written out your translation, Mysie?" said Flossy, mischievously.

"No, Miss Florence," said Mysie, in formal school-girl fashion; but she could hardly restrain her little quivering smile.

"These young ladies are idle, Miss Florence," said their teacher.

"That is very wrong of them," returned Flossy. "There is only one excuse for being idle—" then, as Mysie looked up with a start, she added, "the hot weather."

Neither romance not hot weather interfered with Miss Florence's energy over her German lesson, and the sleepy little schoolgirls had small chance with their brisk young teacher. A bell rang, Flossy fired a concluding question at the sleepiest and stupidest, extracted an entirely wrong answer, and, but slightly disconcerted—for was not she used to it?—ran off to her room, arranged her dress, stuck a great red rose in her hair, and came down to tea.

Miss Florence was much admired by her pupils, and had a sort of half-sympathetic, half-genial pleasure in their admiration. Besides, her rose was as a flag to celebrate the festal occurrence of the afternoon. "I always like to wear pretty things when I feel jolly," she would say; "and if ever you see me going about in a drab dress and a brown veil you may be quite sure I've had a disappointment!"

"Then," said Clarissa, "if you buy that very pink silk I shall think you have had an offer."

"Oh, no; think I don't want one."

Flossy crushed her rose under a big straw hat, when she was set free after tea, and took her way merrily along the fields to Redhurst. The way was very pretty, and the evening lights very charming; but Flossy scurried along, much too full of human nature to care for any other. She had been half playfellow and half teacher to Mysie for years, and had grown up in familiar intercourse with all the household, and was on terms with Arthur of mutual lecturing and teasing.

Redhurst was a square, red house, with white facings; and stood in the midst of pretty, park-like meadows, through which ran the shallow, sedge-grown river, which, nearer Oxley, merged in the sleepy canal. The garden came down to the river's brim, and great white fierce swans and little furry black ducks swam up and down under the willows. The field-path led to an old white stone bridge, looking like a small model of one of those over the Thames, and across it Flossy came into the garden which led up to a terrace and steps in front of the house. So far the garden was rather stiff and old-fashioned, but croquet hoops profaned the soft turf, garden chairs and a tea-table enlivened the terrace; a girl of fifteen, with a mane of dark rusty hair, stood on the step, and a lady was sitting in the most comfortable of the chairs above her.

Mrs Spencer Crichton was as like her son Hugh as a stout, cheerful-looking lady of eight-and-forty can be to a grave young man of eight-and-twenty. She was pale and handsome and fair, and hardly looked her age, so smooth was her brow, so contented her mouth, so ready the smiles that came with equal kindliness for all the young ones who had grown up under her easy sway. It was said that the young people at Redhurst were sadly spoiled—spoiled, that is to say, not by being the objects of devoted affection or too partial admiration, but by being allowed their own way to an extent incredible to more idealistic mothers. Whether from the absence of any very marked individual affections, or from something of the same cast of mind that produced in her eldest son such even-handed justice, she not only treated all her young kinsfolk with the same kindness, but, so far as they knew, felt for them much the same amount of interest. She did not think it incredible that Arthur should surpass James; or that, in the few contentions that crossed their sunshiny life, Hugh should sometimes be mistaken. All were sure of a kind judgment, and often of a sense of the rights of their story: none of them made a demand for an exclusive or individual tenderness; for their bringing-up had made them independent. Mrs Crichton did not trouble herself much as to whether their idiosyncrasies were suitable or desirable or likely to lead to any one result. It was all right that Hugh should keep to his business; she did not wish that James was as fond of books as Arthur, since he preferred Art and a great deal of conversation. George preferred rats and rabbits to either. "Well, poor George did not like his lessons." Mysie liked needlework, and flowers, and Sunday schools—"so good of little Mysie." Frederica thought happiness consisted in a day's hunting. "She was growing up quite a different sort of girl." But Mrs Crichton was not at all surprised when George got flogged at school for not knowing the lessons, observing "that George was so stupid he was always in scrapes;" and when Frederica pouted, sobbed, and scowled when some special friend called her a Tom-boy she only heard: "But you are a Tom-boy, my dear," as consolation. And when in young enthusiasm, anyone brought his or her special hobby into notice, he or she well knew that, though that hobby might prance unrebuked through the family circle, it was regarded as nothing but "so-and-so's hobby," whether it concerned the destinies of the human race or the best way of laying-out flower-beds. There are two sides to everything. It is very pleasant never to be scolded; but when Hugh had laid down some law in a way that bore heavily on his juniors, it was not always quite pleasant to hear his mother placidly say: "My dear, don't resist, it's Hugh's way to be particular"—as if Hugh's way, and not the thing itself, were all that mattered. Still, light hearts and good tempers had resulted from the kindly, peaceable rule, and the young Spencers lived their own lives and took each other for granted. Hugh might hope that his little Italian song-

bird might be accepted as “Hugh’s way,” and Arthur and Mysie need fear no opposition, either tyrannical or conscientious, little as the necessity of each to the other’s life might be realised.

“Ah, Flossy,” said Mrs Crichton, “I thought we should see you to-night. I suppose Miss Venning told you of what she saw?”

“Yes,” returned Flossy, rather shyly; “so I came to see Mysie.”

“Mysie is somewhere. I have told them they must wait in secrecy and silence till Hugh comes home, or he will never forgive us.”

“Then you don’t object, Mrs Crichton?” said Flossy, eagerly.

“No. Mysie might do better, perhaps, but there is no use in making her miserable if she does not think so herself. Surely people *must* choose for themselves in these matters,” said Mrs Crichton, uttering this sentiment—so often practically ignored—as if it were such a truism that Flossy felt as if life was really so easy as to be quite flat.

“I am sure Arthur will get on,” she said.

“Oh, yes; and I don’t know a nicer fellow anywhere. Dear children, how surprised Hugh will be! I wish he would follow their example. But, dear me! I cannot expect him to see with my eyes. There is Arthur!”

Arthur came up and exchanged a hearty squeeze of the hand and delighted smile with Flossy.

“Mysie is in the garden,” he said; “do come and find her.”

“Oh, Arthur, I am so glad,” cried Flossy, impulsively, as she walked away with him. “I am so glad that Mrs Crichton—”

“Aunt Lily? I prepared several irresistible arguments, and felt as if—well, as if I might have kept them for Hugh. How kind she is! But, now, Flossy, you are unprejudiced; don’t you think I shall make Mysie as happy as that swell in the air who is supposed to loom in the future?”

“Now, how angry you would be if I did not say yes! How can you expect me to sacrifice your friendship to a disinterested regard for truth?”

“I want somebody to convince! I feel as if I had been reading hard and the examiners had asked me to decline ‘Dominus.’”

“Oh, Arthur, anyone may see where you have been lately. How ungrateful you are!”

“No, I am not, Flossy,” said Arthur; “but I really feel as if I ought to object to myself as a duty to the family.”

“Do wait for your cousin,” said Flossy; “he will do that duty for you, no doubt. No, I am *very* glad.”

“Thank you—thank you,” said Arthur, pleased at the hearty sympathy in her voice. “Ah, there’s Mysie, picking roses.”

“Now, Arthur, do stay away for five minutes. How can we talk with you there to listen?”

“Well—make haste.”

Flossy ran away from him and seized Mysie in a warm, and—considering their respective sizes—somewhat overwhelming embrace.

“My little darling, it’s delightful. I always meant you to have a fairy prince, and to think it should be Arthur!”

“I am very glad he is not a fairy prince,” said Mysie, smiling.

“What is he, then?” cried Flossy.

“Why, Flossy,” said Mysie, “I think he’s only what old Miss Rogers used to call ‘Mr Right.’”

Part 2, Chapter XII.

Pros and Cons.

> “Go back, my lord, across the moor!”

Signor Mattei was coming out from a rehearsal. He often told Violante that her work was nothing to his; and, indeed, his violin was always in its place in the orchestra. His work was his life, he would have been miserable without it; and yet, with a not uncommon inconsistency, he liked to pity himself for having got it to do. He was a man with an ideal, with a dream that was very difficult of fulfilment; and, perhaps, did not need sympathy less than the girl who suffered so much and disappointed him so sorely. Whatever may have been Signor Mattei’s youthful hopes, in the days when he had thrown away the chance of a more eligible profession to follow the art he so loved, he had long been forced to limit them to making a fair livelihood by it. Aspirations are not always capabilities; and, spite of self-devotion and enthusiasm and much technical skill, he was not destined to rise to the top of the tree. He was not, indeed, great enough to do as he liked; and his temper and touchiness often brought good engagements to a premature end; and, though he had never hitherto failed in obtaining fresh ones, there was an element of uncertainty in his fortunes.

However different things might be with him from what he had once desired, Signor Mattei had not been a discontented man. Small successes which he would once have despised were much pleasanter than small failures; and he had grown to limit his desires to such as were possible of fulfilment; when ambition, desire of gain, and burning enthusiasm were all reawakened by the discovery of Violante's wonderful voice. Here was his chance again. His daughter's name should be heard in every capital in Europe: the fortunes of the whole family should be assured. What sacrifices were too great, what toil too arduous by which the possessor of this glorious gift could turn it to account! If such a voice had belonged to Violante's father how he would have gloried and rejoiced, how he would have worked early and late, how intoxicating would have been the success that crowned his efforts! People bear much harder on each other by the inevitable workings of their alien natures than by wilful selfishness or cruelty. Violante and her father made each other miserable; yet he was anxious to give her what would have been to himself the greatest good, and she wore herself out in trying to obey and to please him. It is not easy for a bystander to judge between distaste and incapacity; it is difficult to say which is the most provoking. No amount of idleness on Violante's part would have so provoked her father as did her unenthusiastic performance of the amount of study required of her, her tears and terror when she achieved a success. Such folly *must* be curable by a sufficient amount of scolding and argument. A person *must* enjoy what is enjoyable when the advantage is pointed out to them with sufficient strength. And Violante had been just successful enough to make her father believe that it entirely depended on herself to succeed better still. Violante thought this belief cruel; and Rosa, standing between both, while she prevented either from feeling the very sharpest edge of the other's opinion, if she pitied her little sister the most, to a certain extent sympathised with Signor Mattei.

So much for sentiment. Violante was unworthy of her gift, but she possessed it, and it brought substantial gains, much needed; for in a life with so many ups and downs Signor Mattei had not held himself free from debt. Besides, no engagement had ever suited him so well as his present one, and was not that confirmed to him by Signor Vasari's interest in his young *prima donna*? If Violante married the manager *her* success was certain, and the fortunes of the whole family were assured; but if Vasari were offended there was an end of everything.

Her gains for her present engagement would belong to her father; and he felt, though he would not own, that there was enough uncertainty about her future to make the solid good of her marriage most desirable. And Signor Vasari had just made the flattering suggestion that Mdlle. Mattei's timidity and reluctance might be in part owing to a maidenly coyness and consciousness towards himself. Once acknowledged as his *promessa sposa* she would gain courage and self-confidence. Signor Mattei joyously pledged himself to do everything in his power to favour the manager's views. Art, fame, and fortune all smiled upon him; and no experience could make Signor Mattei believe that Violante was so unlike other girls as not to view such a proposal with rapture. Full of this pleasing prospect he was walking hastily home from the theatre to his own dwelling, when he was accosted by Hugh Crichton, who begged the favour of a few words with him.

Hugh was courteous and deferential, but he had no expectation that his proposal would not be received with pleasure; and was desirous, since he must speak to Signor Mattei, to have so far committed himself before he again encountered his brother, whose co-operation when he reached home he felt that he could not altogether afford to despise. Spite, however, of his not unnatural confidence in the result, he felt very hot and shy; blundered through a few unintelligible sentences; tried Italian, with a view of being polite; forgot the Italian for "daughter," "proposal," for every thing; and finally, with startling abruptness, hoped in plain English that Signor Mattei would consent to his engagement to his daughter. Signor Mattei stopped short in the street, struck an attitude of astonishment, and loudly exclaimed:

"Signor Hugo! Do my ears deceive me?"

"No, sir, assuredly not," said Hugh, much discomposed at the sudden standstill. "I have long admired la signorina Violante, and to-day I have ventured to tell her so."

"Tell her so! tell her so!" ejaculated Signor Mattei. "Tell her so, in her father's absence! Signor, is this the conduct I could expect?"

"If I have acted in ignorance of Italian customs," said Hugh, "your long residence in England must have informed you that in coming to you at once I have done all that is required by our own. If you will walk on, sir," for Signor Mattei was still figuring about on the pavement in a way that worried all the sense out of Hugh's head, "I will explain myself further."

Signor Mattei, who had really been taken utterly by surprise by Hugh's application, and was not undesirous to gain a little time for consideration, bowed profoundly and walked on by Hugh's side; while the latter, who, with all his desire to make a good impression, felt irritated by his companion's way, began stiffly:

"I should tell you, Signor Mattei, that I am in all respects my own master, and quite independent of everyone. I am not afraid that my mother will not give Mdlle. Mattei a welcome; and of my own feelings, I assure you, sir, they are most—most strong. I love her, and I hope I shall make her happy—happier than she can be in a profession to which she is so unsuited."

Hugh was a good speaker, and generally said what he had to say on all public and private occasions with perfect fluency and distinctness; but his eloquence foiled him now, and he coloured up and looked entreatingly at Signor Mattei as he made this false step.

"Unsuited to her profession, signor! unsuited to her profession! Do you mean to insult my daughter?"

"I mean that the profession is unsuited to her," said Hugh, not mending matters.

"Signor, she has been dedicated to my beloved art from her earliest years. Music is her vocation, as in a lesser—I am proud to say in a lesser—degree it is mine."

Hugh was not naturally conciliatory; and to listen patiently to what he considered such nonsense, uttered with a flash of the eyes that proved its sincerity, jarred upon him so much that there was as much annoyance as entreaty in his voice as he answered:

“I venture to set myself up as a rival to your art, and I ask you for—Violante. Indeed, I don’t think she will regret the fame she gives up.”

Hugh was so sure that it was better for Violante to marry him, an English gentleman, than to sing at all the operas in Europe, he felt that he was making so good an offer, and yet he wanted her so much, that the humility born of passionate desire conquered his sense of his own merits, and he finished pleadingly:

“If I can help it she never shall.”

“Signor, my daughter is already promised, and the arrangements for her marriage will shortly be begun.”

“That is impossible,” exclaimed Hugh; “she has given her promise to me.”

“Her promise?” cried Signor Mattei; “the promise of a little, foolish, most foolish, girl! No, sir, she knows what my views are, and she is Signor Vasari’s promised wife.”

“She knows!” She—the loving, trustful child whom he had seen kiss his white flowers, who had given herself to him without one word of misgiving. Impossible, indeed.

“She shall not be sacrificed,” cried Hugh, in his turn stopping short. “She has told me that she loves me. Whatever you may have intended her to do is without her will or knowledge.”

Now, in thus asserting Violante’s individuality Hugh made a great mistake. The Italian father did not think that it made much difference if Violante had told Hugh that she loved him twenty times. It was his part to arrange a marriage for her; and her little wishes, her foolish tongue, went for nothing.

“I do not believe Mademoiselle Mattei is aware of your wishes,” said Hugh again, hotly.

Now this was an assertion which Signor Mattei could fairly face. Violante *was* well aware of her father’s wishes. That she was involved in any positive promise she could not know, insomuch as the promise had been made for her at the very time when she had been making a far different one for herself. Nor had she fully known her danger, since Rosa, for the sake of peace and composure, had carefully kept the subject out of sight.

“Nevertheless, she is aware of them,” said Signor Mattei; and while Hugh paused, silenced for the moment, he went on, not without dignity:

“Signor, I thank you. Your proposal honours my little girl, and honours you, since you mean to sacrifice much to win her. But I know your country and your manners, and I will not give up my daughter. Your noble ladies will not receive her well.”

“There is nothing of the sort—we have no rank at all,” interposed Hugh, “and I will answer for my mother.”

“My daughter, sir, has a great future before her; she shall not sacrifice it. She shall not marry out of her class and away from her country and give up what Fortune has laid at her feet. Your fancy, Signor, will pass as it came, and hers—pshaw—she has nothing strong in her but her voice, her voice of an angel.”

Signor Mattei was a single-minded man, though he had not dealt singly with Hugh. The good match for his daughter shrank to nothing compared to the career from which it would shut her out. That underneath lurked some consciousness of the advantage to himself is true; but never would he have dreamed of claiming any like advantages from this other suitor.

Hugh walked on by his side pale and bewildered, a horrible doubt of Violante weakening his arguments and chilling his entreaties. At last he said, desperately, “Signor Mattei, after what has passed I cannot take my answer from you. She told me nothing of a former promise. She must tell me that she has made none, and then I swear to you her life shall have none of the trials you dread. I will either go home and bring you my mother’s words of welcome—my mother herself,” he continued, rashly, “or I will seek no consent at all—none is needed. I would marry her to-morrow if you care for such a test.”

“You in England, Signor, may marry spite of a parent’s curse.”

“Curse! nonsense,” said Hugh, impatiently.

“But here a father’s word is enough. She *can* give you no answer but mine.”

“I will have an answer from her,” said Hugh; “and if she can tell me she is not promised to that fellow I will never give her up till—till I have persuaded you to take a different view of this.”

“But she is promised, sir, and I refuse to entertain your proposals for her.”

“She never told me so!”

“She is timid,” said Signor Mattei, with a shrug, “timid, and, like all girls, a fool. Enough; I can say no more, Signor. I have the honour to wish you good evening.” And, with a rapidity for which Hugh was unprepared, Signor Mattei darted down a side street, and left him to himself.

Baffled as he was, Hugh did not mean to rest satisfied with his answer. He could not believe that the opposition would hold out after he had proved himself to be thoroughly in earnest. If only the horrible doubt of Violante's own fair dealing could be removed!—and removed it should be the first time he had the chance of a word with her. For Hugh was not a suspicious person, and it would have been hard indeed to doubt the shy yet passionate tenderness of Violante's voice and face. He did not understand the entanglement, but he was not going to convict her without a trial. Still, this later interview had effectually brought him down to earth; and he went back to the Consulate with the arguments which were to bring James over to his side by no means in such order as he had hoped. He found the ladies drinking coffee and James discoursing on the delights of his afternoon ramble.

"I assure you, Miss Tollemache, she had eyes like a gazelle, and her smile—there was intelligence and intellect in it; you could see by the way that she smiled that she had a mind, you know."

"But flower-girls always do smile, Mr Crichton."

"Ah, but how different this was from the made-up smiles you see in England—such a sense of art, too, in her white handkerchief—no hats and feathers. She only said, 'Grazie, signor!' but there was a sort of recognition, you know, of one's interest in her."

"I shall go and look at her," said Emily.

"Now, if one lived in a simpler state of society," pursued Jem, "what curious intercourse one might have with such a being—how much she might add to one's knowledge of existence! How one can imagine the great men of old—Raphael in search of the Beautiful—dancing in the evening! Oh, Hugh, I didn't see you! Where have you been?"

"Where have *you* been would be more to the point," retorted Hugh. "In one of Bulwer's novels?"

"He has fallen in love with a flower-girl," said Emily.

"Emily, my dear," said her mother, "Mr Crichton was only describing an artistic effect. It is very desirable to cultivate a love of nature."

"Very," said Jem. His enthusiasm had been perfectly genuine, though he had not been without a desire to interest his audience; and he could not resist a side glance at Hugh, who looked hot and cross.

"Have you seen any flower-girls, Mr Crichton?" said Emily, wickedly.

"No, Miss Tollemache, nothing so interesting;" and then a sudden sense of the extreme falsity of his words came over him; and he blushed in a violent, foolish way, which completed his annoyance with things in general.

James saw the blush and knew that something had happened. He did not, how ever, quite like to question his brother; and when the ladies left them they went out on the balcony and for some time smoked in silence.

At last Hugh knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and said, in a formal, uncomfortable tone:

"James, I have made a proposal to Mdlle. Mattei."

"The deuce you have!" ejaculated Jem.

"And what did she say?"

"She accepted it. But, Jem, you may entirely disabuse your mind of the idea that there has been any attempt to—to catch me; for her father has just given me to understand that he will not consent to it."

"What! he prefers the manager!"

"So he says."

"And she doesn't?"

"No," very shortly. "But I cannot suppose that if he was fully aware of the genuineness of my intentions and knew that my mother would receive her— In short, Jem, another person's words—"

"Another person? Do you mean me? Answer for mamma? I declare, Hugh, that's a little too much. You're going to raise such a row at home as was never heard of, and you want me to help you!"

Hugh said nothing, and James's momentary perturbation subsided.

"This is good!" he said. "*You* wanting help! Did you ever live in Oxley, Hugh, or is it all a mistake? 'Jones at the opera abroad' *is* so *very* unlike 'Jones at the opera at home.'"

"I am in earnest, Jem," said Hugh, as James did all the laughing at his own joke.

"It's a great mistake being in earnest," said Jem. "Here have you spoilt all your fun by it."

"I don't understand you."

"Why," said Jem, mischievously. "Of course, Violante was intended to amuse you during your holiday. A little sentiment—study of life."

"I have asked Mdlle. Mattei to be my wife," interrupted Hugh, in a tone of high offence.

"I beg your pardon," said Jem, after a moment's pause. "I'll be serious. So Signor Mattei is the difficulty? H'm! How far do you suppose he is involved with this dangerous rival?"

"That is what I cannot make out. He says that she, Violante, is engaged to him but she never mentioned his name."

"Told you nothing about him?"

"No. So the question is," said Hugh, in a voice that he tried hard to keep at an even level, "the question is, who is deceiving me?"

"Both and neither," returned Jem. "What?"

"I dare say she likes you best, and thinks she will try to get out of her previous entanglement."

"She should have spoken the truth," said Hugh, frowning.

"Come, Hugh, that's expecting a great deal of a poor little frightened thing like that, and an Italian, too. What would you have?"

"You did not see her?" said Hugh.

James looked at him, and saw that his hand shook as he put his pipe back into its case while he kept his face turned away.

"What shall you do?" he said.

"Find out," returned Hugh, "and act accordingly."

He walked away as he spoke. James did not suppose it likely that Violante would come out of the ordeal with such flying colours as to satisfy his brother; and, though he was very little inclined to judge the poor child harshly, he could not help hoping that here was a way of escape for Hugh from a most unlucky prepossession, though, as he was forced to acknowledge, at the cost of considerable pain.

Part 2, Chapter XIII.

Contrary Winds.

"Oh, well for him whose will is strong!"

"Rosa! you were mistaken! He loves me—he says so. Oh, I am so happy—he is so good!" cried Violante, as she ran to meet her sister and threw herself into her arms. Timid as the southern maiden might be she had none of the proud, reticent "shamefastness" that would have led an English girl to conceal her joy even from herself. It was all right and natural; and as Rosa, aghast, dropped into a chair she knelt beside her, her sweet, pathetic eyes and lips transfigured as a flower by the sun.

"What did he say to you?" exclaimed Rosa.

"He loves me—he is coming back again. He does not mind about my singing—Ah, I cannot tell you," and the bright face drooped with sudden bashfulness.

"Oh!" cried Rosa, passionately, as she pulled off her hat and fanned herself with it; "what a foolish world this is! What has he said? what has he done?" she repeated, almost fiercely.

"He asked me to marry him," said Violante, with a sort of dignity.

"Oh, dear! he is a very foolish young man. What is to come of it?—what *can* come of it? Nothing but trouble."

Violante gazed at her, mute and frightened; then her face brightened with an incredulous smile.

"Oh, if you had never seen him!"

"Rosa!" cried Violante, springing to her feet, "rather than that, I would be miserable for ever—rather than *that*, I would die."

"Because you are as silly as the rest! Oh, you unlucky child! don't you see that it is impossible? Either he will go back to his own people and they will talk him out of it, or he will marry you in spite of them. But no, he shall never do that!"

"But he said it would be right," said Violante; then, as Rosa laughed bitterly, she went on, pleadingly: "Oh, Rosa mia, it is you who are silly. *He* will make it right. Indeed, I am happy; but I cannot bear to see you cry. I will act, I shall not care now, and you must keep father from being vexed." There was much in Violante's speech of the unconscious selfishness of one to whom the part of comforter was a strange reversion of ordinary life; but her caresses were very sweet to Rosa, who, recovering herself with an effort, said:

"Well, Violante, you can't expect me to believe in him as you do! I never thought it would come to this!"

"But, Rosa, you will not try to stop it?" Rosa hesitated. Even supposing Hugh entirely faithful, what doubtful happiness lay before her sister; and, if not, what a blank of disappointment, what hopeless injury, what misery how unendurable to the girl who shrank and trembled at a harsh word!

Rosa sat upright and gazed straight before her, while Violante watched, unable to understand her face.

"No!" at length she exclaimed, "you must take your chance with the rest of us. How can I or anyone help it? But—but—I'll never stop anyone's love—oh, my little darling, my little darling!" and Rosa broke down into tears, hiding her face in the girl's soft hair.

"Rosa, you think I could not bear any trouble; but I could—for him."

There was a new fervour in her voice, and Rosa yielded to it. "Oh, I hope you will be happy," she said.

"Why, you see I am happy!" said Violante, with a childish laugh. "Father is late; let us have some coffee—you are so hot and tired, I will get it. There is no terrible opera to-night. Maddalena! Maddalena!"

"Ah! signorina, *I* know who nearly broke the china bowl."

"Why, *I* did, Maddalena! *I* threw it down," said Violante, as she tripped about after the old woman, whose gold hair-pins were quivering with sly triumph. "But it is quite safe—not a crack in it."

The coffee was finished; the bright, hot sun went down; and the sisters sat long by the open window in the warm, pleasant twilight. Violante fell into dreamy silence; Rosa also. But there was a great gulf between their meditations, though they were thinking of the same subject and, partly, of the same person.

"There's father!" cried Violante, as a step sounded. "Oh, I will run away, and you shall tell him."

"No, no, you little coward; he will be sure to ask for you—stay a minute."

Violante leant back against the window-sill, her eyes drooping, her breast heaving, and yet her face flushing and dimpling,—the new confidence almost conquering the old fear. Rosa looked far the more frightened of the two. Signor Mattei's step came up the great staircase quick as a boy's; he seemed almost to skate across the polished floor, so instantaneously did he bear down on his daughters. In a moment his roll of music was cast aside in one direction, his great white umbrella in another; and, with accents rising every moment into higher indignation, he exclaimed: "Violante, what folly is this that I hear? Is this what all your idleness and obstinacy mean? I'll not hear a word of it. A lover, indeed! Never let me hear of it again!"

Violante stood breathless, but Rosa interposed:

"Has Mr Crichton been talking to you, father?"

"Ay, and a fine story he brought me. Talking of promises, indeed! How dare she dream of making promises? And you—what have you been doing? Taking care of your sister? No! No! Encouraging her in disobedience and deceit!"

Now Signor Mattei was wont, on all occasions of domestic disturbance, to relieve his feelings by the most voluble scoldings that the Italian temperament could suggest and the Italian tongue express. Had Violante broken the china bowl she would probably have heard nearly as many reproaches; but no amount of experience ever accustomed her to these outbreaks; and, though practically she had never been ill-treated, she feared her father far more than: he guessed; while Rosa usually answered him back more promptly than respectfully, and, loving him better than Violante did, often ended by having her own way. Now she said:

"Why are you angry with Violante, father? She has done nothing wrong. Is it her fault if Mr Crichton loves her and has asked her to marry him?"

"Asked her—asked *her*! How dared he ask *her*? Now, most undutiful, most ungrateful child, how long has this conspiracy lasted?"

"He came to-day," stammered Violante.

"To-day? You tell me this folly has begun to-day! You, who have been secretly sighing for this stranger, sighing for him instead of singing! Ah—shame on you!—tell me—tell me—*tell me*!" in a rapid *crescendo*, as he seized her wrist and pulled her towards him.

Violante burst into tears.

"Father! how can you speak to her so?" cried Rosa. "Let her go—and I will tell you. Mr Crichton never said a word to her till to-day. Why will you not consent to their encasement?"

"Because I know my duty as a father better. But it is all over. Do you hear, Violante? I have ended it for ever!"

"Oh, father," cried Violante, holding out her hands imploringly, "I will not neglect my singing, I will practise all day long; but you would break my heart—oh, dear father, I love him;" and the poor child, with unwonted courage, went up to her father and put her arms round his neck with a look and gesture that, could she have called them up at will, would have settled her stage difficulties for ever.

"No, Violante!" Signor Mattei said. "You know what my wish has been. You were not free to promise yourself; and to-day I have made my arrangements with Signor Vasari and have promised you to him."

“Father, father, I would kill myself first!” cried Violante, dropping on her knees and hiding her face. “Oh, Rosa—Rosa—help me!”

“Hugh, hush, my child. Stand up and control yourself,” said Rosa, with English dislike to a scene—a kind of self-consciousness shared by neither father nor sister. “Go away—go into our room. I will talk to father first.”

Violante rushed away with her hands over her face, and then the other two prepared for war.

Signor Mattei divested himself of his neck-tie, rubbed his hands through his hair, marched up and down the room, and said:

“Now, Rosa, be reasonable, be dutiful, and hear what I have to say.”

Rosa sat down by the table, with a red spot on each cheek, and took up her knitting.

“Yes, father, that is just what I wish. I want to know what has happened.”

“Am I a cruel father? Do I beat or starve you, or do I work all day for my ungrateful children?”

“I think you were cruel to Violante, father, when you called her deceitful.”

“Violante is a little fool. Now, once for all, Rosa, I will have no disputes. This very day I have promised her to Vasari.”

“Father!” cried Rosa, in high indignation. “It is one thing to forbid her engagement to Mr Crichton, and quite another to insist on her marrying Vasari. *I* would not stand it.”

“But you, figlia mia, have the sense to decide for yourself,” said Signor Mattei, with a little flattery inexpressibly provoking to the downright Rosa. “Your sister is a child, and cannot judge. Consider. This young Englishman goes home. The proud ladies of his house would see him mouldering in his grave before they blessed his betrothal.”

“I don’t believe they would be so ridiculous! And he is quite independent. But I agree with you, father, that it would be a very unfortunate thing if he married her without his friends’ consent, and what we could not agree to. But he speaks confidently of being able to gain it.”

“He speaks!” echoed Signor Mattei, with scorn. “He speaks! He goes home—he sees his folly. Flattered by the flowers of his own aristocracy will he remember Violante?”

“I don’t believe he has anything to do with the aristocracy! Of course, father, I see *all* the risks—they are fearful ones; but the other way is such certain misery,” said Rosa, faltering. “How will she bear it!”

“Rosa, I am surprised at you. Can you not see the benefits of this marriage?”

“Yes, I know all that,” said Rosa, sturdily. “I know, *if* she could make up her mind to it, it would be a very good thing for her and for all of us. But, father, married or single, she will never make an actress, it will kill her; and she *hates* Vasari.”

Then Signor Mattei’s patience fairly gave way.

“Hates him! Don’t tell me of anything so absurd. How many girls, do you think, have hated their suitors and been happy enough! *That* is no reason.”

In spite of Rosa’s English breeding she had seen instances enough of the truth of this remark not to have an instant contradiction ready. It *might* turn out well; which was all that could be said in favour of Hugh Crichton; and yet Rosa felt that, had she been Violante, she would have willingly risked her all in favour of that one glorious possibility. “But it doesn’t always pay,” she thought, and while she hesitated, thinking how such a risk had once been run and run in vain, her father spoke again.

“Now, Rosa, listen. Mild as a lamb in daily life, in emergencies I am a lion; and my will is law, you cannot change it. Violante shall be Vasari’s wife. I have promised, I will perform.” Here Signor Mattei struck his hand on the table in a highly effective manner. “She will be raised above all the uncertainties of our profession, need not work beyond her strength, and we shall share in her success. To this she must agree, and if you will not promise to see that she does so I shall send her to Madame Cellini’s.”

Madame Cellini was a fine old opera-singer who had married and settled in Civita Bella. She had shown much kindness to the motherless girls and had not been an injudicious friend to them; but her contempt for Violante’s fears and her strenuous efforts to rouse her to a sense of her privileges had rendered her instructions and herself an object of dread; and Rosa answered, after a pause:

“I will promise to remain neutral. If Violante can be happy without Hugh Crichton I had far rather she did not marry him. But if she is sent away or too much coerced she will be utterly unable to act. Let her alone, and I don’t suppose she will hold out very long.”

“You will send no letters or messages?”

“No,” said Rosa; “I promise that I will not. I shall leave her to herself.”

To herself! To her weak will and her cowardly spirit! How long would they hold out?

Rosa went in search of her; and, as Violante sprang towards her exclaiming,—

"Oh, Rosa, you will help me!" she held her back.

"No, Violante, I cannot help and I will not hinder you. Father is determined, and you must do it, if do it you will, all yourself. If I move a finger, you will be sent away from me; but I will not try to persuade you either way."

Violante stood still, with despair in her face. How could she resist her father for an hour? She crept away to bed, at Rosa's suggestion; received her kisses with passive absence of offence; and, as she hid her face on her pillow, thought not of self-support but of the only help left to her. "*He* will come again to-morrow—they will listen to *him*."

Part 2, Chapter XIV.

Left to Herself.

> "As we have met, we shall not meet again
> For ever, child, for ever!"

Left to herself! In the early morning Violante's senses awoke from the confusion of disturbed and dreamy sleep; and, with burning eyes and throbbing temples, she sat upright and tried to think "for herself."

"*He* will come and persuade father." She repeated this watchword over and over again to herself; but the new confidence could hardly combat the old experience, and she could not realise that "father" would be over-persuaded—even by her lover. Childish as Violante was she had grown up too much in the constant discussion of ways and means not to be quite aware of the worldly advantages of Signor Vasari's offer. Those attaching to Hugh Crichton's were like a dim and distant dream, scarcely to be realised; nor had she, in the abstract, any sense that she would be unfairly treated by being deprived of her right of choice. Perhaps no creature ever entered on a conflict with less hope of success. She felt so sure that neither prayers nor tears would move her father that she never thought of trying their effect; while Signor Vasari seemed still more inexorable. If Hugh did not somehow set it right for her what remained but submission? "I had rather die; but I shall be so frightened, I shall say yes," she thought. "They have always made me do what they wish. I could not help it! There's no one to help me—no one!" Her cowardice and weakness had been so often cast in the poor child's teeth that she had lost every scrap of confidence in her own powers. Her father said, "You *shall* give in," Rosa said, "You cannot hold out;" and Violante knew nothing of a Strength not her own, of a Hand that would hold hers more firmly than sister's or lover's. Her love was the strongest thing about her: would it hold her up? She thought with a kind of ardour of resisting and refusing, of holding out and dying rather than yielding. But all the time she knew that she should yield; that she could not act and sing between the two fires of father and suitor; that the long days of conflict would not kill her all at once, but would each one be very miserable and hard to endure, and would each one wear out a little of her strength. For Violante had some experience of troublous times, and knew very well what it meant to be unhappy and in disgrace.

"He will come; he will help me." She pushed aside the thought of what was to follow and resolved to please her father as much as possible, in the hope of protracting matters till Hugh should have time to interfere. So, to Rosa's surprise, she appeared in a clean muslin dress and a pink ribbon and sat down to sing her scales, instead of lying in bed and crying, as inclination would have prompted. Nay, she carried her father his cup of chocolate, and kept her hand from trembling as he took it from her. Signor Mattei viewed all this as betokening intended submission: Rosa was puzzled. For the first time she could not understand Violante.

The morning hours wore away; there was, fortunately, no rehearsal. Violante sat in the window with some knitting in her lap. She did not say one word to Rosa of her fears or her intentions. Steps came up the stairs and across the corridor, and Signor Mattei ushered in the great Vasari himself. Rosa started up and came forward to receive him. Violante shrank into her corner; she grew white and cold, but she set her mouth, and under her long eyelashes her eyes looked hard and strange.

"Signor," said Signor Mattei, "here is my daughter. I give her to you with profound pleasure, and assure you that she is sensible of the honour of your choice."

Violante spoke not a word. She rose up, obedient to her father's eye, and, perhaps, somewhat urged by the long habit of obedience to the manager. She dared not utter the refusal on her lips. What would they do to her; what would they say? It was better to submit—to submit till *he* came. Signor Vasari took her by the hand, bowed profoundly, and offered to her a handsome diamond cross and chain of pearls.

"Permit me, Signorina; they were the jewels of a princess."

He fastened it on her neck, and then, putting his arm around her, drew her towards him as he had done before now—on the stage. Violante started and lifted her eyes. There stood Hugh Crichton within the door, his eyes fixed on her, his face as pale as hers.

"Signor Mattei, you were right, and I thank you," he said in English, and in a hard, fierce voice. Then he turned and was gone, before anyone spoke a word.

Suddenly Violante wrenched herself out of Vasari's grasp. She pulled the cross off her neck, scattering the pearls far and wide as she threw it on the floor.

"I hate you!" she said, "I hate you! And if you marry me I will kill you."

"Signorina!" ejaculated the astonished manager.

"Violante, Violante!" cried Rosa.

“I hate, you!” she repeated, and then she threw herself on her knees.

“Father, father, father, kill me, kill me first.”

“Ungrateful, wicked child, you are driving a dagger into my breast!” cried Signor Mattei.

“I am deceived, I am deceived, but I will have my rival’s blood!” exclaimed Vasari.

“Signor Vasari, you are treading on that cross and spoiling it,” said Rosa. “Violante, for shame! You don’t know what you say.”

“I do know,” said Violante; but the quick reaction was coming, and she let Rosa lift her up and cowered into her arms, trembling and shivering. Her defiance was over, and had come, like the actions of most cowards, five minutes too late.

“Signor Vasari,” said Rosa, “I think you had better leave us and—and—come again when my sister is more herself. I will pick up the pearls, and—and, father, isn’t that best?”

“La Signorina has no lack of passion when it suits her turn,” said Vasari, with a sneer. “Yes, I will go—but, as to coming again, that is another matter.”

Then Signor Mattei broke out into a perfect storm of invective and adjuration, calling the Saints to witness his own honest dealing, and speaking of and to Violante in terms of such anger and contempt as were hardly calculated to excuse her to her lover. Violante shook like a leaf, but made no attempt at an answer, and Rosa at last pulled her away from the room, leaving her father still in the full flow of his eloquence and Signor Vasari stiff and upright with offended dignity, yet casting involuntary and half-unconscious glances at his scattered pearls.

Hugh Crichton, on the other hand, had suffered since his interview with Signor Mattei, from a kind of doubt, not unnatural to a man treading on unknown ground. He would have had far more confidence in Violante had she been the Miss Katie Clinton whose cause his mother advocated, little as he would have believed anyone who had echoed the sentiment; and when Mr Tollemache came in before dinner and said that all the world was talking of Mademoiselle Mattei’s great good luck in her encasement to Signor Vasari, Hugh turned visibly pale, and James said:

“Is it a fact or a rumour, Mr Tollemache?”

“A fact, I believe. I had it from young Contarini, who haunts the musical world; and he said Vasari had told him of it himself.” Neither looked at Hugh, who sat still for a moment and then got up and went away. James could not help a look of consternation, and Mr Tollemache said:

“I assure you, Crichton, I had no notion anything serious was going on. Hugh’s the last fellow I should have suspected of—of—”

“Making such a fool of himself?” said James. “Well—you see he never could take things in moderation.”

“He’s well out of the scrape, in my opinion.”

“Yes, poor old boy, I suppose he is. The rest of us are, at any rate.”

Dinner passed, of course, with no reference to the subject; nor did Hugh mention it till the next morning, when, alone with Jem, he said, with a nervous laugh but an odd twitch in his voice:

“Jem, you profess to understand young women. Which should you have said was the favoured one?”

Jem was driven into a corner. He certainly had thought that Violante had favoured Hugh. He thought so still, and felt pretty sure that she was not a free agent; but he did not wish to say so, and yet he could not but be touched by the eager wistful look with which Hugh regarded him.

“Well,” he said, “I thought she looked graciously on you; but you see the—”

“If so,” interrupted Hugh, “I’d marry her to-morrow, spite of them all.”

“Good heavens, Hugh!” cried Jem. “Don’t think of such a thing! I don’t believe Tollemache would consent. It’s impossible!”

“Tollemache?”

“British Consul, you know. You *can’t* get married out here as if it was Gretna Green; and I won’t have a hand in it; I declare, Hugh, I won’t,” cried Jem. “It’s all very well, but I won’t, you know; and there’s an end of it.”

“I did not ask you,” said Hugh, coldly, but becoming conscious that to marry Violante without the consent of her friends or his was, under the circumstances, utterly impossible.

He said no more to James, but resolved to see Violante once again at all hazards. How he saw her, and what effect the scene he beheld had on a mind already full of doubts and suspicions, has been already told. Anger, intensified by the recollection of how he had once before been treated, swallowed up every other feeling. He went back to the Consulate and met his brother on the stairs.

“I shall go home, Jem,” he said. “I cannot stay here. You can explain and follow when you like. Yes, it’s all at an end. Never speak of it any more.”

James could obtain no word of explanation—no single particular—as he tried to help Hugh to pack up his things and to arrange some decent sort of leave-taking. Hugh was too desperate to care who was surprised at his proceedings. The ladies were out, and he wrote three lines of courteous thanks to Mrs Tollemache, but wished her son good-bye without any reason given, and never gave his brother a chance of sympathising with or restraining him.

"I am going straight home," he said, as he went away.

"Well!" exclaimed Mr Tollemache, "who could have expected such a tornado?"

"Oh," said Jem, "Hugh never could take circumstances into consideration. I believe the poor little thing was as much in love with him as she knew how. How could he expect her to tell the truth about the manager? Of course she liked Hugh, and of course she told fibs, and now she will cry her eyes out, and then marry Vasari after all. What else can she do, poor little victim? And then there's Hugh, who won't dance four times with a girl for fear of 'exciting false expectations,' has gone and broken her heart—if hearts ever are broken. Much he knows about the tricks girls will play to avoid an uproar! Poor little, pretty thing!"

"I don't care for the girl," said Mr Tollemache, "but it's no joke about Hugh."

"Poor old fellow, no; but those things pass off, you know; and, after all, anything's better than that he should have married her."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr Tollemache.

"Poor little child!" repeated Jem, with a not unkindly pity, but which yet made small account of Violante beside the other interests involved.

And so Hugh Crichton went away from Civita Bella, and Violante was left behind him.

Part 3, Chapter XV.

Arthur's Story.

> "I love thee to the level of every day's
> Most quiet need—by sun and candle-light."

Part 3, Chapter XVI.

Mysie.

> "Oh, happy spirit, wisely gay!"

"What are you doing, Mysie?" said Florence Venning, as she came one afternoon into the Redhurst drawing-room.

"I am sewing a button on Arthur's glove," returned Mysie, who was sitting by herself on a low chair in the window with a smart little work-basket by her side. "Do you know, Floss, Hugh is coming back to-night? Aunt Lily had a line from him from Paris."

"Dear me! And do you want to get the button sewn on before he comes?"

Mysie shook her head, smiling, while Flossy went on: "Seriously, Mysie, aren't you in a great fright?"

"No!" answered Mysie, "I cannot see why I should be in a fright. You know, Flossy, I have never been at all afraid of Hugh. I know he always does what he thinks right. And he knows what *is* right, too."

"Well, but suppose he says you are too young?"

"But I shall explain to him," said Mysie, "that I am not young. Now, don't laugh, Flossy; but I can't help feeling that when people are so very sure of themselves as I am they must be able to make others believe in them."

"That's a profound remark," said Flossy.

"I'm not at all changeable," said Mysie, "and I know I shall be able to make Hugh understand that I am quite in earnest." There was a peculiar intensity in her quiet voice; and as she lifted up her eyes, clear and serene, Flossy felt that they would have convinced her of anything.

"It will be very unromantic if you don't get anything to try your constancy," said Flossy, teasingly.

"Well, one can be very happy without romance," said Mysie, laughing. "Romance generally means something rather uncomfortable."

"Well," said Flossy, in her full, dear tones, "so does love—generally. I always observe that when a girl can't do her lessons, or can't eat her dinner, and is dismal and rather a bore, Mary has a confidence from home about her. And if one happens to see the man he's generally such a *creature*. Now, I can imagine regarding Saint Ambrose—"

"Flossy!"

"Well, of course, I mean some one like him. I think my ideal is a mixture of intellect and strong common-sense, something like King Alfred. And I greatly admire the strength of Luther and Hampden; only those people are so often on the wrong side. But you see, Mysie, I shall never meet the great man of the age, and I shall never care for anyone unless he is wiser, cleverer, and better than I am myself!"

"That would be so difficult to find," said Mysie.

"Mysie, how dare you be so sarcastic!" cried Flossy, with a great, hearty laugh. "But I don't care; I can do without him, and when he turns up I'll let you know."

"Is he to be anything like that man in your old story who never smiled?" said Mysie.

"No, no, that was a *very* juvenile idea. But, Mysie," coming nearer and speaking with slight embarrassment, "there *is* a story and a hero in it. I wonder if you would like him."

"Oh, do show it to me."

"Then, you must promise not to tell Arthur. Ah, is Arthur so cool as you are about your cousin?"

"No," said Mysie, "he says that he should say 'no' in Hugh's place. But," she concluded quietly, "that is because it is coming so near."

"And what has become of Arthur now?"

"There's a cricket-match between Redhurst and Oxley, and Arthur is playing. Will you come down to the ground? Aunt Lily's there and Frederica; they went to pay a call first."

Flossy assented, and Mysie went upstairs to put on her hat. She was a girl with a great many quiet little tastes of her own, and her room gave opportunities for the study of them. There was something about her far removed from the ordinary hurry and bustle of modern young-ladyhood. She was noted in the family for always having time for everything. So on her table lay an album and a book of photographs, set in little paintings, and a basket containing pincushions and needle-books of wonderful shapes and capable workmanship, besides other varieties of fancy-work. Mysie dearly loved needlework, and secretly regretted the days when she could have stitched Arthur's shirts for him. There were flowers, gathered and growing, and quiet, dainty little birds—avadevats and the like—hanging in the window; while on the mantelpiece was almost every little possession of Mysie's short existence: the China dogs and the China shepherds of her babyhood, the little glass tea-set and the spun-glass boxes of advancing childhood, up to the pots and scent bottles—her schoolfellows' presents in later years. For Mysie never lost or broke anything, and never grew tired of anything because it was old. She kept her big wax-doll in her wardrobe, and all her old story-books on the shelf in company with Arthur's birthday present of Tennyson's poems, and such and so many works of fiction as might be expected on a young lady's book-shelves whose taste was exceedingly correct and who was able to gratify it. Mysie had, however, two little tastes of her own. She was fond of very sentimental poetry, which she read, copied, and learnt by heart quietly to herself, not feeling at all hurt if Arthur laughed at it or Flossy declared that it lowered her spirits; but, being an exceedingly happy little person, she had somehow a peculiar relish for faded flowers, bygone days, sad hearts, and all such imagery. She also liked all books containing quaint and pregnant sayings of wit or wisdom; read George Herbert and Bacon's essays; and when asked, as a little girl, which part of the Bible she liked best to read had replied: "The Book of Proverbs: it was so exceedingly true."

With every possibility of being an idle young lady Mysie was really useful and industrious, good, and pious—in the simplest meaning of that much abused word. She was a far more developed person than her lover, young as she was; and she loved him with all the force of old association, sisterly admiration and anxiety, mingling with the newer and sweeter dependence on his talents and his counsel. She believed in him, but her instinct was to advise him and to take care of him and to think of what was good for him, even while his opinions had unconsciously moulded many of her own; and to please him was her greatest delight.

Carefully she arranged her little hat, with its wild-rose trimming, and settled her pretty summer dress before she rejoined Flossy and started with her for the cricket-field, where several ladies and other spectators were already watching Arthur making runs in a white flannel suit edged with scarlet, which Mysie thought exceedingly becoming.

Mrs Crichton made room for them on a bench beside her. Frederica and Flossy began to compare notes of the runs; while Mysie sat in the bright sun, dreamily contemplating her lover's prowess. Some of the cricketers came up to speak to them; one of the Oxley curates, in black trousers and a grey shirt, eagerly pointed out to Flossy the performance of a mutual protégé. Mrs Harcourt, the wife of the old rector of Redhurst, made the welcome announcement that she had ordered afternoon tea to be brought into the field. Mysie's Redhurst Sunday scholars curtseyed and smiled at her from a distance; and the far more elegant damsels of Oxley, who absorbed all Flossy's unprofessional efforts in the way of teaching, made her gracious bows, and offered her an opportunity of studying how to dress, or not to dress, hair of every shade of black, brown, flaxen, and auburn. A detachment from Oxley Manor, headed by Clarissa and the German governess, appeared at a discreet distance. Mysie became aware that Arthur saw her, and was making his thirtieth run under the inspiring influence of her eyes when a tall shadow fell on the dry, sunny grass, and a well-known voice said, "Well, mother, how are you?"

"My dear Hugh! *How* you surprised me; we did not expect you till dinner time!"

"I came half-an-hour ago; and finding you were all down here I thought I would follow you."

"Quite right. How are you, and have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Very well; and I have enjoyed myself exceedingly," said Hugh.

“Where’s Jem?”

“In London, to-day, I believe, but we did not travel back together. He wanted to see some other places.”

“And Civita Bella was charming? You are sunburnt, Hugh.”

“Civita Bella is a very charming place, with sun enough to burn anyone. How d’ye do, Mysie? I did not see you.”

Mysie put her hand into Hugh’s and felt her courage sink to her toes.

“I’m very well, Hugh, thank you,” she said, in a small voice; and then she perceived that Arthur had caught sight of his cousin, found himself “out,” he hardly knew how, and came over towards them with his face much more crimson than exertion need have made it.

“Well, Arthur, I congratulate you,” said Hugh. “On your degree,” he added, as Arthur started and looked blank.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Arthur, as he turned his back on Hugh and Mysie, in an awkward boyish way, and began to talk vehemently to the two Miss Dickensons, daughters of the Oxley doctor, with whom he had been sometimes accused of flirting; while Hugh turned to receive various greetings. To all this he had looked forward, and his manner and look did him credit, for, as his mother said, “he seemed as if he had never been away.”

Poor Hugh! When miles away from Civita Bella he had come to himself, as it were, after the passion of rage and grief in which he had left the city, he had resolved to cut the past seven weeks out of his life and to let them leave no trace behind. No one knew anything about them but James, who could well be trusted to keep the secret at home; they were utterly apart from all the rest of his life, and they should remain so. All their joy and all their pain should be buried for ever. These few short days should not influence all the rest of his life. What difference could it make to Redhurst and Oxley that a little Italian girl had made a fool of him? He had plenty of interests which remained unaltered, and this thing should be, what James had called it, a foolish holiday incident that was over and done. This resolution, though prompted by resentment, was agreeable to common-sense; and Hugh was not likely to betray himself. He knew that he must suffer a certain amount of pain, and then he supposed it would be over; if not he must bear it. What was there to see here while he waited for the train? A cathedral: he would go and see it.

And a girl offered him a great bouquet of roses and oleanders, such as Violante had put in the china bowl. Hugh turned off with a sharp refusal; but suddenly thought: “What, if after all I was mistaken! If I had waited one moment longer—” and the torment of that doubt, which yet was not strong enough to prompt any measure for its own satisfaction, haunted him and fretted him as the actual sorrow could not do, for it was a doubt of himself.

He had always been grave, and he was too strong and vigorous for trouble to tell easily on his health; so his appearance struck no one as unnatural, while he answered his mother’s enquiries about the Tollemaches, and described the beauties of Civita Bella—rather proud to find that he could do it so easily. Moreover, the home party had an absorbing interest of their own; and as soon as the match had ended, in the triumph of Redhurst, Mrs Crichton took her son’s arm to walk home with him, and Mysie and Arthur slipped away by a different path through the lanes.

Arthur put out his hand and took hold of Mysie’s, and they walked on for a bit hand in hand—a fashion Mysie favoured, perhaps as reminding her of holiday afternoons, when Arthur’s big-boy companionship had been so flattering and delightful to the little school-girl. The air was scented with meadow-sweet and with hay; the elms, in full leaf, threw heavy shadows across their path; a thrush was singing; the church clock chimed half-past six; everything was full of peaceful beauty. Mysie looked shyly into Arthur’s eyes, and then they both laughed; they were not really afraid or in suspense as to their fate, only Arthur wished that the decisive interview was over. “Suppose, for the sake of supposing,” he said, “that Hugh was really to act the cruel parent and send me away. What should you do, Mysie?”

“I don’t know,” said Mysie, lightly. “If he locked me up I think I should give in to him.”

“Then I should blow my brains out!” said Arthur. “I don’t know why I am talking such nonsense,” he added. “I know there is no reasonable likelihood of any interference; but sometimes, Mysie, it comes over me to think what have I done to deserve, what so few fellows get—my first love—nothing in the way? Everything in my life has gone well with me.”

“We must be very good,” said Mysie, in a low voice.

Arthur half shook his head. He was not given to talk about himself, or even to think much about himself from a critical point of view, but he felt that life had been made uncommonly easy to him, by circumstances, by temperament, and by the lodestar of Mysie’s love; and it, perhaps, proved that he was not spoiled by prosperity; since, with the stirring of the deepest feeling that he had ever known, there came a profound sense of these blessings and an almost exaggerated conviction of the absence of effort by which they had been attained.

“I have done nothing to deserve any of it,” he thought. “My work was pleasant to me. How could I go wrong with *her* before my eyes?” The kind actions, the ready aid which won much affection, the quick interest in all around him which made him helpful and useful everywhere—what had these ever cost him? More pains, perhaps, and more virtuous effort than he remembered or thought worth mentioning; but it was true that Arthur’s was a gracious nature, so kindly and genial that, though his life had been singularly blameless, he had hardly been conscious of aims above the average.

Mysie cut into the heart of his perplexity.

“I think it would be very ungrateful,” she said, “not to be glad that we are happy. We should be very thankful to God

for it, and try to make other people happy, too; and trials are sure to come in this life," she added, in her sweet, fearless, untried voice.

"You shall have few, my darling, if I can keep them away. But you are right; and it would be strange, indeed, if one were not thankful—for you."

"The *Christian Year* says," said Mysie, in her free, simple way:

> "'Thankful for all God takes away,
> Humbled by all He gives—'

"That is what you meant, isn't it?"

Arthur listened, half in admiration of Mysie's goodness—he thought, as others like him have done, his lady-love so good—and half with the shyness of young manhood of devotional, apart from theological, language.

"Nothing so saintly, I fear, as that," he said. "But I see what the last part means. What!"—as Mysie started and shrank up to him—"not afraid of cows, still, my little one!"

"N-o," said Mysie, doubtfully, as half-a-dozen cows and a couple of woolly little calves turned out of a field, noisily and quickly. "No; it is very silly, and I am almost cured; but I did not expect them."

Arthur put a protecting arm around her, very willing to forgive the fear that made her cling to him.

"Flossy does tease me so about it; but I shall always hate cows and strange dogs and guns," said Mysie, in whom a sort of physical timidity contrasted strangely with her quiet self-possession in other ways.

"You must not walk by yourself if they frighten you, darling," said Arthur; "but these are very harmless beasts. Come, here's the garden-gate—and there's Hugh. Tastes differ, but a herd of buffaloes would be a trifle; here goes!"

Mysie vanished, and Arthur advanced towards his cousin, into whose ears Mrs Crichton had already poured the whole story.

Hugh had listened, but he was annoyed and unsympathetic.

"Arthur is too young."

"Oh, my dear Hugh, so much the better. Your dear father was very little older, and I only wish I could see you—"

"Mysie has a right to a wider out-look."

"But, my dear, she quite *adores* him; she always did. And she is the most constant little creature. There cannot be a word against Arthur."

"Oh, no; he is exceedingly well-conducted," said Hugh, dryly.

"And what a pity to come between young people! It always does them harm, even where it's inevitable. Disappointments are very bad things."

"Most people have to survive them. However, mother, if you are satisfied on Mysie's behalf, I can have nothing to say. I see Arthur. I'll get it over at once."

Hugh crossed the lawn, but had he wished to win Mysie for himself he could hardly have felt a bitterer pang of jealousy than that which came upon him as he looked at Arthur's gladsome eyes and heard the proud satisfaction in his tones through all their embarrassment.

"I have nothing to say, Hugh, but that we have chosen each other. I think I can make her happy, and I will do my best to be helpful to you, and to place myself in a less unequal position as regards her fortune."

"As mother consents," said Hugh, "I cannot have a different opinion; but as regards the Bank, you must know your own mind, and I shall not consent to your taking any place there till you have taken time to consider of it. It is not exciting work nor satisfying, if you are ambitious."

"I repeat," said Arthur, "I have chosen my lot in life. I want Mysie, and Oxley, and the Bank, if you'll have me; and Heaven knows I think myself a lucky fellow!"

"You know," said Hugh, "by the terms of my father's will you have the offer, but I should wish you to consider well of it."

"Oh, I'll consider," said Arthur, in rather an off-hand manner; "but why lose time? And you'll be very busy and want help now Simpson's getting past his work."

"Thank you." Hugh paused, and then said, he hardly knew how ungraciously: "I shall not interfere with you: you can, of course, do as you like. I believe I ought to speak to Mysie; but, of course, you know what she will say."

Arthur laughed joyously, little knowing how the gay, confident sound smote on Hugh's ears.

"You're *very* good, old fellow," he said. "Don't imagine I think my good fortune a matter of course. But I want to hear all your adventures. We have set upon you before you have even had your dinner, which is cruel. How many girls did

Jem fall a victim to? Have you brought him home safe?”

“Jem took very good care of himself. But, as you say, it is dinner time. I must see if my things have come.”

“You’ve never wished me good luck! Well, you have assured it to me, which is better.”

“Oh, yes,” said Hugh; “I wish you joy, and certainly would not be the means of interfering with your good fortune.”

Part 3, Chapter XVII.

Smooth Waters.

> ”—The old June weather,
> Blue above lane and wall.”

“You are quite sure of your own mind, Mysie?”

“Yes, Hugh. I am quite certain.”

“Because I ought to set before you that you might do much better for yourself. You have seen very few people, and I ought not to let you act upon impulse,” said Hugh, in the driest of voices.

Mysie had been prepared for this appeal; and, though she blushed crimson and kept her eyes on her lap, she replied, not by protestations, but by the arguments which she thought ought to prove convincing. Hugh had called her into the study, a little room looking out on the garden, and more or less appropriated to himself. There was another room which all the young men shared when at home, and where pipes, guns, dogs, and books were to be found in wild confusion; but this was Hugh’s sanctum, where he wrote letters and transacted business and possibly read the highly-respectable volumes that lined its wails. Mysie sat in a great leather chair by the window, with the flickering sun on her bright brown hair and the shadows of the roses on her gay green and white dress.

“I know,” she said modestly, but quite clearly, “that perhaps some one richer than Arthur might—might meet me by-and-by.”

“Exactly,” said Hugh.

“But then, Hugh, you cannot be sure of that, and what would it matter, when—when my mind was made up?”

“If you know your own mind, Mysie.”

“I might not know it if I had only just met him. People often make mistakes then. But—but—”

“Well,” said Hugh, kindly, as she stammered and stopped, “what is it, Mysie? Don’t be afraid. I only want to know your thoughts exactly.”

“I think,” said poor Mysie, though with much confusion, “that I ought to say them, as you seem to think it is I who have the advantage. I could never give Arthur up, and there will be plenty of time for you to see, as he says he thinks that—that—there must be a year at least. I would promise to tell you if I did change, and *I* should not mind not being *called* engaged to him, though he wishes it. I hope you believe me, because I know it depends on that.”

“Yes, Mysie,” said Hugh, “I believe you. You mean to say nothing can change your love for Arthur, no one could over-persuade you, no one could frighten you; you are so sure of it and of him that you don’t care for any outward tie to bind you?”

“Yes,” said Mysie, rather appalled at the emphasis with which this speech was uttered, but holding bravely to her colours; “that is what I mean. For you see, Hugh, we know all about each other so well.”

“Then, Mysie, I shall not consider it necessary to make any opposition.”

Mysie got up and said: “Thank you, Hugh,” and slowly moved away. She thought Hugh would have congratulated her and kissed her, as he had done all her life on set occasions; but he let her go in silence, and, left alone, stood staring into the empty grate with bitter thoughts in his heart. Here was *this* girl had won her way by her own fearless confidence, her absolute trust in herself and her lover. How fortune smiled on the wishes of this pair! How sure might Arthur be of his happy future! He turned restlessly round and, looking out of the window, saw Mysie run down the garden-path with flying feet, saw Arthur spring up from the grass, meet her, and draw her away into the shrubbery; heard the low murmur of their voices, and the gay, careless laughter, called forth by the reaction from Mysie’s anxiety and suspense. It was but a fortnight since he, too, had laughed idly and carelessly over Violante’s flowers; but a fortnight since he, too, had thought himself happy in his love. But he had lost his faith in the poor child who was all unknown and unvouched for, and she had had no power to stand up for herself. The difference between this perfectly simple, straightforward engagement and the foolish, impossible dream from which he told himself that it was well to wake struck him forcibly. It was the contrast between good and ill fortune, between success and failure. There were times when Hugh felt utterly miserable, and when the profound silence in which his short, wild love-story was buried was intolerable to him—thankful as he was for it in cooler moments; times when he longed so to hear Violante’s name that he felt the wildest desire to tell his foolish secret. It is needless to say that he never did tell it, not being of a confiding nature; but concealment is nearly as fatal, in many cases, to the temper as to the complexion; and poor Hugh was unaccountably and unromantically cross. Why, when Arthur was teaching his Skye terrier to jump over a stick, did Hugh feel that if that little beast jumped over at exactly the same height once more

he must wring its neck? Why, when his mother complained that the rabbits had eaten her carnations, did he positively assert that no mortal rabbit could possibly have come near them. And was it not unworthy of him to feel so exceedingly irritated when Arthur produced the corpse of the offender, having shot it from his bedroom window the next morning in the act of eating the one remaining shoot? Why should he oppose the Mayor of Oxley on the subject of gas and the Rector of Redhurst about the new schools? He advocated neither physical nor mental darkness, and when he became aware that he was resting his objections on the colour of the bricks proposed to be used in the building he pulled himself up and gave in with a good grace. But, surely, anyone with ordinary self-control would not allow these trifles to irritate him. Hugh sometimes felt a dim suspicion that, though he had a very good self on the whole, controlling it was not his strong point. Moreover, Mrs Crichton had made the engagement an occasion for a great deal of country summer gaiety, and Hugh was persecuted by croquet and archery-parties, picnics and dances. He was usually very particular in what he called "doing his duty to society;" but now these things were intolerable to him; and, worst of all, perhaps, was the sunshiny, peaceful mirth of the happy love-story that was working itself out beside him. Arthur shrewdly suspected that there was something amiss with his cousin; but they were not on terms for him to invite a confidence, and he contented himself with the idea of consulting Jem, and by taking on himself, with unobtrusive good-nature, all the trouble of the many small arrangements that devolve on the young men of a country house in times of unusual gaiety, even to entertaining the visitors when Hugh might have been free from business and when a stroll with Mysie would have been far preferable to himself.

"Hugh doesn't like it," he would say; "and I think he's rather out of sorts; so we mustn't bother him."

Hugh rewarded him by wondering how he could care for such trifles, and by somewhat despising the comfortable, unsentimental terms of the two lovers, even while he envied them only too bitterly.

Doubtless they were enviable; for in between-times many a sweet morsel fell to their lot, and one shining hour rested in Arthur's memory in the days to come as the typical instance of the warm home-like sunshine, the everyday happiness, of the summer when he was engaged to Mysie.

Once upon a time—there seems no fitter beginning—on a still, hot summer afternoon, Arthur and Mysie went down the new-mown meadows to the water-side. They were going in a boat down the canal to where it joined the river at a place called Fordham Beeches, where Frederica and Flossy Venning were to meet them, having walked through the woods.

Oxley canal was but a canal. Its waters sparkled over no pebbles, revealed no pellucid depths; but to-day its dull and sluggish face reflected the "blue, unclouded weather," and the slow oars splashed up living light. The speedwells were hardly faded, the pink bindweed blossomed all over its grassy edges. The flat meadows were green as emerald. Pollard willows hung over one side, and brightly-painted barges were tugged along by the towing-path on the other.

Arthur rowed slowly, and Mysie sat, in her big straw hat, facing him; and they talked of the time when they should live together in the old red-brick Bank House, in Oxley, unless Hugh married; and then there were the pretty little villas on the Redhurst road. They talked of ways and means, pounds, shillings, and pence; and laid their plans, and settled what they would and what they would not do; and how, in a year's time, Hugh would be satisfied of Arthur's capacity and steadiness, and would admit him to that share in the Bank proposed for him by his father. And, as they talked, they passed along the back of Redhurst village and past the turnip-fields, where the little partridges were beginning to run and flutter, and Hugh's bit of copse, where little brown rabbits were already taking their evening airing.

"Too many by half," said Arthur, and Mysie declared that he was cruel, as their course was stopped by Redhurst lock, rendered necessary by the more broken ground.

The lock-keeper's little cottage, in a bower of vines, stood on one side; and Mysie blushed as she sat in the boat, for the men smiled as they greeted Arthur and responded to his remark on the rabbits; and the lock-keeper's daughter—a tall girl, with fair hair flying in the sun—laughed as she curtseyed and called her little sister to "look at Miss Mysie."

"Alice Wood sees us," whispered Mysie.

"We can see Alice Wood," said Arthur, as the nursery-gardener's smart seedsman strolled by with a parcel, and whispered to the girl, who turned off giggling, shy of the young lady, who gave her a half-sympathetic smile as the boat slowly sank down—down into the cool, damp shadow—down below the steep, dank sides, below the sparkling water—till the great doors groaned back and they shot out into light and sunshine and life, again.

Mysie drew a long breath.

"I am glad to get out," she said. "It seems like the bottom of the sea."

Arthur laughed.

"I am afraid we shouldn't make many scientific discoveries here. It would be hardly like dredging the deep sea-water."

"Do you know," said Mysie, "I always think of the bottom of the sea as if it was like Andersen's Little Mermaid, with beautiful shells and strange creatures and coloured sea-weeds covering the poor drowned people like the leaves did the children in the wood?"

"'Should toss with tangle and with shells,'" quoted Arthur. "I don't think one associates the idea of rest with drowning."

"Oh," said Mysie, "I did, after I read that story. It was my great favourite."

"You must show it to me. But I say, my darling, look out! That old swan wants your blue ribbons."

The great majestic swan, with white ruffled plumes and fierce writhes of his long neck, bore down fiercely on them.

"Now, he has come down the river from Redhurst," said Mysie. "Row faster, Arthur; he is horribly fierce, and, besides, the others will be tired of waiting."

"Never mind them," said Arthur, "we shall be in the river in a moment, and then we're close on Fordham Beeches."

So they sped on their way to where the canal joined the bed of the river, and here the banks were broken and picturesque; great yellow flags, and white star-like lilies grew in the shallow water; and now the great grey boles of Fordham Beeches appeared rising from their carpet of bright brown leaves.

"There are the girls," said Mysie, waving her hand.

Arthur rested on his oars and tilted his hat back, with a sudden twinkle of consternation in his merry grey eyes:

"I say, Mysie, we've forgotten the basket!"

"Oh, my dear Arthur, what shall we do? You called me to look at that horrid little tom-tit just as I was going to give it to you. The strawberries and *everything*! And they have walked all these miles in the heat!"

"I know," cried Arthur. "Don't you say a word. I'll settle it."

And as they pulled into the landing and Flossy and Frederica ran down to meet them he called out:

"I say, Flossy, get into the boat. I've got such a splendid idea. We'll go and eat strawberries at 'The Pot of Lilies.'"

"'The Pot of Lilies!' But you've brought some strawberries, haven't you?"

"Oh, never mind! It's such a jolly place. You can get a capital glass of beer there, and it's only fifty yards further on. Jump in, Freddie."

"But, Arthur, are you quite sure it's proper?" said Mysie.

"Proper? oh, dear, yes! No one there on a week-day."

"Now, if you will humbly confess that you and Mysie forgot all about the provisions, and that you never thought of 'The Pot of Lilies' till this moment, we'll come," said Flossy.

"Flossy! I'll confess I never heard of 'The Pot of Lilies' till Mysie mentioned that you and she rowed up here now and then of an evening! Come along. I'll take care of you, and neither Hugh nor Miss Venning will come and *proctorise* us."

"The Pot of Lilies" was a tiny public-house, so called from the lilies of the valley which were supposed to grow wild in Fordham Woods. It stood close by the water's edge, with a little landing-place of its own, and a quaint, small-paned bow-window hanging over the river. Bright flowers grew on every window-sill and the Lily sign-board swung overhead. On one side was a garden, where arches and arbours, twined with creepers, shaded one or two little tables; for here, on fine Sunday evenings, Oxley and Redhurst sometimes came to tea.

Arthur sprang out of the boat and went in alone; but, soon reappearing, said:

"Come along; it's all right," and a very smiling hostess escorted the girls into the bow-windowed sitting-room while Arthur went to make his further arrangements.

There were china shepherds and great shells on the mantelpiece, queer coloured prints of the Queen and the Duke of Wellington on the wails, which were broken up by endless beams and cupboards.

"What a dear little room!" said Mysie; and, though the floor was sanded and there was a faint odour suggestive of beer and pipes, perhaps this only gave a slight flavour of novelty to the situation.

"I'm sure, Miss," said the landlady, addressing Flossy, who looked the most responsible of the party, "I only wish the gentleman had sent his orders beforehand, for in the middle of the week, you see, Miss, we don't have so much company. If you'll excuse me, Miss—" and she vanished in search of various necessaries.

Arthur soon returned, saying:

"We're going to have tea in an arbour. It's a lovely spot!"

The three girls followed him down the little gravel path, bordered by box edgings, to an erection which was termed by the proprietress "the harbour," and which was built of wood and partly shaded by an apple-tree. Monthly roses climbed up its trellis-work front; and stones, shells, and broken bottles were picturesquely disposed in heaps at its two sides. It contained some chairs and a round table, on which preparations for their meal were begun, and at present consisted of a cloth and large mustard-pot. This was, however, followed by slices of ham, bread and butter, and water-cresses, and by some tea, which—as neither young lady would take on herself to pour it out—Arthur superintended, and which proved so atrocious that he substituted ginger-beer for the girls and some bottled beer for himself. They might have drunk the tea, however, rejoicing; for they hardly knew whether the setting sun on the river or the steel forks and the great tall tumblers were the most delightful, so full of merriment were they at this unusual and amusing festivity, and they afforded quite as much amusement as they received; for hearty landlady and pretty

barmaid knew well enough who these blushing, smiling, well-dressed young ladies were, and that Mr Arthur Spencer, of Redhurst, was engaged to one of them.

Presently strawberries and raspberries and currants, red, black, and white, appeared on the table.

“Mysie,” whispered Arthur, as he helped her to the fruit, “the Oxley folk always come out here for their wedding trip. If they’re very swell they stay a week. Shall we follow their example?”

Mysie, of course, blushed and bridled, and Arthur said aloud:

“I propose we come and have tea here every summer. This is the 15th of July; let us remember it next year.”

“Perhaps it will rain next year,” said Frederica.

“Then we will have tea inside the bow-window. What, Mysie! you’re not looking at your watch? It’s *not* time to go home.”

It proved, however, time to think of it; and after a little more lingering and a few more raspberries the four took boat again. Flossy and Frederica rowed home through the soft summer twilight, while Arthur and Mysie sat side by side in the stern. Mysie sang a melancholy little song about “days of old,” and how

> “The sky was blue in the days of old,
> But now it is always grey;”

and then they all laughed at the way they would describe what Arthur called “their little summer outing” to the home party, for the sentiment of Mysie’s song found no echo in the heart of any one of them.

But the moon rose, and the boat came to land at last; they came home through the meadows; and the tea-drinking at “The Pot of Lilies” was over.

Part 3, Chapter XVIII.

Out in the Cold.

> “Boys and girls, come out to play!”

So sang Florence Venning as she danced down the empty school-room at Oxley Manor on the 3rd of August. The last young lady had driven from the door—even the French governess had gone to see her friends; and Flossy, whose devotion to the cause of education by no means precluded a thorough enjoyment of peace and liberty, sang and danced as she picked up stray school grammars and dictionaries and consigned them to a six-weeks’ imprisonment in the cupboard. Clarissa had been standing on a form to reach its top shelf; and now she sat down on the desk, with her feet on the form, and yawned.

“What are you going to do to-day?” said Flossy.

“Nothing,” replied Clarissa, with emphasis. “I shall go to sleep, or read ‘Tom Brown’—that’s all about boys—or nurse the kitten,” picking it up and kissing it, “which is babyish in a governess, you know.”

“Dear me!” said Flossy, “I shouldn’t care what it was if I liked to do it. Well, it’s nice to have some time to oneself. I shall draw hard. I shall go to the School of Art twice a-week, and see if I can’t get into the Life class; and I shall be able to help at the drawing classes they’re having down at Oxley National School. And I want to have a tea for my Sunday class—I wonder if Mary would! And I never do read anything steadily when the girls are here. Besides,” with equal vivacity, “I want a new dress, and must see about it; I think I’ll do that first.”

“Anything else in a small way?” said Clarissa.

“Oh, fifty other things if I’d time to think of them.”

“Well,” said Clarissa, in languid, sleepy tones, “I don’t want to read a novel; there would be sure to be any number of girls in it! I’d like to be a man myself for the holidays, for a change. One would take an interest in girls then, at any rate!”

“Dear me, why *don’t* you take an interest in them? I am sure forming the minds of others is the most interesting thing possible.”

“If one had a mind of one’s own. *I* haven’t.”

“Clarissa, I call that affectation. I don’t consider you at all a stupid person.”

“Thank you,” said Clarissa, again kissing the kitten.

“Only you are so lazy. Now, will you come into Oxley about my dress? You know we are to dine at Redhurst to-night.”

“Oh, Mary will go with you about your dress. Is James Crichton come home?”

“Yes, for a fortnight. I want to show him my sketches, and see those he made in Italy. Well, I’ll try and get Mary; but I think she is busy. She has been writing to Mrs Grey about a girl to come as governess-pupil.”

“That girl will be a bore,” said Clarissa. “Now, really,” cried Flossy, in tones of virtuous indignation, “I do think that’s a shame. I am very glad of the opportunity. I disapprove of all the books that are written on that subject. They put it into girls’ heads to pity themselves, even if they *are* true. And I intend that there shall be a tone here that will be quite different. Think what a chance it is for really helping a girl! I wish we could have two or three. *I* shall make a friend of her, and then see if the big girls don’t do so too. But if you go and have old-fashioned prejudices—”

“I won’t make her do my hair, if that’s what you mean,” said Clarissa, meekly. “Well, Kitty, come along,” and, with slow, lazy steps, she sought the drawing-room, where she sat in an easy-chair with the kitten in her lap and read “Punch.”

Flossy, finding that her eldest sister was not inclined to spend her first leisure hours in the hot walk to Oxley, got ready to go by herself. If Mysie Crofton’s maiden bower was ordered and coloured by the quiet completeness and tasteful arrangement that marked all her doings, Florence Venning’s afforded a proof of the variety and ambition of her aims and of the many hobbies that chased each other through her soul. With so many irons in the fire it was no marvel that some of them were apt to grow cold; that the plants and flowers, the arrangement of which she considered a form of art, and in which she took great pride, sometimes wanted water; that a chalk head was displaced, half-finished, by a water-colour landscape; and that the books in use at the moment were apt to tumble off the edges of her dressing-table, where they had sought a last refuge. Moreover, Flossy, in a severe fit of historical and artistic fever, had once painted the panels of her room with scenes from English history, set in frames of decorative flowers and scrolls. The flowers were pretty, but the historical heroes—though exceedingly creditable to Flossy’s research and, indeed, to her powers of execution—were hardly up to the mark of the cartoons; and their arms and legs, as her artistic knowledge increased, became a source of anxiety, if not of distress, though she could not resolve to have them hidden by what Miss Venning called a “nice clean tint of buff.” At present history and heroes were finding an outlet on sundry pages of foolscap; which, as Clarissa observed, took up less room; and which reflected, perhaps, better the pictures of Flossy’s imagination. With her head full of the newest and most successful, Flossy set off down the sunny road to Oxley. She walked fast, regardless that the heat deepened her pink cheeks to crimson—for Flossy had always rather more to do than her time permitted—and she walked well, with a free, bounding step, carrying her head well up in the air; with smiling eyes, satisfied with their own thoughts, yet ready for any diversion from them. The hero gave place to blue and white muslin and to a new hat. Flossy also arranged her intended drawing lessons, paid a call or two, transacted a little Sunday-school business, and came home in time to dress for the Redhurst dinner-party. She found Clarissa sighing over the family tea that was to be resigned in consequence; but sighs were of no avail in averting the evil any more than were the grumbles of Hugh over the necessity of entertaining his neighbours. Miss Venning was always a pleasant and popular person. Her fresh complexion and her blue eyes, her handsome silk, and her pleasant tongue ornamented a party; but Clarissa, though thought pretty, was regarded as more entirely the schoolmistress, and, when so regarded, had little to say for herself. Flossy was too devoid of sentiment and of vanity and too full of her own concerns to be a favourite with young men. James thought her overpowering; and though Hugh was at ease with her, no one ever having suggested that he ought to marry her—since Flossy, handsome as she was, was just the sort of girl who does not easily get credited with a lover—he rarely gave her a second thought. But she and Arthur were excellent friends, and she was much more intimate with the whole family than was Clarissa, in whose younger days no girls had existed at Redhurst to afford an excuse for intercourse.

James had arrived the day before. He was warmly greeted by his mother; and, as he congratulated Arthur and Mysie, was informed that Hugh had gone to a magistrates’ meeting. Miss Katie Clinton, who was staying in the house, had been playing croquet in pink muslin with Frederica and the schoolboy George; and as they all sat on the terrace at tea and Hugh’s ordinary doings and sayings were mentioned, James began to feel an odd sort of discrepancy between his thoughts and the actual facts. “Hugh had been rather astonished at their news. Yes, he gave very prudent advice; but, still, he had given his consent.”

“Hugh did not want the new railway to come through Fordham: he was going to vote against it. Had he talked much about Italy? Yes, a good deal. He had described Civita Bella and the art galleries there, and the weather, and the Roman Amphitheatre.”

And presently Hugh came back, greeted Jem much in his usual way, and, sitting down, began to talk of his meeting, and how very foolish he considered his brother-magistrates’ opinion of the matter in hand. James could not help staring at him. Could this be the Hugh who had declared to him in passionate language that life would be worth nothing without Violante? Had he *really* lectured, advised, and reproved, and altogether taken the upper hand of the brother now sitting before him? “I could as soon call at Lambeth and lecture the Archbishop of Canterbury,” thought James. “Surely he never begged and prayed me to take his part with the Mum! *Does* he remember it all as well as I do? He doesn’t look altered.”

And yet James missed something that had been in his brother’s face during that brief fortnight they had spent together at Civita Bella. Lights and shadows had all been stronger then; the clear, sensible eyes had changed and softened, and the handsome lips, that Hugh would never hide by a moustache, had not been set so close together. As James turned his eyes away from this inspection they met Arthur’s, looking at him curiously.

“Well, Arty,” he said, getting up, “come and have a smoke, and let’s hear all about it.”

Jem and Arthur were much more companionable together than either of them was with Hugh, and now strolled down the garden, and after a little desultory talk Jem said:

“Well, and what did Hugh say to you?”

“I declare, Jem, I never was in such a funk in my life! Hugh said—just what he ought to have said, of course; but he wasn’t gushing.”

"No? And how has he conducted himself since?"

"Well," said Arthur, "if it were possible that Hugh could have fallen a victim to some lovely black-eyed peasant, or—you didn't meet any girls, did you?"

"Nonsense, Arthur! Everyone isn't in your predicament."

"Then the Bank must be shaky," said Arthur coolly.

"Do you mean to say that Hugh is out of sorts?" said Jem, after a little pause.

"Well," said Arthur, more seriously, "I shouldn't like to think that he was put out about Mysie and me; but everything rubs him up the wrong way. To give you an instance: You know there's to be a great gathering to open the new Town-Hall, and a concert and dinner. The Lord-Lieutenant is to bring his bride, and Hugh is on the committee. Well, I went to one of the meetings to represent the interests of Redhurst, as the villages round are to send their choirs and school-children to sing 'God Save the Queen' in the square outside. So I went to see that our people were provided for, and also to get good places for Aunt Lily and the girls. There were the rector, and Sir William Ribstone, and the mayor, and everyone else. You never heard anything like the way in which Hugh bothered them. Not a suggestion would he let pass without pulling it all to pieces, till they came to a perfect deadlock. Hugh was perfectly civil, but cantankerous enough to drive the old gentlemen frantic, and generally he knows exactly where to give in. I thought he was overworked, and begged him to let me begin going to the Bank; but he *will* say I shall not pledge myself without due consideration; which, you know, Jem, is really enough to drive a fellow wild! Consider? As if I hadn't considered! He seems to think one can never cease to be a boy!" concluded Arthur, viciously.

James laughed. He would much have liked to confide the story to Arthur; but somehow he felt that Hugh regarded it so seriously that he could not tell it as a good joke, in which light Arthur, never having seen Violante, would be almost sure to regard it. A few hours soon showed him the truth of his cousin's remarks. Hugh, though somewhat condescending, was generally courteous and obliging enough; but the captious way in which he complained of the approaching dinner-party, and the spiteful comments he made on Miss Clinton's manners and looks, his scornful laugh at Arthur's open boyish love-making, were the spray that indicated the waters of a bitter fountain. But he did not soften, even to his brother; on the contrary, with defiant bravado, he referred to the subject, asking James if he did not triumph in the result of his predictions that all would soon be as if his foolish fancy had never come to disturb him.

James was not a person to stir the waters, even with a view to their final sweetening. He disliked a fuss too much to face the matter out. He did not sympathise with the feelings which he supposed to exist in Hugh's breast; it was better to suppose the thing a trifle, after all; so he answered:

"Oh, well, no one's the worse for a bit of romance in their life."

"To supply them with pleasant memories, eh? You've hit it exactly."

Hugh said no more, but a sense of contempt for the brother who was his only confidant added to the loneliness that oppressed him. In this humour, to sit down to dinner with Mrs Harcourt on one side of him and Miss Clinton on the other seemed intolerable thraldom, and every subject more unprofitable than the one before it. He was so inharmonious a host that the discussion on local politics grew rather warm, though Mrs Crichton sat smiling through any amount of "gentlemen's talk." James wondered how anyone could excite themselves over drainage and rights of way; and Arthur strenuously entertained the neglected ladies on either side of him, glinting in between-times at Mysie as she sat far away on the other side of the table. He was the first to propose music after dinner, and Flossy was the first lady to accede to his request.

She stood up, erect, fair, and rosy, and began to sing, clearly and correctly, her last Italian song: "Batti, batti."

Flossy was tolerably self-confident. She had a good voice and ear, and she sang her Italian better than is usual with young ladies, sure of applause at the end. She little knew how her first notes startled two of her audience. James gave a great jump. "Profanation!" he murmured, as he thought of the exquisite voice and accent in which he had last heard the words uttered, of the lovely scared eyes that had so belied their meaning. Jem smiled and sighed and drew nearer to listen, full of the "associations" of the song, even while he glanced round to see how his brother had taken it.

There is a vast gulf between passion and sentiment, and Hugh was too much under the dominion of the one to endure the other. He did not wait for the second line of the song, but turned and escaped from it out into the warm twilight garden, where the clear, strong notes pursued him relentlessly. He sat down on a bench and hid his face in his hands. "Violante! Violante!" he cried, half aloud. "Oh, what a fool I was not to wait one moment longer! Then I should have been *sure*! What is the use of it all—" And then Hugh got up and laughed, keenly conscious of the absurdity of sitting here in his dress-coat lamenting; hating himself for his folly, and yet haunted by the old, soft accents: "I was frightened, Signor Hugo."

Suddenly the quiet garden seemed filled with chattering and laughing. All the younger ones had streamed out on to the terrace, and were wandering about in twos and threes. Arthur had Mysie to himself at last, and as they wandered past Hugh's hiding-place, he heard her say, mischievously, something about "Katie's charming conversation," and Arthur retort with "That curate that was sitting by you;" and then she threw a rose at him and they both laughed, till Hugh muttered passionately to himself: "I wish I had never got to hear them play the fool and laugh again."

Part 3, Chapter XIX.

Sunday and Monday.

> "There is no time like spring,
> Like spring that passes by;
> There is no life like spring-life born to die."

Hugh Crichton was at this time in the sort of humour which, dignified by the name of misanthropy, would have admirably suited, one of those interesting and uncomfortable heroes who stalk through the pages of romance with masks over their faces, under a vow to speak to no one; or who, like Lara, cloaked and with folded arms, look on at life from an altitude of melancholy and disenchantment. The world seems to have watched such vagaries in former days with much patience; but times are changed, and Hugh had far too much to do to fold his arms, and was forced to put on a frock-coat and white waistcoat on Sunday morning as usual. But an invisible and impalpable mask may be as stifling as one made of black velvet; and the mysterious silence which everyone respected was scarcely a greater effort than the silence of which no one was to suspect the necessity, or the words that seemed so trivial or so foolish. In truth, it was as much to avoid Arthur's constant companionship as for any other reason that Hugh had so persistently refused to allow him to begin his work at the Bank. He could not stand Arthur's bright, shrewd eyes upon him as they went to and fro, or endure his notice of the fits of idleness which alternated with the hard work to which he thus condemned himself. For after his long absence he had more on hand than usual; and Arthur, who was brisk and business-like and just then full of an energy that would have made stone-breaking light and interesting work, might have been very helpful to him. Hugh did not, perhaps, dislike the notion of being overworked; but the fact that he was so did not tend to smooth his temper or to raise his spirits. For, of course, the life of a man of business, with all the calls and occupations of a country gentleman added to it, was an exceedingly laborious one; but it was Hugh's pride that he had never shirked any of the work to which his father had been born, and that he made the squire give way to the banker where the two clashed.

James, on growing up, had so decidedly declared in favour of a London life that all notion of his coming into the business had been abandoned; but there was more since his father's death than Hugh could properly manage; and so his determination that no pressure should be put on Arthur if his success at Oxford induced him to wish for a more ambitious career had been a real act of kind and liberal judgment. His refusal to accept at once Arthur's decision in his favour sprang partly from a foolish and unworthy pride, which refused to be the better for anyone's sense or good behaviour, and, partly, as has been said, from a sort of personal distaste to his bright young cousin—a feeling which Arthur had done nothing to deserve. Nor was his brother's presence any satisfaction to Hugh. Now that the danger was past, James was quite ready to forget all the annoyance with which he had regarded the matter, and to find the recollection of so romantic an incident rather pleasant than otherwise. "What is it to him?" thought Hugh bitterly; but it was quite true that, even had James been himself concerned and had sincerely felt the disappointment, he would have taken a certain pleasure in recalling the picturesque aspects of the affair; could have laughed at himself with a smile on his lip and a tear in his eye have made full allowance for Violante's difficulties, and even speculated a little about her future lot, honestly wishing it to be a prosperous one. He found room for kindly sentiment in his flirtations, and would have derived amusement from the externals even of a real passion. But Hugh's equal judgment fell before the force of personal feeling; and as he had thought of nothing at the time but Violante herself his brother's view of the matter seemed to him utterly heartless and frivolous.

Sunday was a pleasant day to the young people of Redhurst. Mr Harcourt, the Rector, was a very old man, who had christened their mother, and to whom "Mr Spencer, of Oxley Bank," meant their grandfather. He was still fully capable of managing his little country parish; and though they had heard his sermons very often, and had not had the satisfaction of assisting at many improvements in his church—since the work had been well done for them in a former generation, when Mr Harcourt, now so cautious, had been regarded as a dangerous innovator—they were very fond of him and of his wife; and had any one of them, in a foreign country or in future years, recalled the Sundays of their youth it would have been the unaltered and seemingly unalterable services of Redhurst Church and its white-haired Rector that would have risen before their eyes. Not but that they liked a walk to Oxley and an evening service at the new Saint Michael's considerably better than an afternoon one at Redhurst; but, whether they deserted his second sermon or not, they rarely failed to present themselves at the Rectory after it was over for a cup of tea and a chat. Indeed, it was almost a second home to Mysie, who had grown up to be the young lady of the village—all the Miss Harcourts having married almost before she was born. Hugh was a very useful and conscientious squire; his mother, by nature and position, a Lady Bountiful: so Redhurst was a favoured spot.

"So you come and eat my apricots, young people, and run away from my sermons?" said Mr Harcourt, as he picked out a specially-perfect specimen of the fruit in question and offered it to Mysie, who, with her smiling face peeping out from a sky-blue bonnet, looked much like a bright-eyed forget-me-not.

"I've been to church and to school, too, this afternoon," said Mysie, with a deprecating look.

"Ah, you are always a good girl. Why didn't you bring Arthur with you?"

"She wouldn't let me come to the Sunday-school," said Arthur. "She says the girls laugh at her. So you see, sir, I can't be useful if I would."

"For shame, Arthur! Mr Harcourt, he did not want to be of any use, only to walk down with me."

"Well, my dear, in my young days we liked a walk with our sweethearts on Sundays."

"And I am going to walk with him to Oxley," said Mysie, slipping her little hand into the old Rector's arm and very little discomposed by his joke.

"Ay, ay, walk away, and come back and tell me what fine things they're doing at Saint Michael's. There is Hugh has never told me a word about Italy. When young men made the grand tour formerly their conversation was quite an

enlightenment to their friends."

"Weren't they rather a bore, sir?" said Arthur.

"We weren't so easily bored in those days, my dear boy, by useful information."

"No," said James, "those were the days to live, when each event had time to round into its proper proportion—the days of taste and leisure, when people were simple enough to be excited by a Christmas party or by the coming in of a coach."

"But don't you think, Jem," said Mysie, "that they must have been rather dull to care about the coach coming. I've heard Arthur say he used to go at school on a wet half-holiday and watch the trains. I'm sure he wouldn't have done it if he had had anything else to amuse him."

"Very true," said Arthur.

"Well," said Mrs Harcourt, "when I was a girl I used to read Sir Charles Grandison, but I took it down the other day and found it very lengthy."

"Such a prig as Sir Charles Grandison never can have really existed," said Hugh.

"Well, Hugh," said the Rector, with a humorous twinkle, "we none of us know what we might come to under favourable circumstances. But, now, what day do you think to-morrow is?"

"Your wedding-day, Mr Harcourt," said Mysie, after a moment's pause. "I remember it was on Sunday last year, and you gave Mrs Harcourt an apricot."

"Ah, you're the little girl for a good memory. Our golden wedding. Yes, it's fifty years ago that I married Mrs Harcourt, and she wore a dark green riding-habit for the occasion. Fifty years to be thankful for!"

"Fifty years ago!" said Mysie, rather awestruck.

"Yes," said the Rector's wife, "and we have asked the school-children to come up after school and drink our health; but not having such a good memory as Mysie I have forgotten some of them. If you could ask the little Woods, my dear, and the Masons to-morrow I should be glad."

Mysie promised to do so, and distant chimes sounding on their ears reminded them that it was time to start for Oxley. Hugh and his mother went home, the old couple went slowly up their sunny garden-path together, while the young pair, lingering a little behind their companions, looked back and smiled.

"There's our model, Mysie," said Arthur, as he drew her hand through his arm. "In fifty years' time—"

"Oh, don't, Arthur!"

"Why not?"

"It frightens me to think of fifty years," said Mysie, with quivering lips. Then suddenly she said, "I wonder which are the happiest, they or we!"

"Let us go to-morrow and ask them," said Arthur, more lightly, perhaps, than he felt.

"Oh, yes! Let us go the first thing to-morrow and take them some flowers ready for their breakfast—they always breakfast at eight."

"Very well," said Arthur, "and they will give us some breakfast. I promised George to take him out shooting to-morrow—the rabbits are really getting intolerable. I want Hugh to come home early and join us."

They soon reached Saint Michael's and dispersed in search of places, for the church was crowded. Arthur and Mysie had the good luck to find them side by side. Mysie's feelings had been somewhat disturbed by what had passed, and she was glad of the quiet and of the service, which took her out of herself. The sermons at Saint Michael's were considered striking, and this one was about thankfulness. "He giveth us all things richly to enjoy." Mysie listened, and thought that she had more to be thankful for than anyone in the world; and she turned her listening into a prayer that she might never forget it. Arthur listened too, but his thoughts were less defined and were pervaded by a certain sense of the prettiness of Mysie's face in its blue setting.

And then they stood up and sang—

> "Brief life is here our portion,
> Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
> The life that knows no ending,
> The tearless life, is *there*."

Brief? And yet they might keep their golden wedding after those long fifty years!

Fifty years of going to church together, of sorrows shared and joys doubled! And as Mysie's heart went forward to what those joys and sorrows might be it was no wonder that she walked home hushed and silent, though there never came to her a moment's doubt of how she might regard her young lover after the fifty years were past.

The morning light brought the golden wedding before her in a more cheerful aspect, and she had gathered most of

her flowers and was arranging them in a large basket before Arthur joined her, accusing her of being unnecessarily early.

“Oh, I wanted to gather plenty. Look. I have put the hothouse flowers in the centre, and then the outdoor ones, and ferns round the edge.”

“And what’s that?”

“That is a note from Aunt Lily to ask them to come up to dinner to-night. It is all ready now.”

Arthur took up the basket, and they went down the garden, out at a side-gate, and across the road into the almost adjoining garden of the Rectory. This was small, but within walls, and so gay with flowers as to seem to render Mysie’s gift unnecessary. Arthur gave her one side of the basket, and they came across the lawn in the bright morning sunshine up to the open French window of the dining-room, where Mr and Mrs Harcourt had already perceived them.

“Here comes the young couple to see the old one!”

“We have brought you some flowers.”

“We have come to wish you many happy returns of the day,” said both at once.

Mrs Harcourt took the flowers, and her husband, kissing Mysie, held out his hand to Arthur.

“God bless you, my dear children, and give you fifty such happy years as He has given to my wife and me!”

“Amen!” said Arthur, and he turned, and, drawing Mysie towards him, he kissed her, as if the blessing had been the seal of their betrothal. The tears came into her eyes, and she was glad to turn to the old lady to be praised and thanked for her beautiful flowers.

“Now, then, of course you are come to breakfast? Arthur, when you were a little boy you always liked my pine-apple preserve; so I shall get you some.”

“At his present stage of existence, my dear, I should think he would rather begin upon eggs and bacon.”

“But don’t forget the jam for a finish, Mrs Harcourt,” said Arthur.

So they sat down and had a merry breakfast, lingering over it till Arthur jumped up, saying:

“I must go home to catch Hugh before he goes to Oxley, to ask him where we shall shoot.”

“But you are not going to carry away Mysie?”

“Oh, no,” said Mysie. “I don’t like the neighbourhood of guns at all, and I must stay to put my flowers in water.”

“Very well, then, I’ll leave you. Mr Harcourt, we shall see you to-night.”

Mysie stayed behind, and arranged her flowers and renovated Mrs Harcourt’s dinner-cap, by which time the morning was so far advanced that she was persuaded to stay to lunch, before going to give the forgotten invitations. Meanwhile Mrs Harcourt entertained her with much pleasant gossip about the days of her courtship and the wedding that had followed it.

“Did not fifty years seem a long time to you then?” asked Mysie.

“Well, my dear, I don’t think I looked forward to any special time, or to any end at all in those days. And I don’t now, Mysie—I don’t now, in another sense, for fifty years is a very little bit of eternity.”

The old lady spoke rather to herself than to the girl; but the words chimed in with Mysie’s previous thoughts.

“I think,” she said, dreamily, “you *are* the happiest. If Mr Harcourt were to die you would have such a little while to wait; but if Arthur— It’s almost all *life*, if it is but a little bit of eternity.”

“Die, my dear? What has put such sad thoughts into your head this bright morning?”

“I don’t know. But I shall remember this morning as long as I live.” Then, shaking off her sadness, she started up, and, kissing the old lady, went off rather hastily on her errands.

The everyday occupation soon chased away the solemn thoughts that had oppressed her, and having disposed of her other business she went down to the canal, along the bank, and across the gates of the lock—the unrailed condition of which was one of those grievances which are always talked of and never remedied—to the lock-keeper’s cottage, where she gave her message about the health-drinking; and sent two little girls, who were at home from school, off in a great hurry to join their companions. These children were motherless, and Mysie took great interest in the pretty sister Alice, who had charge of them.

The youngest boy was ill, and Mr Dickenson, the Oxley doctor—who was most favoured at Redhurst—was paying him a visit. Mysie heard his opinion, and promised sundry delicacies to assist the child’s recovery.

“Then you will send the children down to the Rectory, Alice?” she said.

“Yes, Miss Mysie. I can’t come with them, because of Freddy.”

“No, of course not. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, miss.”

Mysie tripped out into the sunshine, and on to the gates of the lock, Alice thinking how pretty her white dress and muslin-covered hat looked on this hot August day. “She always wears her prettiest things now Mr Arthur’s here,” she thought, when the sudden loud report of a gun sounded from the copse close at hand. Alice gave a little scream and start. Mysie, half-way across, started violently also, and, either losing her balance or catching her foot on the rough surface, slipped and fell, out of the sunshine, out of the light, down into the cold, dark water below.

End of the First Volume.

Part 3, Chapter XX.

The Golden Wedding.

> “Tina died.”
>
> Mr Gilfil’s Love Story.

Arthur went away from the Rectory whistling gaily, and succeeded in catching Hugh before he started for Oxley. Hugh was a good but not a very keen sportsman, and the rabbits were rather a sore subject; and he replied to Arthur’s representations that, as they had been left entirely for the delectation of himself and George, it was his own fault if they were too numerous. Arthur answered that he knew Hugh had asked two friends next week, and had supposed he would want something for them to shoot.

“The Molyneuxes, do you mean? They’re not sportsmen. Never take out a gun.”

“So you said yesterday, and if you have no objection George and I will polish a few off to-day. And if you will just come out early and meet us in the plantations down by the canal, you’ll see if I’m not right.” Hugh never liked to appear indifferent about sporting matters, so he agreed to the proposal, though not very willingly, and they appointed a place and time of meeting in the afternoon. Meanwhile, Arthur, who enjoyed most things that fell to his lot, and George, who lived for the pursuit of rats and rabbits, spent a pleasant and successful morning, and when Hugh joined them could display a sufficient number of rabbits to presuppose either considerable skill on their parts or the existence of plenty of food for powder. Hugh, at Arthur’s suggestion, despatched George with three couple of rabbits to the tenant-farmer on whose land they had been shooting, and sent the keeper for some more cartridges, as their supply seemed likely to run short. Hugh and Arthur, thus left together, went on through the copses, now in the full weight and depth of their summer foliage, before the first tints of autumn varied them. It was, perhaps, the time when the woods were least attractive, since they were powerless and almost silent. Hugh was unsuccessful, and not particularly pleased thereat.

“You have got your hand out in Italy,” said Arthur, “and you have never given yourself a day’s shooting since you came home.”

“I *am* unlucky,” said Hugh, “but you know I am never a very good shot.”

“I wanted Jem to come; but he began to discuss the whole question of cruelty, etc, from beginning to end. So I made myself scarce.”

“It does seem a barbarous way for civilised gentlemen to spend their time,” said Hugh, but the appearance of a rabbit cut his remark short as he fired and missed it, with an exclamation of annoyance rather strong for a civilised gentleman with a contempt for sport.

“So that rabbit thinks,” said Arthur, laughing.

“Ah, there’s Mysie talking to the Woods,” he added, as they came across a stile into the copse by the canal and saw, through an opening, the lock and Mysie and Alice standing by it.

“Hugh, I wish you would make them put a rail on to those gates.”

“It’s not my affair,” said Hugh, “and they’re safe enough. You had better go and help her across.”

As Hugh spoke, rather irritated by Arthur’s fancifulness, as he considered it, another little brown rabbit started out of the ferns.

“I’ll have that one!” he said.

“Don’t fire,” said Arthur. “Look, you’ll startle Mysie.”

“Nonsense, it’s too far off,” answered Hugh sharply, and fired.

They saw the white figure start and reel, then vanish from their eyes. With a loud shout of horror Arthur flung aside his gun, and leapt down through the bushes on to the path, pursued, almost outstripped, by Hugh, who sprang right

into the water, as Alice's screams brought her father and the doctor both at once to the spot.

Arthur stopped short on the brink, as nothing but the blank water met his eyes.

"She fell in here!" he cried, clutching Alice's arm.

"Oh yes, sir; yes—off the gates! Oh, where is she?"

"She must have caught her dress in the gate!" cried Wood.

"Or struck her head?" said Mr Dickenson.

"Let off the water—is there no boat-hook—nothing?"

What gave to Arthur the power of acting and judging he knew neither then nor afterwards. He turned round and said, low and clear:

"No, that will take too long. Open the gates, and she will be washed down the stream. Come out, Hugh, that is useless."

"Yes, sir, for the Lord's sake come out, or you'll be drowned too," cried the lock-keeper, as he turned to the great handles of the gates.

"Run, Alice, open the other!"

Quick as thought, Alice crossed the upper gates, and seized the handle. Arthur held out his hand, and, holding by a post, helped Hugh up the steep side, then ran down the bank, and stood some yards below the lock, waiting. Slowly the great doors groaned back and, with a swirl and a rush, out poured the muddy water, for the lock was full. Hugh would have thrown himself in again, but Wood held him back. Arthur strained his eyes as the water rushed through, saw something dim and white above him; sprang after it; dived, disappeared, then rose to the surface—empty-handed. The impetus of the water had carried her further than he had calculated on. Both Hugh and the lock-keeper had come to his help before the white dress rose again: but it was his hand that caught it—he caught *her* once more in his arms, gained his feet in the shallow water, and carried her to the bank.

There he laid her down with her head on Alice's lap, and wrung the water from her soft, clinging dress. She had lost her hat; but her tightly-folded hair was still in its place, and one was left of the carnations that he had put in front of her dress in the morning.

Mr Dickenson knelt down and examined her carefully.

"It was not the length of time," he said, after a few moments.

"Oh, sir, sir, she's not *dead*, not *drowned*!" screamed Alice.

"She is not drowned. She struck her head and the back of her neck against the side. It was all over before she touched the bottom."

He added a few technical words to explain his meaning, and Arthur understood and knew that it was true.

"Yes, she is dead," he said, and the tone was as quiet, far quieter than the doctor's own. He stood up, put Hugh aside, and took her in his arms again.

"Will you get into that boat, Alice?" he said, pointing to one moored at the side.

Awe-struck and sobbing, Alice obeyed.

"Sit down in the stern," he said.

And then he laid Mysie down with her head once more on Alice's lap, unmoored the boat, and, with quick, vigorous strokes, rowed down towards Redhurst; rowed past the meadows and the copses, as once before he had rowed his love in the same bright evening sunlight, under the same blue sky, and had talked of the future. Now the boat went on, the girl's long fair hair dancing and waving, but her face all white and tear-stained; Arthur bare-headed, his eyes fixed far away and his lips set; and the white motionless figure, with Alice's little handkerchief over the face, between them. Those who followed them on the bank said that it was the most awful sight their eyes had ever seen—all the more awful in that it was in a way picturesque and beautiful.

Arthur stopped at the landing. He fastened up the boat and once more lifted up his burden.

"Mr Arthur, you'll want help," cried Wood.

"No," said Arthur, "she is very light. Go first, Mr Dickenson, and tell them."

But, as he said "and tell them," a sort of quiver came over his face, and he faltered for a moment.

"Keep close to him," said the doctor, "I'll go on. But where's Mr Crichton?"

"He may have gone ahead, sir, to break the news first."

This seemed very probable; but, in case it had not been so, Mr Dickenson hastened on across the meadow, up the

shrubbery, and into the garden. No messenger of evil tidings could have forestalled him in his cruel task of breaking up that happy summer peace. Mr Crichton sat restfully on the terrace, watching for the arrival of Mr and Mrs Harcourt. James, on the step below her, was smoking, stroking his long, brown beard, and discoursing dreamily. Frederica, in her white muslin and red ribbons, was teasing Snap. Mysie's doves, at a safe distance from Snap, were cooing on the grass; the great peacock strutting along in the background.

"Mr James Crichton!" said Mr Dickenson, stopping short of the terrace, with a glance that brought James to his side in a moment.

"What's the matter?"

"Mr James, Miss Crofton has met with an accident. She has fallen into the water, and Mr Arthur is bringing her home. You had better get the ladies into the house."

But, as he spoke, up from the sunny meadows came Arthur, with Mysie in his arms, closely followed by Alice Wood, now sobbing and clinging to her father's coat. James gave one look, and saw that Mysie's face was covered.

"Mamma! there's an accident! Come in. Come in." But Mrs Crichton had started up with a shriek and rushed down the path.

"What is it; what is it? The water? Has she come to herself?"

"You must let me take her in," said Arthur, in a low, quiet voice, while James held back his mother; and Wood said, choking: "Lord have mercy on us, ma'am; she'll never come to herself in this world!" Arthur took no notice; he went on, and they all followed indiscriminately, the servants rushing out with wild cries and questions. Arthur went up the steps, across the terrace, and through the open window, into the drawing-room, where, on the sofa, he laid his dead love down. Then he paused, hanging over her, and drew the handkerchief a little back, and put his hand softly on her wrist.

"Arthur! Arthur, my poor boy, come away," said James, in his ear.

Arthur turned round and faced them.

"How did it happen? how did it happen?" gasped Mrs Crichton.

"The noise of the gun startled her, and she fell off the lock. She struck her head against the side, and she is dead—she is dead," he repeated. And, in the moment's blank pause that followed, Alice Wood's voice rose in a wild shriek: "Dead! oh, Miss Mysie's dead!"

"Take care of that poor little girl," said Arthur; "she has—" but with the words his voice failed him; he staggered, and fell down in a dead faint, before James could catch him, for they had all fallen back with a sort of awe, before his collected voice and the wild stare in his eyes.

They lifted Arthur up and carried him into the house and upstairs to his own room, whither the doctor followed them. The maid-servants pressed into the drawing-room, with tears and cries of pity, till the old nurse came and put them all back. She knew what to do.

Mrs Crichton sat down again in her chair on the terrace, Frederica crouching with her head in her aunt's lap, while Wood, whose daughter had been carried off by the maids, repeated the sad story.

It was not very easy to understand its details, told with sobs and comments innumerable; but the fact was slowly borne in on them—Mysie was dead!

Presently James returned.

"He is coming to himself," he said. "Dickenson is going to give him some strong opiate; then he hopes that he will sleep before he knows what has happened. No one must go to him or try to rouse him now."

"I cannot understand, now, how it happened," said Mrs Crichton. "Where is Hugh?"

Where was Hugh? His brother's absence struck James for the first time as extraordinary.

"Mother," he said, "you had better let me take you into the house, and I will ask Dickenson if he knows where Hugh has gone to. Get up, Freddie, my dear girl, take care of mother. Yes, that's right," as Frederica, with unexpected self-command, stood up, choked back her sobs, and took her aunt by the hand. Perhaps it had hardly come yet to the time for overwhelming grief, for Mrs Crichton rose and walked into the house, unable to realise the truth of what still seemed like a frightful dream.

"What became of my brother?" he said to Wood.

"Indeed, sir, I can't remember. I saw nothing but Mr Arthur with the dear young lady in his arms; but Mr Crichton all the time was like one demented, and would have been drowned too if Mr Arthur had not dragged him out, and I held him back from jumping into the water before the gates were fairly open. O Lord! sir, there's the Rector coming. This news will kill the poor old gentleman, surely."

But the ill news had flown faster than they thought for, and the office of comforter had been familiar for too many years to Mr Harcourt for him to shrink from it now; and, instead of the merry dinner-party to which he and his wife had been summoned, he had left her to realise that she had bidden little Mysie farewell for ever only a few hours

before.

“Her golden wedding—her golden wedding!” he said; but with what force of allusion James hardly knew. He took the Rector, however, to his mother; and when he came out again, with a vague idea of watching for Hugh, Wood had gone to look after his daughter; and Mr Dickenson came out, reporting that Arthur, under the influence of the opiate, had fallen asleep, without rousing to the consciousness of what had happened.

“So best,” said James, with a heavy sigh; “but, Mr Dickenson, what can have become of Hugh?”

“Your brother? I never thought of him till this moment!”

“Nor I, till my mother asked for him. There—no—that’s George. What can have become of him?”

As he spoke, George, white and terrified, came panting up the path and threw himself upon James.

“Jem! Where’s Mysie; where’s Mysie?” Involuntarily James glanced back at the drawing-room, where now the window was shut and the blind drawn down behind it.

“Have you heard anything, George?” he said; “there has been a sad accident on the lock.”

“I have seen Hugh,” said George.

“Hugh! Where?”

“In the copse by the lock. Oh, Jem, he was sitting on the ground, and he had Arthur’s gun in his hand—not his own—and there was a dead rabbit. He looked—I couldn’t ask him a word. He said: ‘Go home, George, there’s no more shooting; Mysie is drowned, and—and—’”

“Steady, my boy,” said the doctor, as George paused and gasped, “take your time. What did he say?”

“He said—he said, ‘I have killed her!’”

“Nothing,” interposed Mr Dickenson, as James almost dropped into a chair with a start of horror, “*Nothing* that anyone says on a night like this is of the slightest consequence whatever. We don’t know what we say. What followed, George?”

“I said, ‘Oh, come now, Hugh, you had better come home. Where’s Arthur?’ And he stood up and cried out ‘Arthur! Arthur! Never—never!’ and then he rushed off out on to the heath. So,” concluded George, “I thought he was mad or something, and I ran as hard as I could to fetch someone. I never thought it was true till I saw the lock gates open and little Bessie Wood, screaming and crying, with Mysie’s wet hat; and I ran on, and there was this pink bow she wore round her neck, wet, on the path in the meadow. Oh, Jem, she’s never drowned, really—not *really*,” as Jem burst into tears at sight of the gay pink ribbon.

“George,” said the doctor, “you must be a man, there’s need of it. Go and fetch Mr James some wine, and drink some yourself; then come back, we shall want you. Call Wood, too.”

“I think,” said George, as he went, “someone had better look for Hugh.”

“I think so too,” said Mr Dickenson. “If Mr Crichton has any morbid ideas in his head, the sooner they are dispelled the better.”

“He could not have done it,” said James, confusedly; “she was not *shot*.”

“Of course not, and if she was accidentally startled by the sound of the gun no blame could attach to anyone. Here,” as George returned with the wine, “take some; we have all work before us. Wood,” he added, “do you think poor Mr Spencer right in saying Miss Crofton was startled by the sound of a gun?”

“All I know, sir, is that my daughter she screamed out, ‘The gun—the gun!’ and I ran out of the house, and Mr Arthur came tearing down from the copse without his gun. Mr Crichton he threw his away as he jumped into the water. I heard no gun in the house.”

“Neither did I,” said the doctor, “but, you see, we shall have to have their evidence to-morrow.”

“The inquest!” said James. “Ah, I never thought of that. What? Must poor Arthur?—”

“I am afraid he must; but, of course, if your brother is there to tell the story, he need say very little. But Mr Crichton *must* be there, you know, and we must get him home without delay.”

“I had better go and look for him,” said James, “though I hardly like to leave my mother.”

“I can stay here,” said Mr Dickenson; “and I can arrange for to-morrow better than you. Could any lady come to Mrs Crichton; and are there any relations to be sent for?”

“No,” said James, “Mysie has no near relations but my mother. But Miss Venning would come to us I am sure. George, you might go and fetch her.”

“Yes; but where’s Arthur?”

“He fainted; he is asleep. You can’t go to him now. Say nothing about Hugh. Of course, he would come back soon, but

I shall go for him. Why, it is getting dusk; is it night or morning? What time can it be?”

“It is eight o’clock,” said Mr Dickenson; “or but a little after.”

James felt as if years had passed since he had seen Arthur come up the path with his sad burden, but the excitement of looking for Hugh came in almost as a relief. James was less alarmed by his absence than anyone less well acquainted with Hugh might have been. He knew the violence with which Hugh’s feelings were apt to overpower him in the first moments of a great shock, and also how completely he was soon able to govern and conceal them. James had little doubt of his speedy return; but it was less wretched to walk rapidly away with Wood, who wanted to return to his children—Alice having been left with the maids at Redhurst—than to sit at home and begin to realise what a blow had fallen on the home which had always seemed, in the few holiday weeks that he spent there, the realisation of sunshine and peace.

They came down towards the lock, which did not yet impress James with any sense of horror, so little realised was the scene connected with it.

“Why, if there ain’t the whole place turned out!” cried Wood, as they came in sight of it, and voices broke on the stillness. The banks of the canal were covered with people, gaping and staring, and surrounding the Wood children, who enjoyed the honour of having been first in the field.

“Well, here’s all Redhurst and half Oxley, and more coming along the path. Get into the house, Bessie, you little forward, unfeeling hussy, a-chattering about the poor dear young lady you saw drowned before your eyes!” cried Wood, not knowing why his real share in the sad tragedy made him so impatient of idle curiosity regarding it. Not but what there would be many genuine tears shed from many eyes for sweet Mysie Crofton; but excitement is a powerful rival at first to grief.

James stood aghast. How could he go and look for Hugh in all this confusion? How would Hugh face it?

Up stepped the inspector of police from Oxley.

“Mr James Crichton, I was fortunately on the spot first, and I have secured the gentlemen’s guns. One was found in the wood and one on the bank; also this rabbit.”

“Is Mr Spencer Crichton here?” said James.

“No, sir, I have not seen him.”

“Can’t you get all these people away?”

“Well, sir, accidents always collect a crowd.”

“My brother,” said James, “was here at the time. Perhaps, if you see him, you would tell him he is wanted at home.”

“Very well, sir,” said the inspector, with an absence of comment which was a great relief to James, who was now beset by a crowd of Redhurst folk, with questions and lamentations.

“It is all true,” James said. “We and all the place are in sad trouble. I think our friends had better go home and leave it to strangers to stare about this place.”

This produced a little effect, and Bessie, picking up the cue, hustled off the younger ones, telling them “to go in and not to be a-staring. Wasn’t Miss Mysie always telling them as little girls shouldn’t run after crowds like that of evenings?”

James ran up into the copse and out on the heath behind it; but he saw no signs of Hugh, and as the light failed he went home in despair, with the picture of his brother, as George had described him, more vividly impressed on his mind than any other of the sad events of the evening. Poor James! he did not know how to contend with the difficulties that he was left alone to bear. He was frightened to death at Hugh’s disappearance, and was almost ready to hope that Arthur might have awakened in his absence to bring his quicker powers of action to bear on the matter. For James felt that he had done just nothing.

It was some relief to find that no one could suggest any other course of action. Miss Venning had arrived and had persuaded his mother to go to bed; and James sat up, waiting and speculating on every possible and impossible cause and result of Hugh’s absence. The unalterable fact of Mysie’s death left no room for fear. Arthur was, for the moment, at rest; but what was Hugh doing?

Part 3, Chapter XXI.

The Morning Light.

> “All joys took wing,
> And fled before the dawn.
> Oh, love, I knew that I should meet my love—
> Should find my love no more.”

In the still grey silence of early morning Arthur awoke slowly, and with a confused sense that things were not as usual. He looked round the room. It had been a hot night, and the window was wide open and the blind up, so that he

could see the quiet cloudy sky and hear the twittering of the birds in the ivy. He put his hand to feel for his watch, and could not find it. Then he tried to recollect what he had done with it the night before, and could recollect nothing. Presently the church clock chimed four. It was very early; what could bring James into his room fully dressed, and with a pale wide-awake look on his face? James came up to the bed without speaking, and put his hand on Arthur's.

"What is the matter; have I been ill?" said Arthur.

"You fainted," said James, in a much-shaken voice.

"Did I? I am quite well now. I can't remember." Poor James blamed himself severely, both then and afterwards, for having no words with which to help or hinder Arthur's recollection; but the great grey eyes in their black circles, fixed on him with a trouble not yet understood, completely unnerved him: he could not speak or look. Perhaps his silence answered the purpose as well as any speech. Arthur grew frightened; his heart began to beat, and his hands to tremble—his face flushed.

"What is the matter, Jem?" he said again, but with a sharper accent.

"Try to remember all you did yesterday," said James, at length.

"Yesterday? We went to the rectory with some flowers, and I left Mysie there. Mysie?" He repeated the name with a sort of enquiry, and then James saw the trouble in his face increase as memory began to awaken and pictures, dim, yet terrible, to form themselves in his mind. He dropped back on the pillow, and lay silent, grasping Jem's hand hard. "Is it a bad dream, Jem?" he said at length.

"No, no; not a dream," faltered Jem.

"Then I remember; then I know, now."

Probably his senses were still dulled and quieted by the opiate, for there was no violent outbreak of misery; he only turned away and hid his face, and James dared not put a single question to him, keen as was his curiosity, for Hugh had not yet come home. He thought it best to leave Arthur alone, as the doctor, when obliged some hours since to leave them, had advised that no attempt should be made to rouse him. Arthur lay quiet for a long time, slowly recalling step by step what had passed, till every incident was clear before him; till he saw again the copse and the rabbits, the swirling water, the boat in the sunshine; felt again the burden in his arms, yet was, perhaps, half asleep still; for, all at once, he roused up and sat upright with a start. After all, was it true?

It was quite broad daylight, and he heard movements in the house. He would get up. Had he had a bad dream after all? He got up, and the first thing he saw and touched was the coat he had worn the day before, which had been thrown aside and was still wet through. The keenest pang he had yet known shot through him as he touched it but still he began to dress, and came down stairs and went out into the garden. Was it really only twenty-four hours ago that Mysie had left the print of her footfall on the dew as she gathered the flowers for her Golden wedding gift? Had she really sat here on the top of the steps and filled her basket with them? Arthur looked down the path towards the meadows, then turned towards it. "If I see that," he thought, "I shall understand. Surely it cannot be!" But he did not set his foot on it, but shrank away with a shiver; for he knew that the sight of the meadows would have brought the truth home, and he knew what was the truth. He went back to the house, and, in a sort of instinctive fashion, turned his steps to the dining-room, where Miss Venning was making breakfast; James and the two younger ones were standing about in a vague, uncertain fashion. They all started at sight of Arthur. George slunk out of the room in a shame-faced, school-boy fashion; while Frederica burst into tears and looked much inclined to follow his example. They were afraid of their brother, afraid of his awful, uncomprehended sorrow. Even Miss Venning could not speak to him as she took his hand, and James said, half-shyly: "Will you have some breakfast, Arthur?"

"Not here," he said, "not here," as their manner began to bring the great change home.

James brought some to him in the study, and began affectionately to coax him to eat something.

"You must," he said. "You know there is something before you to-day. I wish we could spare you from it; but they must have you at—at—"

"I know," said Arthur. "Thanks, Jem; but it won't make much difference. When is it?"

"About eleven. Arthur, I must ask you, do you know anything about Hugh?"

"About Hugh? No; where is he?"

"He has never come back."

"Never come back?" said Arthur, in a much more wide-awake and natural manner.

"Why, where can he be?"

"George saw him in the copse; he seemed—he seemed to blame himself."

"What? Because I told him not to fire?"

"You told him not to fire?" ejaculated James.

Arthur leant back and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"I don't think I'll talk about it now," he said gently. "I must tell them by-and-by. But it is nothing—nothing that you fancy."

"But Hugh should be there?"

"Of course he should. I can't remember anything about him," he added, after a moment, "except that I pulled him out of the water."

"Don't talk now, my dear boy," said Jem, as Arthur's voice failed. "It will soon be over, and Hugh will surely come."

"Jem!"

"Yes?"

"I know it is true now. Don't let me forget and get confused again. I feel so stupid." Then, after a moment: "Let me go and see her."

"Oh, not now, Arty; not till this wretched business is over. Stay here and rest till then. I'll call you in time."

Arthur yielded; he even drank some tea and ate a little at James's entreaty; and the latter was wondering whether to leave him alone, when he caught sight of Hugh coming up the path. Arthur saw him too, and the presence of another actor in the terrible scene effectually roused him.

"Go to him," he said. "Go to him; leave me alone; no one can do anything for me. I shall be ready when you want me—don't be afraid."

James's anxiety could endure no longer, and he hurried out to meet his brother, upon whom no merciful boon of unconsciousness had descended; who had had no period of uncertainty in which to grow accustomed to the shadow of the truth.

He had turned his head as he fired, and had seen her fall; and in a moment his ill-tempered disregard of Arthur's warning flashed back on him, never again to be forgotten. To risk his own life in saving hers was his one thought, and his self-possession and power of judgment had failed him entirely, so that his efforts, even had there been a chance for her, would have been utterly useless. He stood by and heard the doctor's verdict, and Arthur's steady "Yes, she is dead;" felt Arthur push him away, and took the unconscious action as a proof of the horror with which Arthur must henceforth regard him, of the horror with which he must regard himself. He stood still, and saw the boat start on its sad and awful way, saw them all follow, forgetful of everything but the freight that it contained.

"Poor, sweet young lady!" groaned Wood, as he followed.

"Poor boy—poor boy; it's a life ruined," sighed the doctor. But Hugh stood still, and thought—

"*I* have done it. Was ever such a fate as mine?"

He slunk away back into the wood, and stood looking at the lock, there from the spot where that last shot had been fired. He repeated over to himself those words exchanged between himself and Arthur; he saw the rabbit lying dead on the ground. "It's the first I've hit to-day," he thought. A moment's hastiness, a moment's want of thought, and *this* is the result! Oh, it is cruel! Then such an anguish of horror at the desolation that he had caused came over him that it was with a start of something like satisfaction that he caught sight of Arthur's gun where it had been thrown aside on the grass. He took it up, but it had been discharged; and he remembered that Arthur had not reloaded it after his last shot. "There is always the canal," thought Hugh. "My life was blank enough and hard enough before; but now—" It was at this point in his meditations that George had encountered him, and that the boy's inquiry for Arthur had so maddened him that he had rushed off, unheeding where he went; maddened not only—not so much at the thought that Mysie had died a frightful death and that Arthur's life was ruined, as that he himself had been the cause of it all. Filled with a wild, exaggerated sense of blood-guiltiness, he counted up every aggravating circumstance, his old jealousy of his cousins' happiness—his impatience of their laughter and their love, the fact that he was Mysie's guardian, and so responsible for her lot, and that he had been hardly willing to trust her happiness to Arthur's care. He made out the case against himself as no one else would have made it out against him; and then, with a not uncommon inconsistency, ascribed to a cruel chance the wretched result, and felt that he was the sport of circumstances. The deeps of faithless, bitter rebellion rose up to overwhelm him, and he did not cry out of them for help. But the image of Violante came before him, fair and sweet, yet full of reproach for his harsh judgment and hasty desertion. He pushed the thought away from him—was not he one who could never indulge in such thoughts again? Yet he stopped in his wild wrath, and threw himself down on the heath, and, in the midst of a remorse and despair that threatened to drive him mad, he wept for his lost love. They were terrible hours, so terrible as to blot out to Hugh the thought of all the other sufferers; so absorbing that he never paused to wonder what was passing at Redhurst; and they were succeeded by a sort of passive exhaustion, in which the acute pain was dulled, and from which he roused himself with a start and sat upright. It was quite dark, clouds had come up over the sunny sky, and neither moon nor stars lighted up the wild waste of moorland. The night was still and absolutely silent. Hugh did not know where he was as his outer life came back upon him with a strange incongruous sense of the necessity of Mr Spencer Crichton's presence on the scene of action; and, chilled and over-excited as he was, a consciousness of physical discomfort that made him get to his feet and look about him. No, he could not kill himself, nor even lie there to die; all Oxley would be wondering what had become of him—an odd consideration at such a moment; but it brought the further thought of all the painful business to be got through; and who but himself to do it? Somehow, the habit of being forced to consider such necessities did more to bring Hugh to his senses than anything else, and he made up his mind to go home. What right had he to shirk the sight of Arthur's misery? It was part of his punishment. He was, however, so much exhausted as to be hardly able to support himself, and, moreover, where was he? He looked about, and saw far off a red light, which he knew must shine from Fordham Station. He must make for that.

With fatigue and weariness such as he had never known before he stumbled over the heather, and came at last into Fordham village as the church clock struck half-past eleven. He knew that he could not get home without rest, and went into the inn, making some slight excuse of having lost his way—an excuse which he knew would be scattered to the winds to-morrow. However, the hostess knew him, and gave him supper—which he scarcely touched—and a fire; and he lay down for a little, meaning to start as soon as it was light. All sorts of other schemes passed through his mind; of disappearance, of never going home any more or inflicting the sight of himself on his friends; but, somehow, custom and common-sense turned his steps the next morning in the direction of Redhurst, dragging more and more as he drew near, dreading to come up to the house or to show himself; till James rushed out, to his utter surprise, with a cry of relief.

"Thank Heaven, you're here at last! Where have you been? We were so anxious!"

"I came back because I supposed there would be things to attend to," said Hugh, in an odd unnatural voice.

"Yes, of course. We must try to get poor Arthur through it."

"Don't let him see me."

"Hugh, I can't understand this. He *must* see you—he doesn't take it so," said James, much frightened at his brother's wild, haggard look.

Hugh stood looking down at the gravel. Presently he said: "I'll go and change my things. Let me have some breakfast. Where is it, and when?"

"At the Red Lion, at eleven."

"I will attend to it."

They were such commonplace words, and in one way Hugh seemed so entirely himself, that James was all the more confused and puzzled. Hugh went upstairs, made his toilet, and, after eating a few mouthfuls, went off to the village, without asking for his mother, who—fortunately, had not been aware of his absence—and, indeed, without speaking to anyone. Arthur came out at James's summons. The dreamy look was gone, and he was evidently concentrating all his strength on the effort to bear up through the coming trial. He did not try to speak till they reached the inn, where, as they sat down in the quietest corner, he whispered: "Don't be afraid. I shall manage."

Hugh was being talked to, before the proceedings began, by the coroner and one or two others; but made, it seemed to James, hardly any answer to them.

The scene was first described by Mr Dickenson and by Wood, who could only take up the story after Mysie's fall, of which Alice had been the only witness on the spot.

The poor little girl, sobbing and trembling, had answered that she had seen Miss Crofton fall, and then—

"Can you give any reason for it?"

"It was the gun, sir."

"What gun?"

"If you please, sir, I don't know."

Then Hugh stood up.

"I do. It was mine. Will you have the goodness to take my evidence next, and I think you will see that there is no occasion to trouble anyone else."

The coroner assented, and Hugh, having been sworn, went on in a hard, cold voice:

"My cousin and I were shooting in the copse. I was put out of temper because I missed aim twice. My cousin saw her —Miss Crofton—standing by the lock; so did I. He said the gates were dangerous, and I contradicted him, and was irritated by what I thought foolish anxiety. A rabbit got up and I raised my gun. My cousin said: 'Don't fire, you'll startle her—'" Hugh could not get out the name. "I said, 'Nonsense, it is too far off;' and I fired, and she *was* startled, and she fell off and was drowned. Those are the facts; it is my doing entirely."

There was a pause of shocked attention, which was broken by Arthur, who came forward and stood by Hugh.

"I wish to say something."

"Certainly, Mr Spencer. It is my duty to ask you if Mr Spencer Crichton has stated the facts correctly."

"Yes," said Arthur. "Those are the facts; but my cousin has given you a wrong impression. He did not, I am sure, see where she was when he fired, and—and—we *were* at some distance. He could not know, as I do, how easily she is startled."

"I did know it, Arthur," said Hugh passionately. "I did know where she was!"

"It might have happened to me," said Arthur, earnestly. "Indeed, there is no blame."

"You thought so then," cried Hugh, losing all sense of the listeners. "You pushed me back; you would not let me

touch her! What wonder if you cursed the day I was born!"

"Hugh, hush!" interposed Arthur. "That can do no good."

"Yes, Mr Crichton," said the coroner, "it would be better to control yourself. Mr Spencer's language is generous in the extreme. Of course, no one could doubt for a moment that this unhappy event was entirely accidental; but it is never safe to disregard a warning as to fire-arms, however apparently superfluous. Of course, we can feel and express nothing but the profoundest sympathy for yourself and for all those for whom the neighbourhood entertains such high respect."

There was no hesitation as to the verdict; and when it was over, and those engaged began to disperse, Arthur went up to Hugh and laid his hand on his arm and said:

"Come, Hugh, let us get home—that will be best for us."

Hugh shook off the hand and shrank from him with a sort of horror.

"Don't touch me—don't speak to me!" he cried.

Arthur looked surprised and disappointed; and James, who had been hitherto utterly silenced by the horror of Hugh's avowal, hastily drew him away, seeing that he could hardly bear up any longer. Hugh followed them up the garden and into the study, and then broke out into a torrent of self-reproach, so violent and so uncontrollable that Arthur vainly tried to silence it.

"I have broken your heart," he cried. "There is no atonement I can make—none. My life can't make it up to you. The sight of your grief will kill me! I have destroyed her, the beautiful, innocent creature. I was jealous of your happiness and of hers, and I have ruined it for ever!"

"Don't, Hugh, don't," said Arthur, faintly; "don't, I can't bear it!"

"Bear it! Vent it all on me—tell me how you hate me."

"Be quiet, Hugh," interposed James, sternly, as he saw that Arthur grew whiter and whiter. "The least you can do is not to distress him now. This is too much;" as poor Arthur, after vainly attempting to speak, burst into tears. "Oh, mother," as Mrs Crichton came hurriedly into the room, "Arthur must be quiet now."

But Arthur turned as she went towards him, hardly seeing her son—of whose special interest in the matter she was quite unconscious—and threw his arms round her, and laid his head on her shoulder, letting his grief have free course at last, while she tenderly soothed him and drew him down by her on the sofa.

"Never mind, Jem," she said; "leave him to me; this is the best thing that can happen. My poor boy!"

Hugh looked at them for a moment, then turned and went away by himself.

Part 3, Chapter XXII.

Dark Days.

> "Then he sat down, sad and speechless,
> At the feet of Minnehaha—
> At the feet of Laughing Water—
> At those willing feet that never
> More would lightly run to meet him,
> Never more would lightly follow.
> Then they buried Minnehaha."

There was very little to be done at Redhurst during the few sad days that followed. Mysie's fortune was inherited by a second cousin on her father's side—a middle-aged clergyman, who had never seen her, and who was the father of a large young family, and the letter to announce her death to him was almost the only one of any imperative consequence as a matter of business, while it was a very simple statement of a flairs which Hugh must hand over to him when he came to the funeral, which was fixed for the Saturday morning. A heavier cloud could hardly have descended on any household; but Mrs Spencer Crichton was a person of strong nerves; and, deep and sincere as was her sorrow, it was not quite the desolation that it must have been had Mysie been her own child. She was able to stay with Arthur till his first agony had a little subsided, and he murmured something about "Hugh."

"Do you want him, my dear?"

"No; but he will want you."

"Oh yes, presently. Don't you trouble yourself, Arty. You can tell us by-and-by if there is anything you wish. But I will go if you like to be alone. Shall I tell Hugh anything?"

Arthur felt quite incapable of any explanation; it was an effort even to think of Hugh; his grief was utterly crushing and overwhelming.

"Give him my love," he said.

His aunt thought it rather an odd message; but she did not wish to tease Arthur with talking, and she knew that it was quite useless to attempt to comfort him, and so left him alone. She encountered James hanging about the hall, looking forlorn and frightened.

“Oh, mamma,” he said, “I don’t know what is to be done.”

“He is better now,” said Mrs Crichton, “and I think it is best to leave him quiet.”

“I’m not thinking about him. It’s Hugh.”

“Hugh?”

“Don’t you know, mother, how it was?” And James, as well as he could, repeated the substance of what had passed at the inquest.

“My dear,” said Mrs Crichton, with energy, “I should never allow such a thing to be repeated. Don’t say a word about it, and it will die out of their minds. I shouldn’t think of regarding it from that point of view. Why, it’s enough to drive them both mad.”

“But it’s true, mother,” said Jem, gloomily. “True? Not at all; those things rest on the turn of a hair, and Hugh must not be allowed to dwell on it. Where is he?”

Even in the midst of his misery James could hardly help smiling at his mother’s view.

“He shut himself into his room,” he said.

“Of course, he might work himself up into thinking anything his fault. It was *not* his fault. It is a matter which entirely depends on the way in which you regard it; I could not think why he was on Arthur’s mind—he sent him his love.”

“Did he? Oh, he is very—generous,” said James, much affected. “Oh, mother, mother, to think of his life yesterday and *now*! No wonder Hugh is half mad.”

Mrs Crichton cried irrepressibly for a few minutes. “Jem, she was the sunshine of the place. My dear little girl! But I can’t allow Hugh to take it in the way you speak of, and I beg you never to put it in such a point of view.”

Mrs Crichton rose as she spoke, and went upstairs to her son’s room. Jem followed, totally unable to understand her conduct. He forgot that his confused half-hinted story was not the same thing as the actual scene, or as Hugh’s brief, bitter narration of it, and could not make the same impression. Mrs Crichton knocked, but hardly waited for an answer. Hugh stood facing them.

“Am I wanted?” he said.

“Why yes, my dear, of course. Who else can settle things but you. Poor Arthur can think of nothing.”

“He must not be troubled,” said Hugh, “I will come at once.”

“That is right. I was perfectly certain that you would not give way to any such foolish morbid notions as Jem suggests; they can only cause far more distress to Arthur and to us all. He sent you his love—”

“He need not have done *that*,” said Hugh, in a hard, cold voice, though he trembled so much that he was obliged to sit down. “Mother, you are mistaken; I, and only I, am to blame. All this wretchedness has been caused by my temper and presumption. Just a moment’s ill-temper,” he added, with intense bitterness.

“That is exactly what I say, my dear. You make matters worse by exaggerating. No one would think of such a thing but yourself. Turn your back at once on the thought. There is quite enough to break all our hearts without that.”

It is not always wise to ignore passionate feeling, even when it is supposed to be unreasonable. Hugh felt keenly that his mother gave him no sympathy in the trial which he believed to be more bitter than that of Arthur, whom he had seen her soothe and caress. He had neither the tact to conceive nor the unselfishness to carry out the idea that, as the miserable truth *did* greatly add to the pain of all concerned, it would be better to bury it and his remorse in his own breast. Rather would he do penance for it in every way that he could.

“There is enough to break hearts,” he said, “and it is through my means they are broken. But don’t fear that I shall shrink from anything that has to be done. There is no need that Arthur should see me.”

“Arthur must rest, and you too, Hugh,” interposed James. “There is nothing very pressing. Go to bed, you were up all night—do, now, there’s a good fellow.”

“Thank you, I want no rest,” said Hugh. “If mother likes I will come and write letters and settle matters now.”

“Yes, my dear, that will be best,” said Mrs Crichton, “and will help you to recover your balance better.”

Hugh thought his mother unfeeling; Arthur clung to her as his kindest comforter. She thoroughly understood and acknowledged the one grief, and it was such that no one could turn their backs on it; but Mrs Crichton was a person whom nature had gifted with an almost over-amount of that rare quality, a tendency to make the best of things. It was her nature to ignore grief where it was possible, to smoothe it over and hide it, to seize on its most tolerable side; and she could not understand Hugh’s impulse to drink the cup to the dregs. Her mind went on, even in these first sad days, to plans for a little lightening the cloud that covered them; and she was not a person who could sympathise with an unhappiness of which she did not thoroughly admit the necessity, or the duration of which she

thought extreme. Moreover, there was some sense in the view that least said was soonest mended, as far as Hugh was concerned, and that the unhappy words which had accompanied the fatal shot were best forgotten. Here James agreed with her. He had more power of realising the feelings of those around him; but the black oppression was very trying to his kindly nature, and, in the intervals of being as kind and helpful as he knew how, would creep out into the shrubbery with a book or his pipe, or get a little taste of the outside world by answering enquiries or undertaking commissions. Hugh did everything that was necessary, and did not renew the discussion; but he avoided Arthur entirely, and looked so worn out with misery as to excite the pity of everyone who saw him. He pictured to himself the dread that Arthur must have of meeting him, till his own dread grew so intense that nothing but his sense that he deserved any and every punishment could have induced him to face the hour when they must stand side by side at Mysie's grave.

The truth was that Arthur had hardly thought about him at all, had scarcely noticed that when he occasionally came downstairs or sat on the terrace Hugh was not there. His own future life had not yet come before him; the causes that had so changed it were all swallowed up in the great fact of the change. It was of Mysie that he thought hour after hour, of her face and her voice and her sweet eyes, and of every word and look they had exchanged during their brief and sweet betrothal. He was very gentle and grateful for the kindness shown him, and his habitual unselfishness made him considerate of all the rest; but, though there was a sort of surface readiness to be comforted about him, nothing really touched him much. They were all very kind, but he loved none of them with the intense and personal love which only could have gone to his heart then. He made no effort to hide or deny his sorrow, admitting it simply; but he did not talk much about Mysie, and not at all about himself. He did not seem conscious of any want of occupation, though he did little or nothing, and suffered less physically than might have been expected after such a shock. But that awful scene which seemed to have burnt itself in on Hugh's eyeballs as yet scarcely haunted Arthur—partly because he had acted in it, not seen it; but more entirely because he was so much absorbed in his sorrow that he had not begun to think of how it had come about. They said he bore it beautifully, because he uttered no outcries against fate and could smile when people were kind to him; but, in truth, his spirit was too much crushed for rebellion; even his own loneliness and changed life had hardly yet come before him. At night, or when he had been long alone, his first sense of unreality would again recur to him and the truth come upon him in its first freshness as he met the sad faces of the others, or as he looked on the face, not sad, but still and fair, of his lost love. On that face Hugh never looked; but it was as Arthur knelt beside her that he saw Mr Harcourt again. The old rector laid his hands on his head, and once more repeated the blessing he had given him so short a time before.

"She will have fifty happy years, my boy," he said.

"But I—but I—" and poor Arthur hurried away, utterly overpowered, though afterwards he tried to say something to James about "Mr Harcourt's kindness, and there was one thing he wished."

"Anything you wish, Arthur. What is it?"

"That Sunday," said Arthur—as if, poor fellow, it had been some day last year—"they sang a hymn, and she spoke of it. If, to-morrow—"

"I remember," said Jem. "Yes, we'll have it. Mr Crofton has come," he added.

"Has he? I think I ought to come down and see him."

"Hugh is there," said James.

"Oh, yes, but I shouldn't leave it all to him," said Arthur, as he prepared to come down, evidently caring little either way for Hugh's presence, and less for his own heavy eyes and white face. He did not heed who saw the tokens of a grief that could surprise no one. He wanted to show respect to Mysie's cousin. Mr Crofton was a kind, sensible-looking clergyman, and when James said nervously: "This is my cousin Arthur, Mr Crofton," he could hardly utter a commonplace greeting as he pressed the hand Arthur held out to him.

Hugh set his mouth hard and sat quite still in his corner. Arthur said simply: "I am glad to see you, Mr Crofton," and sat down by Hugh on the sofa, but without giving him any special greeting; and then asked some little question about Mr Crofton's journey.

Mr Crofton had two or three sons, and as many daughters. He held a small living, and he had never seen the little cousin whose fortune he had inherited; but as he heard Arthur's gentle, courteous voice, and saw his young face with its heavy shadows, he felt as if the inevitable sense of relief that had come to him at the first had been a deadly sin. He hardly knew to whom to address himself, but before Arthur's arrival he had managed to make them understand that all Mysie's personal property, all her ornaments, every relic of herself, must still belong to those who had loved and lost her; and Mrs Crichton now spoke a little of how much she had been loved, and how many tokens of grief had been shown both by rich and poor.

"There will be crowds to-morrow," she said.

"That can be put a stop to," said Hugh, suddenly.

"My dear Hugh! Surely not!"

"I should not have thought you would have wished to gratify idle curiosity. Under the circumstances we cannot keep it too much to ourselves," said Hugh, unable to bear the thought of meeting the eyes of all the village.

"I should like everyone to come who wishes it," said Arthur.

"It was for your sake I spoke," said Hugh.

"I? I shall not mind! There are so many who—who—I am sure Mr Crofton will excuse me now," he added abruptly, as he got up and went away.

"You forget," said Hugh, "how public all this has become. We shall have newspaper reporters and all the tag-rag of Oxley."

"It cannot be helped," said his mother, "and you should not put it into Arthur's head to mind it."

"He will not care," said Hugh; "why should he? He will have plenty of sympathy from them all."

"He will not care, indeed," said James, indignantly.

James was wrong. When Arthur saw lane and churchyard and church itself filled with those who had loved Mysie the sense of sympathy struck no discordant note, just as the blue unclouded sky and the happy sunlight did not mock his sorrow, but seemed only a fitting tribute to her happy life. Arthur felt a sense of friendly fellow-feeling, as if the love and the flowers and the sunlight were part of the brightness he could hardly feel to be gone for ever; but he could not have described afterwards one tearful face, one flowery wreath—perhaps he hardly distinguished one word in the solemn service, which yet he felt to be right and fitting, and which did soothe him with a sense of union with Mysie, and of the existence of a support of which he might one day take hold.

But Hugh's intense self-consciousness gave to everything the vivid and yet weird distinctness of objects seen in an electric light. Every sob that he heard, every token of affection, seemed to him a reproach. He was conscious of Arthur's every movement, and of every anxious look which his mother and James cast at him; he realised far more intensely than his cousin how pitiful it was that the earth should fall on this bright young creature, and that her story should break off short in the early chapters. He realised this till the tears came to his eyes, and, though he was probably the only person present who cared whether his grief were noticed or not, everyone went home to say how vain his efforts at self-control had been.

The long day was over; they had parted with Mr Crofton, Arthur showing him the little attentions that Hugh wondered he could recollect at such a moment—the week which seemed to join on to no other weeks was over, and they must begin life again. Any change was welcome to Hugh's restlessness; and to the others—Jem especially—the lightening of the outward signs of mourning, the resumption of ordinary habits, was a relief. But to Arthur it brought the first sense of irretrievable loss, the first necessity for any effort to put aside the grief which he had borne, indeed, without resistance, but under which he could not stand upright.

For the first time he shrank from them all, for the first time the sunlight seemed cruel, and kind words like blows; the Sunday bells brought memories that he could not bear, and he shut himself into his room, only begging to be left there in peace. Hugh went to church with the younger ones—what right had he to spare himself any pain?

The day turned chilly and gloomy, and they gathered in the drawing-room in the afternoon. George and Frederica went to church again for the sake of something to do; but they could not go to the Rectory afterwards, and came home to find their aunt, James, and Miss Venning gathered round a small, unaccustomed-looking fire, with some tea on the table, while Hugh sat at the far end of the long room by himself.

"How is Arthur?" asked Frederica.

"He has a bad headache," replied James.

"Do you think he is going to be ill, Jem?"

"Oh, no; I hope not. I don't think it's likely."

"Mother," said Hugh, coming forward, "Arthur ought to go away somewhere at once."

"Yes," said Mrs Crichton, "I think he should. We all must as soon as we can manage it."

"Yes," said Hugh, with a sudden sense of relief, "and I would go to the Bank house and stay there."

"I don't see any need for that. Miss Venning and I have been talking. I thought we might all go to the sea till the holidays were over. Miss Venning kindly promises to come with us, and then she would take Freddie back as a boarder for the next term—poor child, it is too sad for her here."

"Oh, auntie, I had much rather be sad," interposed Frederica, with a burst of tears.

"No, darling—nonsense. I could not have that. Jem, I suppose, must go back to town."

"On Thursday," said Jem.

"But I am sure the rest of us had better keep together."

"I shall be much too busy to leave home," said Hugh, with an emphasis that made Jem smile. "I shall do very well by myself."

Mrs Crichton began to discuss the rival merits of Hastings and Brighton, while Hugh went back to his place, and James and Miss Venning exchanged a few words as to how far the arrangement would be good for Arthur, when, rather to their surprise, Arthur himself came in.

He sat down on the sofa by his aunt, and she asked him tenderly if his head was better.

“Oh, yes, thank you. How cold it is—the lire looks pleasant.”

“You must have some tea—Freddie!” But Freddie’s tears choked her and upset her aunt too; while Miss Venning hastily interposed and poured out the tea. Arthur got up and handed it, and tried to make a little talk, seconded by Jem, till Mrs Crichton said:

“My dear boy, we have been talking about going away. It will be good for you to have a change.”

“I don’t want to go away,” said Arthur, languidly.

“My dear, it would never do for you to stay here. We all want the break.”

“Why do you urge him to do anything he does not like?” said Hugh, so abruptly as to make Arthur start.

“Hugh! I did not see you!” he said.

“I am going out. Mother, there is no need for Arthur to go away unless he likes.”

“But, Hugh, nothing could be so bad for health or spirits as staying here.”

“I daresay Aunt Lily is right, Hugh,” said Arthur, as if he wanted to stop the discussion. “But, you see, I don’t quite know where I could go to.”

“Why, with us, my dear, to be sure,” said Mrs Crichton, as she explained the plan proposed. “Should you like it, Arthur?”

“Oh, yes. I daresay it would do quite well. Please don’t talk about it,” he added, more fretfully than he often spoke, “at least not now.”

Hugh saw that well-intentioned consolation or cheering would only worry the poor boy, who was not able to respond to it, and that he was hardly fit even for the change proposed; and for a moment the thought flashed across him of how he would devote himself to soothe Arthur’s grief if he could have him to himself for a little, how he, of his own bitter experience, would know how to treat the fitful spirits that would only perplex the rest. Only for a moment; the next he thought how intolerable the sight of that grief would be, and how his own unwelcome presence must increase it.

“You must do just as you like,” he repeated as he went out of the room. As he walked up and down on the terrace outside he saw Arthur wander away from the others and sit down on the distant sofa that he had left. Presently Snap followed him, and jumped up on his lap. Arthur coaxed and caressed him, and played with him in a sad, aimless sort of fashion, and at last laid his head back on the cushions, with the dog nestling against him. Hugh watched every weary, restless movement with an intensity of sympathy that seemed to feel how the temples throbbed and the eyes ached, and how the wretchedness seemed to increase every hour. And yet he could not say one gentle, tender word. At last the stillness proved that Arthur had fallen asleep—worn out, perhaps, with the excitement of the day before. But Hugh paced up and down in the chilly, windy twilight, and longed for the time when they would all have gone and he would be left to himself.

Part 3, Chapter XXIII.

Flossy.

> “And life looks dark
> Where walked we friend with friend.”

A great sorrow affects the lives of many other people besides those most immediately concerned, and this not only in the greater or lesser degrees of grief that it may cause, or in the change which it may make in more than one set of circumstances, but in the fact that no great event can come within our ken without presenting life in a new aspect and more or less making a change in ourselves.

Redhurst was changed, utterly and for ever, by Mysie Crofton’s death; and with the change in Redhurst there came a great change to many another homestead, a great piece of brightness and pleasantness went out of many lives.

The old Rector and his wife would miss her when they gathered their flowers and ate their fruit; the village girls would miss her at church and at school; her own schoolfellows in far-away homes would sadden at the tidings; and Florence Venning might well grieve for the loss of her best-loved pupil and friend.

She grieved for her, when once her senses were set free from the stupefying shock of the sudden tidings, with all the energy of her energetic nature. She sorrowed, as she worked and as she rejoiced—with all her might. It was holiday time, and she had no duties to distract her. Miss Venning was at Redhurst. Clarissa, though somewhat appalled by the violence of her grief, could think of no better course to pursue than to let her alone; and Flossy, all the first day, shut herself into her room, and wept and sobbed, feeling as if the world had come to an end for her and for everyone she cared about. It was the first grief that she had ever realised, for she had been too young to feel acutely her parents’ death; and, perhaps, the fact that it was not exactly her own grief, greatly as it grieved her, made her, as the days went by, more prone to moralise about it. She had seen sorrow, read about it, thought about it, and tried to comfort it. She was not particularly ignorant of the world; their large school connection brought her into contact with many events and many people; and parish work, seriously pursued, teaches girls more of the realities of life than is commonly supposed. She had sympathised with great sorrows, understood great difficulties, and yet now for the first

time the sense came to her of what those sorrows had been. How had she dared to try to comfort those who were feeling as she now felt, and not only as she felt, but as she now understood those nearer and dearer must feel. *This* was sorrow. Could even she take comfort in the thoughts she herself had often suggested; and what comfort could they be to her unhappy friends?

She had often said that the only comfort in sorrow was religion. Now she knew what sorrow meant; did she know what religion meant too? It was a matter of course in these days that so intelligent and so earnest-minded a girl should care about the subject; and Flossy was not only critical of different shades of Church opinion, but held her own with great ardour and no want of reality, impressing them strongly on the young girls whom she sought to influence, and possibly arguing about them more forcibly than meekly. More than this, she dutifully followed the practices and principles they enjoined. And now what did her religion do for her? Perhaps she did not altogether realise the Help to which she looked, but, at least, she felt the necessity of it to the very bottom of her soul. She had not herself sounded the depths of grief, she did not soar to the heights of consolation; but at least she looked the grief and the great Comfort full in the face.

But Flossy's thoughts were soon turned away from herself to those more immediately concerned. She envied Miss Venning her place among them, and cared for nothing but the accounts she sent of the life at Redhurst from day to day.

Little as she guessed it, there was something in the wild mournful pathos of the story, in the picturesqueness of its incidents, in the admiration which Arthur's reported gentleness and patience inspired, that did lift it into the regions of romance, and made its exceeding pitifulness a little more bearable to one so young as Flossy, as long as she was not brought into actual contact with it; something that harmonised with the truer and deeper consolation that came with the thought of Mysie's goodness and innocence, and that made that sunshiny funeral, with its scent of flowers, its sound of music, and its crowd of young faces, a time not absolutely miserable; a recollection that might soften into tenderness, and brighten, perhaps, to the perfect day. But it was with a sense of nothing but the absolute piteous reality of loss and change that she walked up to Redhurst with Clarissa to wish them all goodbye before the final break-up of the household, becoming conscious of nothing but the determination not to cry and so add to the pain with which they might meet her. She forgot how well they were accustomed to the atmosphere of sorrow that struck on her with such a chill; and when Mrs Crichton, seeing her agitation, caressed her and spoke tenderly of her love for their lost darling, Flossy felt as if everyone but herself were capable of efforts of unselfish self-control. While she was listening to James's explanation of their future plans, and how he had got his leave extended for a day or two to see them off to Bournemouth, suddenly, without warning, Arthur came into the room. She had not expected to see him, and as he came forward rather hastily and took her hand, colouring up a little, she wondered that he looked so like himself.

"I did not know you were here," he said, and then she heard how the life and ring had gone out of his voice. She could not speak a word, and turned quite white, a strange thing in the pink-faced Flossy.

"Did you want me, Arthur?" said James. "No, I don't want anything, thank you." He turned away to speak to Clarissa, and Flossy moved into the window, and stood looking out and seeing nothing. Presently she heard Arthur's voice at her side.

"Flossy, I wish to give you this. Aunt Lily thinks you would like it."

Flossy looked, and saw by the shape of the case in his hand that it contained some turquoise ornaments which Mysie had been very fond of wearing.

"Oh, no, no, Arthur," she burst out, vehement and outspoken as ever, even then; "not those. I never, *never* could put them on. I have her old school-books and some music. I want nothing."

"But keep this," he said, "I know *she* would have wished it."

Flossy yielded then. She took hold of Arthur's hand and squeezed it hard, but she could not speak of her own grief in the presence of his; and he soon moved away, as if he had done what he wanted to do and was indifferent to anything else.

"Flossy," whispered Frederica, "come out with me. Oh," she continued, as they came into the garden, "I shall be so glad to go to Bournemouth. It is dreadful here. Only I can't think what we shall do with Arthur—Aunt Lily and I. He likes best to be with Jem, or quite alone."

"Mary told us how beautifully he behaves."

"Oh, yes; but it is so difficult to know what he likes. Hugh, there's Hugh!"

Taken utterly by surprise Flossy started, with a half-shrinking movement, and, though she recovered herself in a moment and held out her hand, Hugh turned away as if he had not meant to be seen, and was gone at once.

"There!" cried Frederica, passionately; "*You* feel it too! They may say what they like. I hate him, and so does George; and I wish he would go away and never come back!"

"That is not right, Freddie. I ought not to have started—it must be worst of all for him."

"I don't believe it! I know just how it was; Hugh is so conceited, and so interfering! He ought to be sorry and to know we all hate the sight of him."

Frederica's intolerant girlish harshness gave Flossy a shock.

"Hugh," she said; "whatever you think, what Hugh must feel is far beyond and above anything we can understand, and we must not talk about 'ought' and 'ought not.'"

"Aunt Lily says it is nonsense to say he had anything to do with it; but I know he thinks so himself."

"Then, that is enough, without your discussing it," said Flossy, with a sense of irreverence in thus roughly handling events so terrible. She *did* shrink at the thought of Hugh, but she would not have said so for the world.

Frederica was silenced, but she and her younger brother indulged secretly in much discussion and comment, the excitement of which relieved their dreary hours a little; and Hugh felt the little pricks their childish displeasure gave him. That Arthur showed none of it he attributed to a determination to avoid paining him. Had not Florence Venning shrunk away from him? Jem had fallen into Mrs Crichton's policy of refusing to recognise any special reason for his unhappiness, and was taken up in softening matters as far as possible for Arthur; so that he was only too thankful to talk occasionally to his brother on other subjects, and with stifling slight pangs of regret that he had used up all his leave without that little run down to the cathedral town where Archdeacon Hayward resided, and without that Sunday when he went to church with Miss Helen and indulged his distant admiration for her.

On the afternoon after Flossy's visit he remained in the drawing-room alone, readings the paper, for the others had dispersed. Jem sometimes wrote as well as read the papers, and as he perused an art-critique, from which he differed fundamentally, an answer to adorn the pages of the rival journal began to seethe in his brain. He could not help feeling that tones and tints, lights and shades, on canvas, would be a great relief from the overpowering feelings of real life. He murmured to himself: "If accuracy of drawing and truth of colour are to be sacrificed to a—to a meretricious prettiness and a false—"

"Oh, Jem, look here, read this!" exclaimed Arthur, coming hastily up to him with a letter in his hand. "Don't you remember Fred Seton, who went to India?"

"What, a light-haired fellow, who came to see you one Christmas? Yes, what of him?"

"He has been very ill; he is coming home on sick-leave. He wants me to meet him at Marseilles."

James remembered dimly that Arthur had always entertained a strong friendship for this Fred Seton, and had greatly regretted his going to India some two or three years before. He read the letter, which was written evidently in bad health and spirits and in ignorance of Arthur's engagement, begging him, if possible, to come out and meet him.

"You know, Jem, his people are all dead. He is such a lonely fellow—I must go."

"But, Arthur, it's such a dreary errand for you just now," said James. "If Seton should be worse when you meet him—or you yourself—"

"I shall not be ill, if that is what you mean. And, Jem, it would be *some* object. What could I do with myself at Bournemouth?"

"No, that's true," said James. "I feel that. But, my dear boy, I don't like your going away alone to meet no one knows what, when you want looking after so much yourself."

"No one can help me," said Arthur. "What *can* my life be to me? You're all so good, but the light has gone down for me. Let me go; it will be change—something to look forward to. And I am quite well. I can eat and sleep. I could walk any distance. I must go."

"Well, I suppose you must, but mother will hate the notion."

"Will you talk her over? Somehow, I can't bear to be talked to about myself." James found his task very difficult. Mrs Crichton naturally entertained a thousand fears for Arthur's health and spirits, but he was reinforced by Hugh.

"Let him go; of course, if he wishes it. If he *can* care for any fresh object it will be the best cure. Let him do exactly as he likes now and henceforward. I daresay the change will distract his mind and do him good."

They were kind words, but there was something hard and sarcastic in the tone in which they were uttered.

"I wish you could have a change too," said Jem, looking at him.

"Changes don't make much difference to me," said Hugh; "perhaps they may to Arthur."

Mrs Crichton had resolved that the division of poor Mysie's little belongings should be made at once, and she was right in thinking that it would cost Arthur far less pain now than at any future time. There was no use, she thought, in allowing haunting memories to have a local habitation; and she secretly determined that, during their absence, the house should so be rearranged as to leave no sacred corners; while there was nothing startling *now* in the sight of Mysie's books and jewels, when all their hearts were full of Mysie herself.

Arthur was grateful for having been allowed to have his own way so easily, but even while he arranged his journey with Jem, and felt how intolerable the Bournemouth scheme would have been to him, his heart almost failed him—the long journey seemed such a trouble—and how utterly, how immeasurably sad this turning away from his old life made him! For, young as he was, the loss was as the loss of a wife—it was the dividing of that which had been whole, the changing of every detail of his days. It was not disappointed passion: what lay before him was not life with a dark painful memory in one corner of it; it was life under conditions of which he had never dreamed. It was not that his old delights and hopes had become distasteful, but that they had ceased to exist. He had decided to go to London with Jem, starting late on the Friday evening, and go on to Marseilles on the Saturday; and on the Friday afternoon Hugh,

coming back from the bank, found him alone in the drawing-room, sitting there with a mournful, unoccupied look that went to his heart.

"He will be gone soon," thought Hugh, with a sense of infinite relief. However, he came forward, and said:

"I wanted to ask you, Arthur, have you money enough for this journey?"

"Oh, yes, thank you; quite enough for the present."

"You have only to ask for what you want—of my mother if you like it better."

"I'll ask you," said Arthur, gently. "I hope you'll write to me sometimes."

"If you wish it."

"And, Hugh, will you have this? It was your present to her, I believe."

He held out to him a little prettily-bound book, a collection of poetry of which Mysie had been very fond.

"You are very good to me," said Hugh, almost inaudibly and with bent head, not taking the book.

"Hugh," said Arthur, evidently with great effort, "I don't feel as you suppose. I cannot speak of—of that—"

"No, no, don't, don't speak of it. I know what you feel," interposed Hugh. "Don't force yourself to anything else for me."

The long strain on his nerves had made poor Arthur much less capable of self-control than at first; and though he succeeded in saying, as he put his hand on Hugh's: "I don't force myself; you could not help it"—the shudder of horror at the bare allusion to the fact might well be mistaken by Hugh for a struggle to perform an act of forgiveness. It was agony to Hugh to see him suffer; but, if he could have forgotten that and tried to soothe the suffering, the misapprehension would have passed away and the real sympathy between them have comforted both. As it was, he felt a pang of humiliation, and was relieved when James's entrance spared him the need of a reply; though he knew that his brother would blame him for Arthur's obvious agitation. As James began to talk, half-coaxingly, about the arrangements for their start, and finally carried Arthur off to have something to eat, the thought that came into Hugh's mind, spite of himself, was: "He need not wish to change with me, after all."

Part 4, Chapter XXIV.

Chance and Change.

> "Fresh woods and pastures new!"

Part 4, Chapter XXV.

Private Theatricals.

> "But a trouble weighed upon her
> And perplexed her night and morn,
> With the burden of an honour
> Unto which she was not born."

Between the date of Hugh Crichton's return from Italy and the day when he was left alone to set up for himself in the old Bank House barely two months elapsed. Those days that had been for Arthur and Mysie so sweet, so rich and full, had been long days indeed, the long days of summer, but they had been very few in number, so few that the first tints of autumn had not touched the trees when they were over, though the roses had been fully in bloom when they began. It was still summer, they were still long hot days, when Mysie was buried, and Arthur set forth on his solitary journey, and Florence Venning turned back to her usual pursuits and wished the holidays over, that some sort of life and interest might come back to the Manor again. It was an endless summer, Hugh thought, as he was left alone to reflect on all that it had brought to him, and wondered—in the intervals of wondering how Arthur managed to shift for himself, and how far change of scene would affect his trouble—in between whiles he wondered if the opera season at Civita Bella were over and the manager and his *prima donna* had had time for their wedding.

It was a long summer, too, in Civita Bella, for Violante had to live through the days though Hugh Crichton was gone; there were still seven in each week, and they brought many incidents with them.

She had offended Signor Vasari—not mortally, perhaps; not without hope of restoration to his favour; but so that he determined to punish her and her family by the temporary withdrawal of his suit. With all her shortcomings she was too valuable to him, and perhaps he was too much in love with her, for an entire break, but he intended to make her feel his displeasure. Her failures were no longer treated with indulgence, and her stage-life was made indeed hard to her. Perhaps in so acting he gave her a shield against his pertinacity, in the passionate resentment which such conduct excited; and, had this been the only battle which Violante had to fight, there might have been fire enough in her nature to help her through with it. She could not be scornful, but she could be utterly, passively indifferent, absolutely unconscious of the little flags of truce he now and then held out, careless whether he praised or blamed. So she appeared at first; but, though she was not much afraid of Signor Vasari, she was very much afraid of her own

father, and, in these languid weary days, she often justly incurred his displeasure.

When Hugh turned away in anger, she felt as if nothing could ever matter to her again; but the habit of seeing professional engagements fulfilled at all costs all her life, and knowing that no amount of disinclination made it possible to break them, prevented her, there being no perversity in her nature, from giving way to her longing for quiet and rest.

But, though she did everything that she was told to do, a sort of dead weight of incapacity seemed to have fallen upon her. She forgot the music that she had learnt already, and a fresh part she was utterly unable to master. She gave her time to it, but with no result. Rosa did not wonder that Signor Mattei exclaimed, in a transport of indignation, that he had never had so perverse a pupil as his own daughter. Every performance seemed to cost Violante more and to be less successful than the last, and the private rehearsals on which Signor Mattei insisted were worst of all, since she could scarcely speak, much less act, in his presence.

There they were one morning: Signor Mattei with an opera score in his hand, singing, acting, dancing about, scolding, gesticulating, running his hands through his hair; and Violante, white, trembling, and motionless, with her little hands dropped before her and her eyes utterly blank; Rosa, who had had a hard time of it of late, at work in a corner. She had not been in the habit of seeing Violante practise her acting, as her father had only recently insisted on these private performances, and they were a revelation to her of the extent of her sister's incapacity.

"What possesses the child," she thought, herself almost angry. "If I had half her voice, let alone her beauty, I would have sung every soprano part on the stage by this time! Ah, if I only had! She *is* stupid. It must be sheer fright. Oh dear! there she is singing that coquettish bit like a dirge. What will father say to her? I wonder if I could make her see how to do it—it seems such incredible incapacity. And she is not in good voice either—how should she be, poor child?"

And Rosa's lips moved, and her face assumed half-unconsciously the expression appropriate to the part.

"Violante! It is incredible, most incredible. Here am I a lamb of meekness and mildness. I am not going to beat you, child. Santa Madonna! I really believe I could; you are as obstinate as a mule. Laugh, child, laugh—smile; you can do that. Eleven o'clock! I must go to my pupils, and I am tired to death already. Don't tell me you have tried—No, Rosa—no excuses. See that she knows it better when I come back;" and, flinging the score across the room in his irritation, Signor Mattei departed.

"Oh, Violante!" exclaimed Rosa, "what can possess you? I have seen you do it a thousand times better than that."

Violante stood where her father had left her, with scared stupid eyes and listless figure. She turned slowly, and, sitting down on the floor by Rosa's side, laid her head against her knee, as if stillness and silence were all she cared for. Rosa was afraid to probe to the bottom of her distress; what could she say about Hugh that could do any good? That must be left to time, and she must address herself to the matter in hand.

"Come now," she said, cheerfully, "how is it that you sang so badly this morning?"

"I don't know," said Violante, "it is always so."

"Is it because father frightens you?"

"That makes it worse—but I cannot understand what he wants."

"Well, Violante, I don't think you can. And yet it seems so easy. Oh, dear, if I had your voice—"

"I wish you had it!"

"Hugh—I won't have you say that; but it seems so strange. Why, don't you *want* to say the words rightly?"

"Oh, yes!" said Violante, misunderstanding.

"I mean," cried Rosa, eagerly, "don't you feel as if you *were* Zerlina, as if it had all happened to yourself—doesn't it seem real to you?"

"No!"

"Why, it carries me away even to see you do it. Why! I could express *so* all sorts of feelings. Don't you know, Violante, there is so much within us that cannot come out, and art—music—acting is a means of expressing it. I should feel myself that *I*—I myself—had offended my lover, and wanted to coax him to be friends. Don't you see?"

"I never would!" said Violante, half to herself. "I never could!"

"I don't believe you have a scrap of imagination," cried Rosa, growing excited.

"Of course, it is not the same thing. Can't you translate your feelings into the other girl's nature. You *have* feelings. Now I would show through my acting all that must be buried else. When I came to happy scenes acting them would be something like happiness, sad ones would be a relief, and if—only if—Violante, I had ever cared for anyone, I should know how to say those words, and even the shadow of the past would be sweet—"

"Oh, Rosa," faltered Violante, hot and shame-faced, "as if *he* could remind me—"

Rosa came suddenly down from her tirade, perceiving how utterly it fell flat.

"My darling, I meant nothing to distress you. If you don't understand me, never mind."

"But," she added, half to herself, "if you had the soul of an actress in you, you would."

"Do you think, Rosa," said Violante, after a pause, in low reflective accents, "that anyone *could* be coaxed to make friends?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so," said Rosa, lightly. "You see it succeeded in the case of Masetto."

"That is only a play," said Violante, in a tone of contempt.

"Ah, well, Violante, real life certainly doesn't work itself out quite like a play. But it was of plays we were talking, you know."

"Yes. Rosa mia, I am not so silly but that I can tell the difference between my own acting and other people's. It is not only that I am frightened—and unhappy—it is that I cannot do it. Do you think I could ever learn how?"

There was not a shade of pique or of mortified pride in the anxious, humble question, and Rosa could not help fancying that even in sweet Violante nothing but utter indifference and incapacity could have made failure so endurable.

"Well," she said, "I don't suppose you will ever make a great hand at it; but I should think you might get to act well enough not to spoil your singing if you were stronger and less frightened."

"Can you tell me—I am sure you could act?"

"Yes," said Rosa, with a colour in her cheeks, and an odd light in her eyes, "I believe—I am sure I could. But I have no voice, there is no good in it. I never think of it now. However, stand up. Just sing through Masetto's part, and I will be Zerlina. I know the music, but I shall croak like a raven. Now, then."

In another moment Violante started with surprise, for, without change of dress, Rosa seemed to have disappeared, and the half-coquettish, half-penitent peasant-girl, who, bewildered for a moment by Don Giovanni's flatteries, still is at heart faithful to her own lover, was there in her stead. She ran up to the amazed Violante, face and gesture full of pathetic entreaty. True, her voice was weak and harsh, but a hundred bits of byplay, which Violante had never dreamed of, seemed to come by nature—her face flushed, her eyes beamed.

"Rosa, it is marvellous! How can you do it?"

"Oh," said Rosa, recalled, "I am only showing you. Don't you see?—Now, do you try."

"No, no—go on. The scene with Don Giovanni, that is what I cannot manage."

"Oh, where he makes love to her, and she is just a little inconstant to Masetto. Very well, you are Don Giovanni," and Rosa's hesitating coquetry, struggle with herself, and bewitching airs were so surprising that Violante exclaimed:

"Why, I never saw you look so before."

"No, of course not—I am not Rosa—I am Zerlina. However, you don't know what I may have done in my time—when I was young."

"But you do it so beautifully. Ah, what a pity you have not my voice—you would be the greatest *prima donna* in Italy!"

"Do you think so?" said Rosa, gratified. "But, ah, I have no voice, so there is no chance for me here. I do believe I should have gone on the stage if I had stayed in England; that is, I thought so once."

"I know now," said Violante, "that I shall never be an actress; never."

"Oh, but I think you can do something. Look at me."

And Rosa, nothing loth, went through the different pieces, Violante imitating her with sufficient success, now that she was quite at her ease, to put her in better spirits, as Rosa gave abundant praise to her efforts.

"Ecco," said Violante, "you shall be Don Giovanni, and I will be Zerlina; then I shall see if I can remember what you have told me."

Rosa caught up an old hat of their father's, set it sideways on her brow, twisted a scarf dexterously across her shoulders, delighted at making Violante laugh.

It was a pretty scene in the hot, shady room: Rosa in her fantastic dress, her eyes bright, her face full of ardour, acting the part with a force and fervour that seemed marvellous to Violante; and the slender, delicate, white-robed girl, with her bird-like voice, and natural grace that yet lent itself so imperfectly to the gestures and smiles she was trying to copy, so little inspired by the fictitious character and feeling that Don. Giovanni's vehement and characteristic wooing made her hang her head and blush, forgetful of the coquettish response intended.

Rosa, who had been utterly absorbed in her part, stopped, laughing, and sympathising with the great singer who could not act with Mademoiselle Mattei, while she owned the tribute to her skill.

"Look at me, dear; you are only pretending to be shy, you know. No, not that great innocent stare—through your

eyelashes, *so*. Must I teach my little sister to ‘make eyes,’ as the English say?”

Violante laughed, and the laugh made the next attempt more successful; and in the midst of Rosa’s animated response an unexpected voice cried:

“Brava! bravissima! Why, Rosa, figlia mia, who would have thought it?”

“Oh, father, look at her, she acts so beautifully,” cried Violante, clasping her hands; while Rosa, in her turn confused, paused, colouring deeply.

“Ay, ay! go on, girls; let me see.”

“Courage, courage,” whispered Rosa, and, in the desire to show off her sister, Violante coquetted with praiseworthy archness.

“She can do it now, father, can’t she?”

“Ay, that is better; but you—oh, if the Saints had given you a voice! Again, Rosina mia, here—stand aside, child—play her part, Rosa. I am Don Giovanni.”

Signor Mattei was no contemptible actor, and through the chief parts of half-a-dozen operas he conducted Rosa, praising, encouraging, clapping his hands, as he found how she responded to his hints; while Rosa seemed unwearied. At last he exclaimed:

“It is excellent, most excellent! a real talent, and a face and figure that would make up well. She would be more effective than the child, after all. Now, Violante, you see what it is to have sense.”

“Oh, it is splendid!” said Violante, warmly. “If her voice was better—”

“Ah, yes, if such a gift was not wasted on her sister. But this is talent, and my heart is warmed—it is on fire with delight! Brava, Rosina!” and Signor Mattei extended his arms and clasped Rosa in them, after a fashion not unsuitable to their recent performances. Violante, as he turned away, sprang to her sister’s side.

“Oh, Rosa, how pleased he is with you!”

“I wish he was as pleased with you, my darling,” said Rosa. “What a generous little thing you are to look so happy!”

“But I am so glad,” said Violante, while Rosa sat down and took up her work sedately, but presently let it fall and leant back with dreamy eyes and smiling lips. Years ago, when she was a very young girl, to be an actress had been the dream of her life. While she learnt and taught in England she had dreamt of hard work for a great object, of the excitement to be found in the use of conscious power, of success, of fame. Then had arisen in her life other, and yet sweeter hopes, which too soon were destined to be destroyed, and then came the obvious duty of returning to take charge of Violante. Since then her want of a voice had, in Italy, been an entire bar to her attempting to take to the stage as a mode of earning her living, and she had never till lately realised that Violante’s distaste was anything but shy childish fear. *Now* it did seem to her that such a career might offer some consolation even for Hugh Crichton’s desertion; *now* she felt how she would have valued what to Violante was utter misery. She looked at the girl who, wearied with the exertion of the morning, had dropped asleep on the cushioned window-seat, and a misgiving that had often occurred lately began to deepen in her mind.

Would not the question soon be decided for them—could so delicate a creature bear the strain of long uncongenial effort, added to the trial of wearing disappointment?—in short, would not health and strength go after spirits and energy? Violante’s daily-increasing languor and listlessness made this only too probable.

Part 4, Chapter XXVI.

Lost.

> “Silence, beautiful voice!
> Be still, for you only trouble the mind
> With a joy in which I cannot rejoice,
> A glory I shall not find!”

Rosa’s fears were fulfilled. For a few days, with the help of her sister’s teaching, Violante struggled on a little more bravely; but Rosa’s lessons, however carefully conned at home, were forgotten in the hot, glaring theatre, where fear and exhaustion seemed to stifle sense and memory. She was too much afraid of her father to tell him that she was too ill to sing, and she sang badly and incurred deserved rebuke. She was too imperfect a performer to have much ground of her own to stand upon; and her father did not save her in any way from the consequences of her shortcomings. She was far less beautiful now that her delicate bloom was gone, and her voice, her one possession, was growing harsh and strained. What wonder, when she not only cried herself asleep at night, but cried herself awake again in the morning—a far colder and drearier thing?

Rosa was at her wit’s end, but Signor Vasari’s patience was worn to its last thread, and her father was utterly impracticable. Violante ceased to complain, but her soft, tender eyes had a desperate look, and her sweet confiding ways had grown solitary and strange. What would be the end of it?

It hardly caused Rosa surprise when, one night, in the midst of a performance, Violante fainted. The representation

was brought to an abrupt conclusion, and Mademoiselle Mattei declared to be too ill to appear again. The public of Civita Bella was sorry; somehow the soft, lovely girl had gained a hold on their affections; but through the days while she lay ill and unconscious there was much wrangling between her father and the manager as to the amount of her salary to be forfeited by her non-fulfilment of her engagement. All talk of any tenderer relation had been dropped, and the discussion was settled greatly to Signor Mattei's dissatisfaction. He felt that he had been ill-treated. Violante's further gains were gone for that season; his own hung on a thread; some of Rosa's best pupils, like Emily Tollemache, had left the place. What was to become of them?

As he came in, with his head full of all these various annoyances, he encountered Rosa standing in the sitting-room, holding in her hand the soft, dusky lengths of Violante's hair.

"You have not cut off her hair?" he exclaimed, wrathfully.

"It may save her life," said Rosa, whose eyes were red with crying. "She—she *may* not die."

Then Signor Mattei, realising for the first time that his child's life was in danger, burst out with vehement lamentations.

She had been his hope and his pride, spite of all her wilfulness—should he never hear her angel's voice again?—and he seized on the long, soft hair, and kissed it and cried over it.

"It is the singing that has killed her," said Rosa, bitterly. "If you had listened to her entreaties—" she checked herself, feeling the reproach to be cruel and undutiful; but, with a certain hard common-sense, developed by a life in which she had seen many illusions fade, revolting against the sentiment, coming, as it seemed, too late.

"No!" cried Signor Mattei. "It is not the singing. It is that young Englishman for whom she has pined away. And you—you permitted her to know and to see him, and encouraged her in her folly!"

"This is no time for quarrelling, father," said Rosa, as she turned away, and went back to her sister, feeling as if, with Violante, every ray of sunshine would fade out of her life.

But Violante did not die. Either there was more power of resistance in her nature than they could have supposed, or Rosa's tender nursing triumphed over fever and weakness; for after some weeks of illness she began slowly to recover. She was long in gaining strength. She seemed contented in a sort of passive fashion, was grateful and caressing to Rosa; but she never talked of anything but the matter in hand, never spoke of the opera or her singing, or of Hugh; never showed any feeling except that, when she came sufficiently to herself to know that her hair had been cut off, she had cried and seemed sorry. Rosa was ready to follow her lead; but a great anxiety, unacknowledged even, to himself, was growing up in Signor Mattei's heart. Her voice—was it coming back?

He had not the heart or the courage to speak to her directly on the subject, but he hummed opera airs in her presence, and watched wistfully to see if she noticed them. Violante started and coloured.

"Rosa mia," she whispered, "I do not want to hear them yet;" and her father tried to ascribe her reluctance to a share in his alarm.

"So," he said one day, coming in from a rehearsal, "that Giulia Belloni has a fine voice, her Zerlina is effective—effective to the vulgar."

"Oh, I am glad," said Violante, "for now they will not miss me."

"Violante, will you never cease to be a fool? Not miss you? I would have them miss you every night. And this woman can act, laugh, scream—has eyes that show their size ten times as far as yours. But her voice is of far commoner sort, at least."

Violante had quivered at her father's rough address.

"Father," she said, "I have no voice now."

"It will return—it will return soon. You must practise—"

"She must not think of it," interposed Rosa. "She is not nearly strong enough yet."

"Ah, soon; but in good time—There comes il signor dottore."

The doctor, whose visits to Violante had not yet ceased, would have given much to evade the question as to how soon Mdlle. Mattei would recover her voice; but it was sharply pressed on him by Signor Mattei. Violante lay still, her hands pressed together, her large eyes full of suspense and anxiety. The doctor thought most pitifully of her, the young, delicate girl, whose career had received so severe a check; but yet her feelings to those of her eager father were "but as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine."

"She will sing again," said the father. "Mademoiselle Mattei must not attempt to sing in public for a long time to come. She is far too delicate for the exertion. Nothing but rest will give her a chance of recovering her voice."

"But she will recover it?"

"That is impossible to say. To some degree, should her health return, it is possible that she may; but she must give it rest; she has overstrained it when too weak for the effort."

“But the time—how long?” cried Signor Mattei, breathlessly.

“I cannot tell,” said the doctor, with a shrug; “but if she attempts to act now it will kill her.”

He spoke forcibly, somewhat irritated by the father’s persistence, and then glanced at his patient, anxious to see the effect of his words. Violante had turned very pale, her mouth trembled, she drew a long breath; but there was a light in her eyes as of one that lays a burden down. Her father turned pale also and was quite silent, not one passionate word rising to his lips. He looked at her; then, as the doctor left the room, he followed him. Rosa sat down in the window, trying to govern her tears sufficiently to speak to her sister. And Violante? She had just been told of the loss of her one gift, of the one thing that marked her out from other women, without which she was only a poor, ignorant, helpless girl, with nothing left but a sort of indefinite beauty; from which her illness had taken much of the charm. She leant back on her pillows, feeling very small and mean and foolish, like Cinderella when the clock struck twelve. She felt very good-for-nothing, and yet—and yet—no more of the weary rehearsals, the hateful companionship, the terror and fatigue, the glare of the gas, the jealousy or scorn of her rivals, the anger of her father. She was free! It was like being let out of a stifling prison into the chilly air. She shivered and was cold, but she drew long, deep breaths. It was over. She was not ambitious—perhaps she was not conscientious enough to grieve that her task in life was taken from her, though she belonged to too hard-working a family not to think at once that she had lost the power of earning her own living. She felt that she had failed; but it was failure *versus* freedom, and freedom won.

“Violante—oh, my poor child!” cried Rosa, as she came up and kissed her tenderly.

“Rosa mia, do not be sorry for me. I am sorry, but I am so tired of it all, and now I can rest,” said Violante, pleadingly.

“Rest!” exclaimed Rosa, with hot cheeks. “If I were you I should be half heart-broken, to lose that beautiful, glorious gift. But it is better that you should not care.”

Violante drooped her head in silence.

“When I *did* break my heart they blamed me,” she thought. “How can I care *now*?”

“You cried when I cut your hair off,” said Rosa, unable to repress her own disappointment.

Violante crimsoned to her finger tips. Had not Hugh stroked the long, soft hair? “*He* did not love me only for my voice,” she thought, somewhat unjustly, for Rosa’s love was true and tender, and she silenced her regrets, as she saw how they distressed her sister. Violante’s momentary flash of indignation passed; but she kept her thoughts to herself—she was learning to do so.

“There *was* no good in me but my voice,” she said meekly, “but I will try and help you, Rosa.”

“Oh, my darling, do not trouble, we shall do well enough,” said Rosa, repentant, when she thought how weak Violante still was, and how impossible any exertion would have been to her. “It is only of father I am thinking.”

“Father; oh, yes! Go to him! Rosa, I cannot help it.”

“Help it? No! But he will be very sorry. I will go to him. You must lie still and rest.”

Signor Mattei’s dream was over; he had lost his vision, as his daughter had lost her lover. Mademoiselle Mattei would never be a household word in any capital in Europe, never contest the palm with those who already bore it. It was a great present, a greater future, loss to him; but it was not the thought of this that made his heart sink within him. Rosa’s common-sense words jarred upon him.

“It is a grievous pity, father, but it cannot be helped.”

“She might as well have married the English signor—”

“Indeed she might!”

“When she was a little girl, and used to sing about the house, I looked to her success. She had the power, but never the will—never the will! My sun has set, figlia mia. I may hide my head in obscurity, and she may be as idle and as happy as she can!”

Extravagant as was the language, there was real distress in his faltering voice and tearful eyes.

“My beloved art has lost an interpreter,” he sighed; “and I have lost a hope.”

“Father!” said an unexpected voice, and Violante, with her slow, feeble step, stood beside him. “Father, I am so sorry!” she said, timidly. “I shall be very little good; but I will help Rosa all I can. And when I am well I will teach.”

“Teach? As if that would repay me!” cried Signor Mattei, starting to his feet. “Oh, you unfortunate, foolish girl, you were born to be my grief and disappointment! You who might have been a queen of song, *you* pined and fretted for your lover till this has come on you. If you had obeyed me, and consented to Vasari’s offer, and been *happy*, this would not have been. But you care nothing, the loss is mine—all mine! And I? See how I love you, you ungrateful child; see the tears you cause to flow.”

Against such reproaches Violante had no defence, and she was so well used to them that she was more frightened than grieved.

“Father,” cried Rosa, “you have been mistaken, you cannot change her nature, nor make her what you wish. She is

herself, take her for that. Violante mia! my child, my darling, as if it was not enough to have you safe. What matters your voice, or your success, or anything?” she continued, in high indignation. “Come away; this will make you ill again!”

So they vexed each other sorely; but Violante, forlorn and sorrowful as she was, could nestle in Rosa’s arms, and had Rosa’s pity, if not sympathy, in her grief; while her father, unkind and unreasonable as he might be, suffered alone a pang of disappointment all the keener because the baffled desire had been so vehement that to indulge it he had undertaken the one impossible task of life—to inspire an alien nature with his own ideal of happiness, his own loves, and his own ambitions.

He thought that it was love for Violante that made her misfortune so terrible to him, but in truth it was love of the ideal that he thought to see her fulfil. He grieved over what she *might* have been, but she was only a trouble and disappointment to him as she was. He did not intend to be unkind to her, but he could not forbear to reproach her; all the more because he instinctively knew that she did not regret her loss as he did. Violante did not resent this, but the worry and the depressing sense of inefficiency retarded her recovery. Rosa, meanwhile, set herself to consider the family fortunes. What could they do? Her father’s engagement to Signor Vasari was almost over and was not likely to be renewed. He often talked of trying new fields, and seeking employment in more important places than Civita Bella. And he was quite well enough known to be likely to find what he wanted. A wandering life would suit him well enough. But though he might have connections in half the towns of Italy, Rosa had none, and how could she afford to lose all her pupils? True, she and Violante might remain where they were, with Maddalena for a duenna but Rosa felt that a thorough change would do Violante more good than anything that could be proposed. She might then recover her strength, and, free from all present trials, would surely soon forget her ill-starred love story. For Rosa, with cool, clear judgment, reflected that Hugh Crichton, once set free from his entanglement, was very little likely ever to attempt to renew anything so undesirable. He had no means, so far as she knew, of tracing Violante’s future life, for the Tollemaches did not write to them after leaving Civita Bella; and of himself, beyond the fact of his profession, and that he lived with his mother at Redhurst, and was a man of some fortune, Rosa knew nothing. She had never even realised where Redhurst might be. As for Violante, unfamiliar with English names and images, she had imbibed no notions of her lover’s English home beyond a few descriptions of the garden and the river; of the great town, whose name even she forgot; and of various people whom she had hardly begun to think of as having any connection with herself—his own relations having been exceedingly uninteresting to Hugh at the period of his courtship. One day of actual betrothal and she would have known enough about them; as it was, Violante had no colours to paint her pictures of his present life, and Rosa felt that he had entirely gone out of theirs.

Under these circumstances she thought very favourably of various former invitations received from her uncle, Mr Grey, both to herself and Violante. She believed that she could find occupation of some sort in England; and perhaps an English home life for a time might prove beneficial to Violante. In the meantime old Madame Cellini came to the rescue, and offered to take the two girls to a little village called Caletto, some distance from Civita Bella, where she usually spent some weeks in the autumn. Here Violante would have both rest and change, and when she was fully recovered future plans would be more easily settled.

Part 4, Chapter XXVII.

Caletto.

> “Grapes which swelled from hour to hour,
> And tossed their golden tendrils to the sun
> For joy at their own richness.”

After that stormy summer, with its joy and its suffering, its excitement and hard work, there ensued for Violante a time of perfect peace. Golden autumn sunshine, beautiful places, entire freedom and rest, could not give back a lost career, or a lost lover, but they were very conducive to the revival of health and spirits; and the absence even of anything peculiarly delightful was welcome to the exhaustion of worn-out nerves and spirits. Never to be scolded, never to be frightened, never to be forced to do what she dreaded and disliked, made a sort of Elysium for her, though even Elysium seems to have been sometimes a little objectless and dreary. Still, it was peace; and all the little tastes and occupations which had been crushed down by over-work, or rendered futile by the one absorbing interest of the past summer, began to spring up again; and Violante knitted and worked, picked flowers and arranged them, and made sweetmeats, salads, and coffee, as she had done in the days when the stage was a distant terror, and when Hugh Crichton had never been heard of. For, though she was very easily overwhelmed by storms, she was a flower that opened readily to a little sunshine, and Rosa caught herself wondering whether so soft and childish a creature had really retained the impression that had seemed so powerful. It was hard to tell, for Violante never spoke of her past troubles; the truth, perhaps, being that she took her sensations very much as they came, and never speculated about herself, nor realised her situation further than she felt it. Rosa hoped that the love, having been very brief, scarcely acknowledged, and utterly crushed at one blow, might really die of want of encouragement; and this was possible, even if its dying hours were soothed by the anodyne of a little unconscious secret hope in the vague future. Since Hugh had been mistaken as to Vasari, some day he *might* find it out; and in the meantime the sun shone, the flowers were sweet, she was the object of much petting, she felt fresh and well, and Vasari, his theatre and his diamonds, had all passed away like a bad dream.

Caletto, with its vineyards, its little lake, its distant hills, its peaceful and yet animated life, was new to the town-bred girl, and very delightful. It attracted a few visitors, but lay somewhat out of the beat of tourists, though it possessed many charms for them; one of the chief being a garden belonging to the great house of the place, but which, in the dwindling of the fortunes of the great family, and in their frequent and long absences, was open freely to the scanty public of Caletto. Nay, tables and chairs, where grapes could be eaten and cheap wine drunk, had been placed on the marble terrace that overlooked the lake by the enterprising innkeeper; and here, within sound of the plash of

fountains, under the shade of tall oleander and pomegranate trees, Madame Cellini and her two young charges were wont to establish themselves to see the sun set over the lake and to enjoy the evening air; and here, in search of the picturesque, or perhaps of that soothing and refreshment which novelty and natural beauty might be supposed to give, arrived one evening an English traveller.

Arthur Spencer's journey to meet his friend had not turned out exactly as he had intended. He had hurried across France to Marseilles because there was a sort of relief to his misery in the rapid motion; and, besides, he was not quite certain when Captain Seton's ship would arrive. He was prepared to do anything that his friend might fancy; returning to England or continuing his journey, as might be best for Captain Seton's health, as to which he did not grow very anxious till he was preparing to enquire for him on board the ship; when the possibility of finding him worse, in danger, or not finding him at all, occurred to him. Then it seemed to poor Arthur as if the only comfort in his trouble would be the telling it to his land, warm-hearted friend who had left India too soon to receive even the letter announcing his engagement. Nevertheless, Arthur resolved that if Seton seemed ill and depressed he would prepare a cheerful countenance and keep silence on his own score for the present.

As he came on board and was looking anxiously round, he was greeted with a shout of delight; and Captain Seton, looking neither ill nor unhappy, seized him by the hands.

"So there you are, my dear good fellow! I'm heartily glad to see you. I knew you would come if you could; but I feel as if I'd brought you out on false pretences after all."

"So much the better, if this is what being on sick-leave comes to," said Arthur. "I was very glad to come."

"Oh, it was no pretence at the beginning; but the voyage has made another man of me—and—and—let me introduce you to my friends—a—very kind companions on board ship, you know. Mrs Raymond, Mr Arthur Spencer—a—Miss Raymond."

One glance from his friend's confused yet joyous countenance to the blushing and smiling young lady revealed to Arthur the state of affairs at once; and, after a few words had been exchanged, Captain Seton drew him aside, and informed him how Mrs Raymond, being in bad health, was returning to spend a year in England with her daughter, who had miraculously spent eighteen months in India without getting married; and how he, having met the young lady twice before, and knowing how charming she was—

"Exactly so," interposed Arthur, "you don't feel inclined now for a tour in Italy."

"No," Captain Seton apologised and laughed and explained; but he wanted to escort his lady-love to England, to settle his affairs, and to be introduced to various Raymond relations. Perhaps afterwards—

Arthur listened, smiled, and congratulated him, and managed to escape without any questions on his own affairs from his preoccupied friend. He went back to his room at the hotel, and sat down, feeling as if he had lost his one remaining object, and as if the future were an entire blank. He was almost inclined to go away without seeing Seton again. "But no," he thought, "that would be an unkind, melodramatic sort of proceeding, and he would reproach himself for having given me pain—it would spoil his pleasure."

So Arthur, feeling that he could not speak of what must come out sooner or later, wrote a note, and told his story in a few brief words. He had been engaged to Miss Crofton, whom, no doubt, Seton remembered, and she was dead. He had come away for rest and change.

Arthur had no cause to complain of Captain Seton's want of feeling or sympathy. He came hastily to find him; was full of compunction for not having guessed at anything amiss; would come with him anywhere, stay with him, or join him after he had taken the Raymonds to England. Anyway, he would not leave him alone. Arthur, however, though not ungrateful, decided in favour of solitude for the present; and, with a half-proposal for meeting again in Italy after a few weeks, they parted; and Arthur drifted somewhat aimlessly about from one place to another, trying to make an object of sightseeing, but feeling lost and lonely. He was fond of travelling, and even then got some amusement out of its little incidents, finding in it something to do, but very little to think about; climbing mountains and making long expeditions one day, and doing nothing whatever the next; trying to write cheerful letters home, yet shrinking from the answers to them; making acquaintances when they came in his way, and doing much as other travellers, but quite unable to rouse himself to any sort of plan for the future, and neither knowing nor caring where the next week would find him. There was no one for whose companionship he exactly wished, or who could now have been quite the friend he wanted; but, though the solitude and absence of association were productive of present ease, they offered nothing to fill the dead blank, nothing to wake "the low beginnings of content." The days slipped by somehow, but it was hardly possible to imagine a greater contrast than between them and the days that had been lightened by the hope of such a bright and definite future.

By way of occupation he did a good deal of travelling on foot; and, in the course of his wandering, found himself one evening walking into Caletto and thinking it one of the prettiest places he had ever seen. The lake was shining in the sunset; the tawny colours of the old palace were deepened by the glow; the rich southern foliage clothed the sides of the water, and showed glimpses of picturesque houses in between. There were statues and urns here and there in the palace garden; while its marble balustrade, with steps at either end, gave it something the air of a picture on a fan. There were one or two tables on this terrace, and at one of them stood a girl in white, with a big, flat, straw hat, piling great bunches of white and purple grapes on to a dish before her. Another figure, dressed in some pleasant sort of buff colour, was sitting on the balustrade reading. It was a pretty scene, yet it gave Arthur a pang; for, granting beauty for quaintness, romance for homely simplicity, it was a sort of glorified parody of the little tea-garden at "The Pot of Lilies," with its wall overhanging the river, its urn of geraniums, its statue holding a lamp, its vine-tressed arbour, and its table with the mustard-pot and the ginger-beer. He turned quickly away, but found himself face to face with a stout, dark-eyed lady who was toiling up the ascent towards the terrace. She scanned Arthur

curiously; and he, mustering his best Italian, asked the name of the village and if he could get a night's lodging there.

She gave him a hearty, gracious smile that showed all her white teeth, and replied by such voluble information that Arthur, quite at fault, begged her pardon and repeated his question.

"I am English," he said; "I speak very little Italian."

"Ah, English, yes," she answered in that language. "I speak it—but not well. But here are two ladies who will comprehend perfectly. Will you accompany me, signor?" Much surprised at the invitation Arthur followed her up the steps of the terrace.

"Rosa carina," she said, "here is an English gentleman who has lost his way. Explain to him the situation."

"I have not lost my way, signorina," said Arthur, catching the words, as the lady in buff rose and bowed to him. "I took the liberty of asking if a lodging could be got in this lovely place."

"Oh, yes, I think so," replied Rosa. "Do you see the house with a balcony by the water? That is an inn, and there is almost sure to be a room there if you are not very particular."

"Thank you very much. I am quite used to traveller's fare," returned Arthur, surprised at the English accent and manner.

"And this place is called?"

"Caletto. English tourists don't often find it out."

"So we should make them welcome. Pray, signor, sit down, and take some wine; you have been walking—you are tired. Ah, you understand?"

"Yes, many thanks. But I am so hot and dusty—I am ashamed," said Arthur, fancying he saw a look of slight disapproval in the younger lady's face.

"Ah, we can excuse you. We are artists, signor; all comers are welcome. I have been in your country and sung on your boards, and so will Mademoiselle Mattei one of these days, I hope."

This was in English, and then in a half-aside to Rosa in Italian: "Why not, Rosina? He is a handsome youth—and society is agreeable."

Handsome young Englishmen were not quite the society Rosa desired at that moment. However, she could not be uncivil, and Arthur really looked both hot and tired so she said politely:

"Pray sit down and rest—it has been a hot day."

"Thank you, since you are so kind," said Arthur, seating himself, and thinking, as they drew near the table and Violante silently pushed the bottle of wine towards him: "How Jem would rave at such an encounter!"

"This is a beautiful place," he said. "I wonder that it is so little known to English people generally."

"Perhaps we like to keep some places a little to ourselves," said Rosa, smiling.

"But, excuse me, are you not English?"

"Not exactly. I was brought up in England. I did not mean to be uncivil to English tourists, but you know they do rather spoil a place for the natives."

"Tourists always do," said Arthur. "I don't know, though, what else I can call myself."

"I suppose tourists are people who travel for pleasure, and not because they are obliged."

"Well, I am not obliged to travel, certainly."

"Then you are a tourist," said Rosa, brightly. "But then you come alone, and an English stranger is rare enough in Caletto to be very welcome. Is it not so, madame?" repeating her words in Italian.

"Oh, as welcome as shade in summer. I have lived in your smoke, sir, and I do not wonder you all escape from it."

"I am not prepared to admit that we never see the sun," said Arthur, who all this time was wondering much who his entertainers might be. Rosa, with the address and appearance of a well-bred English lady, completely puzzled him, more especially as he supposed her to be the Mademoiselle Mattei to whom Madame Cellini had referred, and whom he never dreamed of identifying with the silent, childish-looking girl beside him. They were very amusing, out-of-the-way sort, of people, and the scene was wonderfully lovely and picturesque; but he was tired, and admiration was an effort; so he soon rose, and with very courteous thanks prepared to leave them. Madame Cellini accompanied him to the steps to point out the way, and said when she returned: "Ah, I have practised my English. I told him my name. Doubtless he will have heard it, and his—is—ah—Spinchere—Pinchere."

"Pincher!" said Rosa, with an involuntary accent of disappointment: "That is an English name, certainly."

"It is not pretty," said Violante, thinking in her own mind that Spencer Crichton far exceeded it.

So no identity of name came to rouse a suspicion of any connection between their new acquaintance and their old one. There was scarcely any family likeness between Hugh's pale, regular face, grave and rather massive, and Arthur's bright, tanned skin, and pleasant though unremarkable features. Besides, Rosa and Violante did not know Hugh's face without a look of interest and purpose, nor his light, deep-set eyes without the ardour of an eager hope; while, when they saw Arthur, his dark-lashed eyes were absent and languid, and his mouth, though he smiled often, set into sad lines when he fell silent.

But one young English gentleman was sufficiently like another in foreign eyes, and the association of ideas was close enough to make Rosa anxious as to the effect of this encounter on her sister.

"Madame Cellini is so fond of company she cannot pass anyone by," she said, rather petulantly, when the two girls were alone.

"She is very fond of talking," replied Violante, "but I like her now that I am not forced to sing to her. And it would not have been kind not to ask Signor—what did you call him?—Pincher, to rest, when he looked so hot and tired."

"All Englishmen like to tire themselves out," said Rosa.

"You told him we were not English, Rosa; that was not true."

"My dear child, I could not tell him our family history—what did it matter? I daresay he thought us very odd; but I am not tired of solitude, even if Madame Cellini is."

"Oh, no, nor I. I should like to stay here always."

"Some time we must, I suppose, go back to Civita Bella."

"Yes!" with a long sigh. "Rosa mia, I will be good and useful if I can. Perhaps father is dull without us."

"His engagement is almost over. Violante, how should you like to go to England?"

"To England?" echoed Violante, with a startled blush. "I shall never go there—*now*. Now I cannot sing," she added.

"I think Uncle and Aunt Grey will perhaps ask us—you and me, I mean, to stay for a time and see what we could do."

"But what would become of father?"

"I think he would like to travel about for a little. Perhaps he would come to England too."

"And should you teach our cousins as you used to do?" said Violante.

"No, the girls are all grown up, and so are the boys. But I might find other children to teach—or—or—In short, Violante, I cannot tell exactly; but you know Uncle Grey has always wished to see you, and now that you are free to leave home I should not wonder if he asked us."

Violante sat musing.

"I will go, then," she said, after a pause. Rosa could hardly help laughing at the unconscious decision of the tone, which, though Violante had merely meant acquiescence, showed that the idea was not distasteful to her.

Part 4, Chapter XXVIII.

Signor Arthur.

> "The sound of a voice that was still."

Madame Cellini was not likely to be shy of making a new acquaintance, nor were her young companions accustomed to the profound seclusion in which Italian girls are usually trained. Rosa would have accepted an intimacy with a compatriot readily enough, and even Violante was used to a certain amount of intercourse with her father's friends. Here at Caletto Madame Cellini had a few intimates, and when Arthur Spencer lingered on there she discovered that French formed a possible medium of communication, and took a great fancy to the pleasant-mannered young Englishman.

"Folly, Rosina!" she said, as Rosa ventured a remonstrance. "I read your fears. You think the Signor Inglese at the late looked too often above his music at our Violantina. Never fear! So will many another. And as for Signor Pinchere, talk to him yourself, Rosina!"

And the old lady gave an indescribably mischievous smile, and then laughed broadly. Rosa was angry, but she did not choose to enlighten Madame Cellini any further as to the real state of the case; and, unable to prevent the intercourse by Italian restrictions, nor to justify it by the more English manner of ignoring the possibility of a chance acquaintance signifying to anyone, she was obliged to leave it in the neutral ground of "being Madame Cellini's way."

She need not have alarmed herself. Arthur knew that it was all very amusing, and accepted it as an incident in his travels; but would not have cared if anything had turned his steps in another direction. Nothing, however, did turn them; so he tried to distract his thoughts by Madame Cellini's wonderful stories, and to interest himself in her confidences about the young *cantatrice* whose career had been so suddenly checked. He had given the nearest town as an address where letters might find him, and having written to Hugh before his arrival he expected an answer.

Somehow, Arthur's thoughts turned to Hugh with a sort of fellow-feeling. He, too, was suffering; and perhaps would not only pity him, but would understand how no change of scene did him any good. If Hugh had but known! but he only thought that Arthur was well spared the sight of him.

Arthur, however, congratulated himself on having obtained some materials for a letter to Jem, a little less like a guide-book than his ordinary correspondence, describing old Madame Cellini, and telling the wrong end of Violante's history. "She was to have made a great sensation, and married the manager, and the poor child lost her lover and her voice at once. So she looks sad and pathetic; and isn't it a miserable little story for the sunny south? You write too anxiously about me. I am very well, and make a fair fight for it. If that poor little girl can hold up her head after such a storm, one ought to have better courage."

Violante was as unconscious of the garbled form in which her story had reached the English stranger's ears, and of the reflections which he drew therefrom for his own benefit, as she was of the connection of Signor Arthur—or Arturo, as he had taught Madame Cellini to call him, finding her conceptions of his surname beyond correction—with the chief actor in it. But she felt drawn towards him, and ceased to be shy of one so kindly in manner, while a sort of instinct of fellow-feeling made her say, after a few days, to Rosa: "She was sure Signor Arthur was unhappy, and she wondered why."

"I think he seems very cheerful," said Rosa, rather dryly.

"Still, I am sure," persisted Violante; but news came to them at this time which put Signor Arthur entirely into the background. Rosa received a letter from her uncle, Mr Grey, which suggested a complete change in all the conditions of their existence. It bore date from his house in Kensington, and ran as follows:

> "My dear Rosa,—
> "Your aunt and I have been very sorry to hear of Violante's illness and of the change it has made in her future prospects. Under the circumstances we have always felt that it was best that she should pursue the career that your father marked out for her, and have never entertained any prejudice against it. But as she has lost the exceptional power that made it expedient, and is still, I believe, under eighteen, it seems desirable that she should turn her mind in another direction. I do not know what openings your father could find for her in Italy; but as you write that things are somewhat at a stand-still with all of you, I wish very much that you and she should come and pay us a long visit, after which you might form such plans as seem desirable. If you were likely to remain in London I think I know where you could find pupils, and as for Violante, as she is so young, it is possible that she might make up her mind to finish her education at an excellent school, where her music and her Italian would be helpful, and where your aunt's recommendation would be quite sufficient. However, this is for the future; and in the meantime your cousins will be delighted to see you both, as will also your aunt and myself. With love to Violante,—
> "I am, your affectionate uncle,—
> "Richard Grey."

Rosa was sitting under the verandah of the cottage where they lodged as she read this letter. Great flowering creepers and large-leaved vines shaded her from the sun; before her stretched the fair Italian landscape, and at a little distance Violante was feeding and playing with a little white kid, the pet of the household; while two little brown-skinned girls, the children of their landlady, were chattering away to her at the top of their Italian voices. Violante had scarcely ever known a child in her limited life at Civita Bella, but she had taken to these little ones from the first of her coming to Caletto, and delighted in their society. With her short, curly hair and slender shape, she looked scarcely more than a child herself, and resembled nothing less than a disappointed *prima donna*.

Yet, after all her history, there seemed something ridiculous in the idea of sending her to school, something utterly incongruous in the thought of that Kensington house in a London atmosphere, with the blue southern skies and the marble palaces of her native town. It was strange; but Rosa—who had practically been very happy in an ordinary English life and was by far the best fitted of the party to resume it—could not help regarding the loss of Violante's future, and of their somewhat rambling artistic career, with a half-sentimental regret. She felt, like her father, that it was a come-down, that something had been lost that could never be regained. She called to Violante and put the letter into her hand.

Violante sat down on the step, and read it carefully through in silence.

"Well, Violante, what do you think?" said Rosa.

"I have been thinking—*much*," said Violante softly.

"Indeed? What about?"

"Myself," replied the girl. "Rosa, father would be happier without me now I cannot sing. When he sees me he thinks: 'Ah, what she might have been!' It breaks his heart, I know it."

"I think father might do very well with out us for a time, and then he might himself come to England," said Rosa.

"And," said Violante, "I know nothing—nothing but my music, but I think now—now that is over, I could learn."

"But you would not like to go to school, Violante?"

"It does not seem possible to have what we like," said Violante; "but it would not be like acting."

"No, indeed!"

"And I must work somehow. And, oh, Rosa mia! how my heart would ache if father every day looked at me and grieved, and we had no money."

"Yes, my darling, that would be hard for you. But, oh, Violante! to think that all we hoped for you should end like this!"

"I am very sorry," said Violante, meekly; "but I think our uncle will be kind, and—we cannot help it; let us go."

So it was Violante who spoke the common-sense consenting words and recognised the new necessity. But, indeed, since all her faculties had not been absorbed in the effort to perform an impossibility, a new self-reliance seemed to have come upon her and her unreasoning terror had disappeared. Soft and clinging she must always be, as she laid her head on Rosa's knee and whispered: "We shall *both* go, Rosa mia! we shall be together." But the strange land seemed to have no terror for her. Either she feared her father and Civita Bella more, or some strange unrecognised attraction hung over her lover's country. Did Hope, with her wings cut, still flutter feebly at the bottom of her heart; or was it merely that a glamour still hung over English life and English people that made the novelty attractive instead of dreadful? Did she think an English school-girl less removed from Hugh Crichton than an Italian *cantatrice*? She *thought* nothing of all this, but she recognised, without an effort, that it was right to accept her uncle's invitation. Those secret unknown currents, below our wishes, below our sense of duty, below our resolutions, can float the ship against the wind, or hold it back, spite of a fair breeze and all sails unfurled.

"If an English winter should be too cold for you?" said Rosa.

"Oh, I am so much better. I don't think it will hurt me. You know I never feel strong in the heat."

"Well," said Rosa, "I shall like to see the girls again very much."

"You used to talk of Beatrice and Lucy."

"Yes, Lucy is married, you know. Then there are Mary and Kitty, my pupils, a little older than you; and Charlie divides the two pairs of girls. Ned is the youngest. Yes—I shall like to see them all. How strange to be in England again!"

Rosa sat silent and thoughtful. After all, it was not four years since that English life of hers had ended abruptly with her mother's death; and four years is not a very long time in which to lose vivid impressions. She had grown up almost ignorant of her parents and little sister; and when she was a bright, handsome girl of twenty, full of ardour and enthusiasm, she made, in the course of a set of private theatricals, the discovery that she had a taste and talent for acting of no ordinary kind. She did not love teaching, and reversed Violante's subsequent history by trying with all her might and main to gain her uncle's consent to earn her living on the stage. She was in the full tide of an enthusiasm which was only increased by opposition, and which no one expected in the good sedate girl who was her aunt's right hand, when—a new acquaintance, a few weeks' intercourse, a few opposing hints, and Rosa's persistency drooped and faded, and her hot Italian nature took another turn.

He could not marry an actress. Poor Rosa! either circumstances were irresistible or she was deceived altogether; but she sacrificed ambition to love, for it was a sacrifice, and the love failed her too. She never knew what separated them; but it was well for her that the summons home took her right away from both disappointments, and gave her an object in life in Violante.

She was a brave, strong girl, and she had won the battle. How she had mistrusted and hated Hugh Crichton none could say! How she had dreaded her own fate for Violante! Now, when she thought of returning to England, that first ambition returned in a more moderate form to her mind. She felt fairly certain of her own powers, and the attraction of the life was undiminished; but she felt that it would be almost impossible to fix herself permanently in England, and that, now that Violante was useless, she would probably be obliged to take a larger share in earning the family living. She had expected that Violante would regard the idea of a visit to England with horror, and was relieved, though surprised, to find how easily she resigned herself to it.

Violante had a very clear picture in her mind of what it would be to go back to Civita Bella, idle and useless; freed, indeed, from the burden of her profession, but exposed to her father's regrets and reproaches. Life had been very hard before, it would be very dreary and objectless now. The ghosts of happy and unhappy hours would alike haunt the familiar places; and England, over the thought of which a soft sweet halo rested, seemed like a refuge.

Mr Grey's letter had been received on a Saturday, and on the Sunday morning Violante was sitting by herself on the terrace, doing what she called, with a reminiscence of her mother's early training, "reading her chapter," this being one of the few religious observances which had survived their unsettled life. Violante had a sort of half-superstitious reverence for the English Bible, her English mother's gift. She always said her prayers in English, and dutifully read a chapter on Sunday. She was not very particular which; but since she had known Hugh Crichton she had indulged in some self-congratulation that her religion as well as her blood was English. Rosa had bestowed a small amount of technical instruction on her, but it fitted on to nothing; and as the elder sister had never thought it her duty to make Violante unhappy about the Sunday operas, which she could not have possibly avoided, and as Signor Mattei was nearly equally indifferent to his own religion and to theirs, Violante's faith was chiefly negative. On this Sunday morning she sat, with her Bible in her hand, looking at the groups of peasants who were making their way to the little church, and listening to the bell tinkling softly through the murmur of the trees, and the sharper sound of the gay Italian voices. By-and-by they would dance under the trees. Violante began to wonder what Sunday would be like in England. She was surprised at herself for not having asked Rosa more questions about it; but her mind had been absorbed in its difficult present, and she had been first too passive for curiosity, and then too deeply-interested to express it.

As she mused Arthur Spencer came up the steps towards her, with that air of neatness and respectability that generally distinguishes an English traveller on Sunday. Violante perceived for the first time that he was in mourning,

and was sufficiently interested to wonder why.

“Good morning, signorina,” he said.

“Good morning,” she answered. “Isn’t it a beautiful day?”

“Yes, very lovely, it will be getting cold at home, though.”

“I am going to England soon,” said Violante, with a sort of shy confidence, as she bethought her that here was a chance of satisfying her curiosity.

“Are you?” he said, rather surprised. “How is that?”

“We have an English uncle in London, and he has asked us to go and see him. Mamma was English,” said Violante, with a little unconscious pleasure.

“Ah, yes; so Madame Cellini told me. Do you think you shall like it?”

“Yes,” said Violante, “but I don’t know much about England. I wish you would tell me. I should like to seem like an English girl to my cousins.”

Arthur smiled.

“I don’t know where to begin,” he said, kindly. “Does your uncle live in London?”

“Yes; he is a solicitor,” she said, repeating the well-known word with a little pride in its correctness. “But perhaps I am to go to school.”

“To school? You!” exclaimed Arthur, thinking of the opera and the manager-lover. “Should you like that?”

“I know nothing but music,” said Violante, blushing; “I never had any time. But I should like to learn. What is school like?”

Violante did not know why her companion turned away his head and made no answer for a moment.

“I can’t tell you much about girls’ schools,” he said presently. “I know one that must be rather a jolly place. I suppose the girls learn lessons, and go to walk, and have masters. I should think you would find it dull.”

“I should think it was peaceful,” said Violante, using a stronger word than she meant.

“Do you think so much of peace?” he said, rather sadly.

“It is because I have been so tired,” she answered simply, and he thought: “Poor little girl! she is fretting after the manager. But to send a *prima donna* to school; how ridiculous! Well, I won’t discourage her.”

“I know some school-mistresses who are very kind and lively. My sister goes there. She is very happy,” he added aloud, but thinking to himself that even the liberal Miss Vennings would hardly admit a disappointed opera-singer to their school.

“And on Sunday, what do they do in England on Sunday? Oh, yes,” noticing that he glanced at her Bible. “Yes, we are Protestants, like mamma; but I did not often go to the service at the Consulate, because, of course, Sunday was an opera night. What do English girls do on Sunday?”

Arthur’s involuntary laugh at her *naïve* statement died away as her question recalled the very sweetest, brightest picture of his English Mysie, in her white Sunday dress, walking down the churchyard path.

For long weeks he had never spoken of her, never seen anyone who had ever heard her name. He felt a strange impulse to speak of her now, to *hear* of her, though it could only be from his own lips. It was easier to do so in the simple language necessary to make Violante understand so unfamiliar a picture, and to an auditor who would, he thought, only receive the impression that he chose to give.

“I knew an English girl,” he said; and, leaning on the wall, with his face turned away, he tried to describe Mysie’s Sunday—how she “taught the little peasants,” “went to church,” “sang hymns,” “walked about among the flowers,” it had all been very commonplace once, but as Arthur told it now it sounded to him like the Lives of the Saints.

“And she is dead?” said Violante, softly.

“How can you tell?” he exclaimed, astonished.

“Ah, signor, it was in the sound of your voice,” she answered, with an interest that would have been how greatly intensified had she known to whom she was speaking.

“Yes, you are right,” said Arthur, and something in his voice, repressed and almost stern, made Violante start and flush and quiver, for he spoke with the very tone of “Signor Hugo.”

Neither for a moment noticed the other, and then Arthur, perceiving that she was agitated, and not wishing to say more about himself, said kindly:

“I hope you will be a very happy ‘English girl,’ signorina.”

"Oh," exclaimed Violante, "there is too *much* in the world for happiness."

"Or—too little! But see, there's your sister; she is looking for you."

Violante started up, and, perhaps a little conscious of how much she had implied, ran down the steps towards Rosa.

"What a brute that manager must be!" thought Arthur. "But that creature in a school would be like a hare in a rabbit-hutch. Even Flossy couldn't tackle such an incongruity. What a queer incident it is!" and a sort of half-impatient feeling crossed Arthur's mind because he could not be excited and amused by it. He was so young and bright-natured that he got tired of grief, and yet his grief held him fast.

"I wish there was an Italian war up, and I could get myself shot!" he thought, and then his mind glanced wearily over the consolations often thought out so hardly, and that sometimes, and slowly, were having their effect. He tried to be resigned, and he longed, poor boy! not only for his lost Mysie, but for his lost light-heartedness. He strolled back to the inn at last, with a deep sigh; and found himself wondering what new queer sort of Italian dishes his black-eyed talkative hostess would produce for dinner.

Part 4, Chapter XXIX.

No Good at All.

> "There is a tide in the affairs of men
> Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

That same Sunday afternoon Signor Mattei walked slowly into Caletto, and seeking the lodging where he knew that his daughters were staying sat down under the verandah, with the feelings of a man who has come to a period in his life from which he sees no particular means of progress. Rosa and Violante were out, and he rested after the hot walk he had taken from the point where the nearest public conveyance stopped, and thought over the events of the last few weeks.

Things had gone wrong—his highest hopes were destroyed, and his more moderate comforts and expectations had shared in their fall. He was angry with Violante, and as he sat waiting for her blamed her in his heart for their misfortunes, in a way that would have been intensely cruel and selfish had he cared what became of himself. But he did not cherish an unforgiving resentment against her because she could no longer make their fortune and her own, but because she had lost the career that he so honoured. He would not have forgiven her could she have brought him riches gained in another way; but, though she had disappointed the man's high ideal and not his self-interest, the disappointment recoiled just as hardly on her.

Signor Vasari had insulted and dismissed him, "esteeming his own private grudge better than his orchestra, where he cannot supply my place," thought Signor Mattei, with a contempt that almost neutralised his mortification. "Who can play the violin solos as I can?" he thought proudly. "But old Naldi at Florence understands real genius—could I go and leave the girls alone? Rosa has unparalleled discretion and Violante will have no lovers now. Eccola! She is coming."

Violante came round the corner of the house and started with a surprise not altogether delightful. However, reminding herself that she could be in no disgrace now, she ran up to him and kissed him.

"Ah, padre mio! How hot and tired you look. You have come to see us? Rosa will be here directly; she is with Madame Cellini. I will get you some melon; that will be cool and nice."

Her livelier manner, her more blooming looks, were evident at a glance, as she ran into the house and brought out a slice of melon and then a glass of light wine.

"Is it good?" she said, with smiling earnestness. "I will take your bat and stick."

"You look well—have you tried your voice?" he said abruptly.

"No, father;" answered Violante, with a sudden droop into her old timid self and falling into silence.

"It must surely be returning—in a few weeks."

"Father, there is Rosa," interrupted Violante hastily, as her sister and Madame Cellini came up the path.

Signor Mattei assumed a less anxious air; he was sufficiently in awe of Rosa not to wish her to find him reverting to the forbidden subject; and he came in and drank chocolate, which was now provided, and allowed himself to be made comfortable after his journey. Violante fell into the background, leaving Rosa to make the communication of their uncle's letter. Madame Cellini, willing to give them an opportunity for their discussion, strolled away to look at the sunset, and Rosa handed the letter to her father, leaving it to tell its own story. The little tawny children peeped at Violante from a distance, and showed her the kid with vine-leaves round its horns; but she shook her head at them, and sat down demurely in the window, with a sort of good-child air herself, to listen to her father's decision.

Signor Mattei had never shown any jealousy of his daughter's English relations. He loved his wife's memory; and, though his brother-in-law's mode of life would have been totally uncongenial to him and it was well that they never met, he rather liked to talk of "the uncle—of the highest respectability—who could command the London musical world," a power which would much have astonished Mr Grey himself; and the fact that Rosa, coming from this uncle, had been prepared to like her home life had greatly tended to obviate any uncomfortable feelings. Besides, to put it plainly, he wanted just now to get rid of his daughters, and their uncle's proposal was exceedingly convenient to him.

“It has come,” he said, rather sentimentally, “to help our fallen fortunes. Now, with you in the lap of luxury, I can bend to the storm and suffer hardships willingly.”

Violante looked distressed, but Rosa answered:

“We do not wish to be idle wherever we are, and should always come to you when you wanted us. But as my pupils seem to be dispersed, and they have behaved so ill to you at the opera, some change seems desirable.”

“Assuredly, Rosina,—assuredly. Make yourself easy; anything will do for me.”

“But, father, what *shall* you do?” said Rosa—not very uneasily, for she knew from her father’s manner that he had schemes in view.

“I?—I shall take my staff in my hand and make my way to Florence. Old Naldi, my friend there, is a true musician.”

“And you will get an engagement at the opera there?” said Rosa.

“Yes, yes, it may be so; and next spring, perhaps, an opening in London: I am not unknown there.”

“That would suit exactly,” said Rosa.

“If by that time I had found employment in London, and Violante—Violante! ah, she is no good at all,” said Signor Mattei, mournfully—“*she* can do nothing.”

“I will go to school and learn,” said Violante, her voice choking.

“Ah, foolish child! there is but one moment in life when success is possible: pass that—pass all! You threw your chance away—it is over.”

The words fell on Violante’s ears with a double sense: she hid her face in her hands, and ran out of the room, down through the olive trees, towards the lake. “Over for ever!”—and she but seventeen. Was she never to have another chance,—another love?

“Ah, never! never!” she cried, half aloud, as the sleeping passion, lulled by the passiveness of her recovery and by her easy life, woke suddenly in all its force. “I had better die, for it is all over for me! Ah, Hugo,—Hugo mio! ah!”

The last cry dropped into startled commonplace as the branch of a tree caught her long muslin dress, and tore it right across, while she almost lost her footing with the shock.

“All, signorina, take care; you’ll hurt yourself,” said an unexpected voice; and “Signor Arthur” caught her by the hand and began to disentangle the unlucky dress.

“Dear me, I’m afraid it’s a good deal damaged,” he said, good-naturedly; “you should not run so fast.”

“I was—unhappy: so I did not see,” said Violante, simply.

The unhappiness was obvious, for Violante’s eyes were wet and her voice trembling. Yet Arthur could hardly help smiling at the utterly un-English confession. He thought she could only so have acknowledged some very childish sorrow.

“What makes you so unhappy?” he said, with equal directness.

“Because,” she answered, telling half a truth, “because my father is here, and I have lost my voice, signor; and he says I shall never have another chance in my life. All is gone in that one.”

Mistaken as Arthur was as to the facts of her story, he had heard enough to supplement her words; and the kindly impulse of consolation prompted him to say:

“Oh, no, you must not think that. There must be a great deal left in your life yet, and in England you can begin fresh. Perhaps your voice will get strong again there.”

“Ah, *that* may be,” said Violante, without any answering smile.

“Anyway, one must do the best one can and not vex other people,” he said, with a glance at a letter he held in his hand. Violante’s eyes followed his, but she only saw the bit of folded paper, little knowing that the mere sight of the writer’s name would have burst into her depression like a storm into mountain mist, and would have brought the past and the present together again; while Arthur went on, ignorant of how much vivid, unreasonable happiness he could with a few words have given to the creature he was trying so kindly to console. For even to hear of all Hugh’s recent troubles would have been better than not to hear of him at all; and the few reserved, incommunicative lines which had just disappointed Arthur would have seemed like a message from. Paradise.

“All sorts of pleasant things may come to you in England; so keep up a good heart, signorina.”

“Keep up a good heart,” repeated Violante, as if the expression was not quite familiar to her.

“Yes; don’t be frightened, you know, and never say die.”

Violante smiled now. The bright voice and look did put some heart into her; and Arthur, who had merely talked in the most cheering way he could think of, without considering, as Hugh would have done in like case, whether he had

himself proved the truth of his words, felt all the brighter for his success.

“These are very unpeaceful olive-branches to have torn your dress so badly,” he said, after a pause, to turn her attention.

“Ah, yes; but I think I should like to keep a bit of them to remind me of keeping a good heart, and of never saying die,” said Violante, and the words sounded inexpressibly droll in her soft, lingering foreign accent. Arthur broke off a little piece and gave it to her.

“I might do the same,” he said. “I’m sure I need the motto.”

And so unconscious and so uncoquettish was Violante’s way that Arthur actually dropped the olive-leaves into his pocket-book without thinking of smiling at her proposal. “There,” he said, “we will remember.”

“I will try,” said Violante; “and there is Rosa. She will say it is late. Good night, Signor Arthur!”

“Good night!”

Violante repeated the advice, and showed her olive-leaves to her sister; but, though Rosa held her tongue by a great effort of discretion, Signor Arthur, on thinking over the transaction, was not very much surprised to find that he obtained no more private interviews with Violante. Perhaps Rosa was somewhat astonished that he did not seek any.

She had, however, much to occupy her in the arrangements for their journey. Signor Mattei, who was very far from selfish in practical matters, was quite ready to assign a sufficient portion of the money recently earned by Violante and himself to take his daughters respectably to England; and the whole party soon returned to Civita Bella to make preparations. Their small stock of furniture was to be sold, the ready-money being much more valuable to them. Violante tried to induce Rosa to pack up the china bowl among their private possessions, but Rosa refused steadily and a little harshly. She did not mean the old life to cling round her sister still.

“Give it to Maddalena,” she said. “We will not sell it, since you care so much.”

So Violante went to the old woman, whose grief at parting was, perhaps, really the most pathetic part of this break-up of home, and bid her keep the bowl “for her sake.”

“Ecco, carissima,” said Maddalena, “I have had a dream, and the dream-book tells me that it means a meeting and a joy, and thou shalt meet thy true-love, or another better, and then shall I give thee back the china bowl.”

Violante was not without some lingering belief herself in the dreams and visions which Maddalena had impressed on her all her life. So it helped her a little way on her new start in life when, the last night she slept on Italian soil, she dreamt that she gave Hugh an olive-branch and that he put it into the china bowl.

She needed every little help when she sobbed and wept at parting with her father, and begged him to forgive her all she had not done.

“Ah, child, you were no good,” he said. “But do not cry; be happy, since you will not be great.”

Signor Mattei turned away, when he was left to his solitude, with a certain sense of freedom. He laid his plans for going to Florence, and thought of the dream of his youth—an opera that he had never written, but which now, perhaps, might find its way from his brain to his fingers. But he could not lay his hand on the particular piece of music that he wanted, all the store of violin-strings were mislaid, his salad was made with bad oil, and he was so much at a loss for some one to find fault with that he rushed off to find old Maddalena in her new situation and accuse her of packing up his fiddle-strings in his daughters’ box. And Maddalena, having a sore heart of her own, reproached him so unreasonably with having driven her dear young ladies out of the country that she quite restored his self-complacency; and, having refreshed her spirits by this outbreak, she went back and found the violin-strings, and hinted that when il signor was settled at Florence he had better send for her to come and keep house for him.

Part 4, Chapter XXX.

New Kensington.

> “The days have vanished, tone and tint,
> And yet, perhaps, the hoarding sense
> Gives out at times (he knows not whence)
> A little flash, a mystic hint.”

Mr Grey lived in a good-sized house in one of the newest squares in South Kensington. He had prospered in the world since his sister’s marriage, and having himself married a lady with money, was, spite of his large family, comfortably off, and belonged to that large class of Londoners who, by clever contrivances and well-managed economies, mix very happily in a society which is created and upheld by people much richer than themselves. The girls went to balls in cabs, but they appeared at them very well dressed and very agreeable. They did a great many things for themselves which many of their friends depended for on their maids; but though they did not give many parties in the season their entertainments were always pleasant ones. They were acquainted with a sprinkling of artists, authors, and actors, and were themselves alive to a good many different interests. They were also very kind, and were ready heartily to welcome their Italian cousins, not wishing in the least to sink Signor Mattei’s occupation; but rather, in a warm-hearted and perfectly genuine way, willing to make capital of what they knew of Violante’s sad little story, and to think that a young *cantatrice* whose prospects had been so suddenly overclouded was a very interesting

kind of cousin. Moreover, Rosa was an old friend, and had always made herself loved and respected.

In some households the father, and in some the mother, is the leading spirit; but at the Greys' the most prominent people were certainly the girls. Not that they usurped any place or power that did not naturally belong to them; but somehow there were so many of them, they were so available for any kind of entertainment, so good-natured, and so popular, that they were apt to be the first object in making the acquaintance of the family. There had been for a short time four Miss Greys in the world at once—the eldest being about the age of Rosa Mattei, the youngest some seven years younger. They were very much alike, with pretty features, fair skins, and abundant hair. All were good-looking; not one was a beauty. All could sing nicely, dance well, read books intelligently, act pleasantly at private theatricals; but not one of them had any prominent or conspicuous talent. Never were girls so clever with their fingers, so skilful in little matters of dress and contrivance, so obliging and cheerful, so free from jealousies, and so united among themselves. One never grudged another her partners, or her lovers, nor detracted in any way from another's charms. They exchanged confidences freely on the state of their affections and their prospects, which they felt bound to further whenever they could. Rosa, not being quite prepared for this free and easy confidence, had carefully hidden her experiences from her cousins' eyes, and had by so doing possibly lost a chance of a happy ending to them.

Since her time Lucy, the second, had married, and Beatrice, the eldest, had been engaged, and again disengaged—a circumstance which she had borne with an amount of common-sense and courage more easy to despise than to imitate, having returned to the interests of young ladyhood with apparently undiminished fervour and invincible good-nature. Mary, the third, was slightly the cleverer of the four, and had aspirations in less obvious directions; consequently, she fulfilled the claims of her actual state in life a little less perfectly; while Kitty, the youngest, was the softest, prettiest, and most attractive of them all, and had the greatest claim to stand alone as a beauty. The eldest son, Charlie, was at Oxford, and the youngest, Ned, in the Navy. Such were the relations who were now preparing to welcome Rosa and Violante among them.

It was early in November; many a tint of gold and russet was still brightening the woods round Oxley, but in the squares of Kensington scarcely a leaf was lingering; fogs began to prevail, and the streets looked more cheerful after the gas was lit than during the hours of dim and struggling daylight. Nothing outside could make the Greys' drawing-room otherwise than bright and cheerful. With its pink curtains, its bright fire, its variety of little tables and chairs, all in the most convenient situations, and its pleasant, cheerful, young ladyhood, it was a very popular place, and the Greys rarely drank their afternoon tea in solitude.

On the present occasion, however, their only visitor was their sister Lucy. Mrs Compton and they were anxiously discussing the expected cousins.

"You see, Lucy," said Beatrice, "we are not going to make any mysteries. We have told everyone how Violante was making quite a success in Italy when she lost her voice, and she'll be quite a little lion for us."

"Oh, yes, quite a catch," said Mrs Compton. "And she would get endless pupils."

"Yes; but you see Rosa writes that she is so very shy and childish she does not think it would be possible for her to go about teaching."

"And so," said Mrs Grey, "I have been writing about her to Miss Venning. I thought it well to be prepared before they came."

"Dear me, mamma! You don't think of sending her to school. Why, she would set the whole place by the ears."

"I think she would break her heart," said Mary.

"Rosa speaks of her as such a child."

"Oh, don't you believe it, mother. A girl can't have been on the Italian stage, and brought up for it, and remain a child."

"Well, Miss Venning says: 'Your proposal is somewhat startling, but I have great confidence in your judgment; and if you feel that your niece would be suitable in herself, I will accept her antecedents, as Florence is wild to have her, and, of course, her music and Italian will be very useful.'"

"Well, I wish them joy of her, and she of them, though nothing could be nicer than dear old Rosa."

"Yes," said Miss Grey; "but do you remember her passion for going on the stage? She used to walk up and down my room and spout poetry till her eyes would flash! I can quite imagine that the little one might make an actress. But I daresay reality has destroyed that vision."

"I hope so," said Mrs Grey, "for I have heard of a very nice engagement for her after Christmas. Mrs Bosanquet's little girls, you know, Lucy. Nothing would be better."

"Well," said Mrs Compton, "I always had an idea about Rosa. Do you remember that civil engineer—years ago—Dick Hamilton? He danced very well—was a partner of yours, Trixie. I always thought Rosa liked him."

"I daresay she did," said Miss Grey, calmly. "What became of him? He was very ugly, but had a sort of way—I remember."

"Oh, I believe he went to India. I haven't heard of him for ages. We met him, I recollect, at one of those delightful parties at the Stanforths. How are those dear people, by the way?"

"Very well. Mr Stanforth is doing some wonderful pictures. One always meets nice people there. Mary and Kitty made

a new acquaintance the last time they went, and he has ripened very fast. He's in a public office and adores art and music. Kitty sings him German songs."

"He's going to get up theatricals with the Stanforths—one of us is to help," said Kitty.

"Oh, and you wish that 'one' may be you, I suppose," said the married sister.

"What's your friend's name, and where does he belong?"

"Crichton—Spencer Crichton. I don't know where he comes from. I don't think his friends live in London."

"Violante Mattei will cut you out, Kit," said Mrs Compton, lazily.

"I daresay," said Kitty. "It's all right if she does. But we thought the Stanforths would be a good place to begin taking her to. They're so kind and jolly, and they like oddities."

"And you expect them any time now?"

"Yes; almost at any moment. I do hope we shall all get on together."

"Oh, no fear," said Kitty. "We can just let each other alone if we don't."

These good-natured girls fully intended their cousins to have a fair share of all their little amusements and excitements, including the admiration of their acquaintances and the possibility—it seemed a very distant one for these foreign, penniless girls—of admiration growing to something more, where the ground was not preoccupied. But, at any rate, Rosa and Violante should have their share of attention and pleasure, and should do their share in making the house and drawing-room the most agreeable in Kensington.

Being so agreeable, it was not strange that James Crichton, the most sociable of civil servants, should put it on his list of pleasant houses for dropping in at; since his own lodgings were about the last place where Jem ever thought of spending an evening; but it was, perhaps, a curious turn of fate that brought him to the Greys on this particular occasion, with some tickets for a popular play, right into the midst of the discussion on the Italian cousins. James had so many acquaintances in all sorts of worlds, that he had always orders and tickets, magazines and new books, with which to repay the civilities of his friends; and he was proceeding to criticise the actress whom they were going to see when Mary Grey said:

"We must take Violante."

Jem's attention was so evidently arrested by the name that Mrs Grey said:

"We are expecting some Italian cousins, Mr Crichton. My husband's sister married an Italian gentleman devoted to music. His daughters, Rosa and Violante Mattei, are coming to stay with us. We expect them to-night."

Words would fail to express James's utter amazement. He said:

"Indeed—exactly so. Are they?" in tones of conventional interest. He would have been scarcely more surprised if the blue china cat on the cabinet before him had jumped off and purred in his face.

The solemn and sorrowful events that had occurred since his tour in Italy had greatly obliterated from his mind the recollection of his brother's holiday romance. It seemed to have no connection with anything that had come before or after it; and James was of opinion that they were all well out of a great difficulty in which Hugh's inconvenient intensity of feeling had nearly plunged them. His remembrance had been revived by Arthur's letter about Violante, which he had answered with great caution, merely stating that he had seen Violante act, and that Hugh had attended her father's singing classes—the last place where Arthur would have expected to hear of him. For Jem regarded Hugh with some awe, and Hugh's feelings as a sort of tinder that might flame up on the smallest provocation. But evidently she had *not* married the manager, whom James had frequently blessed in his heart as a perfect safeguard. What would Hugh say when he knew this—would Arthur tell him? James was not in the habit of corresponding with Hugh; if he wrote him a letter on purpose it would look as if he thought the encounter of consequence. However, as the letter was consolatory as regarded Arthur's health and spirits, he satisfied his conscience by sending it on to Hugh, merely writing across it, "Odd, isn't it? How people do turn up!" and Hugh had made no response to the communication at all!

But this turn of affairs was certainly odder still.

"I have seen those young ladies," he said, after a moment's consideration. "I joined my brother last May in Civita Bella, and I saw Mademoiselle Mattei make her first appearance."

"Indeed, did you really? Ah, poor child! Her health failed and she lost her voice. Such a destruction to her prospects! Everything seemed turning out well for her. However, we hope she may ultimately return to Italy and to her profession."

"Does that mean the manager?" thought Jem, while one of the girls said:

"Do tell us what she is like."

"I only saw her once off the stage," said Jem, in a dry way, unlike his usual effusive manner. "Her voice was very beautiful."

"Oh, but you will be quite an old friend among strangers. And your brother—but he doesn't live in London, I think?"

"No; in the country," said Jem, for once incommunicative. "My people don't often come to London, and lately we have been in trouble at home. But I shall be in your way if there is any chance of their arriving to-night. Mrs Grey, let me wish you good evening."

"Well, you must look in some day and talk about Italy to my nieces."

"Oh, thanks—very happy—I'm sure," said Jem, getting away as fast as he could, in a much-disturbed frame of mind.

If the story had concerned anyone but his brother he would have liked nothing better than an encounter with a beautiful girl with this semi-sentimental tie between them—with half-allusions to the past, sympathy, confidence, mutual recollections—the shadowy lover would have made the flirtation both safe and interesting. "But," as he said to himself, "there was never any knowing how old Hugh would take things!" he had not seen him for some time, as Hugh had declined various invitations to London, and had remained entirely by himself at the Bank House. It was Mrs Spencer Crichton's intention to spend Christmas at Bournemouth, where George and Frederica were to join her for the holidays, Hugh preferring to remain at Oxley; but directly afterwards she had determined to return to Redhurst and begin home life again.

"After his taking no notice of the letter," thought Jem, as he came into the club, "must I go and insist on forcing them on him? What can have brought them to England? Any idea of finding him, I wonder? I think I'll run down and mention it casually. Wish I'd never got acquainted with those people. Hallo! why, Hugh—Hugh! What brings you here?"

"I was obliged to come up on business, and I thought I should find you here—sooner or later," said Hugh, thinking his brother's excitement unnecessary.

"Of course. Delighted to see you! Do you go back to-night? You'll have some dinner? Here, waiter!"

While James gave his orders and uttered various inconsecutive remarks he furtively watched his brother, whom he had not seen since they had parted in the general break-up nearly three months before. He thought that Hugh looked aged, and, though he did not appear to be exactly ill or miserable, there was an absence of brightness or *comfortableness* about him, which Jem hardly thought accounted for by the fact that he was probably cold and hungry.

But Hugh, by word and letter, was imperturbably silent as to the history of those three solitary months, their morbid imaginings, their tortures of self-reproach, their loneliness and dulness, without the cheerful family life to which he was unconsciously accustomed. Hugh began by thinking that he was too miserable to care for anything external, and ended, though he was for from admitting it, by missing the children's croquet and his mother's wool-work and all the framework of home life. But he still felt a sort of fierce satisfaction in punishing himself, and would have been ashamed to grasp at the slightest relaxation, even if it had been without the knowledge of those whom he felt himself to have injured.

However, he allowed Jem to exercise his hospitality, which was an improvement on his old housekeeper's mutton chops; and, in fact, was sufficiently well-occupied not to notice his brother's unusual silence. At last James said:

"So, mother's coming home after Christmas?"

"Yes, so she says."

"I wonder what Arthur will do."

"I don't know," returned Hugh, gravely.

"He writes in tolerable spirits. Odd, wasn't it, his coming across those girls?"

"Very odd."

"Things *are*—awfully odd. I've made a sort of acquaintance lately—some people called Grey—live at Kensington. They're very musical and know all sorts of people."

"Indeed!" said Hugh.

"Yes, I was there to-night. Such a nice house they have! One of the pleasantest places to drop in at—no stiffness or formality. They've got some cousins—Italians." Here James began to stir the salt violently. "They're expecting them to stay. Just imagine my surprise when I heard they were the two Matteis!"

Hugh set down his wine-glass, and looked entirely confounded. He did not speak a word, but fixed his eyes on his brother in silence.

"She lost her voice, it seems," said James; "and they asked her to come for a change with her sister."

"Is she still engaged to be married?" said Hugh, hurriedly.

"Why, that's what I can't make out," said Jem. "Arthur thought not, you see; but, from what her aunt told me, I think there may be some idea of it. I don't think it's impossible—"

"You need not alarm yourself," suddenly interrupted Hugh. "The danger's over. Whatever right I once thought I had to please myself in that way I have none now, and my life must have other objects."

James was so horrified with this view of Hugh's situation that he began vehemently to controvert it, and was ready to recommend a renewal of the acquaintance rather than the rejection of it on such a motive.

"What would they not be justified in saying *now*?" said Hugh—"and if not—I'm not the same man that—that—"

Hugh paused and drooped his head low, a sudden rush of recollection revealing how much of the same man remained.

"I've got to catch the Oxley train," he said, getting up.

"Why, you're never going back to-night! And I say, Hugh, you've been there by yourself quite long enough. Shall I run down, or why don't you go to Bournemouth?"

"I don't want any change, thank you," said Hugh. "Good night," and he was gone before Jem had time to mutter to himself, "I don't know how it would be if he saw her, though!"

But Hugh, as he went out into the cold night, felt his brain in a whirl. He had had a change, whether he wished for one or not—a change of thought, and feeling, and association; a wave of feeling that seemed to make him conscious of *what he used to be like* at that time that seemed now like his whole past. But it was past, so completely that he did not even argue with himself against its return. His words were so far true that he could not have pushed his recent life aside, and sought out Violante again.

Only, now and then, as the days went by, she seemed to steal like a vision into his solitary rooms. He saw her finger the quaint old ornaments of his grandmother's drawing-room at the Bank House, or sit on its narrow window-seats at work. But Redhurst and all his outer life was haunted by another vision—haunted as truly as if a spirit with wet white dress and covered face had really wandered over the frosty autumn meadows, or seemed to float on the dull waters, which no summer sun awoke to sparkling light.

Part 4, Chapter XXXI.

Relations New and Old.

> "The world is full of other folks."
>
> The Gayworthys.

It was a wintry morning, with pale sunshine struggling through the retiring fog. In the centre of the Greys' pretty drawing-room, among all the ottomans, tables, and nick-knacks, stood Violante. She wore a dark-blue serge dress, with a linen collar and a little red necktie—attire intended by Rosa to be scrupulously that of a young English lady. Nor was the short hair, tied back with a ribbon, so unusual as to be peculiar. Yet she looked, as she stood glancing around, half shy, half observant, something like a hare in a flower-garden, just ready to dash away. In consideration of the fatigue of her journey, which had ended late the night before, she had had her breakfast upstairs, and was now really making and receiving her first impressions.

Rosa and Beatrice Grey were talking fast to each other in a rapid exchange of question and answer; while the aunt and younger cousins were studying this soft-eyed, fawnlike creature, so utterly unlike their self-possessed selves.

"So, my dear," said her aunt kindly, "we have got you here at last. And you must tell the girls all you like best to do, that they may be able to amuse you."

"I do not know what anyone does here exactly," said Violante, afraid of her own voice, as she wondered if her English was *very* foreign.

"Hasn't Rosa told you how we all get on?" said Kitty.

"Yes," said Violante. "I thought I knew—but, after all, I did not imagine it."

Kitty laughed kindly.

"You dear little thing!" she said, "you will soon find it all out. And you haven't got the least bit of voice to sing to us with?"

"No—I cannot sing!" said Violante, shyly.

"All, we shall make you tell us all your history," said Mary, wishing to set her at her ease; "all about your stage-life and its wonders."

"*That* was not very wonderful," said Violante, while Rosa interposed:

"She had very little time to judge of it before she was ill, and now I think she would be glad to forget it."

"Ah, well, we must make her into an English girl," said Mrs Grey. "We will talk of schools and pupils by and by; first we will show her a little of the world. Is she as fond of parties as you were, Rosa? How wild a dance made you, good, sober girl as you were."

"She has never been to a party," said Rosa, laughing; "and I am not sure if she can dance—off the stage."

“Oh, yes, I can, Rosina—Maddalena taught me.”

“Do you remember going to parties at the Stanforths’, Rosa?” said Miss Grey curiously.

“Yes—very well. Do you know them still?” said Rosa.

“Oh, yes—” and here followed details of old acquaintances and new pictures, to which Violante listened in silent wonder. The Greys were fond of little schemes and surprises, so they told their cousins nothing of the old acquaintance whom they expected them soon to meet; and nothing occurred to make all these perplexing novelties more perplexing still.

“Shall you be happy here, my darling?” said Rosa, anxiously, as, in the first interval of solitude, Violante sprang to her side and eagerly caressed her.

“Oh, yes!—yes!” said Violante; “quite happy when I see you. But how strange it would be to have so many sisters! How lousy they are, and how many things they can do! Rosa mia! I see now what everyone meant by saying that you were so English. But I like it.”

Violante’s life during the next week or two was not such as to make a figure in history. She was the prettiest plaything her cousins had ever seen. Her ignorance of ordinary life, her shy softness, and absence of self-assertion, made her seem to them as a specially-lovely kitten, and they never guessed that anything lay beneath. They interpreted all her actions in accordance with the impression that she had made on them. They were fond of reading aloud to each other, and when a passionate and mournful love-scene moved Violante, unused to the echoes of her own heart, to tears and blushes, they laughed at her *naïveté* and simplicity. When she shrank from questions about her theatrical life they concluded that she had nothing to tell of it, and they treated the idea of her teaching Italian at school as an absurd joke.

“But I must earn my living,” said Violante, gravely.

“*You* earn your living—you kitten!” said Beatrice.

“Yes—one must do something, and I cannot sing—or marry,” said Violante, and her cousins’ laughter at what seemed to the foreign girl a perfectly natural suggestion blinded them to the fact that there was more knowledge of the struggle of life in her words than had ever come to them over their drawing-room carpets. But they taught her to talk, and diminished her shyness so that she could not have been in a better atmosphere.

To Rosa the life came with no strangeness; rather her four years of Italy were like a dream. Surely—surely it was but yesterday that she had trimmed her dresses for other parties at the Stanforths’ and Comptons’, where Lucy was then so anxious to go. Was there *now* nothing to give the old zest to her preparations? Only the desire to set off Violante, and to see her enjoying herself. But Rosa’s world was, indeed, full of “other folks;” and she did not decide on her actions with regard to herself. And great questions were agitating themselves in her mind during these early and apparently peaceful days. Her aunt told her of the fortunate opening which she had found for her at Mrs Bosanquet’s.

“And you see, my dear, the money is as much as you would get anywhere. You could continue it if your father does come to England in the spring, as he proposes. It leaves you time for a few occasional pupils, and you would have your evenings at home—an inestimable advantage if Violante is with you.”

“I know my father thinks that, if her voice returns and we stay in England, she might sing at concerts and oratorios. But I don’t think she will ever be able to do anything in public.”

“Oh, dear me, Rosa, she is a child; she will be a different person in a year or two. But I agree with you, she is not suited for it, and must be well taken care of.”

“Indeed, I must take care of her!” Rosa said no more, and her aunt never supposed that she had any hesitation as to availing herself of the excellent opportunity before her; and, indeed, as Rosa listened, she felt that her alternative grew more remote. But it lost nothing in fascination.

After they had been about a week at Kensington some tickets were sent to Mrs Grey for ‘The School for Scandal’—then being performed. Violante did not go: she shrank from the very thought of a theatre; and, as Rosa was by no means anxious to expose her to unnecessary cold and fatigue, she remained at home, while Mr Grey took his eldest daughter and Rosa.

It was a long time since Rosa had seen any acting, and she sat like one bewitched, with hot cheeks and bright eyes, her hands clasped before her—now delighted, now impatient—her lips moving in sympathy or correction—absorbed as she had not been for years. Mr Grey thought what a very handsome young woman his niece was, with her fine eyes and intense expression; but her cousin Beatrice, who had been in the old days more than anyone else her friend, watched her curiously, and when they came home said:

“Come into my room, and brush your hair, and then you will not disturb Violante! So you are as fond of acting as ever, Rosa?”

“Fond of it!” ejaculated Rosa. “Oh, Trixy, I must, I must! I can’t give it up again. Surely there must be some way!”

“Rosa! you don’t mean to say you are thinking of it seriously?”

“It would be just life to me,” said Rosa, passionately, and almost crying, as she brushed her hair over her face.

Miss Grey laid aside a modest portion of accessory plaits as she said, gravely—

“You see, Rosa, ‘life,’ as you call it, is just what most people don’t get. And I’m sure you would not like it; you are not the sort of girl.”

“Yes, I am!” said Rosa, with petulance. “Nobody understands. They think because I *can* work and teach, and take care of myself and other people, and look serious, that that’s all of me, and that I’m good and quiet. But I’m *not*, if being good means being contented in—in a pond with a fence all round it. I should *like* to knock about, have to take care of myself, and live in a lodging! I *like* the gas and the fun, and the ups and downs of it, and not being sure of succeeding; and if Violante was married I’d do it to-morrow!”

“But, Rosa—”

“But, Trixy, I mean what I say. I *can* act as I can do nothing else; but whether it is possible for me to be an actress is another thing, I know very well. It couldn’t make much difference to all of you—could it?”

“Well, no,” said Beatrice, “I don’t think, we should consider that it did. But, Rosa, you would either have to begin in the smallest possible way, or else study for years; and how could you pay for getting yourself taught? You might ask Mr A—,” mentioning an eminent actor of well-known kindness and respectability; “he sometimes comes here. But when there’s the other thing all ready for you!”

“Oh, Trixy, I know,” said Rosa. “But of course,” she added, “I can’t be expected to feel that it would be unsuitable. If I had a voice—oh! if I had—what it would have saved Violante and me!”

“You gave up the idea once before,” said Beatrice.

“Yes,” said Rosa, rather faintly.

“There was something then you would have liked better still, eh! Rose?”

“Yes,” said Rosa, with a sudden heart-throb.

“I’m afraid he wasn’t good for much, Rosy,” said her cousin, patting her hair.

“You never hear of him now?” said Rosa.

“Never. Everyone doesn’t get Lucy’s luck, you know, and when things go wrong one must put up with second-best.”

“I am to have neither first or second,” said Rosa.

“Well, there’s a good deal of third in the world, and one gets on with it.”

“The long and the short of it is,” said Rosa, as she stood up to go, “that that’s my wish, but I can’t turn the world upside down to get it, and I can live without it, as I’ve done before. Why, I almost forgot it till things went wrong with Violante. Anyhow, I must take care of her.”

Beatrice Grey, spite of her easy life, had not found the world accommodate itself so exactly to her wishes as to be surprised at the necessity for submission, but she was struck by Rosa’s last words, and said: “You’re the best girl I know, Rosa.”

“I mustn’t go to many plays if you are to hold that opinion long,” replied Rosa, as she went away.

“Did you enjoy yourself, Rosina mia?” said Violante, sleepily.

“Yes, my darling,” said Rosa, “so much so that next time you must come and look after me.”

Violante gave a little sleepy laugh at this absurd notion, as her sister, wakeful with excitement, lay down by her side.

Rosa was not exactly conscious of making a sacrifice: she rather felt herself yielding to a powerful necessity. Of course, the family well-being and Violante’s happiness must come first, whatever happened. She must act prudently. Life had taught her prudence; only her hot nature rebelled sometimes. Her age and experience taught her that she could live without being an actress. She lay thinking of her life and her sister’s—not cynically, but without any youthful illusions. Her first ambition seemed impracticable—her first love was a thing of the past.

Part 4, Chapter XXXII.

Old Acquaintance.

> “Strange, yet familiar things.”

The scene of Violante’s first party was a great rambling house in Kensington—half old, half new—with odd passages and corners, and steps up and down; incongruous, and yet comfortable; and full of all the daring innovations and the unexpected revivals of an artist’s taste. Mr Stanforth gave his visitors pleasant things to look at, and pleasant people to talk to; and, while a fair share both of things and people were enough out of the common to amuse—by exciting criticism, here and there was a work of art, and here and there a famous person standing on a higher level, and rousing enthusiasm and admiration. Besides, the large and lively family party were always ready for schemes of amusement; and there were no such private theatricals, no such drawing-room concerts and impromptu dances anywhere else—at least, so thought the Miss Greys. To the young Violante the scene had all the wonder of absolute novelty; to her sister the tender interest of an unforgotten past. Rosa remembered the play which she had acted

there, when applause had lighted the first spark of ambition; but she seemed to live over again the day, three months later, when that fire had paled before an intenser flame. The scene was the same, but the play had been altered to make room for new actors; and Violante, in her white dress, with Christmas roses crowning her soft cloudy hair, stood in the front.

“That girl is like starlight,” someone said, and Rosa speedily became aware that her sister was one of the things to be looked at to-night. Rosa herself received a warm greeting; and their kind and pleasant host took the two sisters into his studio, that the younger one, at least, might both see and be seen.

“I am afraid the artistic eyes of Italy will see much to criticise,” he said, with a smile.

“You are used to pictures?”

“I thought they were all painted long ago,” said Violante, “except the copies;” for Civita Bella had not offered many facilities or attractions to painters, and having been behind the scenes of one art did not lessen her wonder at the other. She stared in amazement at recognising the original of a peasant-girl on the wall in the fashionably-dressed young lady who was showing off the pictures, and when the same face which she had admired under a helmet in a picture was pointed out to her above a white tie among the guests; and smiled as its owner handed her a seat, she felt as if the world was very wonderful, unconscious of her own similar and very superior claims to be an object of interest.

“Come and see papa’s new picture!” said one of the girls of the house, smiling, to a new arrival, and James Crichton followed her to the door of the studio.

“Isn’t it a lovely one?” she said.

There stood Violante, as he had seen her once before, the centre of a group, not now pale and frightened, but flushed and smiling; silent, indeed, and shy, but with eyes that were full of life; her childish pathetic charm brightened into unmistakable beauty; the great artist enlightening her ignorance, and half the young men in the company seized with artistic fervour.

“Don’t break the spell,” said Jem, drawing back. He had had some vague notion of the possibility of seeing her at this party, but never like this.

There was generally a little dancing at the Stanforths in the course of the evening, and now James beheld the artist’s handsome model petition Violante for a quadrille with considerable *empressement*. She looked a little shy and doubtful, but finally let him lead her away; while as he passed Miss Stanforth he smiled and whispered triumphantly, “I’ve got the beauty!”

And James was suddenly seized with a sensation of fierce unreasonable jealousy on his brother’s account. “Was this the state of things he had wasted his pity upon? She had not fretted much! After all poor old Hugh had gone through, while he was in trouble and working hard, unable to bear the sound of her name, *she* could laugh and flirt and enjoy herself. It was always the way!” In short, if James had ardently desired that his brother should win Violante he could not have been more put out at seeing her the object of other men’s attention, or at watching her gradually take courage as her partner evidently took pains to teach her the unfamiliar figures. How graceful she was and how sweet her smile!

Jem’s anger was never very long-lived, and before the end of the quadrille he was smiling to himself and speculating on what she would say when he made himself known to her. He turned a little as this thought occurred to him, and came face to face with Rosa Mattei. She started violently, evidently quite unprepared to see him, and then made a stiff little bow.

“Ah, you have met!” exclaimed Miss Grey, joining them. “I did not tell my cousin she was to meet a friend.”

“I had no notion of it,” said Rosa, abruptly.

“*I* was not altogether unprepared,” said James. “Signor Mattei is not with you?”

“No. My father is in Florence.”

“And your sister?—I hope she is well.”

“She is very well, thank you.”

Both Jem and Rosa felt antagonistic. “Why,” thought she, “had he come like a ghost to disturb Violante’s peace?”

“What had brought these girls to England?” thought he. “Did they want to seek Hugh out?”

There was an awkward little pause, which, was broken by a lady, a friend of James’s mother, who came up to him and asked after his brother.

“Very well, thank you. He is at home—not here,” returned James, conscious that Rosa looked relieved at the intelligence.

“And your cousin Arthur?”

“Well, we have pretty good accounts from him, I think. Miss Mattei,” he added, “I believe you met my cousin at Caletto.”

“*Your* cousin! Mr Pinsher—Spencer. Ah, I see! our Italian friend mistook the name; but we certainly did meet an English gentleman at Caletto.”

James never could endure to be on bad terms with anyone. The first attempt at a snub, far from repelling him, only set him to work to find a vulnerable point. Rosa’s stiffness was irresistible, and, besides, he was anxious to hear of Arthur.

“How very singular!” he said. “He mentioned you in one of his letters. Do tell me, Miss Mattei, if he struck you as looking out of health or spirits?”

“No; I think he was quite well,” said Rosa; then, remembering Violante’s impression: “He may have seemed rather sad at times, but I did not see much of him.”

“He went abroad to try to recover from a great shock. The lady he was engaged to died.”

“How very sad!” exclaimed Rosa, feeling that this was much at variance with her distrustful impressions.

“Yes. We have had a good deal of trouble since we met last, Miss Mattei. Holidays are soon over in this work-a-day world.”

James looked rather sentimental, though his expressions were quite genuine.

“We have had some trouble too,” said Rosa, “but it is now, I hope, over. I have occupation in London, and my sister is going to school.”

“To school! Well, this is a world of changes; but there was something in all that sunshine and blue sky after all. And the Tollemaches; oh, weren’t the Tollemaches really nice people—so kind!”

Before Rosa could answer, Violante’s partner brought her back. James drew out of sight for a moment. Away from the overpowering force of Hugh’s reality, he was possessed by a lively interest in the strange turns events were taking. He studied the situation as if it had been a work of art and he a collector, not cynically or critically, but with the affectionate interest of an amateur in picturesque episodes.

Violante looked bright-eyed and rosy.

“Did you see, Rosina? I have been dancing. That was such a nice partner! I was not afraid of him long. And there is his picture. Did you see?”

“Oh, yes, dear; I saw it all,” said Rosa; while James thought: “Not inconsolable!” Suddenly Violante looked up and saw him. She turned pale, then suddenly out of her eyes flashed a look of unspeakable joy, that outshone her childish gaiety and put it out of sight. She glanced all round the room with an eagerness more touching and convincing than any degree of alarm or agitation; and, perhaps, her stage-training in self-command stood her in good stead, for she made no scene, but took James’s offered hand, and looked in his face with a look of happy expectation that touched him more than he could say.

“So you have come to England, mademoiselle,” he said. “Do you like it? I have been talking to your sister, and she tells me you met my cousin—in Italy.”

“Signor Arthur!” exclaimed Violante, with instant comprehension.

“Yes—Arthur Spencer—do you recollect him?”

“Oh, yes! he told me about England,” said Violante, eagerly; but even while she spoke the brightness began to fade out of her face. She *knew* that Hugh was not there, and that James was not going to speak to her about him. He, on his side, felt the attitude he was forced to assume so embarrassing that he gladly availed himself of the first excuse to turn away. She, poor child, could only feel that suddenly her part in this delightful party became like a part in a play. She must act her own character, crush back her surprise and pain, and look as usual. Perhaps, nothing but long habit could have enabled her to do so; she found herself smiling her old stage smile, her fingers felt cold as they used to do at the opera, her eyes took their old stupid look, and the music surged in her ears like the music of the opera orchestra. She was not going to cry or faint now any more than then, but all her sweet spontaneous pleasure was destroyed.

“I felt as if I was acting,” was all she said to Rosa, afterwards, when the confusing scene was over, and she and her sister were alone.

“My darling,” said Rosa, “it was too hard that your pleasure should be spoilt like this.” Rosa was sitting by their bed-room lire, and Violante, half-undressed, sat on the rug leaning against her knees. She did not answer for a moment, and then said, rather imperiously:

“Tell me everything he said to you.”

“I don’t think he was pleased to see us,” said Rosa. “I heard him say his brother was in the country, and that he was quite well.”

“Ah!” murmured Violante.

“And he told me that Signor Arthur, as you call him, had lost the girl he was engaged to—that she is dead.”

"I knew she was dead: he told me so."

"Did he? but, in short, Violante, I hope you won't let this meeting dwell in your mind. What is past, is past; and—you won't be unhappy, my child, will you?"

"No," said Violante, slowly, and with some reserve.

She was disturbed and agitated; but she was very far from hopeless. Now that the seas did not divide them, anything seemed possible: she might meet him in the street—he might seek her again. But slow days passed, and she did not see him, while James, the Greys heard, went out of town for Christmas. The poor child had many weary yearning hours; but pleasure and novelty and affectionate kindness were not powerless; nor was she miserable. During these days Rosa's choice of an occupation was determined—at any rate, for the present. Her uncle offered her a home in his house until her father came to England, if she accepted the situation of daily governess to Mrs Bosanquet. She found that the stage could not be for the present remunerative: and, even with Violante's schooling provided for, the two sisters had to clothe themselves; and she could not bear to be a burden on such kind relations. So when the moment of decision came she told her aunt that she would do her best for the little Bosanquets, and thanked her heartily for her recommendation.

"I can do it, as I've done before," she said, "and I *will*. But now, Aunt Beatrice, will you tell me something about this school for Violante? Do they know who she is?"

"Oh, yes. Miss Venning is an old friend of mine. We haven't met for some years now; but she is a most excellent and kind-hearted person; and her two sisters, who are quite young, are, I believe, admirable. I am sure Violante will meet with nothing but kindness, and it will do her good to fend for herself a little."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Rosa doubtfully, "and she must learn self-reliance, poor child!"

She thought secretly that it would be well to shield Violante from encounters with James Crichton, and that at least she would be safe at school. But Rosa was very miserable at this time. She had not given up her prospects without scorching tears of disappointment. Four years back seemed nearly as recent to her regretful memory as four months to Violante's; and now she must part with her child and lose the caresses that were the sweetest things in life to her. Violante grew frightened as the time drew near, and clung to her more closely than ever; but she never uttered a word of resistance, and regarded the going to school, as she had done the coming to England, with the same curious under-current of inclination.

In the middle of January Mrs Grey received a letter from Miss Venning, saying:

"My sister Florence has been in London, and will return on the 18th. If you would like it she will bring your niece back with her—it is the day we re-open school."

This arrangement was gladly acceded to; and on a clear cold morning Violante, well wrapped up, walked up and down the long platform from which she was to start, furtively holding Rosa's fingers in her muff, and looking about for a school-mistress very unlike the tall, fair, rosy-faced girl who came rapidly up to the appointed meeting-place.

"Miss Florence Venning?" said Mrs Grey. "How do you do? Here are my nieces, and this is Violante."

Florence shook hands with them, and answered enquiries for her eldest sister, and then, as Mrs Grey said something aside about her niece's shyness and grief at leaving her sister, she answered, in a kind, yet matter-of-course manner:

"Oh, yes. I daresay she minds it very much; but she'll soon be quite happy again, I'm sure. I hope we shall be very good friends."

"You are a governess, too, aren't you?" she added, to Rosa, with a view to making acquaintance.

"Yes," said Rosa, rather faintly.

"I think one is quite glad to get to work again after the holidays. I always feel ready to begin. We ought to get in, I think. Will you come now, signorina? That is what we must call you, I suppose?"

Flossy's breezy abruptness was better, perhaps, than a more open sympathy. But when she saw the two sisters cling together, and heard Rosa's murmured "My darling, my darling!" her blue eyes filled with quick, kindly tears.

"I'll take ever so much care of her!" she said, impulsively. "Don't be afraid."

Poor Rosa looked quite fierce with misery; but the inexorable bell rang, the door was shut between the sisters, and while the many struggles of Rosa's last few weeks found vent in a fit of uncontrollable sobbing, Violante was whirled away, through the frosty fields and wintry hedgerows, to Oxley and Redhurst—to the very neighbourhood of Hugh Crichton.

Part 5, Chapter XXXIII.

Haunted.

> "And ghosts unseen
> Crept in between
> And marred our harmony."

Part 5, Chapter XXXIV.

School.

"Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky."

The bells of Saint Michael's Church were ringing a joyous peal as Violante set foot in Oxley. There had been a wedding in the morning, and the bells were honouring the bride with a final peal, as the sun sank low in the clear, cold sky and the wintry moon rose white against the rosy sunset. Below, people stamped through the street, and the horses' hoofs sounded sharply on the hard road. The lamps flashed out one by one, the outlines of the buildings were still visible.

"That is the Bank," said Flossy, as they drove past.

Violante looked, and saw the handsome white building, already closed for the night, and the dark red house beside it where one light showed in an upstair window. She was too much bewildered to care to speculate about it. They passed out of the town along the road, with its pretty villas with cheerful lights shining from the windows, past the nursery-gardens and scattered cottages, beyond which, the last house in the borough of Oxley, stood Oxley Manor.

"Here we are," said Flossy, brightly. "We shall be just in time for some tea. Ah, how d'ye do, Anne," to the servant that opened the door. "Yes; half-a-crown, that's right. This is Miss Mattei's luggage. Come in, signorina! Well, Mary, here she is."

And Violante found herself warmly and kindly greeted and led into a pleasantly-lighted drawing-room, while Miss Venning enquired for her aunt and cousins.

"They are quite well, signora," said Violante, in her soft, liquid voice. She felt shy, but then she was not expected to do anything but speak when she was spoken to, and, being confiding as well as timid, she warmed at once to a kind word.

"Give them some tea, Clarissa," said Miss Venning. "They have had a very cold journey, and then Miss Mattei can take off her things before the school tea."

"We arrived to the sound of wedding bells. For Ada Morrison, I suppose?" said Flossy.

"Yes; it has made quite an auspicious beginning for you, my dear," to Violante.

"That is pleasant," said Violante, shyly.

"Yes; a good beginning is half-way to a good ending. So remember that, my dear, in all your work," said Miss Venning, sonorously.

"Now come with me," said Florence, "and I will introduce you to Edith Robertson. She teaches the little ones English and drawing and learns the higher branches."

Whether Violante had much idea of what fruit might grow in this lofty situation may be doubted, but she followed Flossy to a large room, brightly lit with gas, where, what Violante afterwards described to Rosa as "as many girls as there are singers in a chorus," were enjoying the leisure of recent arrival after the holidays. There was a cry of "Miss Florence, Miss Florence!" and such a confusion of greetings and embraces ensued as made Violante quite dizzy; but presently Florence extricated from the crowd a short, plain, clever-faced girl of nineteen or twenty, introduced her as Miss Robertson, and told her to show Violante her room and to tell her a few of the ways of the house, while she returned to her sisters.

"Well," she cried, as she came back into the drawing-room and sat down on the rug for a comfortable chat. "Isn't she a little dear? She cried, and so did her sister, who looks a famous person; but she soon cheered up."

"And, pray, do you expect her to be of any use?" asked Clarissa. "She looks about as much like a governess as—"

"A public singer," said Flossy.

"Yes," said Miss Venning. "Mrs Grey was quite right in saying there was nothing unsuitable in her appearance."

"Oh, nor in herself," said Flossy. "She is a mere child, evidently; but, of course, she can speak her own language, and that is all we want. And it will be very interesting to study a mind that has had so different an experience from one's own."

"Always presupposing," said Clarissa, "that she has a mind to study."

"Now, Clarissa, you know I hate that idea that people must have a certain amount of stereotyped cleverness before they can be supposed to have any characters. *No one* is commonplace, or like anybody else, if one really understands them. They say even sheep are all different, and I'm sure girls are. The most unexpected developments —"

"Well, Flossy, never mind all that," said Miss Venning. "You shall do as you like with Miss Mattei, and I daresay you will make something of her."

"Oh, I feel sure of it. But, now, how is everyone? Is there any news?"

“Yes; Mrs Crichton comes home next week; so I think Freddie will not come back as a boarder.”

“It will be very dull for her at home, poor child,” said Flossy, gravely.

“Well, Mrs Crichton writes, in her usual energetic way, that she thinks it a duty to keep the house as cheerful as possible; and she means to ask a friend Freddie has made at Bournemouth to stay with her. She hopes, too, that Hugh will live at home as usual.”

“He will not be an element of cheerfulness,” said Clarissa. “I met him riding yesterday, and I never saw so gloomy a face.”

“And Arthur?” said Flossy.

“I don’t think his plans are settled yet; but Mrs Crichton says he writes cheerfully.”

“I don’t think much of those cheerful letters,” said Flossy, sadly. “What can he say? How will one ever go to Redhurst? Ah, there’s a ring! That’s the Pembertons, no doubt. I must get ready for tea.”

At six o’clock Violante found herself sitting at tea in a large, cheerful room, and gradually took courage to make her observations on the new scene before her. She was placed among the elder girls, who were exceedingly polite to her, for Flossy’s genial influence told in the tone of the school; but she felt more attracted towards a row of long-haired lesser ones, for whom Miss Robertson was making tea. “I should like to do that,” she thought; “I hope they will love me.” There was a grand French governess, who looked formidable; and who, to tell the truth, was the only person of whom Miss Florence stood in awe, and who regarded her merely as a big girl and not as a theorist in education. There was also a younger and quieter-looking German, and about thirty pupils. There was a good deal of conversation, and plenty to eat. Violante occupied at night the same room with Miss Robertson, a pleasant one enough. Her companion pretended not to notice the tears which the longing for Rosa’s good nights could not fail to bring. She had seen a good many school-girls cry, since she had been sent to an orphanage for clergymen’s daughters at eight years old; and she thought everyone ought to appreciate their good luck in being at Oxley Manor—certainly a little ignorant foreigner, who was, besides, too old and too tall to be legitimately homesick. She must learn not to be a helpless child. But Violante’s beauty and fascinating sweetness were a magic armour with which to face this new world. Everyone, even her stern young judge, was kindly disposed towards her and ready to make allowance for her ignorance and helplessness.

Miss Venning, however much licence she might allow to Florence, was very really the mistress of her school. The girls, Flossy included, read the Bible to her every morning—a ceremony almost as alarming to Violante as standing up to sing. When this was over Miss Venning called her, and said:

“Now, my dear, tell me what you can do?”

“I cannot do anything, signora. I am very stupid,” faltered Violante. “I will try.”

“What have you learnt?”

“English. I know English, and just a little French and music.”

“Have you read much of your own literature—Dante or Tasso?”

“No, signora.”

“Read me a piece of this,” said Miss Venning, putting a volume of Italian poetry into her hands that she might judge of her accent. Frightened as Violante was, and little as she had responded to her long technical training, she declaimed the verses in a very much more vigorous style than Miss Venning expected.

“That is very well,” she said. “You must read Italian with Miss Florence, and help her to teach her class.”

“Signora,” said Violante, emboldened by the praise, “I can knit and sew and embroider. I could teach these to the young ladies.”

“And you shall,” said Flossy, who was standing close by. “Sister, we’ll make needlework popular.”

“They are very pleasant occupations,” said Miss Venning. “Now, let me hear you play; for it will be part of your duty to overlook the little girls at their music.”

Violante played very prettily, though her fingers had comparatively been little cultivated; but she refused even to attempt to sing, flushing and trembling in a way quite inexplicable, if the Miss Vennings had known nothing of her former history.

“Well, my dear,” said Miss Venning, “you have a great deal to learn, and a little to teach. We will do our best to make you happy among us, and you on your part will, no doubt, be industrious and obedient.”

“Yes, signora,” said Violante, a good deal impressed by the profundity of Miss Venning’s manners.

“And one thing I wish you to notice. As you make friends with your companions, do not make the details of your former life a matter of conversation. You have no need to be ashamed of it; but it would excite great curiosity, and you might be questioned in a way you would not like.”

“It is only *silly* girls who wish to talk,” said Violante, quoting a sentiment of Rosa’s, and looking slightly hurt.

“Then do you be wise,” said Miss Venning, rather amused. “Now go to your lessons.”

Violante dropped into the routine of her new life with surprising quickness. She did not dislike it; but, as she wrote to Rosa: “There is so much that I do not understand.” She found herself, of course, very ignorant; but either her teachers found teaching her a pleasant task, or she had exaggerated her own dulness, for no one gave her up as hopeless. She even managed to exercise a sort of control on the few occasions when she was forced to assume authority. The little girls delighted in her, and her greatest pleasure was to do their hair for them, make them pretty things, teach them fancy-work, and be generally a slave to them. She was willing to assume any amount of the playtime responsibility generally considered so irksome, and, as Clarissa observed, would have been “all nursery, and no governess,” instead of sharing the prevailing tendency in the opposite direction. The elder ones were very fond of her, but, though she responded quickly to kindness, she did not bestow any depth of affection on anyone but Miss Florence, whom she regarded as a superior being. Flossy was a perpetual wonder to her. Rosa had been a fairly efficient and conscientious teacher; but, assuredly, she had not found it her greatest delight, nor rattled away even to such an uncomprehending listener as Violante of classes and examinations and the principles of education. She had not taken so vivid an interest in each one of her pupils, nor been so anxious to extend her sphere of labour, that she could scarcely, as Flossy’s sisters said, see a girl passing in the street without wanting to teach her, and had always a plea for extending some of the advantages of Oxley Manor “just this once” to some poor little outsider who stood just “next” in the social scale to those who already enjoyed them. And she could do so many things herself. The girls said Miss Florence was writing a book, and she certainly drew nearly as well as the master. She could make her dresses, too, *not* quite so well as the dressmaker, and was much prouder of them than of the drawing or the book either. Enthusiasm is infectious. Violante caught the prevailing tone and worshipped Miss Florence with innocent ardour. It was a somewhat dangerous atmosphere for Flossy, but she was more wrapped up in her occupations than in herself; she heartily loved her admiring pupils, and had her own enthusiasms in other directions.

There were two schoolrooms at Oxley Manor; and in the larger one, in the dusky firelight of a Saturday afternoon, the two young “pupil teachers,” for which simple name Flossy was wont to contend, sat learning some French poetry. Violante did not like learning her lessons, it reminded her too much of learning her parts; but, then, as she reflected, it did not matter nearly so much if she could not say them. She sat on a stool in a corner by the mantelpiece, her face framed in its softly-curling locks, in shadow, and the firelight dancing on her book and on her childish, delicate hands—hands that looked fit only to cling and caress, belying their fair share of deftness and skill. Miss Robertson sat on a chair, and held her book before her eyes, for she was short-sighted. She had chilblains, and occasionally rubbed her fingers. Her companion’s idleness was quite an interruption to her; she felt obliged to keep her in order.

“You don’t seem to get on with your poetry, signorina,” she said, giving the title which attached to Violante as a sort of Christian name.

“No, it is hard.”

“One must give one’s mind to it. I don’t think you take a sufficiently serious view of life, signorina.”

“A serious view?” repeated Violante.

“Well, of work, you know. Look at Miss Florence. What do you suppose makes her so energetic and useful?”

“I suppose,” said Violante, “that she is like my father, and has enthusiasm. And, perhaps, she has not much else to think of. She is very happy.”

“Do you mean that no one should work at what they don’t like?”

“Oh, yes; but it is much harder, especially when there is so much besides,” said Violante. She did not mean to turn the tables on her companion, but merely to state simple fact.

“I don’t see,” said Miss Robertson, “what can be more important than getting ready to earn one’s living.”

“Yes—we must do that—if we can,” said Violante.

“I assure you,” said Miss Robertson, “things would be very different here if it weren’t for Florence Venning. I’ve been at other schools and I know. You and I would not have such good times without her.”

“Oh, she is good and beautiful!” cried Violante. “I would learn lessons all day to please her. Where is she now?”

“She is gone to Redhurst?” said Edith, gravely.

“Redhurst?”

“Yes. Have none of the girls told you about poor Mysie Crofton?”

“No, who is she?”

“She used to come here to school, and—it happened last summer before I came; but they often talk of it—she was drowned.”

“Oh, how sad! Did she fall into the water?”

“She was going to be married, and her lover and his cousin were shooting, and they saw her standing on the lock, and Mr Crichton—”

“Who?”

“Mr Hugh Crichton. He lives at Redhurst, don’t you know? She was going to marry his cousin, Mr Spencer. Well, they were shooting, and—it was very awful—but Mr Crichton’s gun frightened her, and she fell into the water and was drowned.”

Violante sat in the shadow. Her dead silence might have come from her interest in the story.

“That’s not the worst. They say Arthur Spencer told him not to fire—and he did—”

“Was he jealous?” suddenly cried Violante.

“Good gracious, signorina! What a horrid—what a ridiculous idea! How foreign! Of course not. He didn’t mean to hurt her. He was half mad with grief. I’m sure *now* he looks as if he couldn’t smile—and Mr Spencer has been abroad ever since it happened—last August.”

Violante sat in her corner, her heart beating, shivering, her face burning. “He is near—” Then that wild foolish thought of the poor foreign opera-taught girl gave place to a pang of shame, and then, “He is unhappy.” She had forgotten herself—forgotten where she was; when Miss Florence came slowly into the room in her hat and jacket. She came and knelt down by the fire, looking much graver than usual.

“Frederica comes to school on Monday,” she said, in rather a strained voice.

“How were they, Miss Florence?” asked Edith.

“Oh, I don’t know. Mrs Crichton is very well. They are hardly settled.”

“I was telling signorina,” said Miss Robertson.

Flossy looked at Violante.

“Why, you have frightened her!” she said, “with our sad story.”

Violante could not speak; but something in Flossy’s trembling lips spoke to her heart. She pressed up close to her and hid her face on her shoulder.

“Why, my dear child, how you tremble!” cried Flossy, touched by the action and by the sympathy, as she thought it. “Hush, *we* have almost left off crying for her!”

“I never thought it would make you hysterical,” said Miss Robertson, rather severely.

“Let her alone,” said Florence, for all her tenderest strings were still quivering with the renewal of old associations, and somehow this girl, who cried for her dear Mysie, spoke to her heart as no one had done since Mysie’s star had set. Violante clung closer and closer, conscious of nothing but a sense of help and fellowship in the stormy sea that, had suddenly burst in on her. She had lost all sense of concealment, she forgot that Flossy did not know her secret; she was only silent because no words adequate to her bewildered horror suggested themselves. At last she half sobbed out:

“And he killed her—killed her?”

“Oh, no; you must not say that,” said Flossy. “It was a very sad accident, but poor Hugh could not help it, and Arthur never blamed him. She was so good, so sweet. But you must not cry, dear; why are you so startled?” she added, becoming aware that Violante’s agitation was excessive, though, on the score of her Italian actress-ship, she was not prepared to consider it unnatural.

Violante was slowly coming to herself. She sat up and pushed back her hair; while things began to arrange themselves in her mind. Hugh Crichton lived close at hand; she might see him, and he had been in a great storm of trouble—was that why she had heard nothing of him? Then Signor Arthur—she remembered how James Crichton had told Rosa that his cousin’s love was dead. Here was something she could say.

“Signora, I met Signor Arthur Spencer in Italy at Caletto. That was partly—” She stumbled over the truth so like a lie; but Flossy broke in—

“Saw Arthur? Did you? Oh, tell me—how was he—what did he look like?”

“He was very sad—I knew that, though he used to come and talk and laugh with us. He was travelling. And when I knew we were coming to England I asked him what English girls were like? And, oh, Miss Florence, I knew he spoke of one he loved who was dead. But he told me to be brave. He is so!”

It did not strike Flossy at the moment to be surprised at Violante’s interest in Arthur and his story; the subject was too interesting to herself, but the fact dropped into her mind and was recalled in the future. Now she asked a few more questions about him, and in return told Violante a little of the circumstances of his trouble, till they were obliged to separate to dress for tea. Violante crept away to her room, and as she stood by herself in the dark she felt that she had in a manner deceived Miss Florence. “But,” thought she—“he shall say first he knows me—if he will. When shall I see him? How shall I see him? Oh, never—shut up here! Hugo—ah, Hugo mio!”

Yet she felt full of expectation, full of something like hope. “I will tell Rosa if I see Signor Arthur,” she thought; “but if I tell her who is near she will be angry and foolish and take me away. It will not hurt me.”

So, to excuse herself to her own conscience for thus concealing so important a fact from her sister, she found heart

to go through her work as usual, teaching and learning, with one question ever before her, one expectation filling her life. She could tell Rosa when she could talk to her, she thought; but a letter would give a false impression, and make her sister anxious to no purpose.

Part 5, Chapter XXXV.

Discords.

> "Those blind motions of the spring
> That show the year has turned."

Redhurst was entirely unused to absenteeism. Mrs Crichton had scarcely ever spent five months together away from it in her life, and now she seemed to have taken with her all the movement and interest of the place. From the time when the little heiress had ridden out with her father on her long-tailed pony, all through the days of her bright, joyous young ladyhood, and happy, active wifehood, she had lived among her own people; and, as she was both an affectionate and conscientious woman, she had fulfilled her duties towards them well, and found and given much pleasure in the fulfilment. Moreover, besides the Rector, the Crichtons had been the only resident gentry in the parish, though there was a large neighbourhood beyond its bounds. Substantial benefits were not intermitted, and Hugh was far too conscientious to neglect his local duties; but kind words and gossip were missing. Mr and Mrs Harcourt seemed to have grown years older; the girls, who had been wont to admire Mysie's hats and profit by her teaching missed both; and the old women had no one to recount their aches and pains to. Some excitement was, however, derived from the fact that Ashenfold, a large farm-house in the place, had been taken by a Colonel Dysart, in search of a country residence, who brought there a large family of girls and boys—active, helpful, and good-humoured. So the pathway through the fields was trodden by other girlish feet on their way to school; other hands hung up the Christmas wreaths in Redhurst Church; and Mysie's duties were not altogether left undone. The new folks were grumbled at and sighed over; but they had stirred the dull waters, and on their side, of course, were ready to welcome eagerly the return of the family to the great house—none the less eagerly on account of their mournful story. There would be an acquaintance, for Mr Spencer Crichton had met Colonel Dysart in Oxley, and had left a card upon him. All business matters remaining in Hugh's hands he had been obliged sometimes to go to Redhurst, and he hardly felt one place to be more dreary than another. Indeed, he was so tired of his self-imposed solitude that he felt glad to think that his mother was coming back again. Perhaps, things would be better, somehow. Still, he could not make up his mind to be there to receive them, but made some excuse of business for the first night, and then rode home the next day, after the banking hours were over, through the cold, frosty evening, as he had done all his life till the last few months, in secure expectation of finding warmth and light, girlish voices, and little bits of news, small matters to be decided, life and comfort; in one word—home. Ah, could that busy, troublesome, foolish home come back how sweet it would have been! What would he find now? His heart beat fast as he rode up to the door, which was quickly opened, and Hugh felt an odd sort of relief at sight of the bright hall fire burning; and in another moment he was in the drawing-room, and held his mother in his arms, in, perhaps, the fondest embrace he had ever given to her since he was a little school-boy.

"Oh, mother, I'm glad you're come home!" he said. Frederica came up promptly to kiss him, and he felt that it was all very comfortable and pleasant, and much more cheerful than he had expected. He had retained the impression of the sorrowful faces and heavy mourning of their last parting. Now there was white about his mother's dress, and Freddie's hair was tied with violet ribbons. He could have dispensed with the presence of the two Miss Brabazons, whose acquaintance had been made at Bournemouth; but, perhaps, as Mrs Crichton had thought, they helped to fill up blank spaces. Hugh was not a very observant person, but as he glanced round the room he saw that it had a different aspect; the coverings were of another colour, the tables and sofas had been moved, the lamp stood in a new part of the room; there seemed to be no well-known corner or combination left.

"The place looks different," said Hugh, who was not easily affected by externals.

"Ah, yes," said his mother, "it was best to make a few changes."

Hugh shivered, and seemed to see the old scene through the new.

"You don't look very well, my dear," said Mrs Crichton. "Have you been working too hard?"

"Oh, no, mother, thank you; I'm well enough. I'll go now and dress for dinner." The changes in the drawing-room had caused Hugh to look out for old associations; but his mother followed him upstairs.

"You see, Hugh," she said, "for all the young ones' sakes it was necessary to get over old impressions. You know this old door was shut up"—suddenly opening it—"and, by closing the other, and changing the furniture, there is nothing to recall our darling's room."

Hugh shrank back. He saw vaguely that it all looked very different; but he could not cross the threshold.

"Yes, mother, I daresay you're right," he said, hurriedly; "it may make a difference."

"And, Hugh, we must not let the house be mournful. When Arthur comes back it will be much better for him to find us cheerful."

Hugh made no reply. He could not contemplate the thought of Arthur's return. How had any of them come back, he thought, as he dressed hastily and went downstairs. At dinner his mother asked him if he had seen anything of the new comers to Ashenfold.

“Yes, I have seen Colonel Dysart. He is a gentleman. There are a great many of them.”

“I must go and call. Didn’t you tell me, Freddie, that some of them were going to Miss Venning’s?”

“So Flossy said in her letter,” returned Freddie.

“They have been kind and helpful, I hear. It is a great thing to have that house occupied.”

“We did very well with the old Horehams,” said Hugh, “though Colonel Dysart is likely to be a good neighbour. Have you been to the Rectory?”

“Oh, yes, we went over at once. I think the dear old folks want us back again. You should have looked in on them now and then on a Sunday, Hugh.”

“It is you they want, not me,” he said. “I went to Oxley parish church generally. You have not seen the town yet, I suppose, Miss Brabazon?” he added, to change the conversation.

Before the evening was over, Hugh was doubtful whether the cheerfulness around him was not dearly bought by the effort to join in it. There was no want of affectionate feeling in Mrs Crichton; she missed Mysie every hour, and acknowledged their loss to the full; but she was determined that it should be regarded as nothing more than a loss, and that, as she phrased it, “no morbid feelings should be allowed to exist;” and she would not acknowledge that Hugh had any special occasion for sensitiveness. Being, with all her good-nature and easiness of discipline, a person of strong will she was determined to create external cheerfulness. Frederica, who had now, of course, become a more important element in the household, was reserved by nature, and, like many young girls, afraid of the force of her own emotions. She could not bear to speak or hear of Mysie, so she turned vehemently to other things; while, the more her high spirits regained their sway, the less she liked any infringement on them.

Hugh was away at the Bank on the day that Flossy came to see them: but she, too, nervous, and inwardly agitated, was glad to talk of external things—about the new people, and their girls coming to school, and the dear little signorina of whom she was growing so fond, and whose wonderful sweet face was like a poem or a picture.

“You must bring her to see us, Flossy, when Freddie asks some of her schoolfellows,” said Mrs Crichton.

So, little pleasant plans were made, and Redhurst came back into Flossy’s life. Yet, as she walked home through the cold afternoon, the tears rolled down her cheeks. It seemed cruel for the home to be regaining its cheerfulness while Arthur was away, solitary and unhappy. Yet she, herself, how full her life was; how fast the world went on!

“And we forget because we *must* And not because we will,” thought Flossy, and in this mood Violante’s tears had surely met with warm sympathy.

Colonel and Mrs Dysart were called upon, and the family proved to be what is called in country neighbourhoods an “acquisition.” They had done up their house. Colonel Dysart hunted and was anxious to get some shooting. There were four sons and five daughters, all between nine and twenty-eight, ready to be sociable. Two of the girls went to school with Freddie; one of the elder ones was useful in the village; some among them rode, sang, and drew—it was worth while being attentive to them; and a promising acquaintance began to spring up. Even old Mrs Harcourt found visits from the children enlivening to her, and liked to give them winter apples and Christmas roses. It was a good thing, too, to have someone to take an interest in the choir, and the curate, whom Mr Harcourt’s age had recently rendered necessary, found work for the young ladies; while they spoke together with a certain tender curiosity of her whose sweet life and sad fate was already becoming a tradition, to give to the scenery of the tragedy a certain mournful interest, and to make the touching of Mysie’s doings and the taking-up of her duties something of a rare privilege. So, new lives and new possibilities were springing up, slowly and naturally, as the snowdrops began to peep on Mysie’s grave.

Hugh did not see much of the new comers; he was away all day, and did not always come out from Oxley in the evening; and he paid so little attention to the talk going on around him that he neither discovered the names and ages of the Dysarts, nor heard anything of the charms of Freddie’s new Italian teacher, whose youth and gentleness excited her surprise and delight. But one sunny morning, as he rode into Oxley, a little incident occurred to him. He was passing Oxley Manor, riding slowly under its ivied wall and thinking of nothing less than of its inhabitants, when, from one of the upper windows that looked out close on the road, something fell on his horse’s neck, and then down into the dust at his feet. Hugh looked down—it was a little bunch of violets; then glanced carelessly up at the windows with a laugh. “Those girls must be very hard up! What would Flossy say?” he thought. But no one peeped out to see what had become of her violets, and he rode on, amused as he recalled various boyish pranks of Jem’s and Arthur’s, and left the violets lying in the dust.

When he came back that afternoon his mother called him into the drawing-room. “Hugh,” she said, eagerly, “here is a letter from Arthur, which greatly concerns you.”

With the curious sense of reluctance with which he always received anything connected with his cousin, Hugh took the letter, and read—

> “Rome, January 28, 18—
> “My dear Aunt Lily,—I am glad to hear you are at home again; I did not like to think of the place being empty. This is a wonderful city, and it is impossible even to mention all the objects of interest it contains. I wish Jem was near to enjoy them. If I tried to describe them it would be like copying a guide-book, and I would rather tell you something of what I have seen when me meet; and I hope that will be soon, for, my dear aunt, I think I have led this wandering life long enough. I have been thinking over things of late, and I wish, if you and Hugh consent, to come home again, and take my place in the Bank, as was originally

proposed, and try and do as well as I can. I am very tired of travelling; and, as for choosing any other profession, I don't feel that I can turn my mind to anything fresh, and something I must settle upon. Give my love to Hugh, and tell him I hope I shall be able to make myself useful to him. I shall be very glad to see you all again; and, though life is for ever changed to me, all that is left to me is at Redhurst with you and my sister and my brother—my brothers, I should say, for so Hugh and Jem have been and must be. I hope and pray not to be idle or useless for *her* sake.
"Ever your loving nephew,—
"Arthur Spencer."

Hugh read the letter through, and it touched him to the heart—the exceeding sadness that the writer could hardly disguise, the unwonted profession of affection for himself, and yet the coupling of his name with Jem's, as if to hide that there was any reason for such profession. He saw how conscientiously Arthur was endeavouring to act, and yet the proposal was terrible to him.

"Well, Hugh," said his mother, after a long pause, "it is the best thing for the poor boy, isn't it?"

"Of course, mother," said Hugh, slowly. "Arthur must do exactly as he pleases, have everything as he wishes it; but—but—I think he is mistaken."

"Mistaken, how?"

"I think he is trying to do what he will not be equal to. How can he *bear* this place?" said Hugh, in a passionate undertone. "Every day would be an agony to him. It is—it would be to me!"

"Of course," said Mrs Crichton, "there will be much that is painful at first; but he will get over it, and he cannot be banished for ever. Depend upon it, Hugh, the truest kindness will be to let everything be as much a matter of course as possible. The world could not go on if everyone shrank from the scenes of their misfortunes. Arthur is perfectly right, and I am sure he will be much happier in having something to do; and you'll find his natural cheerfulness will help him through. We must make it as pleasant and easy as possible."

Hugh rose and gave the letter back to his mother. "Tell him it shall be as he wishes," he said; "but tell him also that if ever he changes his mind I will not hold him to his word;" and, without waiting for an answer, he went hurriedly away to his own room. How should he bear Arthur's presence, how endure the sight of his sorrow? Could he ride into Oxley with him every day, when every weary look and dispirited tone would be like the thrust of a dagger. The more generous and unselfish Arthur was, the bitterer seemed the reproach. The idea of constant association was so terrible to him that, just in judgment as Hugh was, it almost seemed to him as if a choice so unlike his own must be dictated by feelings less intense and a memory less keen. "How can he bear the sight of me?" he thought. "*I* would have gone to the ends of the earth sooner than come back. If he has any feeling he will not be able to endure it! However, it doesn't matter what it is to me!"

Hugh honoured the sacrifice, and yet half despised his cousin for the power of making it. He would have considered it his duty to yield up his most cherished feelings for Arthur, and yet he regarded him with a shrinking that, in so passionate a nature, was almost hate. Truly, his mother was right in thinking that such morbid feelings, did not deserve encouragement. And then there was the constant haunting belief that he was enduring in silence a loss and a want similar to that for which everyone was pitying his cousin. And when Hugh's thoughts took that turn he sometimes felt as if he were making a sort of secret atonement. But all this was in the depths of Hugh's soul; his sensible outer judgment knew the probable risk of reaction for so young a man as Arthur, and felt that home and work were his best safeguards. And Hugh remembered that he had still his rooms at the Bank House, where a press of business might always detain him if Redhurst became quite unendurable. When Frederica went to school the next morning she told Flossy, as she came into her Italian class and was waiting for some of her companions, that Arthur was coming home.

"Signor Arthur?" said Violante, who was standing by.

"Yes," answered Frederica, who, of course, had been informed of the meeting at Caletto; "he will be surprised to see you, signorina. He is coming back and going to begin at the Bank, and go on as usual."

"I hope—it will do," said Flossy, rather tremulously. Violante glanced at her and began to read herself, as the girls came in and took their places; and Miss Florence let her take the lead, and neither asked nor answered a question for full five minutes.

End of the Second Volume.

Part 5, Chapter XXXVI.

Beginning Afresh.

"When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown,
And all the sport is stale, lad.
And all the wheels run down."

It was on a soft mild afternoon early in February that Arthur came home—an afternoon with a pearly sky and gleams of pale spring sunshine to light the starry celandines and budding palms. Spring was coming—there were lambs in

the meadows, and birds in the hedges, the gaily-painted barges floated down the slow water, children and young ladies tripped along the path—nothing was changed. Redhurst, always a cheerful place, was at its brightest, fresh and spring-like, yet familiar as the golden crocuses in the garden-beds.

Mrs Crichton was glad of the sunshine. Though rarely nervous she longed for the arrival to be over, and sent her young ladies to meet Frederica as she came from school, so that there was no one to receive her nephew but herself, arrayed in mourning, purposely lightened before his return. She heard him ring the bell, perhaps for the first time in his life, and came out to meet him.

“Well, my dear boy, I hardly expected you so soon; come in—I’m glad to see you.”

Arthur kissed her warmly, and followed her into the drawing-room.

“I think the train was punctual,” he said.

“Are you tired—did you stop in London?”

“Oh, yes, and I saw Jem. He says he will run down soon. I crossed yesterday, so I have had nothing of a journey to-day.”

“And—are you quite well, my dear?”

Mrs Crichton did not mean to make much of the meeting; but she put her hand on his arm and looked at him tenderly, hardly able to speak. Arthur smiled a little.

“Very well,” he said, “and glad to see you.”

Arthur was quite quiet and calm; but he was very grave, and made no attempt to feign an ordinary tone of feeling that could not have been real; he was always entirely genuine, and rarely thought of the effect of his own demeanour. Mrs Crichton looked at him anxiously, he was a good deal tanned and rather thinner than of old; but she thought that he did look well and wonderfully like himself.

“Isn’t Freddie here?” he said.

“Yes—there she is—she has been at school.”

Ah! he went forward rather eagerly to meet her; but Frederica, nervous and excited, and by no means sharing his absence of self-consciousness, kissed him rather boisterously than tenderly, and began to talk fast because she was afraid of crying.

“I suppose Hugh is at the Bank,” said Arthur; but as he spoke there was a rush and a scamper through the hall, and Snap, his terrier, rushed upon him with a welcome in which there was no cloud of embarrassment, and no room for regrets. After that Arthur was glad to get away to look after his luggage, and when he came back afternoon tea was in progress, and he sat down and talked about his journey and the wonders of Rome, and the new coloured curtains Jem had hung up in his highly-decorated rooms. Arthur was a pleasant talker, and they thought how nice it was to have him at home again. But he looked vaguely about the room between whiles, as if its changes perplexed him. He walked over to the window and looked out, where the light was dying away on the garden-paths. He had expected to feel the first sight of home severely—he hardly felt anything except that he had been there for a long time—an interminable number of hours.

Hugh was, perhaps purposely, late, and at length Mrs Crichton proposed going to dress, audibly wondering why he did not come.

“There he is!” said Freddie, as a horse’s hoofs sounded. “Hugh,” she added, throwing open the door, “here’s Arthur!”

Arthur started up and went forward.

“Hugh!” he said with a sort of eagerness:

“Well, Arthur, how d’ye do?” but as Hugh uttered this commonplace greeting his hand was as cold as ice. They exchanged half-a-dozen words as to Arthur’s journey and the weather, and separated in two minutes to dress; and the much-dreaded meeting was over.

Everyone was eager to talk at dinner, and a little bit afraid of home topics, and soon Frederica started what she conceived to be a delightfully safe and interesting subject.

“Oh, Arthur, we have heard of you lately from someone you met in Italy.”

“Really; who is that?”

“Why, a young lady who teaches us Italian—she was at a place called Caletto.”

“Miss Rosa Mattei?” said Arthur. “Has she come here?”

“No—it is her sister. Oh, she is the dearest little thing—her name is Violante—do you remember?”

“Violante! You don’t say so! I remember her perfectly. Is she at Miss Venning’s? Well, that is the most extraordinary chance!” exclaimed Arthur, much interested. “I never thought she would really go to school!”

“Oh, yes; Miss Venning knows her aunt, I believe.”

“Poor little thing!” said Arthur. “I was so sorry for her. She—she lost her voice, you know.”

“Oh, yes, I know all about it. Flossy told me. She likes being at school much better than on the stage.”

“They were very kind to me. It was like a bit of a romance. She used to ask me questions about England. Why, they don’t make her teach, do they? What a shame!”

“Arthur, what nonsense!” cried his sister. “But Violante just bewitches people.”

“Well! she doesn’t look fit to light her way. By the by, Hugh, Jem told me that you and he saw her act. It was rather a failure, wasn’t it?”

As no one had expected Hugh to take any particular interest in this conversation his dead silence surprised no one. A great fern hid him from his mother, and no one else looked at or thought of him. He answered Arthur, mechanically:

“I believe it was considered so.”

“But was her voice so lovely?” said Freddie.

“They said so, I think.”

“Oh, Hugh!” said his mother, laughing, “what opportunities you throw away. We must ask Jem, Arthur?”

“Ay, I should think Jem would have been enraptured. I thought of him when I saw her in the golden sunshine piling up the grapes, and they gave me coffee because I was tired and thirsty. I can’t believe she could do anything so prosaic as teach.”

The subject in its various branches lasted for some time, and when the ladies went away Arthur continued it:

“I don’t suppose Freddie *does* know all about her. You know she was engaged to the manager of the opera-house there, and he threw her over when she lost her voice. So the poor little thing was fretting her heart out.”

“How do you know?” said Hugh, with a sense of being suffocated.

“Oh, there was an old *cantatrice* who had charge of the sisters, and she used to talk to me. And one could see the poor child was unhappy—indeed, she owned as much.”

“She would be quite pleased to see you again.”

“Well, I daresay she would,” said Arthur, carelessly; “but I don’t suppose Miss Venning would allow—” He stopped, as the words suggested a different recollection, and after a moment went on, gravely:

“Hugh, I don’t want to lose any more time. You will let me begin work to-morrow?”

“If you wish it,” said Hugh, without looking at him. “You can do as you wish always.”

“Thanks; you’re very good, Hugh. I’ll do my best. You’ll be patient?”

Poor boy, he was naturally outspoken, and wanted, perhaps, a word of sympathy and support in this painful home-coming; but Hugh only answered, as they left the room: “I could not be otherwise,” and the coldness of the tone neutralised the kindness of the words. He lingered behind as Arthur turned towards the drawing-room, and went into his study. He would not have believed beforehand how little he would have thought about his cousin on that first day of meeting, which he had dreaded so much beforehand. His cold, short answers had come, not from embarrassment, but because he was wholly absorbed in something else. Had he avoided Violante to find her close at his side? Had he really passed her every morning and evening? Ah—and the violets—he had thrown them away! Perhaps this fact gave to the sensible Mr Spencer Crichton the keenest sense of lost opportunity that he had ever experienced. She had not, then, forgotten him. Had she come there knowing of his neighbourhood? Or had she really never cared for him at all? Arthur confirmed her engagement to the manager, and seemed well-informed, much *too* well-informed as to her sentiments with regard to the breach of it. Hugh was not naturally trustful, and through all his passion he had never trusted Violante, never forgotten that she was a foreigner and of altogether different training from his own. Besides, she *had* been false to him. He had seen her with the diamonds on her neck—he had been deceived by her confiding softness—hadn’t she been just as ready to tell her troubles to Arthur as to himself? At home Hugh was much more convinced of the unsuitableness of his choice than he had been in Italy; and now, after all that had passed, what right had he to create such a family convulsion as would be caused by any renewal of it? His love remained, but the charm of it seemed to have faded. The bitter hours he had lately passed had half awakened him from his dazzling holiday dream, taking from it the force it might else have had to bend his pride to own what had been passing in his mind all the summer, and to shake the conviction that had a sort of uncomfortable attraction to him—that he had lost the right to choose his own happiness against the pleasure of his family. How could he say to his mother now, “Consent to this—I cannot live without her,”—when, through him, Arthur must live without his love? To do so he must have been careless and selfish—and Hugh was neither, in intention, or he must have been able to sound the depths and rise to the height of a humility of which he could not even conceive. Besides, this unlucky love paid the penalty of all feelings that are unlikely and, as it were, against the nature and the circumstances of those who experience them. It was sweet and enticing, but it was insecure and beset by doubts and misgivings.

But yet, when he and Arthur rode away together the next morning, Hugh’s sense of being alone with his cousin was lost in the knowledge that he must pass Oxley Manor. He looked up at it, and his heart thrilled; but no face was at the

window, no violets, cool and fragrant, touched his hand. Where was she? What was she doing? He was absorbed in the present, full of an excitement which enraged him, but which made life worth having after all. Arthur, by his side, had his own vision, but it was back in the past. Those walls held no imprisoned princess for him. That little green gate could never open again and show her standing under the ivy, with her happy eyes and brisk light tread. During his long absence Arthur had felt continuously that he had lost Mysie; he began now to realise that the world was going on without her. He found the home life hard. He had never expected to be other than sad; but he had not foreseen that one thing would be worse than another, that there would be some paths that he dared not tread, some faces that he could not bear to see. When, as he strolled through the garden after breakfast, he suddenly felt that he *could* not turn down the path towards the river, when he counted with nervous dread each familiar object yet to be met, he was surprised and vexed with himself. He had thought that everything that recalled his darling must be sweet: what was the meaning of this horror which he tried to forget in taking part in the family talk and life around him; when his natural cheerfulness asserted itself, and Hugh looked at him with wonder? And then, when he fancied that he should rather like some occupation or amusement, why did he suddenly break down in the attempt to share in it, and only long to get away by himself? Even his work at the Bank—which was less trying, since it was entirely new—was sometimes a great burden to him after his long desultoriness; but in this case there was something definite to struggle with, and he could succeed in conquering himself; but at home he could not tell what was the matter with him, and no one helped him to find out—his aunt continuously ignoring his fluctuating spirits, and congratulating herself when he was lively and talkative; while Hugh, seeing that the cheerfulness was spontaneous when it came, marvelled at it, and, while he could not bear to see him dispirited, wondered what his world would think if he showed his moods so plainly. Nevertheless, he was not always even-tempered, and, as Arthur had lost his careless good-humour, Hugh would be shocked to find himself arguing hotly or speaking sharply to one with whom he was bound to have entire patience; and Arthur would wonder why, with such a weight at his heart, things should seem all out of joint—not because Mysie was dead—but because Hugh frowned, or Freddie laughed, or some trifle put him out of his way. He had returned home on a Tuesday, and by the end of the week had grown fairly perplexed with himself. On the Saturday afternoon, however, he walked out early from Oxley by himself, and, taking a roundabout way through some of the woods belonging to Ashenfold, felt soothed and cheered by the pleasant light and air of the early spring. When he was thus alone, and could let quiet thoughts of Mysie have their way unchecked and undisturbed, he lost the sense of discord and trouble; and, as was, perhaps, too much his wont, the sensations of the hour obliterated all others, and he stood leaning over a gate, watching the faint, pinky tints on the woods, and listening to a robin singing close at hand. Suddenly, in the copse beside him, there was a sharp noise—the report of a gun. Arthur started, as if he had been shot himself, his heart beat violently; he caught at the gate, and held it hard; the sound struck his ears like a repetition of that one fatal shot. It was some minutes before he recovered himself sufficiently to be conscious of anything but his own sensations, and when he looked up at last and drew breath he was fairly exhausted. He had thought so little of himself, and so much of his sorrow, that he had had no conception how severe the shock to his nerves had been. He was annoyed with himself and very thankful that no one had been there to see, so that he carefully concealed the incident from everybody; but it set him on the look-out, as it were, for his own feelings; and, while it certainly roused him to attempt to conceal them, he so dreaded a recurrence of the shock, and was so ignorant as to what might cause it, that he shrank from many old associations which he had previously never thought of avoiding. The sound rang in his ears, and he tried vehemently to distract his mind from it by talking and laughing with his aunt's guests; and when Hugh saw him playing bezique he wondered whether he was to envy him for heroic self-control or for boyish carelessness and reaction.

Part 5, Chapter XXXVII.

Faint-Hearted.

"The grave of all things hath its violet."

The Redhurst drawing-room was looking uncommonly cheerful on the Saturday week after Arthur's return; and Jem, recently arrived, was enjoying an unwonted *tête-à-tête* with his mother. It would be, perhaps, untrue to say that a person with affections so even as Mrs Crichton's had a favourite son; but there was much in Jem's ways that suited her, and he had the charm of novelty. He was strolling about the room, criticising the alterations somewhat unfavourably.

"I say, mamma, what did you buy this thing for?" touching the chintz. "I could have chosen you a much better one. Why didn't you write to me?"

"Really, my dear, I didn't think of asking you to choose my drawing-room furniture. Why don't you like it?"

"Why don't I like it? Why, it's altogether incorrect. Those autumn leaves are false art."

"Dear me, don't you like my leaves? They're so natural you might sweep them up."

"Exactly. You might as well be out in the garden. Now, there's a thing up in one of the spare bed-rooms. It's yellow, with a faint brown pattern."

"*That*, Jem! Why, it belonged to your grandmother Spencer, and was moved here when she came and spent her last year with us. It's hideous. I was going to have it taken down."

"It's about the best thing in the house," said Jem, critically. "You should have it made up for this room."

"Ah, my dear fellow, I hope your wife will have some taste of her own."

"I hope she'll leave it to me. I shall stipulate she does when I marry and settle."

“I am afraid, my dear, life in London doesn’t lead young men to marry and settle.”

“Well, mamma, I’m sure I don’t know about that,” said Jem, sitting down on the obnoxious chintz and stroking his beard. “Girls look out for so much now-a-days.”

“I hope, my dear, you haven’t been falling in with any girl,” said Mrs Crichton, composedly—for she was not excitable—but a little struck by Jem’s manner. “You make so many acquaintances. When you were abroad I was quite anxious.”

“I assure you, mamma, *I* was a miracle of discretion when I was abroad—couldn’t have been better with you at my elbow,” said Jem, unable to resist a little emphasis.

“Well, I am sure, I wonder you did not make a heroine of that little Italian girl, Arthur’s acquaintance. Hugh said you met her.”

“Hugh said I met her!” ejaculated Jem, “Well, if that isn’t cool!”

“Why, something was said of seeing her act, and, of course, my dear boy, I didn’t suppose *Hugh* had been the one to discover her merits.”

“I assure you, mother, I was quite as discreet as Arthur or Hugh either. But what made Mademoiselle Mattei a subject of conversation?”

“Why, she is at Miss Venning’s at school.”

“Good heavens!” ejaculated Jem, utterly off his guard; then, catching himself up: “*At school*! Extraordinary!”

“Yes, but I believe there’s nothing extraordinary about her. So pray, my dear, don’t go and do anything foolish.”

“Why am I always to be the black sheep?” said Jem, in an injured tone, but with inward laughter. “Hugh and Arthur saw *quite* as much of her as I did.”

“Well, we may put poor Arthur out of the question, and as for Hugh, do you think I’ve any reason to be anxious in that way about him?”

“So you wouldn’t like an Italian daughter-in-law?”

“My dear, don’t be absurd,” said Mrs Crichton, contemplating her wool-work. “How can you talk of such a thing? I should like to see both you and Hugh married, but I dread your doing something foolish when I think of the number of times you have been on the verge of it—and as for Hugh—”

“Well, as for Hugh?”

“I really despair of his ever turning his thoughts in that direction.”

“How are you all getting along together?” said Jem, rather glad to change the conversation.

“Oh, pretty well,” said Mrs Crichton, sighing. “Of course, Arthur, poor dear boy, has ups and downs; but he is very cheerful, in and out, and I make a point of going on as usual.”

“And he and Hugh get on comfortably?”

“Yes. I tell Hugh it is absurd to expect that he should not flag sometimes. Now, Sunday was a trial. He went to church in the morning, but he was more knocked up afterwards than I have seen him at all; but the next day he was quite ready to be interested in these pleasant Dysarts who have come to Ashenfold. Hugh was quite angry with me for making him come in to see them; but we can’t shut ourselves up, and I must ask them to dinner in a quiet way. It is much better for Arthur. Then, there was another thing. I wanted him to come to the Rectory with me—to get it over, you know—but Hugh interfered, and said no-one should urge him to make such an effort, in such a peremptory way I had to give it up.”

“I should avoid discussions,” said James.

“It’s hard work for them both. By the way, mamma,” he added, having conducted the conversation well away from its former matrimonial channel, “do you know that there is going to be a great choir festival at H—, in the cathedral in Easter week—shall you go?”

“Is there? Oh, no, I hadn’t thought of it.”

“I expect it will be rather fine. I shall run down, and if you did care about taking Freddie I daresay the Haywards would get you good places.”

“The Haywards?”

“The Archdeacon, you know. He is a Canon of H—. Young Hayward’s in the War Office. I know him. There are some daughters.”

“Oh, I know Mrs Hayward very well. She was at the only ball to which I ever took dear Mysie at H—, with her daughters; tall, fine girls, rather insipid.”

“They’re very superior,” said Jem, in an odd, meek voice; but, as he was not much in the habit of admiring superior young ladies, his mother only said:

“Are they? Their mother is a very ladylike woman. Well, I should not mind going over if Freddie wished it. I daresay Flossy Venning might like to go with us.”

“Oh, thank you,” began Jem. “I mean the organist is a friend of mine. Oh, there’s Hugh. How d’ye do?”

“I didn’t know you were here, Jem,” said Hugh, as he came into the room.

“I came by the early train. Where’s Arthur?”

“He preferred walking. How long shall you be here, Jem?”

“Till Tuesday.”

“Oh, then,” said Mrs Crichton, “Hugh, I think I shall ask the Dysarts to excuse a short notice and come here quite quietly on Monday night. As it is Lent, that is a reason for having no party.”

“There can be no reason wanted for that,” interrupted Hugh. “Mother, how can you think of such a thing? It is not suitable, and must be intolerable to Arthur.”

“Really, Hugh,” said his mother, for once offended, “I am the best judge of what is suitable. You talk as if I wished to give a ball; and Arthur does not dislike a little society.”

“If he does not,” said Hugh, and then broke off, “Perhaps he does not.”

“Why don’t you ask him?” suggested James.

“Because he has never shown any of this foolish reluctance,” said Mrs Crichton; “and, indeed, my dear, I can’t give into you about it.”

She rose and went away as she spoke, and James said:

“How’s this, Hugh? Things going all crooked?”

“Of course they are,” said Hugh, bitterly. “How could they go right? As for Arthur, I don’t profess to understand him. I daresay he does like amusement, but he can’t bear this place. How they can say he is less altered than they expected! I can feel the chance allusions stab him!”

“Then do you think he is putting a great force on himself?”

“No, no,” said Hugh, in an odd, restless tone. “It’s just as it comes, I believe. But they say he bears it beautifully, because his spirits come back in and out. He is boyish enough still. I daresay in a year’s time it will all be pretty well over.”

“It strikes me, Hugh, you are more out of sorts than Arthur.”

“I?” said Hugh. “If Arthur feels one half—No, he could not choose to be always with me.”

Hugh knitted his brows and walked over to the window. His was the perplexity of an erring, earnest nature watching another live over a difficult piece of life, by means of a more gracious temperament, succeeding, as he felt, without the struggles that went towards his own failures. Arthur behaved much better to him than he did to Arthur, but he did not take half so much pains about it. This is always an unsatisfactory consciousness, and in Hugh’s case it was intensified by the morbid interest that he was forced to take in his cousin.

“Mother’s been telling me all the news,” said James, to change the subject.

Hugh understood his marked tone at once.

“Remember, Jem, that is closed for ever,” he said. “If you breathe one word of the past, in joke or earnest, to my mother or Arthur, it will be past forgiveness.”

“I’m sure I don’t want to stir it up,” said Jem; “but it is a strange turn of fate.”

“It will make no difference,” said Hugh, in a tone that meant “it *shall* not.”

James was silent. Hugh’s resolve was exactly what he had always counselled him to make, yet he could not help thinking of Violante’s look of joy at seeing him, and wondering whether that light was quenched in her soft eyes for ever.

In the meantime, Arthur had not taken his solitary walk without a purpose. However far Hugh might be right in supposing that he allowed his feelings to drift as they would, he was becoming conscious that there was some cowardice in shrinking from anything that could excite them. He must stand by Mysie’s grave—and he must stand there alone; for on Sunday he had not dared to lift his eyes as he walked down the path. She was buried in a corner of the churchyard where it was especially green and still close by the wall of the Rectory garden, over which a bright pink almond-tree was visible. Snowdrops and violets were thrusting their heads through the short turf between the graves, and were blooming in sweet abundance round the white cross that marked where she lay, while several half-faded wreaths were placed above them. There was nothing here to make Arthur nervous,—he wondered why he had

stayed away so long. He was full of grief, yet something of the peaceful spirit of the past came shining back into his heart as he knelt there in the spring sunshine, and kissed the letters of Mysie's name. It was better, he thought, than being far away. He had risen to his feet, and was still dreamily gazing, when he heard a startled step at his side, and, turning, saw Florence Venning, bright, tall, and blooming, with a basket of flowers in her hand.

"Flossy!"

"Oh, I did not see you—I—I'll go!" said Flossy, crimson with the sense of intrusion.

"No, don't go. I am very glad to see you," he said, as he took her hand and held it, while they looked down at the grave together.

"Did you put these?" he said, touching the wreaths.

"Only this cross. The school-girls bring them on Sunday," faltered Flossy, as she bent down and showed how the frame of the cross was made to hold water, which she now replenished from a little jug she had brought with her. Arthur, with a look of entreaty, and with trembling inapt fingers took the flowers and began to place them in the cross. Poor fellow, he did it very badly; but she refrained from helping him, and let him put the last snowdrop in himself.

"Flossy," he said, suddenly, "if I were lying there, and she were left, do you think she could have—have endured to live?"

"Yes, Arthur," Flossy said, in her full tones, which vibrated with intense feeling, "I think she could. I think she would have found a good life somehow; like—like a robin in the snow," as one fluttered down beside them. "She was so clear and real—I think she would."

Arthur had sat down on a broad, flat stone near, still gazing at the flowers.

"She was not so weak," he murmured.

"Oh, Arthur, you have not been weak. Everyone says—"

"No one knows," he answered. "All that should help me has no reality apart from *her*."

"But it is not apart from her, Arthur," said Flossy, earnestly. "I—"

"Yes?" said Arthur, looking up.

"*Even* I," said Flossy, humbly, "I think of her at church, and doing my work, or on beautiful days like this."

"Yes, dear Flossy, I'm sure you do," said Arthur, gratified; but not as if he took the words home.

"And I hope," said Flossy, "that it will make me a better girl, and more like her."

"You are right, Flossy," said Arthur, after a pause, with more spirit. "I don't want to give up, and everyone is so kind to me; they all think of what I like. But," he added, in a passionate undertone, "she was my angel; and all prayers, Sundays, all the things that comfort a good girl like you, are filled with longing for her!"

"But they won't be less dear for that?" whispered Flossy.

"No," he said, "No, I'll hold on!"

And he felt then that through such holy associations his lost love might still be a star in his path, and lead him, not back to his old self, but on to something better, and even brighter. But, then, how could he tune his life to such a solemn melody as this? He longed for the joy-bells, and even the jingling tunes of his old, easy boyhood. He was so weary of his heavy heart. He knew, as Flossy could not know, why men plunged into folly, and even sin, to drown grief. He would, not do that; but he thought how incredible it would have been to Flossy that there were times when he wanted to forget Mysie—times that came oftener as the months went by. He would have walked so contentedly on the easy, unheroic meadows of every-day life, and fate, or the hand of God, had forced him on to the rocky paths of sorrow. Just at that moment he caught a glimpse of the golden gate above them.

"How many birds there are here!" he said, after a silence.

"Do you know why?" said Flossy. "Mrs Harcourt comes and feeds them here every morning and evening, because *she* was so fond of birds."

"And I have never been to see her. I'll go now," said Arthur, rising with sudden energy.

"I came from there," said Flossy. "This is Mrs Harcourt's jug."

"Well, then, let us come," he said, without giving himself time to hesitate, and Florence took up her basket and followed him into the garden.

Part 5, Chapter XXXVIII.

Pin-Pricks.

"The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one.
But the light of a whole life dies
When love is done."

The Rectory drawing-room window was open to the sunshine, and Mrs Harcourt was standing by it, waiting for Flossy. But Arthur turned aside from it, and went round to the door in front.

"Who is that, my dear?" said the old lady, as Flossy ran up to her.

"It is Arthur," she said. "I met him *there*. He said he ought to come and see you."

"Ah, poor boy, I'm glad," said Mrs Harcourt, as she went to let him in, while Flossy exclaimed nervously:

"Oh, Violante, I forgot you. Never mind, it will be just as well."

"Is it Signor Arthur?" asked Violante, who sometimes accompanied Miss Florence on half-holiday walks, and had needed no teaching to consider Redhurst sacred ground.

"Yes," said Flossy, as Arthur and Mrs Harcourt came in. He looked very pale, while Mrs Harcourt, half-tearful, half-hospitable, was eagerly welcoming him.

"Ah, my dear Arthur, we have been longing to see you; but I can't get out much now; and I know—I know you could hardly come. It is very good of you."

"I am almost all day in Oxley," he said, "but I hope you are well, and the Rector?"

"Pretty well, my dear, for our time of life. We have had a lonely winter; but we push along together, you see."

Arthur managed to smile, but his face went to Flossy's heart, though neither she nor Mrs Harcourt knew exactly how the fifty years which the old husband and wife had "had wi' ane anither" had once seemed to stretch before the young lovers, who never saw of them a single day.

"You have been getting some tea for us, Mrs Harcourt?" she said.

"Oh, yes, my dear. Now, do you pour it out, and Arthur will have some. But will your young Italian friend drink tea?"

"Oh, yes, signora, I like tea," and, with a start of relief, Arthur turned at the sound of her voice.

"Mademoiselle Mattei!" he said; "I did not know you;" and, in truth, Violante was much altered at first sight by her dark winter dress and jacket, and little black hat with a red plume.

Arthur shook hands with her, and asked her how she liked England.

"I like it very much."

"Why, we were very near an explanation. If you had told me where you were going to school I could have enlightened you much better as to what your life would be like there."

"But I did not know myself," said Violante, colouring as she thought of what a difference a few explanations might have made. "I did not know anything," and her sweet voice faltered with its weight of meaning.

"But I was right, wasn't I, when I gave you good advice? You have found—"

"Miss Florence," said Violante, with a grateful look.

She felt as if Signor Arthur was quite an old friend. He had seen Rosa and her father, and she began to tell him about them, while Flossy made a few words of explanation to Mrs Harcourt as to their previous meeting.

"I expect to find my cousin James at home," he said. "You remember him?"

"Yes, Arthur," said Flossy. "It's the strangest thing that she should have met you without knowing that Mr Crichton and James were your cousins, and that then she should come here!"

"Mr Hugh never comes to see me," said Mrs Harcourt.

"Doesn't he?" said Arthur. "I will tell him that he should. There's the Rector."

Mr Harcourt, with more tact than his wife, only gave Arthur a warm handshake. Violante rose and curtsied to him in a pretty reverential fashion that pleased and touched him, and while he complimented her, in a little old-fashioned Italian, Flossy said aside:

"It makes Violante very shy to hear of anyone who saw her act; and, as Mary isn't very fond of the subject, we say very little about it."

"Ah, yes, poor child! It's a mortifying recollection if she made a failure of it. She's a lovely creature. What on earth does she do with herself?"

"Oh, many things. Surely, Arthur, you don't think she need be useless because she's pretty?" and, in the little laugh

that followed Flossy's return to her natural inclination for argument, Arthur took his leave.

It was a great relief to have got this afternoon's work over, and comfortable to find Jem at home when he got there, cheerful and chatty, and taking no apparent notice of his words or looks, yet with a little undercurrent of sympathy that he felt all the time. James amused everybody, and put them into good-humour, taking the burden of cheerfulness off their shoulders; and yet he avoided every word that could have touched painfully on his cousin or brother—or would have done so, had not some mention of a new opera recalled Violante to Arthur after dinner, when both he and Freddie demanded a description of her performances, as he stood on the hearthrug, looking round at his audience. Hugh was sitting on one side of the fire, holding up a "Quarterly Review;" the ladies looked expectant over their work; and Arthur, leaning back in a low chair in front of him, was looking right up in his face.

"Well," said Jem, apparently measuring his beard, hair by hair; "I only saw her once. She acted badly and sang well, but it was a failure—"

"How so? She was enough applauded," abruptly said Hugh; and then could have bitten his tongue out for speaking.

"She is pretty, you know," said Jem.

"Lovely," said Arthur. "There's a sort of pathetic grace about her; but I suppose it didn't tell at a distance."

It would be difficult to say whether their admiration, or the careless, critical tone in which it was uttered, enraged Hugh the most.

"Since her public career has ceased," he said, "it seems a pity to discuss it."

"Yes. It's hardly fair," said Arthur; "but she interested me, poor child, and I was very glad to see her with Flossy. She is sure to be well taken care of, and, perhaps, she'll forget her troubles."

"What troubles?" said Hugh, sternly.

"Why, I told you the other day," said Arthur, regardful of Frederica's presence. "She looks twice as bright as she did in Italy."

"Now it seems to me," said Mrs Crichton, "that you are all making a very unnecessary talk about her. Miss Venning has decidedly stretched a point in having her here. I don't altogether approve of it. Young ladies shouldn't have histories, and they should keep her and hers in the background."

"Aunt Lily, I think that would be mean," said Frederica.

"Aunt Lily's never seen her," said Arthur.

"No, my dear, I don't feel any curiosity about her," said Mrs Crichton, didactically.

Jem—no other word will express it—giggled; Hugh sprang to his feet, and, happily for the preservation of his secret, knocked over the lamp beside him, and in the confusion that followed Violante was forgotten, and he contrived to apologise and make his escape.

Such discussions rendered him furious, far more so than any amount of opposition could have done while he had had the one purpose of marrying Violante clear and straight before him. Then he would have borne patiently with his mother's natural opposition, and would have smiled at anyone else's. But now that they should all dare to praise her, and judge her, and "take an interest" in her! It made him very angry, and yet he was ashamed of his own connection with it. He would not have had it discovered for the world; and then, when he knew this feeling to be despicable, it was justified by the knowledge of the pain and disturbance any discovery would cause, and increased by his jealousy of Violante's reported confidences and conversations. Arthur had been eager about nothing else. Hugh had an unbounded belief in Violante's irresistible charms, and none in the depth and permanency of Arthur's sorrow, even while that sorrow made his own. He was never in the same mind for five minutes at a time, angry, miserable, jealous, and self-reproachful. He was sacrificing himself, of course, in giving up all his chances of winning her, and yet he could not quite rid himself of the suspicion that he was false and cruel, and that he had been his best self when he defied the world for her sake. If accident had thrown her in his way the whole current of events might have been changed; but he could not and would not seek her, though he thought about her enough to make chance allusions far more his dread than they ever were Arthur's, who never thought of them till they came; and he bemoaned himself over the Dysart dinner-party, the announcement of which his cousin hardly heeded.

"Hugh has become exceedingly cross," Freddie said to Jem, with the freedom of speech of the Redhurst household.

"Then, don't make him more so," was Jem's advice, given with equal openness.

The party was merely to consist of Colonel and Mrs Dysart, their two elder daughters, and one of their sons, who was discovered to be at home and invited at the last minute. It was difficult to see why a few extra people should make any difference, but Jem dressed himself with a sense of preparing to walk on egg-shells, and Arthur felt suddenly reluctant, and as if the sense of even this small festivity was depressing.

"My dear Jem," his mother had said, "I look to you to make it go off well." But the second Miss Dysart was very pretty, and just in the style Jem admired, and he was speedily absorbed in discussing a new novel with her, and forgot to guide the rest of the party, who talked of the neighbourhood and the society in the manner of people entertaining new comers. The ladies of the Dysart party were very conscious of the recent history of their entertainers; and, perhaps, Miss Dysart was a little disappointed that Arthur's manner and conversation were so much like other people's. The gentlemen were less well-informed, or more forgetful; and about half-way through

dinner—after the shops of Oxley, and the excellence of Miss Venning's school for girls, and the doubtful advantages of the grammar-school for boys, had been well discussed—the inevitable subject of a country dinner-party made its appearance, and young Dysart, across the table, began to ask Arthur about the shooting. Hugh paused suddenly in what he was saying, as Arthur answered: "I am afraid you haven't much at Ashenfold; but ours is pretty good."

"You shoot, I suppose?" said young Dysart.

"Oh, yes," said Arthur, but with a catch in his breath.

"We shall take a day together, now and then, I hope, Mr Crichton?" said Colonel Dysart to Hugh.

"No. I have given it up," said Hugh, with sudden abrupt emphasis. "I shall let my shooting." He spoke as if he were confessing his faith on the scaffold; and, in the midst of the dead silence that ensued, James was heard wildly asking his little country-bred neighbour if she had ever been to a pigeon-match at Hurlingham; while Arthur, at the sound of his voice, said, with an effort that he could not conceal:

"The Ribstones are the great sportsmen in these parts. Sir William always has plenty of pheasants;" and Mrs Dysart caught up the Hurlingham shuttlecock and conducted the conversation safely on to the Princess of Wales. Arthur joined in, but his eyes looked absent, and once or twice he missed the answers to what he had said; while Jem's pretty neighbour looked at him with the tears in her eyes. No one could forget what, had passed; and, indeed, in such a household as Redhurst, this matter of the shooting was a practical difficulty, and a subject that could not be tabooed.

The guests had hardly departed when Hugh said suddenly:

"To set this matter at rest for ever—as long as I live I shall never touch a gun again. Rest assured of it."

No one answered, till Arthur said, moving away:

"Good night, Aunt Lily, I'll go to bed. I'm tired."

Then James broke out:

"Really, Hugh, I am surprised at you!"

"Would you have me let anyone—would you have me let Arthur think that I could ever shoot again?"

"Who cares whether you do or not?" said Jem, angrily. "Neither you nor Arthur can live without hearing the subject mentioned, and the only way is to pass it off quietly. He would have got over it in a minute if you had been silent, and next time it would have been a matter of course to him. Now you have raised up a scarecrow for ever."

"Yes," said Mrs Crichton. "It would be all very well to let the shooting for a time—"

"Of course, mother, I meant with your permission," said Hugh, who was very punctilious as to invading his mother's rights.

"Nonsense, my dear. As if I should interfere with you about it! But now you have made our friends uncomfortable, and Arthur will feel the impossibility of it, instead of slipping back to it naturally by degrees. And you have made a most painful scene." Here Mrs Crichton herself ended in tears—half-nervous and half-sorrowful.

"It only shows," said Hugh, passionately, "that life here is impossible for Arthur and me. It is a problem that cannot be worked out. What is there left that has not that awful mark on it: the fields, the river—and would you have it supposed that I do not feel it?"

"I thought," said James, drily, "that it was Arthur's feelings, not yours, that were in question."

Hugh paused, manifestly checked by this observation, and James went on: "We all feel enough sorrow, but this is not a question, of feelings but of nerves, as it seems to me. Arthur's are naturally strong, and these things may not affect him as they do you."

"As to that," said Hugh, "one thing is as bad as another. I have shirked no associations. They don't affect me."

"Then, if not," said his mother, "why did you speak as you did to-night?"

"Because I was thinking of him," said Hugh. "Must I not feel them through him? What would he think of me if I seemed not to care? Am I not bound to spare him?"

"You set to work about it in a very odd manner," said James.

"My dear," said Mrs Crichton, "it is what I always told you. You will insist on looking on this matter from a morbid point of view. Just drop that, and time will heal all things—even such grief as ours and poor Arthur's. And I don't think he will feel these things after the first. He never had any nerves, as a boy, you know."

"You cannot drop facts," said Hugh, wearily, "but I have been wrong, as it seems, somehow. There's no use in arguing about it."

"Yes, my dear, you were quite wrong," said Mrs Crichton, cheerfully, as he left the room; "so there's an end of it."

Arthur, meanwhile, was reflecting on the practical aspect of the case. Although Redhurst was not a household where

sport was made the business of life, it was one into the ordinary habits of which it entered considerably; and, perhaps, from his connection with the town, Hugh was a little tenacious of this privilege of the county. He liked sporting matters to be well managed, and Arthur was a very good shot and genuinely fond of the pursuit. He really could not conceive how the civilities of life could go on, or the ordinary intercourse with their neighbours be maintained, as the year went round, without it. Certainly, they must see and hear of it, if they declined to join in it themselves. Arthur had formed no resolutions about it; and, but for his experience in the Ashenfold woods, would have been ready to take it up by degrees, with a heavy heart enough and with little interest, but as part of the life he had got to struggle back to. And, surely, that would never happen to him again. Arthur was much more ready to resist these involuntary sensations than the listlessness and dejection that seemed to have become natural to him. Hugh's speech had, of course, been intensely painful; but without it he would have gone gallantly through the discussion and felt the better for his victory. But he knew that Hugh had spoken for his sake. He would try not to be such a worry to them all. He had a bad night, however, and was, perhaps, not in the best tune the next morning for trying experiments on himself, but he would not falter; so, coming down early, he went into the little back-room, where they smoked, and kept and cleaned their guns, and began to look for his own. He found it in its usual cupboard and took it out; but the sight, the touch, the very thought of the sound of it, were more than he could bear. He just managed to put it back, and rushed out into the garden. No, he could never touch it again! But there was no use in telling anyone that he had such strange sensations; and James and his aunt, only seeing the outside, agreed that he was as well and cheerful as could be expected.

"My parting advice," said James, "is that everyone should let everybody else alone."

The shooting was let for a year to Colonel Dysart without more discussion, and only Hugh discovered that Arthur shrank from every trace of it. But, though some of Jem's words rankled, he was far too much afraid of seeming to forget his own share in the matter to offer the support and sympathy which might have been better than the let-alone system.

Part 5, Chapter XXXIX.

Divided!

"Again I called, and he could not come."

During the weeks that were so comfortless and disturbed at Redhurst, Violante's school-life went on, on the whole, peacefully; but, still, with various ups and downs of feeling—fits of longing for Rosa, of loneliness and discouragement; times when she could not learn her lessons nor interest herself in the little trifles that interested her companions. Yet she never thought of giving in and going away from Oxley Manor. When she was unhappy she dreaded lest Rosa should discover it. All the interest of life lay close at hand—here anything might happen, elsewhere the scene was closed. Not that Violante gave herself this reason for her perseverance. No; she could not bear to foil a second time; and Miss Florence was so kind to her, she was learning to bear the little rubs of life. So she mused one soft, line morning, as she stood leaning out of the window of the little upstairs class-room, where she superintended the girls' practising. As she waited for her pupils she thought to herself that she was growing brave and sensible—more like Rosa—who let nothing interfere with her work.

And then, looking half-expectantly down the road, she saw a man come by on horseback, riding slowly, and looking straight before him, upright and grave. *She* knew—*she* saw—*he* did neither; and, with a sudden impulse, she leant far out of the window and pulled the little bunch of violets from her dress and threw them to him, then darted back behind the curtain. And, as he started, the violets fell down in the dust; and she saw him laugh and ride on and pass her flowers by. Violante could almost have thrown herself out of the window too, in her agony of shame and disappointment. She could not tell whether Hugh knew that she was at Oxley Manor or not—surely he had not intended to repulse her! If he would but smile at her, speak to her!

"If you please, signorina, it's a quarter to ten."

Violante turned round to encounter a small fat-fingered child in a pinafore, and sat counting, "One, two, three, four," and mechanically checking wrong notes, as she wondered if he would look up next time that he rode by. When Miss Venning observed shortly afterwards that she thought it would be more convenient if the history classes preceded the practising, which need not then begin till eleven, she little knew what springs she touched. By one accident and another Violante did not see Hugh again for a long time; but she did once or twice encounter Arthur when in company with Florence, and, therefore, her walks were haunted by a sense of possibility. She also occasionally heard Mr Crichton spoken of at meal-times as an authority in local matters under discussion, and gathered that his opinion was considered important, and that his judgment was generally supposed to be severe. It so happened that at this time the population of Oxley was convulsed with excitement as to various public improvements then under discussion. There was a talk of a new branch line of rail between Fordham and Oxley, and the direction that this was to take involved local interests of the most incompatible description. Some new gas-works were about to be set up by an enterprising company, and one of the sites proposed was a field a great deal nearer Oxley Manor than Miss Venning thought to be pleasant or profitable for her school. As this field belonged to a certain charity, long ago bequeathed, it was thought that the interests of the poor of Oxley would induce the trustees to dispose of it for a high price to the gas-works.

Miss Venning observed that she was not a person to be put upon without a reason, and that she should represent the matter in the proper quarters.

"If you mean Hugh Crichton," said Clarissa, "you may represent it, and he will do exactly what he has already decided upon."

“Well, my dear, I shall take care that he has the proper information on which to decide; so I shall ask him to call, and show him the field from the windows, so that he can judge for himself.”

So the tones that were associated for Violante with music and flowers, tenderness and love, first fell on her ears to the following effect:

“But you are aware, Miss Venning, that the gas-works must be somewhere? That field is very convenient for them, and I really think it is too far off to cause you any annoyance.”

“Now, Hugh, I’ll thank you just to step into the little school-room and look out of window. No, you’ll not disturb the girls. Never mind them.”

Violante rose up with her companions as Miss Venning entered. She stood a little behind the others, and could suppose that Hugh did not see her, as he walked up to the window and looked, or pretended to look out.

“It’s a very healthy situation,” he said, vaguely.

“Healthy! And, pray, what consequence can it be to gas-works if they are healthy or not? They would spoil my view; and, really, between them and the railroad, the place won’t be worth living in much longer.”

“It doesn’t rest with me, you know, Miss Venning. Can you suggest a better situation?”

“I should place them the other side of the town,” said Miss Venning, with decision, “out towards Blackwood.”

“Yes,” said Hugh, still staring out of the window and hearing nothing.

It may seem a somewhat contemptible state of mind to record; but Hugh was overpowered by a sense of embarrassment, of utter uncertainty as to what to do, as to how to greet her. Why should he evade the previous acquaintance acknowledged by James and Arthur? And yet he felt there was but one way in which he *could* speak to her. As he half turned, and hesitated as he talked confusedly to Miss Venning, the class of girls filed out of the room. Violante passed him. All the short-lived fire of her nature was roused by his hesitation. She gave him no glance of appealing timidity or hopeless love. She flung up her head and looked at him with an indignation such as he had never dreamt of seeing in her soft eyes, and, in answer to his confused bow, she made the slightest of curtseys and walked out of the room.

“You have met Mr Crichton?” said Clarissa, who had been with the class.

“Yes, Miss Clarissa, at my father’s classes, but I have no acquaintance with him. It was Mr Spencer who met us at Caletto. Come, Katie—come, Agnes. Your exercises have too many faults. I shall scold.” And she sat down and took up her pen, and felt for the moment as if she could defy every turn of fortune. Clarissa looked at her, and went back to where Hugh, confused and wretched, was talking at random, having heard Violante’s parting shot. She had turned the tables on him; she was no vision, no holiday dream, as he had sometimes called her; but a living woman, first misjudged and then neglected. *He* might be right and self-denying, might be giving up his greatest good for the sake of others; but she was wronged, and she had made him feel it.

“I have given it all up!—all—to make some slight atonement for the wrong I have done,” he thought; “and I must seem a sneak and a scoundrel to myself. How little they know! What a lie life is! If I were a boy I’d run away to sea and have done with it. And I must go this eternal round of committees and business—and—*gas*-works—” with passionate impatience at the momentary matter in hand, as he hurried away, having wildly pledged himself to vote for the locating of the gas-works in the midst of Lord Lidford’s park at Blackwood.

He was stung to the very quick by Violante’s anger, yet he had made up his mind that all should be at an end between them, and he had too much self-respect to try “to make the worse appear the better reason,” and to offer her any explanation, since he withheld the one that was her due. Perhaps, the very renewal of regret that the sight of her face—more womanly and more beautiful than when he had left her—caused him was a sort of support, as it strengthened the sense of self-sacrifice. But he was sufficiently upset and perturbed by what had passed to forget one or two important pieces of business, and was forced to accept Arthur’s help in hastily repairing his neglect, though he had begun the day by resolving that he would not let much work fall on his cousin when the soft spring weather made him look so pale and languid.

With Violante anger was a short-lived passion, and an hour had not passed before she longed to recall her scornful words and look, before she was making a hundred excuses for her lover. The sight of Hugh in his own place affected her as it, doubtless, had, however unconsciously, affected him. She felt miles farther away from him here in his own town than among the flowers of Italy. The pleasant novelty around her was beginning to lose its effect; she began to grow scared and stupid, to be again the little helpless Violante of Civita Bella.

One afternoon—it was a half-holiday—Miss Florence came sweeping into the school-room, penetrating it like a fresh sunny wind, darting into its corners, touching the sports, employments, humours of all its inhabitants, criticising a drawing, suggesting a book, adjusting a little quarrel; fresh currents of air seemed to follow her bright flaxen head as she whisked about till she beheld Violante standing by herself in the window and looking very disconsolate.

“Why, signorina, what’s the matter?”

“I am so sorry, Miss Florence.”

“Sorry, what for?”

“La signora is displeased with me.”

"My sister? Is she? Why, what have you been doing?"

Violante blushed, and with much confusion answered that they had been reading English poetry, and something in it made her cry. "Only a little, Miss Florence," but the girls laughed and she had burst into tears, and Miss Venning had told her she ought to command her feelings better.

"Well, don't let them get the better of you now," said Flossy. "What was this dreadfully touching poem?"

"It was a play called Hamlet, Miss Florence, and he was angry with the girl who loved him."

"The sentiment was not sufficiently disguised, as our old English teacher used to say," said Flossy, laughing heartily. "Did you feel as if you might act Ophelia?"

"Signorina, it seemed too true for acting. It is not like an opera. It might be oneself. But I should not have cried at it."

"No. School-girls don't like sentiment. But, come, it doesn't signify. My sisters are out. Come into the drawing-room and have some tea with me; and I want to sing something to you and ask your advice." Violante followed gladly into the cheerful drawing-room, with its sunny flowery windows, and its look of feminine pleasantness. She sat down in a low easy chair and rested passively. She was tired of her own emotions; she wanted Rosa. Miss Florence was kind, and bright, and strong, but she did not dare to creep into her arms and lay her head on her shoulder—she did not dare even to cry over her troubles. Excellent discipline, doubtless, but, perhaps, the hardest that could have been devised for so dependent a creature.

"Miss Florence," she said, after a minute; "did Hamlet ever forgive Ophelia?"

"Why, don't you know? She went mad and drowned herself," said Flossy, cheerfully.

"I wonder how miserable anyone must be before they go mad!"

"Why," said Florence, as she sat down and began to knit some bright wools together, quite ready for a lively discussion on the characters of the play. "I suppose no one would who had a well-balanced mind to begin with."

"I am sure Rosa would not," said Violante, thoughtfully.

"No, your sister looks like the last person to do anything so silly," said Flossy, laughing.

"But when there are long years, and friends are cruel, and one has a hard fate, and there is nothing in the world that could happen to set it right—"

The deep, passionate trouble in her voice made Florence look up surprised: she was constantly puzzled by the mixture of ignorance and experience in this girl whose life had been so unlike her own.

"You know, Violante," she said, "we are Christians, and so we must not despair." Violante looked perplexed and thoughtful; yet the words had a meaning for her, for these weeks had been in one respect a period of development. She had from the first taken very kindly to the religious practices which were observed at Oxley Manor, and set to work to cure her deficiency in religious knowledge. Whether because she thought it was English, or because she wished to imitate Flossy, or from some blessed instinct leading her to what was for her good, she showed a love for going to church and for all sorts of Church teaching which the Miss Vennings were half-inclined to ascribe to novelty only. Many of the girls were under preparation for Confirmation, and she acquiesced eagerly in the suggestion that she should join their number. They were carefully taught by the Oxley clergy; and Flossy, who was an enthusiastic Sunday-school teacher, had delighted in explaining difficulties and doctrines to the little Italian. How much Violante comprehended intellectually may be doubtful, but she began to see better reasons for trying to do what was distasteful than the fear of being scolded, began to have some notion of abstract duties. This she was carefully taught; but it was surely no human words, but the blessing of God on her innocent humble spirit, that opened her loving heart to a new and Divine love. There dawned upon her the thought of a Friend who was with her when Rosa was away, who loved her when Hugh was cold. It was but a dim conception, but it had capabilities of growth. Hymns and texts were something more than words, and her endeavours to fulfil these new requirements had something of the fervour of enthusiasm. She used to forget the new comfort, let it be swept away in the tumult of exciting feeling; but when the thought came back it was like Rosa's kiss when she was in trouble and disgrace. Flossy's hint recalled it now, and she said, with childish directness:

"Because our Saviour loves us. Ah! I love Him very much!"

There was something in the soft, earnest *naïveté* that made the words touching and sweet even to the English Florence, with whom reverence and reality meant reserve, and who, however she had felt, would have thought such an avowal presumptuous.

"Then, you must try to be good, Violante," she said, rather repressively.

"Yes," said Violante, "and then He will be pleased with me."

Florence had taught this truth hundreds of times; but she had never heard it thus echoed and claimed; and it came with a new force, as the Bible words are said to do when read in a strange language.

Part 5, Chapter XL.

Mr Blandford of Fordham.

“Like some long childish dream
Thy life has run.”

Easter was now drawing near, but, owing to the approaching Confirmation and one or two other reasons connected with the girls’ studies, though some of the pupils went home, there was no general break-up of the school; and a week’s holiday was to be given in the beginning of May, when Violante was to go to London and meet her father, who was then expected in England. Moreover, the Miss Vennings, interested in the affection between the two lonely sisters, invited Rosa to spend a few days at Easter, and see for herself what sort of home Violante had found, and to this meeting Violante herself looked forward with a mixture of delight and alarm, as she reflected on the facts hitherto concealed from her sister.

In the meantime Redhurst had filled up all the leisure in Flossy’s busy life; and, perhaps, more than all the leisure in her busy soul. She was always welcome there, with her inveterate freshness and brightness, which even the associations of the place could not destroy; she was almost the only visitor whom Arthur really liked to see; and, consequently, the only one to whose coming Hugh did not object. But she was not encouraged to bring Violante there with her, Mrs Crichton secretly thinking that the young men had talked quite enough about their old acquaintance with her, and Miss Venning being by no means desirous of bringing about a renewal of it. So Hugh only suffered from hearing her progress and her charms described by the unconscious Flossy to Arthur, while he expressed a hope that “she had forgotten the manager.”

Flossy was too busy a person to be entirely absorbed in one subject; but beneath all her daily occupations Redhurst was for ever present in her mind, and—though she was herself scarcely aware of it—Redhurst as it affected Arthur Spencer. She never heard of any incident taking place there without wondering whether it was pleasant or not to him; and, though she did not rival Hugh in the keenness of his self-conscious insight into the passing phases of Arthur’s humour, her sympathy enabled her to draw much kinder, and, on the whole, truer conclusions from them. For Arthur was in an unsatisfactory state, languid and inconsistent, sometimes indolent and careless, and sometimes over-vehement as to his work, in a way really trying to Hugh’s patience; sometimes silent and listless, and sometimes apparently excited by any change, and even ready to seek it in the companionship of the young Dysarts and Ribstones. He was so uncertain as to be sometimes very provoking; but he did not look well; and Hugh, though secretly despising what he thought want of self-control, was outwardly marvellously patient, when his own secret fretting vexations were considered. Flossy did Arthur a great deal of good. She believed in his faith, patience, and courage, and helped to create the qualities that she believed in. She liked to coax him into an argument, to induce him to tease her in the old fashion, and she was the only person to whom he ever mentioned Mysie’s name, or to whom he ever talked about himself. All this was very good for Arthur, who sorely needed a friend; but, even for the simple unsentimental Flossy, it was very dangerous work. How long the peculiar circumstances of the case might have blinded her eyes to her danger may be doubtful, as an incident happened, extremely startling to her in itself, and which caused her to make a still more startling discovery. At twenty-one she had never even been accredited with an admirer, and had thought far less of young men than of young maidens; but, of late, possibilities had begun to dawn on the minds of her sisters. A short time before Colonel Dysart had taken Ashenfold the living of Fordham had been given to a connection of his, a Mr Blandford, who had made some stir in the clerical world of Oxley by his fine sermons and by the superior manner in which he organised his new parish. He was about five-and-thirty and unmarried; and, through a whole dinner-party, was observed to discuss Church matters, practical and theoretical, with Miss Florence Venning, who dearly loved good conversation.

“So exactly the sort of man to suit Flossy!” said Miss Venning, confidentially, to Clarissa. “So superior and with such kindred tastes!”

“It’s much too good to be true,” said Clarissa, with one of her quaint little grimaces. “I shouldn’t wonder if he is in favour of the celibacy of the clergy.”

“Oh, my dear, with that nice vicarage! But I’m sure I don’t wish to lose Flossy. She is young enough yet.”

Flossy was much flattered at finding that Mr Blandford adopted some of her suggestions in his Sunday-school, and even went so far as to pity his parish for having no lady to look after it, and to wish that he could prepare the girls for their Confirmation; but, though she met Mr Blandford tolerably often, she did not regard him in the light of a probable lover, till one morning, as she read her letters at breakfast, Miss Florence’s pink cheeks grew redder and redder, and at the first opportunity she pursued her sisters into the drawing-room, and, with a sort of half-dignified fright, communicated the alarming fact that Mr Blandford had actually made her an offer.

“My dear Flossy! Well, it is no surprise to me,” said Miss Venning.

“I’m sure it’s a surprise to me,” said Flossy, rather ruefully.

“Why, you don’t mean to say you never thought of it?” said Clarissa.

“I did,” said Flossy, “of course, when everyone was wondering if he would marry; but, as he never paid me any attentions, I decided that—that he would not.”

“Never paid you attention?”

“Why, you don’t call talking about Sunday-schools and districts attention, do you?” said Flossy.

“That depends. Did you expect him to talk about hearts and darts and forget-me-nots?” laughed Clarissa.

“I thought anyone would do *something*,” cried Flossy, crimson and nervous, as she twisted the letter in her hand.

“My dear, don’t be so childish,” said Miss Venning. “You are startled; but, depend upon it, Mr Blandford’s feelings are

just as sincere as if he had talked more about them. And I'm sure a more excellent person—"

Miss Venning paused, rather overcome by her feelings; and Flossy said, gravely:

"I am afraid I *have* been childish. It is because I think so much of the things that interest me. But, indeed, I didn't mean to—to flirt and lead him on."

"Whatever you meant, my dear," said Miss Venning, "you see the result."

"What in the world shall I do, Mary? What shall I say?"

"Why, my darling, if you can care about him—"

"Oh, dear, no!" interrupted Flossy. "Of course, I can't say yes. I never dreamt of such a thing!"

"Flossy, don't be such a goose!" suddenly cried Clarissa. "Do bring your mind down to the realities of life, and think of something besides school-girls."

"If one mayn't talk to an old clergyman about his parish," cried Flossy, who was chiefly concerned in exculpating herself from the dreadfully unfamiliar notion of having trifled with the lover's feelings.

"Old! Flossy, you are *too* silly," said Clarissa, angrily. But Miss Venning interposed:

"Now give yourself time to recover. Mr Blandford should have tried to prepare your mind for it. Go up to your room and think it over, and try to understand yourself." Miss Venning spoke somewhat as if Flossy had been a naughty child; but the girl was glad of the respite, and hurried away to her own room. There she soon began to recover herself. A lover in the flesh is a startling novelty to many maidens of this latter nineteenth century, and Flossy's heart had not prepared her so to regard Mr Blandford. Her sisters were unmarried, and she had thought it very likely that she should not marry herself. But she had no doubt as to her own feelings, and too much sense to reproach herself after the first flutter was over. It was a simple, honest, womanly answer that she was beginning to write, when a knock interrupted her, and Clarissa came in.

"Flossy," she said, in an agitated voice, "Don't—don't be a silly child! You don't know what you are throwing away."

"Indeed, Clary!" said Flossy, "I am quite sure that I do not love Mr Blandford. I am *very* sorry. I misunderstood him, but I am quite clear in my own mind; and if I talked nonsense at first it was just the fluster of the thing."

"Oh, Flossy, you don't know," said Clarissa, with tears in her eyes. "Don't be in a hurry! You think your life will always be like it is now; but you'll get tired of it—you will, indeed. You'll want something more. You'll grow into a woman—and—and you will have missed your chance, and you'll be sorry."

"Do you wish me to accept him for the sake of being married?" said Flossy, in superb disdain.

"Oh, I cannot tell," said Clarissa. "But, Flossy, I want you to think what you are making up your mind to. Girls now-a-days don't have many chances, and, though you're handsome, you are not so very taking. Don't you see that it means, perhaps, never to be married—never to have— Flossy, think, *think*!"

"Why, Clarissa, anyone would think you had said no yourself and repented."

"I? I never said no—nor yes either."

"You can't suppose I am going to marry a man I don't love?"

"No; but there are different ways of putting things, and if there is no one else—"

"Is it likely?" interrupted Flossy. "Clarissa, how can I go and marry a man when I don't care as much for him as for hundreds of things—as I care for you and Mary, and the girls—"

"Or Arthur Spencer?" whispered Clarissa, with a sudden mischievous twinkle.

Flossy stood still; a great throb passed through her, and she quivered to her fingertips.

"Oh, Flossy, Flossy, forgive me," cried Clarissa, clinging to her. "Indeed, I didn't know—I didn't mean to—"

"No!" said Flossy, putting her little, slight sister back, and standing up, tall and straight; her blue eyes lightening as they had never lightened before. "No! I don't care half so much for him as I do for Arthur Spencer—as I did for my dear Mysie. I care exceedingly for Arthur, and Mr Blandford is only an acquaintance. You said no harm, Clarissa." She stood grandly to her colours; but the sharp-eyed Clarissa saw it all. She ceased her arguments—they had their answer.

"You've got your life-story, anyhow," she said, "and you will do as you please. I haven't got any experience to give you the benefit of."

It is sometimes thought impossible that a woman should give her heart away, wholly without solicitation, utterly without hope of return; and, perhaps, the fire of passion cannot be quite spontaneous. But, whatever Flossy's young, fresh nature understood by love, the absorbing interest, the unselfish devotion, the romantic idealism had gone out to Arthur Spencer, as she thought, for ever. To use an expression prevalent among the gentle, self-restrained heroines of an earlier day, "she had allowed her affections to become engaged," and she faced the fact with all her natural sense and honesty. He was the one man in the world for her, and she would have—

Poor Flossy burst into tears of shame and fright as she thought that there was nothing she would not have done for his sake. But as she was not "disappointed," as she had never for a moment connected any personal hopes or fears with him, she could bear to think that this feeling must be carried about with her, hopeless of result; without being utterly wretched, or fancying that she could never care for life again. And as she was proud and brave, and was his true friend before all things, she could resolve to make no perceptible change in her behaviour, but to be as kind to him as ever, while no single soul should guess *how* kindly she felt. The idea had its attraction. Flossy's young eyes were half-blinded by the sunrise still; her loves and her sorrows had still some of the fascination of romance, were still fresh from the stately dreamland of hero-worship and self-sacrifice. And so, fearless, she turned her back on cloudland, and came out "into the light of common day," which would soon show the stones in her path plainly enough. But as she was sensible and practical too, and not inexperienced—if experience can ever be other than personal—she was aware also that it was an unlucky thing that had come to her, and one to solemnise, if not sadden, her life; and she was seized with a fit of self-distrust. "I feel as if my case was just the one exception to all rules; but I never heard any girl talk nonsense who didn't think *that*," she said, bitterly, to herself. "Well, any way, someone has liked me," and with that she burst into a great flood of tears; and, though she was far too single-minded to waver in her determination, the result of her discovery that she had given her heart to another was that poor Mr Blandford received a much softer and more tenderly-expressed refusal than he would have got before, and that she thought of him with a much greater amount of gratitude. However, between tears and excitement, she had worried herself into a bad headache, and was quite unable to go down to her teaching—a circumstance nearly as unusual as the event which had caused it, and which cost her another half-hour's argument before she could convince Miss Venning that she did not regret her decision, and could induce her anxious sister to leave her in peace. She had been lying on her bed, half-asleep, for some time, when there was a little tap, and Violante came in with a cup of coffee in her hand.

"Miss Clarissa said I might bring you this. Are you better, signorina mia?"

"Oh, yes," said Flossy, sitting up. "My headache is gone, I think. Thank you, Violante; this is very good. Oh, dear! Whatever became of the Italian?"

"I did it, Miss Florence, all myself; and Miss Clarissa sat in the room," said Violante, in accents of pride.

"Why, Violante, how clever you are getting!"

"All, Miss Florence, I would do anything to help you a little bit!" said Violante, kissing her hand. "The house is sad when you are ill."

Flossy was in a soft mood, and thought that she might yield to the girl's caressing sweetness, without the possibility of a suspicion that she was fretting for Mr Fordham or for anyone else. She little thought that Violante—who, it is to be feared, considered being in love as the normal condition of young maidens, and who had heard Florence talk a great deal about Arthur—was only deterred from guessing the true state of the case by her conviction that such a being as Miss Florence could only find her equal in "Signor Hugo." To be sure, when, in a fit of holiday-gossip, some glib-tongued girl had made this suggestion, Edith Robertson had silenced her with a sharp "Oh, dear, no; not likely at all! Mr Crichton will marry into a county family," which remark had seemed to show innumerable vistas between *herself* and Hugh; still, *could* Flossy know him and be insensible? Flossy little guessed these thoughts, as Violante caressed her and helped her to twist up her long bright hair—the flossy flaxen—which the little Italian girl thought the most beautiful colour in the world; and Florence was comforted, she hardly knew how, and went once more about her business, perhaps a little graver, a little less ready for unnecessary interests; but giving Miss Venning no reason to suppose that she regretted Mr Blandford. When she looked back on her interview with Clarissa it struck her that sister's manner had been singular; and one day she said to Miss Venning: "Mary, did Clarissa ever have any lovers?"

"Never, my dear, that I know of. I wish she had. She doesn't like girls, and would be happier married."

"Nor ever cared for anyone?"

"Not that I know of," answered Miss Venning, placidly, as she folded the letter that she had been writing to an anxious mother to relate her daughter's progress and well-being. Flossy reflected; but her own memory did not come to her aid; for, indeed, there was nothing to remember, and Clarissa subsided into her usual lazy, satirical, yet not uncheerful, demeanour; sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued; always the provider of the family jokes and the arranger of the little family comforts, the easy-chairs and cups of tea and unexpected fires, of which she always showed such a strong appreciation. Yet it occurred to Flossy for the first time to wonder what was Clarissa's main-spring. Certainly not her work, which she hated: nor any art or occupation, for she had none of any great consequence; and not her sisters, for she did not often excite herself about their concerns. It seemed an objectless life; could Clarissa have mended it? Flossy, young and enthusiastic, was much inclined to answer that she could; and yet it was very difficult to imagine Clarissa taking up any of the lines that seemed so alien to her. She could no more acquire Flossy's strong impulses and inborn tastes than she could alter the outlines of her lot; no more give herself a love than a lover.

Part 5, Chapter XLI.

Among the Primroses.

> "Who on faint primrose-beds were wont to lie."

"Rosa—Rosa, carissima mia! To see you—to have you again! I have wanted you every day!"

"My darling child, I don't know when I have not wanted *you*! Tell me all—everything. Are you well—are you happy? I think you look so."

“We have tried to make her so,” said Flossy, as Rosa withdrew from Violante’s clinging embrace to look into her face and read its story. “Now, Violante, make your sister comfortable, and all the rest of us are going to walk.”

Left thus alone, Violante put Rosa into a chair and knelt at her feet, looking up in her face. Rosa was looking remarkably well and handsome; she was nicely dressed, and had an air of prosperity.

“And so they are very kind to you?” she said.

“They are as kind as angels,” said Violante, “and there is no one like Miss Florence except you.”

Rosa laughed, and Violante went on, rather hurriedly:

“And our cousins,—how are they? And your pupils—are they stupid? How far have they got in Italian?”

“Not very far,” said Rosa; “and that’s the first question you ever asked me about a pupil in your life.”

“But I teach a great deal of the Italian. Miss Florence showed me how. And father—will he come soon?”

“Yes. I’m afraid, Violante, he has not found much to do in Florence. I shall be glad when he comes to London, because I think he is likely to get engagements.”

“Does he know anyone in London?” asked Violante.

“Well—there is a gentleman who comes a good deal to Uncle Grey’s,” said Rosa, colouring a little. “He is not exactly a professional musician; but he loves music better than anything, and he has composed some things—they’re very good, I think. He said he would ensure some engagements for father. So we shall get some nice little lodgings near the Greys. I know some that would do for us, and when you come, darling—it will be home again.”

“And father is coming?”

“The first week in May.”

“Yes, and our holidays are to be on the 7th. You know we should have gone home now, but for the Confirmation; and, besides, Miss Venning’s brother, who is a clergyman, is coming to examine the school on the 5th of May in arithmetic and those hard lessons; so the classes preparing for him have not broken up.”

“How funny it sounds to hear you talk about lessons and arithmetic! Can *you* do your sums, my child?”

“Not very well,” replied Violante, modestly; “they are very often wrong, Rosina. But I have learnt many things.”

She turned and slipped down by Rosa’s side, playing with her fingers; but keeping her own face averted.

“Things are very strange, Rosa mia. I never expected to see Signor Arthur here.”

“Signor Arthur. Mr Spencer? *Here*. Where?” exclaimed Rosa, greatly surprised.

“Yes,” said Violante, trying to control her trembling, “he—that is, *they*, live here at Redhurst. They are Miss Venning’s friends.”

“*They*—you don’t mean Mr Crichton! Oh, Violante, if I had known this—” then, as there was a pause, “Have you seen him?”

“Oh, yes. But he never spoke, nor I to him. Do not fear, Rosa. He is a great gentleman, and he knows well *here* that I am only a poor little girl; and no one knows anything.”

“Oh, my darling, you should not have stayed here an hour!”

“Then you would be more foolish than I,” cried Violante; “more foolish a great deal, Rosa. You see I am well and happy. And is not a girls’ school like a convent? I never see any of them but Signor Arthur, and he is always kind. His *promessa sposa* was here at school, you know, Rosa. She was Miss Florence’s dear friend.”

“I could not have believed that you would have concealed such a thing from me!” said Rosa, reproachfully.

“It was because I knew you would expect me to be unhappy. I wanted you to see me and to know that I can bear it,” said Violante, with excitement. “Rosa, I would not deceive you—it is all over—all over! But I knew you would hear their names.”

“Mr Spencer Crichton, then, is an acquaintance of Miss Venning’s?” said Rosa, still in a tone of perturbation.

“Yes; and, besides, he has to do with everything—the railways and the gas—”

“The what?”

“Why, they were going to build some ugly gas-works in the field, and he was the only person who could prevent it. That was why he came here. But it is Signor Arthur who is their friend.”

“Ah, has he got over his trouble?”

“No,” said Violante, with an air of interest and knowledge rather surprising to Rosa.

“Oh, no, he looks much more sad and ill than he did in Italy. I think he will never forget Mysie. But they will be coming in, and I was to show you your room. There,” as Rosa followed her, “that is the school-room, and I must go there presently and see that the little girls get ready for tea.”

Rosa felt utterly bewildered. It is always startling to find one’s nearest and dearest possessed with a flood of new ideas and interests, acquired apart from ourselves, and this is specially the case with a girl’s first experience of independent life. Violante’s very accent and idiom had attained a more English turn, and there was an air of life and capability about her entirely new. She had opinions and ideas, and evidently was proud of her various occupations and anxious to show them off. How much of this was owing to her more vigorous health—the English air evidently being very favourable to her—how much to the mental awakening which some congenial experience often gives to girls sooner or later, and how much to the undercurrent of excitement that Hugh Crichton’s neighbourhood caused, Rosa could not tell. Certainly she was glad to see her little sister so bright and well; but she could not get over the idea of Violante’s secrecy, and forgot, perhaps, how hardly while pitying her sister she had judged Hugh in her hearing. Moreover, Rosa’s attention was not so entirely devoted to Violante’s affairs as had been the case last year. Possibilities were arising in her own life; but they were still too vague for her to wish to make a confidante of her young sister. There seemed to be what the Miss Greys called “a chance for Rosa;” and Rosa, it was thought, was not altogether averse to avail herself of it. She was very agreeable, and her foreign experiences and shrewd cleverness gave her an originality refreshing in a London young lady. She liked society; and, besides, she liked attention, in a sensible moderate sort of way; at any rate, she liked the attentions of the musical Mr Fairfax. He was not a very young man, and not at all handsome; but he had enough enthusiasm of character to appeal to Rosa’s sympathies, and enough of unconventionality to think her history and connections attractive rather than the reverse. He held a situation in the British Museum, and had some private means; so that he had been able to indulge his musical taste without being dependent on it for support. Nothing very definite had passed, but he was gradually giving Rosa to understand that he meant something serious; and she had welcomed this short absence as an opportunity for making up her own mind and testing her own feelings.

She made a very good impression on Miss Venning, and became friendly with Flossy, though secretly she thought her rather high-flying, and considered her objects of interest inadequate to the enthusiasm expended on them. She found that Violante, allowance being made for her imperfect education, was considered to have fair capabilities; and, with the help of her music and Italian, to be likely to be able to earn her living, under favourable circumstances. (“If I had a home for her to fall back upon,” was Rosa’s mental comment;) while she was much liked by teachers and companions. Rosa was constantly amused and surprised at seeing her busy and important; but, perhaps, she liked the moments best when Violante nestled down by her side, happy once more in her caressing presence. Rosa had arrived on Easter Monday, and was to stay till Saturday. The Confirmation would take place on the Friday, and on the Wednesday afternoon the whole party went into the woods to gather primroses, to renew the Easter decoration of Oxley parish church. The best primroses grew near Fordham; but, as nothing would have tempted Miss Florence’s steps in that direction, she ordained that they should walk towards Oxley—“it was a prettier view to show Miss Mattei.”

All along the opposite banks of the canal, between Fordham, Redhurst, and Oxley—and, indeed, out beyond Blackwood, on the other side of the town—were, at intervals, great oak copses, skirting the heath behind. Ashenfold was in the midst of them; they touched at one end the famous Fordham beeches, and at the other were lost in Lord Lidford’s park at Blackwood. The London road crossed the canal by a bridge at Oxley, where the woods were interspersed with villas, and a path, rough and dirty in winter, but charming in summer, led right through them to Redhurst and Fordham. A sort of hand-bridge led back to the Redhurst Road, opposite Ashenfold; further on there were only Redhurst and Fordham locks.

A considerable tract of copse had been felled the year before; and this spring the place of the underwood was supplied by the young sprouting oak-shoots and by myriads of primroses and anemones, ivy, lichen and moss, and all the beauties of woodlands in the spring. It was a lovely day, warm and sunny, with a sky the colour of the speedwells that were still hiding in the hedges. Birds sang and twittered; butterflies, like flying primroses, hovered about in pairs.

“There is nothing like a wood in spring,” said Florence; “and out there, Miss Mattei, the furze is getting golden, and even that ploughed field has a deep, rich colour under this wonderful sky.”

“Yes, abroad we don’t believe in English spring, but a day like this—”

“Vindicates the spring of the poets—and makes up for rain and east winds, doesn’t it?” The girls scattered over the wood in search of their primroses, Violante among them; while Rosa sat down on a log and talked to Miss Venning. The chatter and laughter of the girls sounded through the wood; and Flossy, in her great straw hat, with her hands full of primroses, came back towards them over the rough broken ground, tall, lithe, and blooming, like an incarnation of this fresh woody spring. Suddenly she paused, and exclaimed, as Hugh and Arthur, in rather unwonted companionship, came up the narrow path towards her.

“What? A great primrose-picking?” said Arthur.

“Yes, did you come to enjoy the woods?” she said.

“I wanted to go to Ashenfold,” said Hugh, “so we came back this way. We are rather idle this week.”

As he spoke, Hugh became aware of Rosa’s presence, by hearing Arthur greet her; and, after a momentary hesitation on both sides, they bowed, and he asked after Signor Mattei.

“My father is very well, thank you,” said Rosa, without an unnecessary word. Hugh stood like a shy boy in his first quadrille, trying to think of something that would do to say. Arthur had strolled away towards the primrose-pickers, and he decided that it would look too marked to walk on without him. At last he said: “Oh! Miss Venning, about that

gas. I believe I shall get it arranged as you wish."

"I always knew, Hugh, that no sensible person could see it in any other light," said Miss Venning.

"I don't think gas is injurious to human life," said Hugh, looking round the wood. Rosa almost pitied him, he seemed so ill at ease. "The component parts—"

"Now, I am said to be fond of discussions," said Flossy; "but, really, to talk chemically in this lovely wood is a shame."

"Let us come, then, and look at the view and find Arthur," said Hugh, relieved; "I ought to be going."

Rosa would fain have followed, but Miss Venning, with a "You see, my dear," entered on the subject of the gas-works, and the other two walked farther into the wood.

There were days when Hugh was sure that he ought not to marry Violante, there were many days when he thought that he did not wish to marry her; but now and then came a day when he dreamed of a future that might come when time should have softened the present troubles, and this day was one of them. He would *not* throw away this chance—at least, he would see her and hear her speak again. Suddenly the sound of her sweet unmistakable voice fell on his ear. They were coming over a piece of rising ground, and down below them sat Arthur and Violante on a fallen tree. She was tying the primroses into little bunches. The occupation and her light spring dress brought another sunny afternoon and other brighter-tinted flowers to Hugh's mind. He could only see the top of Arthur's hat; but her face was visible, raised in profile, tender and smiling, in the radiant sun. She was evidently answering a remark.

"Ah, then, do *you* 'say die,' so often?"

"Very often, I am afraid."

"But I keep the olive-leaves, signor, and I look at them sometimes."

"Ah, yes, I remember, I believe I have mine here still," and Arthur took out his pocket-book, and after a moment's search showed the little spray of leaves.

Neither Hugh nor Florence were so conventionally-minded as exactly to misinterpret the facts of what they had seen; and, besides, Arthur's voice and manner were essentially unloverlike; but it seemed to Hugh as if those sweet looks and smiles were for all alike, awakened by his cousin as well as by himself. *Something* there was between them, and what might there not come of it by and by? while to Flossy the first sharp pang of uncontrollable jealousy was not unnaturally aggravated by Violante's look of utter confusion and perplexity, as a turn of her head revealed their presence and they stepped down the bank beside her. She had not known that Hugh was with Arthur.

"You are still fond of flowers, Mademoiselle Mattei?" said Hugh, dryly.

She looked at him.

"These flowers are different," she said. Perhaps she hardly knew what she meant.

"Fresher and newer," said Hugh. Hugh was the worst of hypocrites, and Arthur had never seen him look quite as he looked now. Impossible, incredible!

"Flossy," he began, "let us come—" when a sudden outbreak of voices and laughter near them made them all turn. Two of the Dysart girls had been of the party and had previously coaxed their mother to surprise Miss Venning with a supply of cake and new milk to be eaten in the wood, as an impromptu picnic, and Mrs Dysart had now made her appearance, followed by two of her little boys carrying the provisions.

Miss Venning did not emulate the schoolmistress who desired her charges to turn their faces to the hedge when a man passed by; still, she was conscious that Mrs Dysart might think the situation unusual; while, as for Hugh, he looked so indignant, so ashamed, and so uncomfortable that Rosa could hardly help laughing, and Arthur's face of amusement was a study. But Mrs Dysart was a lady who took things easily, even the presence of two of her elder sons, who declared that they had followed as the milk was too heavy for their little brothers.

"What quantities of primroses you have got!" she said.

"You see, Hugh picked so many!" said Arthur. He could not resist the little joke, any more than he could help the bright courtesy that made him enter into the spirit of the thing, and pour out the milk and hand the cake.

"Drink, signorina!" he said, gaily, as he gave a cup to Violante.

And yet, when the thought came over him of what such a merry-making would have been to him last year, perhaps Hugh, angry and full of miserable misunderstanding as he was, need hardly have envied his cousin's smile. For Violante stood, living and beautiful, before him; and though he shut his eyes to the sun-rays of possibility, he felt their warmth.

It was all over in ten minutes. Miss Venning summoned her flock; Hugh asked if Colonel Dysart was at home, and, with Arthur, followed the milk-jugs back to Ashenfold. Flossy, feeling miserable, cross, ready to cry, and utterly unheroic, thought she should hate the sight of primroses for ever; and Violante—flushed, excited, knowing that, whatever Hugh's tone indicated, it was *not* indifference—thought the fair, tender blossoms had just a little of the sweetness that had clung to the white bouquet, one precious trophy of her stage-life.

Part 6, Chapter XLII.

At the Year's End.

> "This, only this; through sorrow cometh learning.
> Through suffering, greater growth.
> In patience, therefore, wait the golden morning
> That draweth near us both."

Part 6, Chapter XLIII.

Another Chance.

> "Only the sound of a voice,
> Tender and sweet and low—
> That made my heart rejoice
> A year ago!"

James Crichton was spending a few days at home, with a view to the proposed oratorio at H—, which was to take place the week after Easter. He was, however, obliged to go up to town on most days, and was rather fond of calling in at the Bank on his way from the station and walking or driving back with his brother and Arthur. Perhaps, this practice had partly induced Hugh's visit to Ashenfold on the day of the primrose picnic. For Hugh was not fond of walking down Oxley High-street with Jem. It was all very well, he thought, to know every man, woman, and child in Redhurst, and even to be on civil terms with the inhabitants of Oxley; but Jem carried things too far.

When they passed the greengrocer's—"Well, Mr Coleman, how d'ye do? How's your little girl? Gone to boarding-school?—hope she'll get on with her French. Why, Hugh, there's Kitty Morris—how dark her hair's grown! She's not as pretty as she used to be."

"I never saw her before, to my knowledge," Hugh would probably reply.

"Never saw Kitty—oh, she belongs to that little print-shop. She's always standing at the door. I declare, there's old Tomkins! I must just cross over and speak to him."

A delay of two or three minutes listening to old Tomkins; and then, still worse, an elaborate bow to two Miss Harrisons—and, though Hugh knew that neither the popularity nor the familiarity of the "Oh, Mr Crichton, *'ow* pleased ma *will* be to see you!" could be intended for him, he would grow desperate, and march on, while Jem would finish up by saying:

"Ah, when you want to represent the borough send me to canvass—that's all!" Jem had not been at home long before he proposed that Arthur should come back to London with him for the sake of a little change and variety. It was evident, he said, that a change was wanted, and the proposal was eagerly taken up by his mother, who pressed it upon Arthur in a way that hardly left him a choice.

"You see, my dear boy, you don't look well, and are sadly out of spirits," she said, in her outspoken way; "and this will be the very thing to do you good."

"Jem is very kind; but it would not do me any good," said Arthur.

"Oh, yes, my dear, it will. Change is always good for people, and you haven't been much in London. You know we must all make efforts."

"There is nothing the matter with me," said Arthur, escaping from the room; while his aunt went on: "Poor boy, it's time he should be a little cheerful, and he is not half so bright as he was at first."

"No; that's just what I say," returned Jem; "everything here reminds him of her, and London will be all fresh."

Even Flossy Venning was moved to give the same counsel, which she did with rather suspicious eagerness, half-afraid to seem unwilling to part with him. Arthur had no counter-arguments to urge but his own unwillingness, and this seemed only to prove the necessity of the measure; but he did not yield readily, though he half-believed they were right, and had not the energy to put an end to the discussion by a more emphatic refusal. Hugh would not interfere, save by the brief remark:

"Yes, things are wrong; but it will take more than that to set them right;" but at last he said:

"You do not wish to go, Arthur?"

"Oh, no," said Arthur, in a sort of matter-of-course tone.

"Is there anything you would like better to do?" said Hugh, with the elaborate gentleness with which he often addressed his cousin.

"Oh, no," said Arthur again. "I am sorry to make such a bad business of it. Perhaps, I ought to get away somewhere, and not make you all miserable."

"It is not that," said Hugh; "but Jem is always cheerful; you and he have tastes in common, and sometimes you do

seem brighter for a little amusement."

"That's only because I'm such a fool, Hugh, you are so wonderfully good to me. Don't you think I know how I put you out? I take up with things—sometimes I forget how I've changed—then I get deadly sick of it all and tired out. Or else a word—a look! Oh, I know well enough what I ought to do; but it's making bricks without straw—I've no pluck left."

Perhaps because he *had*, with whatever shortcomings, tried very hard to be "good" to Arthur, perhaps because the confidence was made to himself, Hugh was able to conceal the personal pain which these passionate words caused him; and it was with real tenderness that he answered:

"I think you have shown no want of pluck; but when you first talked of coming back I was afraid you would not be able to bear it; this place is full of sword-pricks for you. Aren't you straining your nerves too far by staying here?"

Arthur did not answer, and Hugh, watching him as he stood leaning against the shutter and staring fixedly out into the sunshine, said, with more hesitation:

"Or is it that the want of an aim, of an object is worse than anything else, and that you feel less at sea when you are obliged to do something?"

"Yes," said Arthur, quickly. "Yes. Ah, *you* understand! I *want* something to hold by."

"But then," said Hugh, "you mustn't be too hard on yourself. You look ill, and sometimes you feel so; you don't sleep, and then you are not fit for these efforts."

"You seem to know all about me," said Arthur; but not as if the comprehension hurt him.

"Yes, I believe I do," said Hugh, looking away from him; but with a curious sense of a fresh spring in his heart. Was all that bitter involuntary watching, that keen, morbid analysis of Arthur's feelings, which had cost him so much pain, to bear fruit at last? Had the sympathetic suffering which he had looked on as expiation been no fruitless penance, but a training that might enable him to make some poor amends? Was it possible that he, who had caused and shared the sorrow, could be the one to comfort and help?

"I think I do understand," he said. "It will be best for you to stay here quietly, and join when you can in what goes on, or pass it by without any comment being made. Only, you must promise to tell me if you feel that it is getting too much for you—that is, if you will," he added, with a little return to his self-distrust.

"Oh, yes, I'll tell you, if you don't find out," said Arthur, with some of his natural liveliness; then added, earnestly and affectionately: "You have done me a great deal of good."

Hugh had never felt so nearly happy since he had come back to England as at those words. If Arthur could feel so he should never want for comfort again. The first effort at really helping him for his own sake had broken through his self-conscious shrinking; and Hugh felt that, with so ready a response, he could comfort Arthur and find his own consolation in doing it.

There was no doubt of the response. Arthur never theorised about what he could or could not do and feel, and he turned instantly to Hugh's offered comprehension and sympathy. Indeed, he was so easily cheered for the moment, and almost always so bright in manner, that it was difficult to believe how completely he had been thrown off his balance, and how much the strain was telling upon him. It was by his irresolution and changeableness and excitable vehemence, ending in utter indifference, rather than by absolute low spirits that his grief told. Sometimes he could not decide on the merest trifle, such as a walk *versus* a ride; and, again, he would involve himself in some undertaking, just because he was asked to do so, and then a voice, a look, the name of a place or a person—anything that jarred his nerves with a sudden recollection—would make the act impossible to him. In the same way, though he rarely had even a headache to complain of, he was often utterly unequal to an exertion which another day would be easy to him.

It was just the state for which change of scene seemed most desirable; but to which by itself it would do little good; and it was well, indeed, for Arthur that fate, or his own judgment, had placed him where all this irresolution and want of ballast was likely to result in nothing worse than idleness and uselessness. Had he been thrown in the way of temptation at this critical period neither his own principles nor the memory of Mysie might have supplied an adequate resisting force, while he would probably have broken down under solitude altogether.

That conversation was like the lifting of a veil. Hugh had always known where Arthur's shoe pinched him; he only needed to act on his knowledge to be the very help that was wanted, and he had not won Arthur's glance of thanks and relief twice before he began to look for it as his own greatest pleasure. Like many severe people when once softened, he was almost over-tender, and could not bear to see his cousin struggle with himself. He would not, therefore, allow the expedition to H— to be urged upon him; so Jem, Mrs Crichton, Frederica, and Flossy set off on the day appointed.

Hugh found time, in spite of this new interest, to display what the Vicar of Oxley called "a very proper feeling on the part of one of the chief laymen of the parish," by attending the Confirmation. He had meditated much on the scene of the olive-leaves; but, in the new light thrown on Arthur's mind, it had lost much of its sting. Not so with Flossy. She had never dreamt that her unselfish love could be marred by such foolish, miserable jealousy. Did silent devotion mean that she was to be wretched whenever he spoke to another woman? Her thoughts wandered, her mind was disturbed, she wondered as to Violante's past history, it was an effort to think of the scene before her.

Hugh watched Violante from a distance, and perceived that she was not aware of his presence. The impressionable Italian nature was lifted into enthusiasm by the first religious ceremony in which she had ever taken part. Her eyes

were bright and tearful, her cheeks flushed. This epoch in her life did not present itself to her as a moral crisis, as a new resolve to fulfil difficult duties, a strain after a recollectedness and gravity respected but hardly attained to. It came to her as a new happiness, a new love and a new sense of protection. She was not conscious that she felt differently from her companions; and Flossy watched this beautiful fervour with a sort of awe, even while she half-distrusted it as a lasting motive of action.

Before they left the church a hymn was sung and as Violante's heart swelled with the words and the music, unconsciously she raised her voice too, and its long silent notes smote on her ear, clear and full, as when she had sung last in the opera-house of Civita Bella. She dropped down on her knees and hid her face. Had it come back to her—this invaluable gift, this terrible, beautiful possession? Was her new ease of living to slip away from her, and must she return to the "pains austere" of the talent which belonged to her and to no other? She had heard a great deal lately about her duty, and for her "her duty" had always meant singing in public. And her father was coming; and he had not been successful. But no one had heard her—no one would know! Hitherto she had but helplessly yielded to the will of others—*this* was the first moral struggle she had ever known. She saw and heard no more of what was passing till they reached home, when she escaped from the others and ran away by herself down to the farther end of the garden. She stood still in the shrubbery under its budding green, and listened. All was silent, but the twitter of the birds; and softly, timidly, she began again to sing the hymn that she had just heard:

"Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire!" and as she went on the notes rose fuller and clearer, and she could not but rejoice in their sweetness. Then she paused, and, with a sense of desperation, began to sing the melody so fraught with memories of every sort, the never-to-be-forgotten "Batti, batti." And, as she sang, Rosa came down the garden path, and beheld her standing under the trees, in her white confirmation dress, and singing the passionate operatic love-song with a curious look of resolution on her face. She broke off suddenly, and threw herself into her sister's arms: "Rosa, Rosa! I will be good. I meant to tell you. My voice, my voice! Oh, father, father!"

The voice was choked in an agony of sobs and tears, and Rosa, hardly less agitated, held her in her arms and tried to soothe her.

As soon as she could speak she sobbed out: "It has come back, and—and I will sing for father—but, oh! I thought I should stay hero always and teach the little ones."

"Indeed, my darling, you shall not come away from here yet."

"No, and I could not act."

"No, that you never shall; but, darling, to hear your voice again!"

There was a little pause; then Violante said:

"I may stay here and learn things a little longer—and afterwards I will sing at concerts—if—if—"

She faced her probable future; but there was still an "*if*" in her life.

Part 6, Chapter XLIV.

Jem's Ideal.

> "Faultily faultless—icily regular—splendidly null."

The weather favoured the choir festival at H— and the production of spring dresses for the occasion. James cast critical eyes on his mother's bonnet and on Frederica's hat; and anxiously consulted Arthur as to whether he liked a flower in the button-hole of a morning.

"Oh, yes, when you want to look festive," said Arthur, without paying much attention till he was roused from the perusal of the "Times" by a crash in the conservatory; and on hastening to the rescue perceived Jem, contemplating the ruins of his mother's best azalea, which he had knocked over in trying to reach a bit of fern beyond it. Three dainty little bouquets were already lying in a row.

"Well, Jem, you have done it now!"

"Oh, confound the thing, yes—and it's time to be off. Isn't the carriage there?"

"Not yet. Are you going to wear three bouquets?"

"No," said Jem, looking foolish, "I was only choosing the best. I think I'll go without."

"You couldn't improve on that rosebud, and it might come in handy," said Arthur, gravely.

"Well," snatching it up. "Just pick up that pot. I hear the carriage."

"Pick up the pot!" ejaculated Arthur, as Jem rushed away, "when it's in fifty pieces! I shall retire before I'm supposed to have thrown it down. I say, Hugh," as he came back to the house, "who's the attraction at H—? Jem is evidently on tenter-hooks."

It was this easy laughter and readiness to joke on what would have seemed to him a tender subject that had always puzzled Hugh in Arthur; but now he was glad to see him amused on any terms, as he answered, gravely:

"I daresay there are several; but I haven't heard him mention anyone in particular."

"Perhaps he wanted a bouquet apiece and I've spoiled sport! What a pity!"

James recovered his equanimity as they drove away, and was very smiling and chatty by the time they picked up Flossy, fresh and spring-like, and prepared to enjoy herself, though she had hoped that the party might have been differently constituted. They had about twenty miles to go by train, and James made himself very agreeable to her, mentally thinking her less overpowering than usual. He asked after Violante and listened with much interest to Flossy's account of the return of her voice, and her subsequent resolution.

"But her sister says she must stay with us till next year, that she may grow quite strong and finish her education. She is going to London in May."

"Indeed! Perhaps I shall see her there."

"Is Arthur going with you?" asked Flossy, who had been meditating on this simple question ever since she joined them.

"No. Poor boy, he couldn't make up his mind to it. I should have had to leave him alone a good deal, and he doesn't seem up to gaieties."

"Oh, no!"

"No—he laughed in an odd sort of way—and said: that I'd better not help him to cast off from his moorings; but I'm sure being at home doesn't answer. He has a bright way with him; but I see more and more how he is altered. His eyes have a sort of wretched look, instead of their old jolly one—don't you know what I mean?"

"Yes; as if he wanted something."

"Exactly. I think he'll have to make a change. I wish he could go abroad and begin a new life altogether—in India, or somewhere."

"Would that be best?" said Florence, slowly.

"I think so. But there's one thing—Hugh seems to understand him now, and he has got excellent judgment when he likes to use it."

Poor Flossy! That conversation did not raise her spirits, or prepare her to enjoy her day. There was a dreadful probability in James's suggestion, and she mused over it while he was talking to his mother and urging her to drive at once to the Archdeacon's.

"My dear, we have our tickets—we shall see them afterwards."

"But, they have ways and means of getting in, you know; and you would avoid the crowd."

Mrs Crichton yielded after a little demur, and they drove to Archdeacon Hayward's, where they were politely received and offered an entrance with the Cathedral ladies, Mrs Hayward being glad to be civil to Mrs Spencer Crichton. The girls were introduced to three or four fair, tall young ladies, much alike in dress and demeanour, with aquiline features and graceful figures, and a very proper amount of conversation. Jem sat profoundly silent, with his hat in his hand and his rosebud in his coat, till one of the Miss Haywards, *not* Helen, said:

"You are fond of music, I believe, Mr Crichton?"

"Oh, devotedly!" said Jem, smiling.

"And there is nothing like Handel?"

"Very fine!" said James.

"Why, Jem, I thought you despised him?" said Freddie, abruptly. "I thought he wasn't a new light."

"Is that one of your heresies, Mr Crichton?" said another Miss Hayward, from behind; and Jem turned round, with startling rapidity, and asked who had been setting him down as a heretic?

As the oratorio took place in the Cathedral the conversation was limited, but Mrs Crichton was gratified by observing that Jem sat peacefully with his own party, discovered no odd acquaintances, and afterwards returned with them to the Archdeacon's, where there was a large party to luncheon.

Miss Helen Hayward was polite to Mrs Crichton, who remarked to Frederica how nice it was to see girls attentive to their guests, and not forgetful, or taken up with their own affairs.

"Yes, auntie; but she always talks in the same tone of voice," said Freddie, suspecting a didactic motive.

Flossy had a dull neighbour at lunch, and leisure to look about her, and she felt inclined to pity Jem, who sat opposite by the third Miss Hayward, whose mild restrained smiles and obvious, if intelligent, remarks did not strike her as very interesting. Presently, however, she perceived that James had more and more to say on his side; that he made Miss Helen laugh and blush, and look at her plate, and then across the table to see if her sisters were noticing her. This amused Flossy, but she was surprised to observe that Jem looked across at her, and when he met her eyes actually blushed too.

Helen retreated when they moved, and began to entertain some of the young ladies; and very soon the Redhurst party were obliged to start to catch their train for Oxley. The parting was cordial on all sides, and Flossy observed to James:

"I did not know you knew the Miss Haywards so well."

"Oh," said James, "I met one of them when she was staying in London, and I came here once to sing at a concert for some schools. They're very nice girls, Flossy—quite in your line—go to Sunday-school, and everything."

"I daresay," said Flossy, who did not think this implied a great stretch of virtue.

"And not at all stiff, when you know them."

"Yes," said Mrs Crichton, "I think I should like to ask two of them over to stay for a few days. I am sure Hugh could not say they were chatterboxes, as he does of the Clintons."

An indescribably comical expression crossed Jem's face.

"I think it would be a very good plan, mamma," he said. "You always get on with, *nice* young ladies."

"Yes, my dear; I get dull by myself," said Mrs Crichton, with a sigh. "Not that we have much amusement to offer them."

"I don't know that they mind about amusements," said James.

He was dying for a confidant; for Jem could never keep his affairs to himself, but he did not quite dare to enlighten his mother as to his wishes, for fear she should betray them by over-zeal to the Miss Haywards. It had not quite come to the point of announcing his intentions to Hugh, who would not easily have been convinced of their seriousness. Arthur, who knew the names and charms of most of Jem's many sweethearts, would have been his natural outlet; but how could he tell his love-story to him? Nevertheless, as they sat smoking together that very evening, out it all came—provoked, certainly, by a little joke about the three bouquets; and Arthur was so much amused at the notion of Jem's choice that the latter was soon absorbed in convincing him that he had finally made it; which, by his unusual modesty, he at last succeeded in doing.

"Why, you know, you're irresistible."

"But *she* never would be attracted by the same sort of humbug that goes down with most girls."

"Oh, come now, Jem, you don't mean to say so. I don't think I should like her the better for that."

"She'd look to what one really was."

"I'd try a little humbug, though, now and then."

Jem laughed.

"I shan't be here when they come, you see. It's supposed they will suit Hugh; and he is just the sort of fellow—"

"She'd admire? But, you know, Jem, Hugh is tolerably safe; and if you came down on the Saturday we might refer to your excellences beforehand."

"I wouldn't say too much," said Jem, seriously; then suddenly, "Arthur, you are a good fellow. It's too bad of me to tell you all this—"

"Don't!—don't!" interposed Arthur.

"Why should I mind, Jem? It doesn't make any difference."

The invitation was sent and accepted by the right pair of sisters, and before they arrived Jem's family had a very good notion of what was expected of them, and were all ready to make the visit pleasant to the young ladies. Arthur divined that Helen, at any rate, was well inclined to be pleased. She was apparently a very good girl, cultivated and intelligent, able to talk on all the subjects expected from a young lady, polite to himself and Hugh, but not particularly interested in them. She indulged in a mild but evident enthusiasm for Mrs Crichton, and made friends with Flossy over school-teaching, books, and favourite heroes; and she was very pretty and very well dressed. There was, too, a sort of good-tempered, sunny satisfaction about her, which was not without its charm, especially as the other sister was rather critical of their acquaintances, and Arthur overheard between them the following fragment:

"He goes about smoking on a Sunday afternoon."

"But he always goes to church again in the evening, Constance."

"And I don't think, do you, it's *quite* good style to wear that sort of coat?"

"Don't you?"

"A gentleman should have *no* peculiarities."

"I'm sure, Con, there couldn't be more of a gentleman—"

Here Arthur thought himself bound to retreat, having discovered that the fair Helen, could lose her composure sometimes. Jem arrived on the Saturday evening, very much on his best behaviour, and listening to the Miss Haywards playing the pieces and singing the songs which he had most been wont to criticise. However, he gave Helen the names of some new ones, and sang himself, as he well knew how to do, contenting himself with finding fault with Freddie's touch. Hugh did not show off the skill acquired under Signor Mattei, which, truth to tell, was not very considerable.

"I never sing," he said, emphatically; but he sat by and watched, and when some particular old English ballads were asked for, and Jem began to wonder where they were, he checked him quietly, knowing by Arthur's flush and quiver that they were among the books which he could not bear to see touched. Arthur looked grateful, but Jem found the book on the piano the next morning.

A slight flaw in the harmony was produced on Sunday afternoon by the discussion of a new colour, which Miss Constance Hayward declared to be vulgar, and never worn by any lady "who was very nice."

Jem defended it as found in the old masters. It was very artistic.

"I'd rather look like a lady than like a picture," said Miss Hayward, a little dryly.

"I quite agree with you, Miss Hayward," said Hugh.

"Hugh's taste *is* conventional usually," said Jem, in a wicked undertone.

"I *like* that funny green," said Helen, in her soft, changeless voice, as she rose to get ready for church.

"What makes you laugh so, Arthur?" said Hugh, savagely, as they remained for the purpose of taking a walk together, Arthur having a great shrinking from Sunday afternoon at Redhurst.

"I was laughing at Jem. He's fairly caught at last!"

"Do you mean that this is more than Jem's way?"

"Oh, yes, and it's coming rapidly to a crisis. Don't you see? I wonder which will rule the roast? Will Jem dress her in 'funny green,' or will he have to cut his coat according to his lady?"

"It seems to me very unsuitable," said Hugh, after a slightly-puzzled pause.

"That's the beauty of it, I suppose. One wouldn't have been half so much surprised if Jem had fallen in love with Mademoiselle Mattei!"

"Mademoiselle Mattei had a great many admirers," said Hugh, as he looked out of window. "I suppose, now she has recovered her voice, she will fulfil her engagement to that, scoundrel—I mean that manager—Vasari."

"She was very forlorn at the loss of him, poor child," said Arthur, making most unconscious mischief.

"She told you so?"

"Yes—pretty much. I told her to keep up her heart, and she picked some olive-leaves as a reminder. The other day she told me how she had kept my advice. She is a confiding little creature, and very simple-hearted."

A silence. Then.

"James is perfectly right to stick to the conventional type—that is, to a known and proved one. Where shall we go this afternoon?"

"Oh, anywhere—I don't care—I think I won't go out," said Arthur, irresolutely.

"Well, you will have a quiet afternoon," answered Hugh, glad of the solitude; but even then he paused and retraced his steps.

"Arthur, if this affair of Jem's worries you—"

"Oh, no, no. It gives me something fresh to think about," said Arthur, with evident truth. "I'm only—tired."

"Well, rest then," said Hugh, with the kind smile that Arthur liked.

Nothing should ever make him thoughtless of Arthur's comfort; but, unsatisfactory as the conversation had been, there was growing up in Hugh's mind the conviction that somehow, somewhere, some when, he would have to ask Violante to tell him the truth.

Part 6, Chapter XLV.

Past and Present.

> "'Tis time my past should set my future free
> For life's renewed endeavour."

Rosa Mattei was sitting by herself in her aunt's drawing-room. That afternoon Violante was expected to arrive from Oxley, and the next day they would meet Signor Mattei at the lodging close by, which was to be their home for the present. It would not be nearly so pleasant for Rosa as the ease and companionship of her present quarters; but she had learnt to accommodate herself to circumstances, and did not fret over the prospect of dull evenings. Besides, it would not be for very long. Rosa's fine, considerate face rounded into a look of satisfaction. She had a great deal to tell Violante and her father. How would they take her news?

"Well, Rosa, sitting and repenting?" said her cousin Beatrice, coming into the room.

"No, Trixy, I'm not going to repent," said Rosa. "I'm very well satisfied with my arrangements."

"I think you are a wise girl, and a lucky girl," said Miss Grey; "but I should like to know how you tamed your wild flights down to this result."

"Well, Beatrice, I never in all my life saw the use of fretting over what can't be helped. It seems to me that the present is just as good a time as the past, and deserves at least as much from one. Things aren't any the better *really* because they happened ever so long ago."

"Yes. How long have you been so philosophical?"

Rosa blushed, but held her ground.

"When a thing is *impossible* it may be the best thing in itself, but something else may be far better than the shadow of it."

"'A live dog is better than a dead lion?'"

"Well, yes; now, you see, it was not possible for me to go on the stage, so it was better to put away that, and—and my school-girl fancies with it. I'm not imaginative enough to live on memories, particularly memories of—nothing! And this came—"

"I'm only afraid you might find it a little humdrum—"

"Humdrum, Beatrice? How could it be when Mr Fairfax is so clever, and so interesting?"

"Ha, ha, Rosy. Come, confess now. This talk is all very well; but you have just gone and fallen in love with Mr Fairfax, and you'll begin life fresh."

"If I have I'm afraid it's since I accepted him! I thought—that is, I did not think. But you see, Beatrice, it is not often that a girl is so fortunate as to meet with anyone—"

"Like him? I'm quite content, Rosy. You'll do. And now tell me about the prudent part of it."

"The prudent part is," said Rosa, "that he wishes me to have Violante with me whenever I like—always, if need be. If she gets on better with father, and if this concert scheme comes to good, of course that won't be necessary; but still I shall be able to take care of her, though she has almost grown into a woman."

"I suppose she will go back to school?"

"Oh, yes, I trust so. It is so good for her. But it is time, I think, that I should go and meet her."

Rosa was very happy, and just a little ashamed of herself for being so. As she had said, she could not live, and never had lived, on the memories of her first love; though circumstances had at times brought them vividly before her, the very renewal of them had shown her how entirely they were vain. Rosa had a very passionate but by no means a sentimental nature, and both her common-sense and her craving for a vivid, happy life forbade her to find satisfaction, in shadowy recollections.

"I am neither silly enough, nor unworldly enough," she thought, as she held Mr Fairfax's letter in her hand, and felt that its offer would be a good exchange for that bitter old sorrow to which she had offered up sacrifices enough already.

And, as for that other dream of ambition, it was tempting, but it was nearly impossible; and Rosa was a woman and had tried what earning her living meant, and could guess pretty well at the taste of the apples of fame, as well as of the Dead-sea fruits of failure. And, as Rosa made up her mind to say yes, she became aware that she was excusing herself for her readiness to do so, not arguing against any lurking unwillingness. It is needless to say that her uncle and aunt were pleased at her good fortune. Everyone would be pleased. And it was wonderful how well Mr Fairfax understood her ideas. Fancy having Violante to stay with her in a pretty little house; or, still better, going with the master of that pretty house to hear Violante sing and feel proud of her talents! It was from such happy visions that Rosa was roused by the sound of Violante's voice.

She looked a little paler and graver than when they had last met, not quite so happy or so much at her ease; and almost her first words were:

"I have been singing a great deal, Rosina, and I think my voice is good."

"So you have made up your mind to try to sing again?" said Rosa.

"Yes, Rosina, after the summer I will come home and sing."

“You shall not do it if it frightens you and makes you unhappy, my darling.”

“But—father will wish it. And I think everyone is unhappy.”

“My dear child, what makes you take such a gloomy view of life?”

“Why, look, Rosa. Signor Arthur’s heart is breaking for his Mysie; while Miss Florence loves him, ah, I know how much!”

“Miss Florence! Does she? I thought her head was full of classes and school-girls.”

“Yes, she will not sit and cry; but I know how she listens when Freddie talks of him, and she will not begin herself to speak of him, but when I ask her questions then she will tell me. She thinks I am only a little girl and know nothing.”

“And you, yourself, dear?”

“I,” said Violante; “Rosa, I think he is ashamed of having loved me, and that he will never speak to me again.”

“Violante, it is wrong to let you stay there! I shall not consent to it.”

“Ah, no, Rosina, no! *There* I can see that he does not care for me; away, I should think—and hope—and fancy—and—and—oh, let me stay!”

“I am afraid that is not true,” said Rosa, and Violante blushed; for she knew in her heart that Rosa was right.

“*You* look well, Rosina mia,” she said.

“Yes, Violante, I shall surprise you very much. How should you like—you never thought that I should be engaged to anyone?”

“Rosina *mia*!” exclaimed Violante, with eyes opening wide, and accents of blank astonishment, and then a shower of kisses and questions.

She listened to the story with all the delight that Rosa had anticipated, and after every detail had been discussed between them there was a silence, as Violante sat in her favourite place, leaning against her sister’s knee.

“Now,” she said at last, “now Rosa, you can tell how hard—”

She paused, and Rosa could hardly help laughing.

“My dear child, I knew that long ago. Listen, Violante, I think it is good for you to know, I was older than you when *my* trouble came, and I think it was as bad as yours. Yet, you see, I am happy.”

“Did you know Mr Fairfax then?” eagerly said Violante.

“No, no,” said Rosa, “quite another person. It doesn’t signify who he was. It’s all gone now.”

“Oh, Rosina, was it when I was a tiresome little girl, and troubled you?”

“You were my one comfort, my darling, never any trouble. But, you see, I told you to show you that one day happiness may come to you, though quite in a different way from what you now fancy.”

Violante started up, clasping her hands. “No, no, Rosina! I will not be happy so! I would rather have my sorrow. There would be nothing left in my heart without it. If he is cruel, he cannot take that away!”

She spoke so because she was a passionate untaught creature, with instinctive impulses, which she had never learnt to resist. Yet, did not her lover feel every day the force of her words; had he not lost with her the best of himself? Was not Florence, with all her sense, and all her intellect, resigning herself to the same fate? What would Arthur be without the memory that was breaking his heart? Her words awakened an echo strong enough in Rosa’s heart to silence her for the moment.

“If I changed, I should be nothing!” repeated Violante.

“You would be what your life had made you, Violante,” said Rosa, “ready for what might come. And you would want something real. But, dear, how should you know anything about it? I should have said the same.”

Violante said no more; but she *thought* that, after all, Rosa’s circumstances were different, for *her* unknown lover could never have been like “Signor Hugo.”

Probably both the girls prepared to meet their father the next day with some trepidation, and as they awaited his arrival they owned to each other that it was very strange to be thinking of supper, and making coffee again.

“It makes me want Maddalena,” said Violante.

“Poor Maddalena! She would not like London fogs. But if I did not make the coffee I am sure there is no one else who could make it fit to drink.”

In due time Signor Mattei arrived, very affectionate, very voluble, and strangely familiar to his daughters.

“Ah, my children; how I have pined for you! While I have been toiling, you have prospered, and I find you richly clothed;” here he indicated a piece of new pink ribbon that was tied round Violante’s neck.

“Yes, father,” said Rosa, “we have some good news for you, each of us. Will you have mine first?” and, Signor Mattei assenting, she made her communication, while Violante sat by wondering how *this* love-story would be received.

But Signor Mattei was romantic only on one point.

“He is, no doubt,” he said, “a fascinating youth, and respectable, since he is your uncle’s friend; but, figlia mia, his income? Ah, you cannot live on air!”

“Mr Fairfax is not a youth, father,” said Rosa, slightly hurt; “he is five-and-thirty, and he has a very good income, which he will explain to you, himself, to-night, if you will allow him. I shouldn’t think of living on air.”

Violante had not a strong sense of the ludicrous; but even she could hardly help smiling a little at Rosa’s aggrieved air, and could not help wondering how her father would have managed to coerce her resolute, independent sister, even if he had been dissatisfied with “the fascinating youth’s” prospects, as he replied:

“Then, Rosina, if that point is clear, I will consent.”

“Thank you, father.”

“And will Violante bake a crust of bread for her poor old father when you have left us?”

“Yes, father. I— My voice is come back. I can sing now.”

Signor Mattei’s whole face changed from its sentimental air to a look of fiery enthusiasm. He started to his feet, and caught her hands.

“Your voice, child? All your voice—every note? Let me hear, let me hear.”

He pulled her towards the piano, which had been esteemed by Rosa a necessary part of the furniture of their lodgings, and, controlling her heart-beating, with a great effort she sang up and down the scale. Signor Mattei fairly wept for joy. He kissed her over and over again, he made her repeat the notes, he crossed himself, and thanked the Saints in devouter language than his daughters had often heard from him; but finally exclaimed, with an air of chagrin:

“And Vasari has married a woman with a voice like a screech-owl!”

“That is surely of no consequence,” said Rosa. “Violante can never try opera-singing again. She will never be an actress, and her health would fail again directly if she attempted it. But she is willing, after her year at school is over, to try what she can do in the way of concert-singing. And you know that, here in England, no career could be better or more profitable.”

“If you wish it, padre mio,” said Violante, “I will try now to do what you wish.”

“My sacrifices are repaid!” said Signor Mattei, though he could hardly have defined what the sacrifices were.

The interview with Mr Fairfax, who shortly arrived, was beyond Rosa’s hopes. Violante, though secretly wondering at her sister’s taste, could not but be pleased at his kindness, and was forced to acknowledge to herself that, under the most favourable circumstances, she could not have imagined Signor Hugo either condescending to so many explanations, managing to praise exactly the music Signor Mattei liked, or giving quite such a comprehending and encouraging smile and nod as the one received by Rosa, when her father was a little argumentative.

Signor Mattei obtained one or two evening engagements, and a good many pupils, so that Violante did not feel bound to begin her new life in a hurry; and Rosa began with a good heart her modest preparations for the wedding, which was to take place in the middle of August. The Greys gave a musical party, at which Signor Mattei played, and once Mr Fairfax took them all to the opera. Rather to Rosa’s surprise, Violante showed no reluctance to make one of the party. How did she feel when she sat and looked on at “Il Don Giovanni,” and saw another, and how superior, performer playing her old part of Zerlina? *Her* voice, at its sweetest and clearest, had never been quite such as this, and she seemed for the first time to know what was meant by acting, as she looked on at the world-famous *prima donna*.

This power, this popularity, this applause was what the father had looked for; the loss of this was what he had mourned. Could she ever have had it, or anything like it? Did she regret now that she could not? Did the woman see the value of what the girl had turned from with tears and distaste? For in this past year, what with trouble, change, and experience, Violante had grown into a woman.

She sat quite still, with her delicate face, pale and passive, and her eyes fixed on the stage. She had pushed all this away from her, all this light and sparkle, this splendour and excitement that had seemed so hard and glaring, so utterly untempting to her shy, tender spirit. What had she gained from that other vision that had worn such a lovely hue? It seemed just then to Violante as if both love and fame had played her false. Since she had lost the first, would it not be better to try and regain the second? It was but a passing thought, but it touched her to the quick. She put put her hand, and held Rosa’s tight, as Zerlina curtseyed, and picked up her bouquets.

“Oh,” she thought, “I would be Zerlina. I would do it all, *all*, if he would throw one. It was better to have all the trouble when he loved me—when he gave me my flowers—my flowers—”

Rosa was not surprised that the old association cost Violante that night such tears as she had not shed for many a month, and Violante wept in silence, uttering no word of her secret yearning and regret.

Part 6, Chapter XLVI.

Perplexities.

"Does the road wind up-hill all the way?"

While Violante was in London James Crichton, at some happy juncture, brought his wooing to a crisis, and became the accepted lover of Helen Hayward. His choice was equally surprising and delightful to his mother, who threw herself with the greatest interest into all his preparations for his marriage in the autumn, invited Helen whenever her mother would spare her, and regained all her elastic spirits in this new interest; while James smiled more than ever, and talked about Helen to everyone who would listen. Both his cousin and his brother were naturally strongly affected by this new love-story working itself out beside them. Lengthening days, summer weather, summer flowers, and summer habits, could not but remind both of them of what these young days of last year had been to them. There awoke in Hugh all the old questioning with himself; all the old arguments that he had thought laid at rest for ever; all the old passion, which jealousy and self-reproach had for the time overclouded. He hardly knew how; but his belief in the causes which he had for jealousy had gradually faded, and he no longer believed that Violante was either engaged to the manager or that she was pining for his loss. A little reflection convinced him that all that Arthur had told him of her sadness *might* have been caused by the memory of himself, and something in the look of her eyes at their two brief meetings confirmed this thought. As Hugh's mind gradually freed itself from the hard, bitter judgment of himself and of others that had followed the stern self-reproach and self-pity which had for so long occupied it, as his new kindliness towards Arthur warmed and softened him, he came to view things in a more natural light, and ceased to tell himself that his love, like everything else, was turned to bitterness. No, it was sweet and soft and strong as in the May-days of last year; but Hugh had become far more conscious of the difficulties attending it, and Hugh had lost in this year of sorrow and self-distrust the bounding energy by which he had intended to overcome them. Besides, he was no longer quite the authority that he had been at home, and, though Violante was doubtless really more fitted to marry him by her school-life, she had lost a great advantage in having become known first to his mother as a girl whom there was not the slightest likelihood of his fancying. A wonderful Italian unknown beauty was one thing; a little foreign, penniless girl, half-singer, half-school-teacher, was quite another. And though Hugh was, of course, his own master, his relations to his family formed so large a part of his life that he hardly knew how to disturb them, and the Crichtons belonged to exactly the class most easily disturbed by an incongruous marriage. He had given up the notion that he ought to punish himself for the destruction of Arthur's happiness by destroying his own; but his feelings strongly revolted against any deliberate effort to secure it just at the time then coming, and there was nothing morbid in the belief that he was bound to make Arthur his first consideration; for Arthur's sake, not for that of his own conscience. And what was to become of Arthur was a problem that grew in difficulty.

The recurrence of these once happy summer days, perhaps spite of himself, Jem's bright hopes, and the return to the amusement and occupations of which Mysie had been the centre, were more than he could bear, and cost him such heart-sickness as he had never yet known.

It seemed as if his light-hearted youth had been beaten at last in the struggle, and efforts to brave it out only made matters worse; and, though he had, perhaps, never fought so hard with himself, he got none of the credit that had attached to his first home-coming. They did not cease to pity him for his sorrow, but it did become wearisome to sympathise with the indications of it, and it was impossible to order matters only with reference to him. He was out of place among them, and he felt it keenly, yet he could not resolve to go away by himself, he had grown very reserved, and certainly tried as much as possible to avoid notice; and even Hugh, who saw the most of him, found it very difficult to know how to deal with him, and turned over many plans in his mind, none of which appeared to him quite satisfactory.

They were walking home together one afternoon by the field-path from Oxley. The summer heat was beginning to be felt in the air, the summer look was coming over the woods and fields. The summer silence would soon succeed to the perpetual song and twitter of the birds. They were walking on silently, when, tripping down the path came a smartly-dressed girl, with fair hair flying. It was Alice Wood, who had been absent all the year. As she recognised them, she started violently and stopped, a sudden look of agitation in her face as she made a half-curtsey.

Arthur hesitated, then went up rather eagerly, and shook hands with her.

"How d'ye do—you have been away?" he said.

"Yes, sir, at my aunt's, learning dressmaking. I—I hope you are pretty well, Mr Arthur," she added, faltering.

Arthur seemed unable to say more; he turned away from her, and she hurried on, crying as she went.

The two young men stood still, each of them overpowered by the sight of her. Then Hugh saw that Arthur shivered, and was very pale. He turned towards a tree-trunk near, and sat there with hidden face, trying to recover himself, while all Hugh's agony of remorse once more came over him.

"God knows, Arthur, I wish the stroke had fallen on me!" he said. "It is from *me* you should shrink. How can you bear the sight of *me*!"

Arthur did not answer, but he looked up after a few minutes, and said simply:

"I am very sorry. I wish I could get over these things."

“This was not a thing to be got over.”

“No. But, Hugh, the canal—the meadows—it’s like a nightmare—I can’t forget them. I have trial to go there—to conquer it, but I never could. Yet I have dreamt over and over again of it.”

“You never spoke of this?” said Hugh.

“Oh, no. Hugh, have you ever been there?”

“Yes,” said Hugh, “often at first. It was better than thinking of it.”

“Will you come with me, and get it done? I think I could—with you.”

“Oh, my dear boy, I don’t think I ought to let you do that.”

“It would be over. But I don’t know— In the morning, when it looks different.”

“Yes, not now,” said Hugh, firmly. “See here, Arthur. I have guessed at these feelings of yours. I know too well how natural and inevitable they are. But Redhurst is no fit place for you just now, and I have a plan. Should you like to come back to the Bank House and stay there with me? I think it’s comfortable, and you could rest, and there would be no discussions about society, and no worries. If you *could* like to be alone with me?”

“I should like it very much,” said Arthur, decidedly. “I know I’m no good at home, but I cannot bear the thought of wandering about.”

“Well, then, shall we come back now? You are tired and shaken, and I will go and explain things at home.”

“Yes. Hugh, we shan’t rake up all these matters again; but I want to tell you, once for all, that you mistook my feeling about yourself. I need not say I never blamed you—how could I? But all this nervous folly can only belong to—to indifferent objects. You suffered too, only at first I could not think of that. But you *do* help me—you always know the right thing for me.”

“I would lay down my life for you,” said Hugh, passionately.

“No. But you will help me to recover myself. I’m glad I have told you. And as for what must remain, when—when I have ‘got over it,’ as they say—life without her—though you wouldn’t think it after this, I believe I am learning to look forward to it a little better, and I shall have you to help me.”

“I have been very miserable about it,” said Hugh, moved to equal simplicity by Arthur’s straightforwardness. “It was my first comfort when you said I helped you. Nothing shall ever come between us: you shall be my first thought, for ever.”

Hugh’s voice swelled and quivered; he did nothing but hold Arthur’s hand for a moment, but no sign or gesture of passionate emotion would have seemed exaggerated to his feeling then. “I *can* make atonement,” he thought.

Arthur, who, after all, cared far less about the relations between them, though his affectionate expressions had been perfectly genuine, said more lightly:

“Then are we to turn back to Oxley?”

“Yes; then you will not have to talk it all over at home; I’ll settle it.”

So they retraced their steps; and Hugh took Arthur into the Bank House and upstairs, where he had never been for years. It was rather a large house, in the time of their grandfather the largest in Oxley, and was well-furnished and handsome. The drawing-room had never been used by Hugh; but he had established himself in the library, a stiff, old-fashioned room, with two long, narrow windows, with high window-seats in them. His writing-table, with its untidy masculine papers, had intruded on the orderly arrangements in which his grandmother, who had long survived her husband, had delighted. Arthur sat down in one of the window-seats while Hugh gave the orders rendered necessary by this unexpected decision.

“Do you remember how we used to come here to see grandmamma?” he said.

“Yes, but I should have thought you were too small to recollect it.”

“I remember it, perfectly. You used to be desired to keep Jem and me from walking on the grass; and you obeyed implicitly!”

“You may walk on the grass now, if you like,” said Hugh.

“It was a nice old garden. And, I declare, Hugh, there are the cats!”

“Cats? I haven’t got a cat.”

“The velvet cats on the mantelpiece—the first works of art I ever appreciated.”

And he pointed out two cats cut out in black velvet, and painted into tortoiseshell, with fierce eyes and long whiskers, objects of delight to the infant mind of any generation.

“I declare I never noticed them. You had better find out some more old friends, while I go over to Redhurst.”

The experiment proved very successful on both sides. It gave Arthur the rest he needed; the absence of association without the strain of novelty. His cheerfulness revived; and, perhaps, Hugh had rarely found life more pleasant: for, though he was tenderly desirous of making his cousin comfortable, of saving him fatigue, and amusing without oppressing him, it was really Arthur who twisted the things about till the room looked homelike and cheerful; found out how cool and shady the garden was, and how pretty a few changes might make it, and started agreeable subjects of conversation. Though not so amusing and argumentative as Jem, he was a wonderfully pleasant person to live with, even when languid and only half himself; and Hugh, delighted to find that the companionship suited Arthur, grew quite lively himself under its influence. They saw James whenever he came to Oxley, and frequently Mrs Crichton; and Hugh dutifully went over, at short intervals, to Redhurst, and, though he avoided without regret many summer gaieties, was obliged to share in a few, and, among others, went to a large musical party given by Mrs Dysart.

There had been some croquet and archery in the afternoon; but Hugh did not make his appearance till just as the music was going to begin.

“How late you are, Hugh!” said his mother, as he came up and joined her. “And no Arthur?”

“No; he was tired with the heat. I never meant to let him come. I am sure I’m early enough. They’re just going to begin.”

And Hugh sat down by his mother, and listened decorously to an instrumental piece. It was still early, some of the company were still wandering in the gardens, and the windows were open, letting in the soft evening air. But some wax candles were lighted at one end of the drawing-room, where the performers were gathered, and as Hugh, after listening to one or two songs and to a violin solo, was politely suppressing a yawn, a young lady stepped into the light. It was Violante—Violante, the same as when she had stood in the hot Italian sunlight, and sung to her father’s pupils. The same, and yet different. It seemed to Hugh’s confused eyes that she had turned into a fashionable lady, in her trailing white muslin, with its puffs and flounces, with her soft, curling hair, done up in an attempt at the prevailing fashion. She looked taller, older somehow—more unmistakably a beauty; but not, he thought, at first—his own Violante. She held her head up too, and if she was frightened managed to conceal it. Hugh made a snatch at his mother’s programme.

“Who—what—how?”

“Don’t you know?” said Clarissa Venning, who was near them. “Miss Mattei’s voice has come back. I suppose she will sing again in public; but *this* you know is quite in a private capacity. She was asked to come with Florence.”

Hugh looked at the programme:—“Song.—Miss Violante Mattei.”

He was just about to commit himself to a vehement exclamation of astonishment that no one had thought of telling him she was going to sing—how could they overlook such a fact?—when the old, sweet notes fell again on his ear, as lovely as ever he thought, and he listened, breathless, till they ceased amid loud applause and exclamations of admiration.

Violante smiled and curtseyed her thanks, with elaborate grace, and as no young lady amateur would have thought of doing.

“She has such pretty foreign manners,” cried a lady; and one of the young men of the house, laughing, tossed her a little bunch of flowers, and she picked it up and curtseyed again, just as she had been taught to do by old Madame Cellini, long ago in Civita Bella.

She was to sing once again, and Hugh waited in breathless expectation; but though the applause was as ardent as ever, she only acknowledged it this time by a dignified little bow, and retreated.

“Oh,” said one of the Dysarts, “someone has been telling her her pretty curtsey was not *selon les règles*. What a shame!”

“She is a very beautiful girl,” said Mrs Crichton, who, now that there was no need to fear Jem’s foolishness, was ready to be interested in Violante.

“Yes,” said Clarissa. “She is too fine a bird for us, which is a pity, as she is a nice little thing; and never so happy as when she is playing with the little ones. Ah, here she comes!”

Violante came up to Clarissa, without immediately perceiving her companions.

“Miss Clarissa, Miss Florence says they are going to dance. May we stay a little longer?”

“No one could think of carrying you away, Miss Mattei,” said Mr Dysart. “Pray, let me thank you for your songs. And, of course, Miss Venning, you are not thinking of stirring yet? Let me find you a partner.”

“Thank you, I am acting chaperone. You may stay if Florence likes, Violante. I think you have not seen Mrs Crichton?”

“Let me thank you for your sweet music, my dear,” said Mrs Crichton, in her kind way. “I think it was my other son you knew in Italy?”

“Mother, you mistake. It was I. I knew Mademoiselle Mattei *once*.” And Hugh started forward and held out his hand, imploringly. Violante put hers into it; but she stood passive and still.

“You were not so gracious, Miss Mattei, when we applauded you the second time,” said young Mr Dysart.

"I saw that the young ladies did not curtsey, signor," said Violante, simply; "but I thank you for listening to me."

As she spoke the lights flashed up and revealed her standing, facing Hugh, with a sort of desperate self-possession, as the first notes of the dance-music sounded.

"Mr Crichton, I think you don't dance. Miss Mattei, will you give me this waltz?" said another Dysart, approaching.

Violante was no coquette, but she was a woman, and her pride had been hurt by Hugh's neglect. So she smiled graciously, and moved away as Florence joined them, before Hugh could get out a somewhat undignified and hurried declaration that he did dance—sometimes.

"We must only stay for three dances, Flossy," said Clarissa.

But Violante had promised the three dances before she had left their side five minutes; and Hugh returned home, with the discovery that he was not the only man of taste in the world, and the firm conviction that Violante was wholly indifferent to him. It is also remarkable that at the same time he forgot entirely all the excellent arguments by which he had endeavoured to render himself indifferent to her.

Part 6, Chapter XLVII.

Thunder-Showers.

> "But whither would my fancy go?
> How out of place she makes
> The violet of a legend blow
> Among the chops and steaks!"

After Mrs Dysart's party there ensued a fortnight of intensely hot weather; so close and sultry that it wore a shade or two of pink even off Flossy's rosy cheeks and accounted partly for Violante's demeanour being unusually languid and *distraite*.

Mrs Crichton had gone to London to superintend some of James' preparations and Frederica had been left at Oxley Manor, so nothing, of course, was heard there of the young men at the Bank House. It seemed to poor Flossy as if, with the discovery of her new feelings for Arthur their old intercourse had vanished away, for on his removal to Redhurst, she ceased to see him, and she could not feel that she counted for anything in his life. Thus separated from him, she felt with and for him every pang of memory and association more keenly than he always felt them for himself.

Poor Flossy! To have given her affection not only without thought of return, but to one lying under such a heavy cloud of trouble, was enough to tame her exuberant brightness; and her lessons lost their liveliness, her own occupations their interest. Miss Venning might have seen that something was amiss; but she was greatly occupied in receiving the two little sons of the brother just older than Clarissa, who had been settled in India for some time; and, if she thought Flossy looking pale, merely suggested a holiday visit to the eldest brother, who was a Lancashire clergyman, or observed that the care of the little boys would make a nice change for her. Flossy was too young to have had much home intercourse with any of her brothers, and not just then in the humour to take up with anything new.

But Clarissa had never been so fond of anyone as of the brother Walter, whose youthful scrapes and youthful interests had all been confided to her ear, and whose departure for India had been the great grief of her girlhood.

"What a blessing they're not girls!" was her comment on the letter announcing their arrival.

"Indeed!" said Miss Venning. "It would be easier to do for them here if they were."

"Oh, I daresay they'll fit in," said Clarissa. "We want a little change."

And she went herself to Southampton to fetch them, and took them silently under her special protection, making exquisite and ever-varying grimaces for their amusement and jealous of the character of their favourite aunt. Miss Venning was glad that the children were so well provided for, and Flossy perceived that Clarissa had at last found an interest in life.

One sultry afternoon early in July Flossy, with Violante and two or three elder girls, had been to a lecture which had been held in Oxley by some celebrated personage. Miss Venning had taken the opportunity of paying a visit and had desired them to meet her at a certain shop in the town. As they crossed the marketplace ominous sounds were heard and heavy drops began to fall.

"We're going to have a thunderstorm," said Flossy, looking up at the bank of heavy clouds that was rolling up.

"Oh, Miss Florence, what shall we do?" said Violante, rather timidly.

"My new hat!" exclaimed one girl.

"It's going to pour," said another.

"We must run across to the station," said Flossy, "or down to Cooper's, as my sister said."

As they stood for a moment hesitating which way to turn, they were suddenly accosted.

“Flossy! There’s going to be a great storm. Come in with me. You will all be wet through,” and Arthur hurried up to them.

“The station—Mary,” murmured Flossy.

“The station? Nonsense! you’ll all be drenched. I’ll send after Miss Venning. Come, Flossy, don’t drown your flock from a sense of propriety. I’m sure Mademoiselle Mattei doesn’t like thunder.”

The gay voice, the familiar address, chased away half Flossy’s fears and sentiments. She laughed and yielded, and they hurried through the plashing rain-drops across the road and into the Bank House—unknown ground to them all.

“Come upstairs,” said Arthur, and he led the way into his grandmother’s drawing-room, into which for the sake of coolness he had lately penetrated.

The delighted school-girls gathered into a knot, smiling and whispering. Violante glanced round, as in sacred precincts, and Arthur, pointing to the lashing rain, laughed boyishly.

“Here you are, fairly caught in the ogre’s castle. What shall I do—shall I have up Mrs Stedman?”

“Don’t be so absurd,” said Flossy, aside. “What will the girls think of you?”

“No? Then I’ll try to be polite. Isn’t this a quaint room, Miss Mattei?”

It was a long room with three high windows, looking over the garden, against which the rain was beating violently. Everything was slender, prim, and pale-coloured. Old-fashioned prints hung on the walls, on the paper of which long-tailed birds drank out of wonderful vases. Old china was varied by wax flowers and queer little bits of fancy work. Elaborate wool-work chairs were preserved with tight-fitting muslin covers. Arthur made Violante sit down in a tall straight-backed one; he opened a cabinet of curiosities for the amusement of the girls, and was just beginning: “I don’t know when I’ve seen you, Flossy,” when the door opened and Hugh walked in, to find the stiff grandmotherly chamber full of laughing, summer-clothed girls, and in the centre, soft and smiling, Violante herself.

“Hugh looks like a man who has ridden into a fairy ring,” said Arthur, as his cousin paused in utter surprise.

Hugh made a few polite speeches, Flossy some rather hurried explanations, and then their host fell silent, till, after a minute or two, he said, gravely:

“Arthur, don’t you think we could give these young ladies some tea?”

“To be sure. I’ll go and see what can be produced.”

“Arthur has made the house quite habitable,” said Hugh to Flossy.

“He looks much better than when I saw him last.”

“Yes, I think he is better; but he has felt the hot weather, and he always turns the brightest side up, you know.”

Hugh’s affectionate tone turned up quite a new side of himself to Flossy; but Violante recognised the familiar accents which she had missed so sorely at first. He did not speak a word to her; but her heart was beating, she felt intensely happy.

Arthur presently reappeared, followed by Mrs Stedman, with preparations for tea and such a plentiful supply of cakes of all descriptions as Flossy suspected had cost the office-boy a wetting to obtain from the neighbouring pastry-cook’s. The girls were in a state of blissful delight. Was there ever such a fortunate thunder-shower? and, perhaps, their young teachers were not far from the same opinion.

“I’m afraid it’s going to clear up,” whispered one of the younger ones.

“There’s not a chance of it,” said Arthur, gravely. “It’s going to pour for an hour yet.” But struggling sunbeams began to force their way through the clouds and to dance on the rain-drops. Arthur flung up the window and a great rainbow was arching over the sky, while trees, grass, and flowers were brilliant with reflected light.

It *had* cleared up, and Miss Venning made her appearance in her friend’s waterproof cloak, with—

“Well, young ladies, I need not have been anxious about your getting wet!”

“You’re just in time to have some tea, Miss Venning,” said Arthur. “They were just getting wet through when I met them.”

Miss Venning drank her tea, and carried off her flock; but, though no one had exchanged a word in private, somehow that tea-drinking had left three people much happier than it found them.

It seemed to have restored to Flossy a natural intercourse with Arthur, and to have brought his real self before her again; while to Violante it had restored the gentle, smiling Signor Hugo of last year. The effect on Hugh was less definite, but it was long since he had laughed so much as at Arthur’s account of his finding the girls hesitating and wondering in the fast-coming rain.

He was engaged the next morning for some time by a meeting at which the plans for the gas-works, which had been invested with so incongruous an interest, and the plans for the new railway were brought forward and discussed, and it was with a very grave face that he came back to Arthur with some papers in his hand.

“Look, Arthur,” he said. “I must show you what has been proposed about this railroad. You know they want to connect Fordham and Oxley, and the line proposed would cut right through the Ashenfold woods and along the bed of the canal (which would not be worth keeping up if there was a railroad), and keep by the bank of the river up to the ‘Pot of Lilies’ and then strike across the heath to Fordham. Redhurst would have a station somewhere down by the lock. This is much the most direct line; but it is possible that they might take one round at the back of the woods, and as the property nearly all belongs to my mother we might, perhaps, get it adopted. I want to know how it strikes you.”

Hugh made this long, business-like explanation without pausing, and now he drew the plan forward and pointed out the proposed route.

“It *shall* not be done if you mind it very much,” he said, vehemently, as there was no answer.

“Does Aunt Lily know?” said Arthur.

“Yes. She is not unwilling. I would not have it talked of till it was necessary to tell you about it.”

“I remember it was talked of once before. We thought it dreadful destruction; but you said then that a good many local interests were involved in it, that it would be a good thing for the place, and that it would be a very unpopular act to oppose it.”

“I don’t care a straw about the unpopularity,” said Hugh.

“What, when you know you’re the Member of the future? No, Hugh; what reason could you give for opposing it? Don’t vex yourself about me. Why should one cling to the mere empty shell of things? To oppose a real public advantage for—for our feelings. It would just be ridiculous, and can’t be done. You would be the first to say so.”

This was perfectly true; yet Hugh could as little bear to hear the effort in Arthur’s voice as if he had not been a sensible, clearheaded man of business, who scorned the notion of acting on sentimental motives. For his own part the removal of all these haunted places was a positive relief; but he knew that to Arthur it was like rifling a grave.

“When is this likely to be carried out?” said Arthur, presently.

“Why, very soon—if they get it through Parliament before the end of the session. To-day is the fifteenth of July—”

Arthur started up and walked away to the window. Was the fate of the poor old “Pot of Lilies” to be sealed on the very day of the year when, with such mirth and merry-making, they had agreed to revisit it and renew their innocent little celebration; to live over once more the hours that had been so cloudless and so gay? Ah, never, never again!

There came over Arthur one of those agonies of regret that were worse to bear than any nervous horror, even than the daily loneliness to which he was trying to grow accustomed. He seemed to feel again Mysie’s little hand in his; to see her sweet round eyes looking into his own. The air was sweet again with summer fragrance; the sun shone hot and clear in as blue a sky; but that hand—those eyes— He hurried away, and Hugh dared not follow him, and, having no mental picture of the daily events of the past summer till it had broken up into storm and misery, could not tell what had affected him so strongly.

He could only try to be doubly tender and considerate, and, as soon as he thought Arthur could bear any discussion about himself, suggested that they should go together for a little trip to North Wales. He had not been away himself for more than a year, and could easily contrive to take the holiday. His mother, he knew, meant to go to the sea almost immediately; so Redhurst would be shut up, and Oxley was too hot and dusty in August to be endurable. Arthur acquiesced, rather languidly, but as if he knew it was right.

“Jem asked me if I would like to take a last bachelor trip with him; but I should have known all the time that his heart was elsewhere,” he said.

“You will not think I want to be anywhere else,” said Hugh, and, perhaps, just at that time he hardly did.

The trip prospered. Arthur was fond of travelling and clever in contriving plans for it. He was grave and quiet as Hugh had never known him, with fewer ups and downs of spirits, and seemed to be losing the boyishness that had clung to him so obstinately; and so the dreaded days drew near, with nothing whatever to mark their coming, and the first Sunday in August dawned damp and grey over heathery hills and mossy valleys. They were at a place where there was no English service. Arthur went to hear the Welsh one, and Hugh wandered about, anxious and wretched, and yet with his mind perversely filled with hopeful visions of Violante. He would have liked to make this a day of penance, but whenever he let his mind loose, as it were, it sprang back like an elastic band to the image that daily filled it more and more.

“It has not been at all a bad day, Hugh,” said Arthur, gently, as they parted for the night. “I am glad we came here. To-morrow, if you will, we’ll go for a long walk somewhere.”

And so they spent that Monday, so full of memories—though, of course, the Tuesday was the real anniversary of Mysie’s death—beneath cool, dull skies, over hill-sides half shrouded in mountain mists, heather and furze for roses and carnations, cloud for sunshine, wild lonely solitudes for homely quiet. They did not talk very much; but the day had none of the terror that Hugh had anticipated from it. Rather it had a kind of sorrowful peace.

In the afternoon the mist thickened into heavy rain; and, as they approached a small wayside public-house, Hugh suggested that they should take shelter; find out exactly where they were, and if there was any chance of a conveyance to Beddgelert, where they had ordered their luggage to meet them. They had been walking all day, and if their object had been to look at the scenery, instead of to find some monotonous occupation, would have been

much disappointed.

Accordingly they turned into the little inn, and while Hugh went to enquire of an English-speaking host as to the possibility of reaching Beddgelert, Arthur, who had picked up a few words of Welsh, and generally contrived to make himself understood, was engaged in a lively pantomime with the tall, dark-eyed girl who waited on them, making her laugh and talk volubly and incomprehensibly, as he tried to indicate that he wanted something; hot to drink, and something substantial to eat. There was no guest-room but the low, spacious kitchen into which they had first entered, and he was standing before the smouldering peat fire and pointing with animated gestures first to the bottle and then to his flask when the house door was burst open, and a whole party of tourists, struggling with wind, waterproofs and umbrellas, ran hastily in. There were three ladies and two gentlemen, and they were too much occupied in shaking themselves free from their wraps to perceive Arthur, till Hugh came back, saying: "There's nothing to be got here, Arthur," when a young lady, letting her waterproof drop on the floor, sprang forward. "Why, it's Mr Spencer Crichton! How d'ye do?—oh, how funny! Charlie, Charlie, here's Mr Crichton!"

"Miss Tollemache!" exclaimed Hugh, in equal surprise, as Emily Tollemache, bright-haired, frank-faced, and smiling, stood confused, while her brother came forward with—

"Why, Crichton, who in the world would have thought of meeting you here?"

One or two letters had passed between Hugh and Mr Tollemache since their parting; but with no reference to the past, the restraint of which had caused each to be less inclined to seek out the other, and Arthur, as Hugh made a sort of introduction of his friends, could not fail to be struck by his look of embarrassment. Emily, however, was equal to the occasion.

"So, you see, Mr Crichton, we *have* come to England, and I do like it so much, quite as much as I expected. Mamma is in London, and we are travelling with my cousins, only it has rained every day since we came here."

"Our climate certainly is variable," said Hugh.

"I am afraid you must regret Italian sunshine, Miss Tollemache," put in Arthur, as he tried to kick the peats into a blaze.

"Oh, no! not yet. But it seems quite natural to see Mr Crichton. And you know we went away and I have never seen Rosa or my dear Violante. I wonder what has become of them!"

"I can tell you that," said Hugh, and Arthur saw Mr Tollemache turn and look at him with an involuntary start; while Hugh grew crimson, as he continued: "They came to England, and she went, by chance, to school at Oxley."

"How strange! Do you ever see her? Oh, what a lovely, dear creature she was when we all went to the classes together! Did *you* ever see her?" to Arthur—"Couldn't I find her out?"

Arthur answered with a few words of explanation as to Violante's present circumstances, but he felt as if he were finding the explanation of all sorts of trifles which he had thought strange, but had been too much preoccupied to reason about.

"Mamma wants me to go to school," said Emily, "and, though I consider myself much too old, I should like to go to school with Violante."

Here Mr Tollemache changed the conversation decidedly, and Hugh said aside to Arthur:

"This is very unlucky! That we should have encountered all these people! Cannot we get away?"

Arthur glanced expressively at the window, against which the mountain-rain was beating almost in sheets of water.

"It cannot be helped," he said, "and I do not mind it."

He had only meant to reassure Hugh's anxiety for him; but he was surprised at the colour and hurry with which Hugh disclaimed minding it on his own account. So they were obliged to stay and eat fried ham and eggs together; and Arthur, by cultivating Miss Tollemache's acquaintance discovered a good deal that was new about Hugh's visit to Civita Bella, and by the time their meal was over the clouds had lifted, and the Tollemaches' carriage, which they had left some two or three miles behind them for the sake of the mountain walk, came in search of them. Hugh and Arthur found that they were only five or six miles from Beddgelert; and after Hugh had extorted from himself an invitation to the Tollemaches to come to Redhurst, which he was sure that his mother would follow up, and had parted cordially with his friends, they set forth on their walk once more alone together.

Part 6, Chapter XLVIII.

The Meeting of the Waters.

> "And the brooklet has found the billow,
> Though they flowed so far apart,
> And has filled with its passionate sweetness
> That turbulent, bitter heart."

The heavy walls of mist slowly lifted themselves, and the purple mountain-sides showed dark and close at hand. The passionate rush of the mountain torrents sounded full and free after the violent rain, and their foam showed white

against the grass and heather, ready to dance in the first rays of returning sunshine. Arthur and Hugh walked on for some distance in silence—a silence that confirmed Arthur's suspicions. It was so strange a revelation, so much in contrast with his life-long surface knowledge of Hugh's character, that he hesitated to believe it. Yet all Violante's looks and sayings, which he had understood as referring to Vasari, were now, he perceived, capable of another interpretation. He now recollected his impression that there had been something amiss with Hugh on his first return from Italy, the passing thought that had flashed across him when he had seen them together at the primrose-picking; Violante's wish to go to England, and her content when she found herself there; and, more than all, Hugh's flushed, agitated look as he walked on now beside him.

"Hugh," said Arthur, with sudden courage, "I think I have found the clue to a great deal that has puzzled me. I thought it was the manager-lover for whom Violante was fretting at Caletto. I think now—"

"What do you mean? Fretting? You told me it was Vasari—you confirmed all my suspicions. Tell me the real truth, what was it?" cried Hugh, stopping suddenly, and facing round upon him.

"I made mischief, I am afraid," said Arthur, "but I had a preconceived idea. I see now that her hints and her little sorrowful ways were on your account only. How *could* I guess *you* had anything to do with her?"

"Don't laugh at me!" cried Hugh, fiercely.

"I don't want to laugh. I want you to tell me the whole story."

"Tell *you*—now?" said Hugh, recollecting himself. "No, no, impossible."

"You can't leave me in such a state of conjecture. Here, it's quite fine and sunny now. Let us stop by this stile, and tell me all about it."

As he spoke Arthur perched himself on the stone step of the stile, while Hugh leaned against the wall beside him. The white masses of cloud torn in every direction rolled rapidly away, showing great wells of blue between them. Every stone and puddle shone and sparkled in the sunshine; sharp peaks, and large, round masses of rock came one by one into view.

In this unfamiliar scene, to the last person and at the last moment that he could possibly have anticipated, Hugh began to tell his story. Arthur listened with a few well-timed questions, till Hugh spoke of "trying to convince Jem," when he could not repress a laugh.

"Jem in the seat of judgment!"

Hugh laughed too, and went on, more comfortably:

"He said nothing I did not know before. I meant to carry it through. I could have done so."

"Then you did not come to an explanation with her?"

"Yes, I did. I thought *then* I had found out the secret of life," said Hugh, with an intensity of feeling, which Arthur could well sympathise with.

"But what on earth upset it all?"

"Didn't I see her with the diamonds, taking them from him?—ah!" Hugh broke off, and drove his heel into the ground, unable to recall the scene without passion that was almost uncontrollable, and turning white with the effort to restrain language and gesture to the dry composure which he had adopted.

"Her father said she was already engaged to him," he said, after a pause; then hurried on with his story, and demanded:

"Now, what do you say to that?"

"That I would not have believed you could be such a fool," would have been Arthur's natural answer, but he modified it into, "Well, I think you were very hasty, and rather hard on the poor child—"

"Hard? Do you think I was hard—don't you think I was justified in what I did?"

"I don't think you allowed enough for her father's authority and her own timidity—certainly."

"Sometimes I think I acted like a brute," said Hugh.

"Well, but you see the worse you acted the less you were deceived in *her*," said Arthur, plainly. "Well, then you came home and thought it was all over?"

"Yes. Perhaps you can understand now what caused the temper and the conduct which led to—to—. Could I have had *any* conscience, *any* feeling, and have renewed *my* happiness after last year?"

"But how was it?" said Arthur, hardly comprehending a view so unlike his own instincts.

"Well, you know recent circumstances as well as I do. I have become aware that, however it may have been once—I think now she is not indifferent to me, but I saw all the difficulties more plainly—that was not it, she is more than all the world to me—but *how* could I do it?"

"But, Hugh," said Arthur, gently, "what good could it possibly do me for you to make yourself miserable?"

"No good," said Hugh. "I know that now. But I could bear better to see you. I should have hated my own happiness." Arthur did not answer for a moment, he was thinking how little they had any of them known of Hugh.

"But you make me out rather a dog in the manger," he said, with a half-smile.

"No, no! You are all that is unselfish. But I was not thinking of you. I know I was mistaken, but lately I have seen things differently."

"It has been a great comfort to me to have you to look after me lately," said Arthur, with tact to say the most soothing thing; "and, no doubt, last year you did not know what you felt. But I should not have thought you heartless. There is one person whose feelings I think you have forgotten—Violante herself."

"When I believed she loved me it seemed too good a thing for me to put out my hand to take," said Hugh, in a low voice.

"Oh, Hugh," said Arthur, sadly and earnestly, "don't throw away a great love. Neither she nor you will ever most likely feel the like again. It is much too good to lose. It's the best thing in the world, you know."

"And I must have it. *I*, while *you*..." said Hugh, with much agitation.

"You *have* it. She loves you, and you only can make her happy."

"You don't imagine," said Hugh, passionately, "that I don't know how precious, how utterly good it is! You don't think I don't love her?"

"No, no, I don't think that."

There was a moment's silence, and then Hugh said, more lightly:

"And how about my mother, and all that part of the business?"

"As to that, Jem was right, of course, at an early stage of the proceedings; but it is not such an extreme case but what I think it may all be managed. Violante is differently placed now, and is herself all anyone could wish. And you wouldn't be worth much without her, Hugh."

"Just nothing," said Hugh.

"Well, then," said Arthur, boldly, "why don't you go home to-morrow morning and see her?"

Hugh leant over the wall in silence, enduring a conflict of feeling that only such natures ever know. He desired this thing with passionate intensity; he knew, from bitter experience, that he could not bear its loss. He was not one whose feet went creditably along the paths of self-denial, or from whom voluntary self-sacrifice came with any grace. And yet he felt how little he deserved this blessing, how utterly beyond his merits it would be, with such humiliation that he could hardly bear to put out his hand to take it. To feel himself crowned with such undeserved joy, to take it almost from Arthur's hand—to find that there was left for him no expiation, no penance even for the wrong he had done—to know "that no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him," was a pang unknown to humbler, simpler souls, but bitter as death to him.

It was almost inconceivable to Arthur, with his unconquerable instinct for making the best of things, and his readiness to accept consolation from any quarter. He had no particular insight into character, nor any inclination to sit in judgment on his neighbours; but he did perceive that Hugh was distressed by the contrast between their fortunes, and that he was suffering under an access of self-reproach, so he said:

"You can't tell how much good you have done me lately. It has been the greatest rest to be with you; but this will only be pleasure to me. I know you would put it all off to save me any pain, but I shall be happier for it—I shall indeed—don't have a single scruple."

Hugh hung down his head; he knew that to seek his own happiness was the only right thing left.

"Utterly undeserved," he murmured.

"As to that," said Arthur, with much feeling, "who could deserve love like—like theirs? I felt that, thoughtless fellow as I was, always. I had done nothing. I *was* nothing much, you know. I said so once to Mysie, and she thought it over, and that last Sunday afternoon I remember she said as we walked back together, that she had been considering what I said—I'm afraid I had never thought of it again—and that she did not think anyone need trouble about not deserving the love that was given them; for did not undeserved love lie at the very foundation of the Christian religion, yet the love of God made people happy, and we made each other happy by our love? Wasn't it a wonderful, wise thing for a girl to say? And it's true; when I think of her love, I can better bear the want of herself."

How well Hugh recognised the sweet, well-expressed wisdom of Mysie's little sayings! It struck home with an application far deeper than Arthur guessed. Had not his whole history during the past year been one long attempt to expiate his own sin, to atone himself for his errors, to absolve his own conscience from its remorse?

He looked up, with his eyes swimming in tears, at Arthur.

"I shall go, then," was all he said.

"That's right; let's get on, then, and you can have a look at Bradshaw."

Hugh laughed at this practical suggestion, and presently remembered that, as Miss Venning's holidays had begun, Violante would not be in Oxley.

"Well, you could find out her uncle's address—Jem knows it."

"Oh, I know where he lives," said Hugh, declining to encounter Jem. "Come what may, I shall come back to you at once," he said.

"Well—send me a telegram, and I could come and meet you. You know we should have gone home in a week or so, anyhow." Violante was alone at Signor Mattei's lodgings. Rosa's wedding was to take place in about a fortnight, and the little drawing-room was full of preparations for it. Rosa's modest trousseau, her uncle's gift, looked magnificent lying on the chairs and sofa, where her cousins had been inspecting it before taking her out to make further purchases. It was a hot, sunny afternoon, and Violante, as she stood in the window, thought how dusty the trees looked in the little garden, how brown the grass, and how shabby altogether was the aspect of London in August. For almost the first time she thought, with a faint sense of regret, of Civita Bella, with its harmonious colours, its fretted spires, the deep blue of the skies, the flowers. She glanced at Rosa's white bridal wreath, just sent home, and took it up in her hand—orange flowers, myrtle, and stephanotis, but these were dry and false; those other blossoms—Violante heard a little noise, she turned her head, and there stood Hugh Crichton, tall and stately, just as he had come towards her over the old palace floor more than a year ago. She was so utterly surprised, and yet his presence fitted in so justly with her thoughts that she stood waiting, with her eyes on his face, without one conventional word of greeting. Hugh had rehearsed a thousand greetings; what he uttered was a new one—

"Violante—Violante! will you forgive me?—can you love me still?"

He held out both hands imploringly. Violante looked up in his face; she dropped the wreath, and in a moment, neither knew how, he held her in his arms, and the long year of parting was a year that was past. He had come back; what had she to do with mistrust or pride?

"My darling—oh, my darling! I have not been so faithless as I seemed," he said.

"I was misled, and then—"

"I never broke my promise," sobbed Violante; "before you were gone I threw the diamonds away. I was never engaged to him—never."

"It was all my own wrong-headed folly and suspicion. And then, you know our terrible story?"

"I know many things now," said Violante, withdrawing a little. "Mr Crichton, I have seen your home, and I know the difference between us. I have not wondered lately that you did not come back."

"Never think of that," cried Hugh, "for my life is worth nothing without you. I have been so miserable that I could lead no life at all. Oh, my darling, give yourself back to me, and I will—I will be good to you! I will make you happy. I have loved you every moment of this bitter year. Oh, make the rest of my life better!"

So Hugh pleaded, with all that past bitterness giving force to his words. And she, who needed no urging, whose love had been his without an hour's wavering, felt all her troubles floating away, till the dusty suburban drawing-room was filled with a sunlight as glorious as the Italian palace, and there needed no scent of southern flowers to bring back the charm of their one half-hour of happiness. It had come back to them, and by the long want of it they knew far better what it was worth.

Part 6, Chapter XLIX.

The Lesson of Love.

> "Wed a maiden of your people,"
> Warning said the old Nokomis;
> "Go not eastward, go not westward,
> For a stranger whom we know not!
> Like a fire upon the hearth-stone
> To a neighbour's homely daughter;
> Like the starlight or the moonlight
> Is the handsomest of strangers!"
> Thus dissuading spake Nokomis,
> And my Hiawatha answered
> Only this: "Dear old Nokomis,
> Very pleasant is the firelight,
> But I like the starlight better,
> Better do I like the moonlight."

When Rosa came in from her shopping the first sight her eyes beheld was her white wreath on the floor, but before she could speak Violante sprang into her arms.

"Rosina, oh, Rosina! who do you think is here?"

As Hugh's tall figure appeared in the background Rosa had not much difficulty in answering this question; but the look in her bright, straightforward eyes was not wholly a welcome, though she held out her hand as he took Violante's and said:

"You will give her to me now?"

"Mr Crichton," said Rosa, "my little sister has no mother, and my father is not accustomed to English ways. You will forgive me if I ask you a few questions. She has already suffered a great deal from suspense."

"You can ask no questions that I am not ready to answer fully," said Hugh.

Rosa kissed Violante, and sent her upstairs, with a decision that admitted of no question. Then she picked up her wreath, and asked Hugh to sit down, while he forestalled her by saying:

"Miss Mattei, you are aware of the misunderstanding under which I left Civita Bella, and of the repulse I received from your father? I hope he will give me a different answer now."

"Indeed, Mr Crichton, there have been a great many misunderstandings. Is it only now that you have discovered your mistake?"

"No, Miss Mattei," said Hugh, colouring, "it is some weeks since I have felt certain that I was mistaken. But if you know in how much trouble we have been during we past year—and—and my share in it, you will, perhaps, understand that it was my cousin Arthur's discovery of my secret and his encouragement which has made me venture here now."

Rosa was softened.

"Ah, yes, Violante told me," she said.

"I could not have raised any discussion about myself at such a time. I don't think you like protestations, Miss Mattei, but I think a year is long enough to test our constancy, and surely—surely, Signor Mattei's objections can no longer exist."

"No, she must choose for herself now. Mr Crichton, I'm afraid I am very ungracious," said Rosa warmly; "but I have been so anxious for Violante. I know this will be best for her, if—if nothing *now* comes in the way."

"Nothing can—nothing *shall*. And Signor Mattei?"

"I think, Mr Crichton, that it would be a good thing if you spoke first to my uncle, Mr Grey. He has shown Violante and myself so much kindness that we feel he ought to be consulted. You would find him at home, he is not much engaged at this time of year—and—and—life has taken a very different turn for my little sister from anything that we anticipated for her. You will not forget that you are going to take her into a strange world?"

Rosa's eyes filled with tears as she looked earnestly at Hugh.

"I will try," said Hugh simply, but something in his tone impressed Rosa, who saw him depart in search of Mr Grey with more satisfaction than she could have imagined possible. Hugh found himself obliged to make a very clear statement of his circumstances, his independence of his mother, and the home at the Bank House, to which he would bring Violante, in all which matters he acquitted himself to Mr Grey's satisfaction; his own manner and appearance probably being strong arguments in his favour. Nor, of course, could Mr Grey be insensible to the advantage of such a provision for the girl who had failed once in her attempt to earn her living and might easily fail again. He concluded with—

"Well, Mr Crichton, you must not suppose that I am not aware of how good a prospect you offer to my niece; but I hope you have considered well your own feelings. Violante is as sweet a girl as any man could wish to see. Her father is a gentleman born, and I don't do you the injustice to suppose that you will make yourself unhappy about the accident of her former profession any more than you have about her want of fortune. But she is to all intents and purposes a foreigner, she has none of the training, and probably few of the ideas of an ordinary English girl; do not be disappointed when you find this out."

"Do you suppose I wish her to be like an ordinary English girl?" exclaimed Hugh.

"No," said Mr Grey, shrewdly; "but, having chosen your humming-bird, don't expect her to turn out a robin redbreast."

"I am not so unreasonable," began Hugh; then changing his tone, "You judge me rightly if you think I am apt to be harsh and stern, but if I can be gentle to anyone it is to her. I could not wish her other than she is for a moment."

In the meantime Rosa had prepared Signor Mattei's mind for what was coming. He listened to her with tolerable patience, looked ruefully round the room at her wedding presents, and said:

"Was not one enough?"

"We couldn't well help its happening at the same time, you see, father. And I always felt that there was a great risk that Violante would not be strong enough even for the concerts. I hope you will not oppose her happiness."

"No, figlia mia, no; my time of opposition is over. My children do not love my art, and are grown beyond me. You are English, rich, respectable; the life of the artist is not for you."

“Oh, father!” cried Violante, bursting into a flood of tears. “Indeed, it is not so; I am not rich, I am not respectable, only I love him so, father, just as you love music, how can I help it? That is all.”

“Ah, well, you are your mother’s daughters. Perhaps I may hand down to my grandchildren my own ambitions!”

With which distant, and, perhaps, doubtfully-desirable probability, Signor Mattei was forced to content himself; but there was enough truth in his disappointment to make a piece of good fortune that now befell him very delightful to his daughters.

He had been so much separated from his own family that their existence was hardly realised by his children; but about this time he received a letter from Milan, saying that an uncle, his father’s last surviving brother, who had been a physician, had died at an advanced age, and had left him a small competence. He was thus set free from the necessity of seeking engagements which would grow more precarious as he grew older, and could set to work to compose his long-dreamed-of opera in any place which he preferred.

“My children,” he said, when the first surprise was over, “you can live without me, and, doubtless, the gentlemen you are about to marry can do so too. Your England,” (this form of expression always distressed Violante) “is a great country to visit, but I am Italian. I shall go and visit the tomb of my honoured uncle at Milan, and then, perhaps, at Civita Bella old Maddalena and I can lead a quiet life together. She knows my ways.”

“And when we come to see you, father,” whispered Violante, “will you not give me the old china bowl?”

Before, however, things had arrived at this satisfactory condition many other arrangements had been made. Mrs Crichton had been at the sea and was on the point of coming to London, on her way back to Redhurst, for a final inspection of Jem’s arrangements; and, Hugh’s scruples at shortening Arthur’s stay in Wales giving way to the desire for so powerful an ally, he asked him to come to London and join him there. Arthur did so, and found that Hugh had already sought out James, who was tied to his work, in view of the lengthened holiday he meant to take in September, and had informed him of the state of the case. James was quite ready at last to accept the necessity, but revenged himself by giving Arthur the ludicrous side of the old courting timer and enjoying a hearty laugh over Hugh’s secret.

So, to Mrs Crichton’s great surprise, she was met at her hotel, not by James with his hands full of patterns, but by her eldest son, looking so grave that her first words were:

“My dear Hugh, what brings you here? Is anything the matter?”

“No, mother, nothing; but Arthur and I are in town, and I wanted to say a few words to you.”

Frederica was staying with a school-friend, so Mrs Crichton was alone; and Hugh hurried her over her cup of tea, and was unusually attentive and unusually impatient till she had finished with her maid and her orders to the hotel people, and could give her mind to his story, into the midst of which he plunged, hurrying through it with tolerable candour, and at last breaking off abruptly and waiting for his mother’s reply.

She was taken exceedingly by surprise, and though she was a woman of many words at first she hardly said anything. She was honestly desirous that her son should marry, and did not stand in that sort of relation to him which his marriage would disturb, and she was clear-sighted enough at once to recognise that this was no fancy which could be talked away.

“Mother, why don’t you speak to me?” said Hugh.

“I hardly know what to say to you, my dear. You have surprised me exceedingly; but I do not expect that anything that I say could induce you to alter your choice.”

“But, mother, you’ve seen her?” said Hugh, entreatingly.

“Yes; she is very pretty, and everyone speaks well of her; and, I have no doubt what you say about her relations is correct. But, Hugh, she is an Italian.”

“Surely, that is an unworthy prejudice!”

“Not at all. She may be as good as any English girl, but she will be different. She will not like the life of an English lady. Differences will start up in an unexpected manner. I have seen a great deal of life; and I don’t see how people are to be happy together with such thoroughly different antecedents. You will puzzle her, and she will disappoint you.”

“I would rather *she* disappointed me than that anyone else should fulfil my most perfect ideal,” said Hugh, ardently.

“But, indeed, Hugh, had you none of these doubts when you delayed so long in carrying out your intentions?”

“I delayed,” said Hugh colouring, “because I did not wish to raise this discussion at a time of such trouble—because I could not grieve Arthur. He approves of this.”

“And you have really set your heart on her all this year?”

“Set my heart!” exclaimed Hugh, starting up. “Mother, she was never out of my heart all the time when my mind was full of Arthur, when I thought renouncing her was the only atonement I could make to him!”

“How could it affect Arthur?”

“I thought no devotion, no sacrifice would be enough to make up to him ever so little. And what right have I to any happiness of my own? Oh, I have been very miserable; the only softness, the only sweetness, was the thought of her!” said Hugh, vehemently.

“My dear boy,” said Mrs Crichton, “that view was wrong. You could not give Arthur back what he lost. I think you blame yourself unduly; but, be that as it may, though we cannot undo the consequences of our actions, you seem to have forgotten that pardon was granted to the greatest of sinners not for any atonement that they could make, but for their repentance and love. We do not stand on our own merits—surely I need not say this to you.”

Mrs Crichton was a woman who very rarely spoke on serious subjects, and her sons could almost count the few occasions in their lives when she had so addressed them. She rarely criticised their behaviour; but they knew that her judgment of them was almost invariably true.

“Yes mother,” said Hugh, “I have had need to work out that truth. But if I have in any way done so it has been through Arthur’s love and forgiveness, so undeserved—so unmerited. But mother, I could not even have turned to that but for the one thing that kept my heart alive—my love for Violante. I would have taken all my happiness from her—I loved her! Though I injured her I let her forgive me!”

Hugh’s speech was somewhat confused; and, perhaps, his mother only partially understood him. He was only beginning to understand himself. For his history, with its attempt at atonement, hopeless till humble love made the offering acceptable and the pardon possible, was surely like a parable of the Greatest of all Histories, of human sin and Divine love, which this deep personal experience might help him profitably to realise. But Mrs Crichton did see that, through all this storm and conflict, the natural spontaneous love for Violante had been as a star in his heart—often obscured, indeed, by clouds of doubt and suspicion; but shining in and out till day returned. Whatever sorrow it had brought, however unwise it might be, it had kept Hugh from despair, and she could not scorn it.

“My dear,” she said, “it is too late for me to oppose what has survived so much. Nor have I the right; at your age you must please yourself. Of course, I wish you had chosen otherwise.”

“I think you will not wish so for long,” said Hugh, as he kissed her warmly.

Mrs Crichton was not ready to accede to this remark; she was troubled and anxious; and when Arthur presently came to see her and Hugh left him with her she expressed her doubts strongly.

“You wouldn’t wish Hugh to lose his better half, Aunt Lily,” he said, half playfully, and then he told of Violante’s simplicity and sweetness till Mrs Crichton was half convinced, though she still held to—

“Yes, my dear, it was very delightful for you all to rave about her; but can you imagine her Hugh’s wife, and an English lady of position?”

“Well, Aunt Lily, I can imagine Hugh very well as her husband, which is the point to interest you, I suppose.”

Mrs Crichton behaved beautifully. She forestalled Hugh’s proposals for an introduction, by going with him the next day to call on Violante, who was now staying with the Greys, from whose house Rosa was to be married.

Violante was alone in the drawing-room, and she started up flushing and trembling, then, without heeding Hugh, she went right up to Mrs Crichton and put her little hand in hers.

“I will try so hard to please you, Signora,” she said, with faltering lips.

“My dear, I am not difficult to please,” said Mrs Crichton, and somehow her fears of incongruity and incompleteness went into the background before the charm of the soft eyes and the sweet humility of the heroine of her son’s romance, which, for good or for evil, was to be the one great reality of his life.

Part 6, Chapter L.

The Lesson of Life.

> “His days with others will the sweeter be
> For those brief days he spent in loving me.”

Towards the end of August Florence Venning returned from a visit to her brother, eager, of course, to hear the details of the wonderful event that had taken place during her absence. Her sisters, however, had not much to tell her, as Mrs Crichton had only just returned to Redhurst. Hugh had been perforce busy since he came back, and Arthur had remained for some little time with Jem. They were all at home now, however, and Flossy set off on the afternoon after her return to call on Mrs Crichton and hear the news, with which Oxley was ringing from head-quarters. As she walked along the road she was overtaken by Arthur, who greeted her cordially.

“I am so glad I have met you,” he said; “I have a great deal to tell you, and it is a very long time since we had the chance of a conversation.”

“Yes,” said Flossy. “I never was so astonished, *never*! Latterly, I had half fancied that Violante had some one on her mind; but that it should be Hugh!”

“No one ever suspected him of such a romance, did they? However, it is all turning out very well, and Aunt Lily likes her very much.”

"I suppose she won't come back to school?"

"Well, no, I think under the circumstances that would hardly answer. But she, with Mr and Mrs Fairfax—you know her sister was married last week—are to come and pay us a visit; so you will soon see Violante, and, no doubt, she will tell you all her little secrets."

"I shall be so glad to see her. We shall miss her very much—she is as good and sweet as she is pretty. When?"

"When are they going to be married, do you mean?—I think in October."

"That is very soon," said Flossy.

"Yes, but there are reasons. Her father is going to live in Italy, at Civita Bella, and Hugh thinks he will take her there once more. And besides—I have something to tell you, Flossy, about myself."

Flossy looked up at him, struck by the grave tone. He looked quite well, and had lost his air of languor and preoccupation; but his manner was serious, though now he looked in her face and smiled.

"Well, it is a long story, and I think you will be surprised. I can't tell you how thoughtful Hugh has been for me through all this, and he *knows* I have come to a right decision, though he does not like it."

Flossy still looked at him, unable to frame a question, and he went on:

"Perhaps you don't know that our Bank has a sort of branch in Calcutta, not absolutely in connection with this one, but belonging to a cousin of my father's. Our grandfather, I believe, owned them both. Hugh had a letter last week from this cousin, saying that his son, who has been educated in England—I don't know if you remember him—Walter Spencer—he spent Christmas with us once—had found, on coming out, that India did not suit his health, and had to throw up the good opening out there. He is a very clever fellow, I believe; and, though his father did not exactly say so, I think he hoped that Hugh would make some proposal to him. He offers his vacant place to me, or to George, if I was otherwise provided for—you see he knows nothing of the circumstances."

Arthur had made many pauses during this long speech; but Flossy did not answer him a word. She turned deadly pale, and there was an expression in her large blue eyes as she resolutely returned his enquiring looks so miserable that he could not forget it. He could not but see that his words affected her very strongly.

"You are going, then?" she said, at length.

"Yes," said Arthur, "I have made up my mind to go. I should like to tell you all my reasons, because, Flossy, you have always listened to my troubles, and I know how you grieved with me as well as for me."

"Oh, yes—yes!" faltered Flossy, thankful for the tears that seemed to bring her senses back, and for this excuse for them.

"The idea made Hugh wretched," said Arthur, "but yet he knew there was a great deal of sense in it. He knows that *here* everything brings back what's lost. I cannot bear it. I *cannot* forget what I hoped my life would be. The best would be a sort of make-shift. But my life is before me, and I *must* not look on it as only fit to throw away. I *must* make something of it yet, if I can. And as for the parting with them all, that's the lot of hundreds. I have fewer ties than most."

"It is such an ending, Arthur!" said Flossy, sadly.

"No. I hope it will be a beginning—with God's help. You told me once that *she* would have made a life for herself without *me*. I don't think she would wish mine to have no future."

"And has Hugh consented?"

"Yes. You know he said at first that I made a mistake in coming home; but that is not so. Last winter I could not have decided on such a step as this. And now he has made me promise that I will give it up if I am ill, or if I dislike it very much. But the first is not likely to happen, and the second—shall not."

"But what does Mrs Crichton say?" asked Flossy.

"Oh, they are all very sorry, Flossy, and so am I," said Arthur, with an odd sort of smile, "but—they'll get on very well without me, and I must make my way for myself as others do. I cannot be the worse," he added, in a lower tone, "for—for *her* memory."

Flossy walked on in silence—it was almost more than she could bear. She hardly knew which was the saddest—that no one seemed to depend on Arthur for happiness, or that he seemed to regret their independence so little.

"What shall *I* do?" was in her heart, and she was speechless, lest it should find its way to her tongue.

"You know, Flossy," he said, after a pause, "a sorrow like mine swallows up everything. I can't care very much for lesser partings. Don't think me heartless. I shall never forget any of you; but things are so changed that, now that I have partly got over the shock, I feel as if an outward change were only the natural consequence of the inner one."

It was natural enough. Arthur had had many affections, but only one love. There had always been a sort of self-reliance about him; while he had taken gratefully all the sympathy and all the tenderness that was offered him he had never been able to depend on any of it. There was a great risk of hardening; but he had the safeguards of an

unselfish disposition, the pure and perfect love that could not die with its object, and a most earnest desire not to fall short of what Mysie's betrothed had hoped to be. He would try hard to hold himself upright, and it might be trusted that, with the blessing of the prayers of those who loved him, he might realise a yet higher love than Mysie's, and keep his heart soft and open for the days when even another earthly love might come to fill it. There was no thought of such a time in the heart of the poor girl by his side, who endured, not, indeed, the most passionate, or the most keen, but, perhaps, the most depressing grief a woman can know. But Flossy was young and bright and strong; and, moreover, the passion that only an idealistic nature could have entertained needed very little nourishment, and could find some satisfaction in imagination, admiration, and just the spark of possibility that would not define itself into hope.

In other words, so long as Flossy knew that Arthur's life was all she could wish it to be, she would lead her own, *having no closer ties to remember*, without intolerable disturbance or dissatisfaction. It would not spoil all other interests, because the world held for her an interest surpassing them all.

But the last days were very hard to endure; and, though the impulsive outspoken girl guarded every word and look, though Arthur parted from her as from a sister, there came a day when the new depths in her clear, honest eyes, the new tones in her fresh, firm voice, came back on his recollection and suggested a new ending to her story.

To Hugh, in the midst of his own happiness, and such happiness as he had never imagined for himself, it was a great pang to find that Arthur must seek content without his help, and find it away from his side. His judgment acquiesced, and, perhaps, nothing showed how well he had learnt his late hard lessons as the way in which he made everything easy, and secured for his cousin the lot that he had chosen as best for himself.

So Arthur went forth from among them whither these pages cannot follow him, as his young energies recovered their force, and a new life gradually roused his old interest in new hopes and new ambitions.

At home the old canal gave place to the new railroad, and the wedding parties no longer drank tea at the "Pot of Lilies;" but rushed over it and beyond it to more distant and exciting places of entertainment, before the old rector and his wife entered into the promise of their golden wedding, after the fifty years that "were such a little bit of eternity."

A new generation of girls, among whom Emily Tollemache was for a short time numbered, found Miss Florence still bright and enthusiastic, Miss Clarissa full of her little nephews, while, away in London, Rosa Fairfax congratulated herself that teaching was over for her for ever. Signor Mattei, in sunny Italy, dreamed over and composed the opera that was to be more famous than his daughter's voice; while the precious china bowl held the place of honour in the Bank House drawing-room, and was discovered by Jem to be quite in the highest style of art, and worth *anything* to a collector.

"People find things out in time," said Hugh, with a smile, as his romantic choice was justified by the real happiness that resulted from it. For Violante was all that Hugh needed, and what more could she need herself? His love and his happiness made her own.

But there never came a day that Hugh forgot to look for Arthur's letters, or to feel responsible for his fortunes; never a day when the incompleteness of Arthur's life did not mar the perfection of his own. Nor ever will, till, amid the scenes of the sorrow that closed his youth, Arthur finds the happiness of his manhood.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE ***

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