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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HATHERCOURT ***

Mrs Molesworth

"Hathercourt"

Chapter One.

"Twoe Sisters."

"The haunted aisles, the gathering gloom,
By some stray shaft of eve made fair;
The stillness of the neighbouring air,
The faded legends of the tomb.
I loved them all..."

Songs of Two Worlds.

Hathercourt Church is not beautiful, though the internal evidence in favour of its having at one time been so is considerable. It has suffered sorely at the hands of plasterers and white-washers; yet the utmost efforts of these misguided people have not altogether succeeded in effacing the traces of a better state of things—there is still grandeur in the sweep of the lofty roof, oak-raftered behind its dingy white covering; still "meaning and mystery" in the quaintly varying windows; much satisfaction for the learned in such matters, and indeed for the unlearned too, in the unmistakable beauty of the carved screen, the one object untampered with since the days when it gladdened the eyes of the ancient men who fashioned it, long, long ago.

A *very* long "long ago" that time used to seem to Mary Western when, in the intervals of her attention to the service, she sometimes dreamed of those far-away days. She was not much given to dreaming, but in Hathercourt Church there were circumstances under which the temptation became irresistible.

After a course of years the words of the morning service, especially when read, Sunday after Sunday, by the same familiar voice with precisely the same intonations, are apt to grow monotonous; and had Mary not occasionally allowed her thoughts to go wool-gathering, the chances are that her brown straw hat would have been seen to nod, and she might have fallen asleep altogether. For that part of Sunday morning which preceded their appearance in church was a tiring and trying ordeal to the elder daughters of the Western household. There was the early class at the school, there were "the boys" at home to keep peace among, there were the very little children in the nursery to coax into unwonted quiet, for on Sunday mornings "papa" really must not be disturbed, and mamma, "poor mamma," looked to her girls to do their part in helping her.

Hathercourt Rectory offered in every particular a contrast to its neighbour, the church. The one was old, very old, the other comparatively new; the Rectory was full to overflowing of life and noise and bustle, the church, even when its whole congregation was assembled, seemed empty and bare and strangely silent.

"It is thinking about all the people that used to be here—the air is too full of their voices for outs to be heard much," Mary said to herself sometimes, and her girlish eyes would see strange scenes, and strange murmurs would sound in her ears. There was the leper window in the chancel, which alone, she had been told, testified to a date not more recent than that of the reign of King John. Mary's glance never fell upon it without a shudder, as in imagination—imagination in this case no doubt falling far short of reality—she saw huddled together the crowd of accursed beings, old world Pariahs, gazing up with bleared yet longing eyes at the priestly forms about to dispense the mystery to them, doubtless with little meaning but that of a charm. Then there were the tablets on the walls, many of them very old, telling in a few simple words a whole life history, or in some cases that of an entire family, whose members had either died out or left the neighbourhood so long that these chronicles of death were all that remained to tell of their ever having lived.

There was one tablet in particular on which Mary, sitting in her own corner of the wide bare pew, had for so many

years, Sunday after Sunday, allowed her eyes to rest that it had grown to seem to her a part of her own life. The service would not have been the same to her without it; her father, she almost fancied, could not have got through his morning's work had the tablet been removed from its place, a little to the left of the reading-desk. Mary knew its burden by heart as well as, or better than, "the creed, the ten commandments, and the Lord's prayer," yet she could no more help reading it afresh every time she came into church than one can help counting the tantalising telegraph-wires, as they slowly rise up, up, then down again, from the window of a railway-carriage.

Of a time far remote from railways and telegraphs told the old tablet in Hathercourt Church.

"Here lieth," so ran the inscription, headed in the first place by an imposing coat-of-arms, the date 1597, and the initials M.B.—"Here lieth the bodi of Mawde, the elder sister of the twoe dovghters of Arthur Mayne, late of Southcotte, and the late wife of John Beverley of Hathercourt, who departed this worlde the sixt day of November, 1597, whiche John and Mawde had issve five soones and five dovghters, whiche Mawde, the wife of the seid John Beverley, esqvier, and dovghter of the seid Arthur Mayne, esqvier, was 37 yeres oolde at the time of her deathe."

Mary's meditations on "whiche Mawde" represented various stages in her own history. Long ago, in the days of little girlhood, the era of brown straw hats and tendency to nod, it was not Mawde herself, so much as the great army of "soones and dovghters" she had left behind, on which her imagination dwelt. They must have been quite tiny things, she calculated, some of these Beverley boys and girls, when their mother died. How they must have missed her! How, beyond words, terrible would be *their* plight, that of the nineteenth century Western children, that is to say, in such a case! Mary trembled at the mere dream of such a possibility. Poor little Beverley boys and girls! what had become of them all? Had they grown up into good men and women, and married and had children of their own, and died, and in their turn, perhaps, had tablets put up about them in far-away churches? What a great many stories might be told of all that had happened to poor Mawde's children and children's children since that dreary "sixt of November" when they were left motherless!

But as time passed on, and Mary grew into womanhood, Mawde herself engaged her sympathy. Thirty-seven when she died, that was not so *very* old. She must have been married young, probably, and had a busy life of it. Was her husband kind and good, and did she love him and look up to him? They could not have been poor, that was one comfort to think of; life, even with the ten "soones and dovghters," could not have been quite so hard upon John Beverley's wife as, Mary thought with a little sigh, "mamma" found it sometimes. And then her fancy would wander to the sister dimly alluded to in the inscription, the *younger* daughter of Arthur Mayne. What was her name, what had become of her, and did she and Mawde love each other very much? Mary used to wonder, as her glance strayed to *her* sister at the other corner of the old pew—her own especial sister, for somehow Alexa and Josephine, being much the younger for one thing, never seemed *quite* as much her sisters as Lilias. How strange and sad that the record of affection should die, and only the bare fact of the old relationships exist! Mary could hardly picture to herself a tablet even three hundred years hence bearing *her* name, on which there should be no mention of Lilias too.

The congregation at Hathercourt Church was never, under the most favourable circumstances, those even of "weather permitting" to the extent of cloudless skies and clean roads, anything but a scanty one. And on rainy days, or very cold days, or very hot days, it was apt to dwindle down to a depressing extent. Of an afternoon it was seldom quite so poor, for, unlike the denizens of the manufacturing regions, who would consider it very hard lines to have to hurry over their Sunday hot joint for the sake of so-called evening service three or four hours before its time, the agriculturalists, employers, and employed of Meadshire and its neighbouring counties, much prefer the half-past two o'clock service to any other: So, as a rule, Mr Western reserved his *new* sermon for the afternoon, contenting himself with choosing for the morning one of the neatly tacked together manuscripts which for many years had lain in a dusty pile in a corner of his study. Sometimes, when they compared notes on the subject, Lilias and Mary agreed that they preferred the old sermons to the new.

"Papa must have been clever when he was young," Mary would observe, thoughtfully.

"He is clever *now*," Lilias would rejoin, with some little show of indignation.

"Yes—but—I suppose anxieties, and cares, and growing older, cloud it over in a way," was the best solution Mary could arrive at as to why greater things had not come of her father's talents.

Perhaps the truth was that they were not very remarkable—not so remarkable, certainly, as to have forced for themselves a way through the adverse circumstances of being united to a somewhat easy-going, kindly, and contented nature such as that of the Rector of Hathercourt, whose worldly needs had never been pressing enough to force him to great exertion, who loved the place he had lived in for a quarter of a century, and was not hard upon his people, even though they were averse to morning service, and now and then indulged in forty winks, even of an afternoon.

"We have got into each other's ways," he would say sometimes, with a mixture of deprecation and self-congratulation, when, even to Hathercourt, echoes of the strange noises beginning to be heard in the ecclesiastical "great world" would find their way. "We understand each other, and know each other's good points. I don't pretend to go along with all these changes, though I am far from saying no good may come out of them. But they are not in our way—they are not in our way; and, after all, there is something in letting well alone. It is something to feel, as I hope to do when I die, that at least I haven't left my people *worse* men and women than I found them—eh, Polly?"

For on his second daughter's face there came sometimes a look her father hardly understood—a look of questioning and consideration, of less readiness to take things just as she found them, than altogether tallied with his philosophy. Yet Mary was his favourite child. Lilias disagreed with him openly in her sweet-tempered way, grumbling with a sunny face at their monotonous and secluded life, and openly avowed her determination to change it for a different one, should she ever get a chance of doing so to advantage.

“What *would* you do with five old maids, papa?” she would say sometimes. “Just fancy us all in a doleful row—the *five* Miss Westerns! In ten years hence even Francie will be grown up, remember.”

“Ten years may bring—indeed, are sure to bring many changes, Lily dear,” her mother would say—“some, perhaps, that it would take half the heart out of us could we foresee.”

“Mamma is so sensible and reasonable always, I sometimes think she has forgotten what it was to be a girl,” said the elder to the younger sister one October Sunday morning as they were crossing the pretty little bit of inclosed meadow land which was all that separated the church from the Rectory.

“No,” said Mary, “it isn’t that; she knows and remembers quite well. It is that she knows *too* well, I fancy.”

“How do you mean, Polly? I’m stupid at understanding things, unless people say them plainly. Stay a minute, we are in plenty of time—nobody is coming to church yet, and it is so nice here under the trees.” Lilias leaned against one of a beautiful cluster of horse-chestnuts growing in the middle of the church paddock, and as she spoke looked up through the already fast baring branches to the cold, grey, blue sky overhead. “Dear me, how very quickly the leaves are falling this year!” she said, “it was that stormy weather in September that shook them, and, once they begin to fall, winter seems to come with a rush.”

Mary smiled, and her lips moved as if she was going to speak, but she stopped and said nothing.

“What were you going to say, Mary?” asked Lilias, whose eyes had idly journeyed down from the sky to her sister’s face. “Why did you stop?”

“On second thoughts I thought it not worth saying,” replied Mary, “but I’ll tell you if you like. It was only what you said about the leaves—it made me think that was what mother feels. *She* knows how fast they fall once they begin, and it makes her afraid for us in a way. *She* doesn’t want to hurry us out into the storms; we have always been so well sheltered.”

Lilias looked at her sister for a minute without speaking. “How prettily you see things,” she said, admiringly. “You think of things that would never come into my head, yet people fancy you are the practical and prosaic one of us all. I believe it is all because you are called Mary.”

“But Mary was just *not* the practical and prosaic one. You mean Martha.”

“No; no, I don’t. Marys nowadays are practical and prosaic, any way. I don’t mean to say that you are, except sometimes, perhaps. I think you must be very like what mamma was at your age, but I fancy you are cleverer and—”

“And what?”

“And wiser—at least, in some ways. You would not be satisfied to marry just such a person as my father must have been; you would want some one more energetic and stronger altogether.”

“Perhaps,” said Mary. “But I do not think we need speculate about that sort of thing for me, Lilias; there’s plenty of time to think what sort of a person I would marry, if ever I do, which very likely I won’t.”

“Don’t speak like Mrs Gamp, and please don’t be so sensible, Mary. If you only would be silly sometimes, you would be perfect—quite perfect,” said Lilias.

Mary smiled.

“But indeed,” continued Lilias, “I am not at all sure that it *is* sensible to look at things as you do. If none of us marry, or do anything for ourselves, it will come to be rather hard upon papa in a few years.”

“But why suppose none of us will marry?” said Mary. “It is unlikely, to say the least, that we shall *all* be old maids.”

“I don’t know that it is,” replied Lilias, seriously. “I am three-and-twenty, remember, and you not two years younger, and things go on just the same year after year; we never make a new acquaintance or go anywhere.”

“Except to the Brocklehurst ball,” put in Mary.

“Oh, that Brocklehurst ball,” said Lilias, laughing. “Many and many a time, when it comes round again, I have been tempted to give up going, just that I might be able to say I had not been, when every one shakes it at me reproachfully if ever I grumble. What good is the Brocklehurst ball, Mary? It is so crowded, and the people come all in great parties; we never get to know any one. I suppose our beauty is not of that striking order to shine out through country made dresses, and crowds of finer people! I enjoy it, of course—even dancing with Frank Bury is better than not dancing at all.”

“Or with one of Mr Greville’s curates,” said Mary, mischievously.

“Don’t,” said Lilias. “I cannot bear the subject. I told you some time ago—and I shall always say so—the bane of our life has been curates. Because papa is a poor clergyman, with lots of daughters, every one seems to think there can be, and should be, nothing before us but curates. It almost makes me dislike papa, to think he ever was one!”

“Lilias,” said Mary, suddenly, “we shall be late. The school children have gone in, and there are the Smithson girls coming up the lane, and they are always late. Do come!”

It felt chilly in church that morning. There was a decidedly autumn “feel” in the air, and the ancient building always

seemed ready to meet winter, with its gloom and cold, more than half way. With corresponding reluctance to admit warmth and sunshine, it shrank from the genial spring-time—summer had to be undeniably summer before its presence could be realised within the aged walls. And this morning the congregation was even unusually small, which made the bareness and chilliness more obtrusive.

Mary was busy in a calculation as to how many years would have passed since Mawde Beverley's death "come" the next "sixt of November," a date fast approaching, for it was now late in October, when there fell on her ears a sound—the mere shadow of a sound it seemed at first—which almost made her think she was dreaming. Such a sound had *never* before been heard in Hathercourt Church on a Sunday morning; the sensation it produced in her, as gradually it grew louder and clearer, and more unmistakable, was so overpowering that she was positively afraid to look up. Had she done so she would have expected to see the whole congregation turning to the door in awestruck anticipation of some portentous event. For the sound was that of carriage wheels—coming nearer, nearer, till at last—yes, there could now be no mistake, they stopped at the church gate. Then, after a little pause, came the creaking of the heavy oaken door, opened cautiously—the intruders evidently expecting themselves to be late comers—and seeming, as is the manner of doors, on that account to make all the more noise. Again a little hesitation, then the sound of footsteps, several footsteps, coming along the aisle, the rustle of dresses, a faint, indescribable stir in the air, the result, probably, of the heads of nearly all the congregation present being turned in the direction of the persons approaching. Mary's curiosity overcame her at last. She glanced up, first at Lilias, whose eye she caught for an instant, an instant in which it spoke volumes.

"You *must* look at what is coming up the aisle," it said, "it is worth looking at. See how discreetly I manage to do so—my prayer-book a little to one side. No one would guess I was not attending to the service."

But from where Mary sat so much diplomacy was hardly called for. Another moment brought the newcomers full in her view, as they filed in, one after the other, two ladies, then two gentlemen, to a pew some little way in front. The first lady was middle-aged, if not elderly, well-dressed and rather fat; the second was tall and thin, and seemingly very young, well-dressed too, and—an accidental turn of her head brought the face full in sight—yes, there was no doubt of it, very, *very* pretty. Pretty with the prettiness that is almost, but not *quite*, beauty, that might, perhaps, grow to be such in a few years, for just now she could not, thought Mary, be more than sixteen or seventeen—the rounded cheek and white forehead, on which the dark, soft hair lay so nestlingly, had no lines or suspicions of furrows such as are seldom altogether escaped even at twenty; the nose, the mouth, the lovely, happy looking eyes, showing bright blue through the long black lashes, all told of the very first spring-time of life; the poise of the graceful little head on the shoulders, the flutter of unconcealed interest with which she looked about her, put her extreme youth beyond a doubt.

"How pretty she is!" thought Mary. "How bright and sweet and happy she looks!"

And for a moment or two the girl personally so interested her that she forgot to ask herself the question at which Lilias had long ago aimed, "Who can she be?" or rather, "Who can they be?"

For the "they" was made up by more interesting objects than the well-dressed, rather fat lady at the top of the pew. The rest of the "they" consisted of two gentlemen, who next fell under Mary's investigation. Neither of them was old, yet one was decidedly older than the other; both were good-looking, but one was better than good-looking, he was undoubtedly handsome, and his expression was almost as attractive in its way as that of the young girl beside him. Could they be brother and sister? thought Mary to herself. There was no striking likeness between them, certainly, but neither was there any decided *unlikeness*, and she fancied there was something brother and sister-like in the way they sat together, sharing a hymn-book when the time came for the anthem's substitute, Hathercourt Church being supposed to be "a place where they sing," though the way in which the singing was performed was sometimes a matter of mortification to the Western girls, considering the time and labour they bestowed on the "choir." It seemed unusually bad to Mary to-day, listening, as she caught herself doing, with "other people's ears;" and once, when she fancied that she detected the ghost of a smile pass between the two young people on whom she was bestowing so much attention, she felt her cheeks grow hot, and she turned her eyes away from them with a little feeling of irritation.

"I wish strangers would stay away, if they come to criticise," she said to herself.

Just then for the first time she caught distinct sight of the face of the other gentleman, the elder of the two. It was grave and serious enough to please her, surely! Too grave and serious by far, she decided. It was like turning from sunshine into gloom to watch his dark, quiet face after the two beside him. He looked older, a great deal older, than his companions.

"Thirty-three or four, at least," was the age with which many credited him, but when she looked at his face again, she doubted the correctness of her opinion. It was more grave than old, after all, and after all, too, there was something rather nice about it. What fun it would be to talk them all over with Lilias afterwards! What—Suddenly a little pause in her father's voice startled her wandering thoughts back to the present; the sermon was just coming to an end, and with considerable compunction Mary confessed the truth to herself—she had not heard a word of it! Certainly these strangers had a great deal to answer for.

There was a little delay in the coming out of church. The Smithson girls, and old Mrs Bedell, and even the school-children and the clerk seemed to be stupefied by the presence of the unexpected visitors; they all hung back and stared at the strangers, and at each other, as if they did not know what to do, till at last Lilias Western, waxing impatient, touched her mother with the end of her parasol, and leaning across little Francie and Brooke, whispered something which resulted in the rector's wife, contrary to the usual order of procedure, leading the way down the aisle, followed by her goodly array of sons and daughters. Thus encouraged, the rest of the congregation followed with a rush, and when Lilias looked back from the door, there was no one to be seen in the church but the two gentlemen and two ladies, gazing about them in dignified desertion.

“What a set of boors all the people make themselves look,” exclaimed Lilias, almost before the Rectory party was out of earshot of the other members of the congregation.

“Hush, Lilias, some of them will hear you,” said her mother. “They don’t mean to be rude, poor people. You must remember how unaccustomed they are to strangers.”

“Mamma,” interrupted George, the second Western boy, hurrying up—“mamma, who can those people be? They’ve come out of church, and they’re standing staring about as if they didn’t know what to do. Where can they be going to? Their carriage hasn’t come back.”

Lilias’s fair face flushed—a very small amount of excitement was enough to deepen the soft pink colour of her cheeks at any time.

“We should do something, mamma,” she said, appealingly. “Shouldn’t Basil or George run back and ask them if they would like to wait at the Rectory till their carriage comes? You, Basil, run back, do, and ask them if they wouldn’t like to come in and rest a little.” (Basil was much the best-looking of “the boys.”)

“Rest—rubbish!” he said, contemptuously. “Haven’t they been resting in church all this time? I’m not going with such a nonsensical message,” and he turned away.

“George, you go, as Basil seems afraid of behaving like a gentleman,” said Mrs Western.

But George, too, hesitated.

“I wouldn’t mind if it wasn’t for those ladies. Mother, they are so *awfully* grand,” he said, beseechingly.

Lilias’s face grew scarlet.

“I will go myself, then,” she exclaimed, and turning quickly, she had gone some way across the grass before the others quite understood her intention. Mrs Western looked distressed.

“Lilias excites herself so,” she said.

“I’ll ran after her, mother,” said Mary, quickly, and in another moment she was by her sister’s side. Lilias was still flushed and breathless to boot.

“Did you ever know such ill-mannered, rude—” she was beginning, but Mary interrupted her.

“They are just *boys*,” she said, philosophically. “But, Lilias, you have put yourself quite into a fever. Let me go and speak to these ladies—yes, do, I would rather—it is better for me than for you.”

“But why?” said Lilias, doubtfully, though visibly relaxing her speed.

Mary laughed.

“I can’t say exactly, but somehow it’s not dignified for you to go hurrying back in that sort of way, and for me—well, I don’t think it matters.”

Lilias still hesitated.

“It isn’t that,” she said; “I wouldn’t have you do anything I would not do myself, only—Mary, you will laugh at me—I do feel *so* shabbily dressed.”

Mary did not laugh. She looked at her sister with real sympathy and concern. There are some of the trials of poverty whose stings are even more acutely felt at three-and-twenty than at seventeen, and Mary pitied Lilias where she might have laughed at Alexa.

“Let me speak to them, then,” she repeated. “Do, Lilias; I will hurry on, and you may follow slowly and see how I comport myself,” and Lilias made no further objection.

“How Lilias under-estimates herself,” she thought. “Who, with eyes in their heads, would think of her dress when they see her face?”

She was close to the little group of strangers by this time. They were standing just outside the porch, “staring about them,” George had said—rather, it seemed to Mary, examining with some interest the outside appearance of the ancient church. Three of them did not see her approach, the two ladies and the handsome, fair-haired man were at a little distance and looking the other way; only the elder of the two gentlemen was standing so as to face her, and he appeared sublimely unconscious of her errand having anything to do with himself or his friends. He moved aside a little as she drew near, evidently with the idea that she was going into the church again. Mary’s heart beat a little faster; this was by no means what she had bargained for, but there was no retreat possible now. There was Lilias slowly advancing in the background, her grey alpaca skirt trailing behind her on the grass with all the elegance of silk or cashmere—somehow Lilias *never* looked shabbily dressed!—her very observant blue eyes doubtless taking in the situation fully. Mary felt that the credit of the family was in her hands; she must prove herself equal to the occasion.

“I—I beg your pardon—excuse me,” she began, but the gentleman did not seem to understand that she was speaking to him; half mechanically he raised his hat, under the impression that the young woman, or lady, he had scarcely observed which, was about to pass by him into the porch, when again she spoke, and this time more distinctly. “Excuse me,” she said again; “mamma—my mother, I mean—thinks perhaps the ladies will be tired. Do you think

they would like to come over to the Rectory and rest a little?”

Chapter Two.

Who—Whence and Why?

Joan.—”... she with the green kirtle too. Ah, but they are bravely clad!”

Isabel.—“And see, sister, he in the crimson doublet. Save me, but they are a pretty pair!”

Dame Winnifrith.—“Fie on ye, damsels! Call ye that a saying of your prayers? Fie on ye!”

Old Play.

She had stopped just in front of him. This time her voice could not fail to attract his attention, and with a slight start—for his thoughts had been busied with matters far away from the present—he turned a little and looked at her. This was what he saw: a girl with a face still slightly tanned by last summer’s sun—or was the brown tinge, growing rosier on the cheeks, her normal complexion? afterwards he thought of it, and could not decide—very bright, *very* wavy chestnut-coloured hair, ruffled a little about the temples, and growing low on the forehead; pleasant, hearty eyes, looking up at him with something of embarrassment, but more of amusement, eyes of no particular colour, but good, nice eyes all the same—a girl whom it is difficult to describe, but whose face, nevertheless, once learned, could not easily be forgotten. There was something about it which softened the seriousness of the man looking at her; his own face relaxed, and when he spoke it was with a smile, which, beginning in the grave, dark eyes before it journeyed down to the mouth, so transformed the whole face that Mary mentally improved upon her former dictum; there was certainly something not “rather” only, but “very nice” about the elder of the strangers “when he smiled.” Mary had yet to learn the rarity of these pleasant gleams of sunshine.

“I beg your pardon,” he said—for notwithstanding that Mary’s alpaca was several degrees shabbier than her sister’s and that her little white bonnet was of the plainest “home-make,” he felt not an instant’s doubt as to her being that which even in the narrowest conventional sense is termed “a lady”—“I am so sorry. I had no idea you were speaking to me. I shall tell my aunt and sister what you say; it is very kind of your—I beg your pardon again. I did not quite catch what you said.”

He had been on the point of turning to speak to his companions, but stopped for a moment, looking at Mary inquiringly as he did so.

“My message was from my mother, Mrs Western—I should have explained,” Mary replied. “I am—my father is the clergyman; we live at the Rectory opposite.”

She bent her head in the direction of her home. The stranger’s brow cleared.

“Of course,” he said, “I understand. Thank you very much.—Alys,” he called, hastening a step or two in the direction of the two ladies—“Alys, tell your aunt that this young lady has come to ask if you would like to wait at the Rectory till the carriage comes.”

The girl caught the sound of her own name in a moment; she had quick ears.

“How kind of you—how very kind of you!” she exclaimed, running up to where Mary still stood. “Laurence, please ask aunt to say yes. I *would* like to go across to the Rectory.” She was close beside the gentleman now. “Laurence,” she continued, giving him a little pull to make him listen to what she went on to say in a whisper, “I want to see those girls, the clergyman’s daughters; I noticed them coming out of church. One is *so* pretty. Ah, yes, there she is!” as she descried Lilias standing a little way off. “Is that your sister?” she went on, turning again to Mary. “Do you think she would mind if I went to speak to her? I do so want to see her quite close—she is so very, very pretty.”

The gentleman looked annoyed.

“Alys,” he was beginning, “you really should—” But at this juncture up came the fair-haired man and the elderly lady, and from another direction Lilias, her curiosity overpowering her misgivings, moved slowly towards the group. Mary’s position was growing a little uncomfortable; she was glad to take refuge by her sister’s side. Again Mrs Western’s message of hospitality was repeated, this time to the elderly lady, whose name Mary thus discovered to be Winstanley; she, too, was profuse in her expression of thanks.

“So very kind of you,” she said to Lilias, who, feeling extremely conscious of her grey alpaca, replied by a bow of extra dignity.

“I really do not know what we had best do,” continued Miss Winstanley; “the carriage should have been back by this time.”

“If you and Alys like to wait at the Rectory, Cheviott and I can walk on to see if it is coming,” said the fair-haired young man, speaking for the first time.

At the sound of his voice Lilias looked up, and an expression of surprise crossed her face.

“Captain Beverley!” she exclaimed, impulsively, instantly, however, appearing to regret the avowal of recognition, for she grew scarlet and glanced at Mary in real distress. “I am sure he will not know me again,” she was thinking. “What

a horrid, stupid thing of me to have done!—a man I only met once in my life, and that at a ball nearly two years ago! What *will* he think of me?”

Mary felt perplexed. She could not understand her sister’s embarrassment, and was therefore unable to help her. But the awkwardness lasted for a moment only. With a flush of evident gratification, Captain Beverley stepped forward.

“Miss West!” he said, eagerly. “I was almost sure it was you, but I scarcely hoped you would remember me. I had no idea you lived at Hathercourt. Is it your home?”

“Yes,” replied Lilias, though still with a shade of constraint in her manner, “my father—our father,” turning to Mary with a pretty sisterly air, “Mr Western, is the rector.”

“Dear me, how curious I did not know it,” said Captain Beverley. “Cheviott,” he continued, turning to his companion, “you remember our meeting Miss West—Western, I mean—at the ball at Brocklehurst the year before last?”

Mr Cheviott bowed, somewhat stiffly, it seemed to Mary.

“I fear you are mistaken, Arthur,” he said, “I do not think I ever had the honour of being introduced to Miss Western.”

“Arthur” looked annoyed, and as if he hardly knew what to do; Lilias’s face flushed again, and Miss Winstanley began talking to Mr Cheviott in a hurried, fussy manner, with so palpably evident an anxiety to set every one at ease that she only succeeded in making them all more uncomfortable. Mary, animated by a sudden consciousness of antagonism to Mr Cheviott, came quietly to the rescue.

“I think, Lilias,” she said to her sister, speaking distinctly, so that they all heard her, “I think mamma will be wondering why we are so long. If these ladies, Miss Winstanley and Miss—”

“Cheviott,” put in Captain Beverley, hastily.

“Miss Cheviott, do not think it worth while to rest at the Rectory, perhaps we had better not interrupt them any longer. Of course,” she went on, turning to Miss Winstanley with a smile that showed she meant what she said, “if your carriage does not come soon, and we can do anything to help you, we shall be very glad. One of the boys can go to the village to see about it, if you like; we have no carriage, otherwise I am sure—”

“Thank you, thank you,” interrupted Miss Winstanley, nervously glancing at her silent nephew, and, without his permission, not daring to commit herself to anything but generalities, “you are, really, so very kind, but I think the carriage is sure to come soon. Don’t you think so, Laurence?”

“It’s here now,” exclaimed Alys Cheviott, in a disappointed tone; “and Laurence,” she added, in a lower tone, but not low enough to prevent Mary’s hearing the words, “you are very, *very* cross.”

Mary was quite inclined to agree with her, but, looking up at the moment, she caught a smile on Mr Cheviott’s face as he made some little answer to his sister, a smile which so altered his expression that she felt puzzled. “I don’t like him,” she said to herself, “he is haughty and disagreeable, but still I fancy he could be nice if he liked.”

Another minute or two and the strangers were driven away—with smiles and thanks from pretty Alys and her aunt, and bows of equal deference, but differing in cordiality, from the two gentlemen. Lilias and Mary walked slowly homewards across the grass, Lilias unusually silent.

“Well, Lilias,” said the younger sister, after waiting a little to see if Lilias was not going to speak, “well, we have had quite an adventure for once.”

“Yes,” said Lilias, absently, “quite an adventure. But, oh, Mary,” she went on, with a sudden change of voice, “don’t speak of it; I am *so* disgusted with myself.”

“What for?” said Mary. “I didn’t understand. Was it about recognising that gentleman, Captain Beverley, you called him, I think? And some one called him Arthur—how curious!” she added to herself.

“Yes,” said Lilias, “it is about that. I met him two years ago, and danced with him twice, I think. I thought he was very nice-looking and danced well, but, *of course*, that was all I thought about him. I think I must have told you about him at the time; it was the year you did not go to the ball—Brooke was ill, don’t you remember, with the measles, and you were nursing him because you had had it—but I had nearly forgotten him, and then seeing him so unexpectedly again his name came into my head and I said it! It must have looked as if I had never seen a gentleman before to have remembered him so distinctly—oh, I am so ashamed of myself!”

“I don’t think you need to be. I think it was perfectly natural,” said Mary.

“Oh, yes, in one way, I know it was. I am not really ashamed of *myself*, I did nothing wrong. It is what those people must have thought of me,” said Lilias.

“I wish you would not care what people think of you,” answered Mary. “What does it matter? We shall probably never see any of them again. How pretty the girl was! By-the-bye, Captain Beverley’s name is Arthur, he may be a descendant of ‘Mawde’ in the tablet, Lilias. Her name was Beverley, and her father’s ‘Arthur.’ Very likely one of her sons would be called after her father. I wonder if that has anything to do with their coming here,” she went on, growing more interested in Captain Beverley than she had hitherto appeared.

“How do you mean?” asked Lilias.

"Why, supposing he is a great grandson, a great, great, great grandson—oh, more than that—there has been time for six or seven generations—supposing he is a descendant of Mawde's, he may have something to do with this neighbourhood, and that may have brought him here."

"We should have heard of him before this," objected Lilias. "Papa knows every land-owner of any consequence in the country by name, and I never heard of any one called Beverley."

"Here is papa," said Mary, looking back just as Mr Western emerged from the church, where he had been detained later than usual by some little official discussion, "let us wait for him and ask him. Papa," she continued, as her father came up to them, "do you know that one of those gentlemen who came to church is called Beverley?"

"And Mary is making up quite a romance about his being descended from the old woman on the tablet," said Lilias, laughing, but yet not without interest. "There are no people of the name hereabouts now?"

"Beverley," repeated Mr Western, "how do you know that is his name?"

The girls explained.

"No, there are no gentle-people of that name hereabouts nowadays," said Mr Western. "The old Hathercourt Beverleys have quite died out, except, by-the-bye,—I was told the other day that old John Birley, who died at Hathercourt Edge last year, was a lineal descendant of theirs."

"That rough old farmer!" exclaimed Mary, her thoughts flying back to "Mawde."

"Yes, you remember him? It was Greville, I think, that was telling me about it. The name 'Birley' he said was only a corruption of Beverley. The old man was very proud of his descent. He left the farm and what money he had saved to a Mr Beverley, whom he believed to be of the same family—no one in this neighbourhood. By-the-bye, that may be the young man you are telling me about, Mary, which was he—the fair or the dark one?"

"The fair one," replied Mary, "the other was a Mr Cheviott."

"Cheviott—ah, indeed," said Mr Western, with a tone of faintly discernible satisfaction. "I fancy that must be Mr Cheviott of Romary. You remember Romary, girls, that beautiful old place near Withenden. We went there picnicking once, several years ago."

"Yes, I remember," said Lilias, "but I thought the people living there were called Romary, not Cheviott."

"Well, this Mr Cheviott was a nephew or grandson—all the male Romarys had died out, I suppose," said Mr Western.

They were at the Rectory door by this time. An unmistakable odour of roast mutton greeted them as it opened.

"It must be dinner-time," said Lilias, going in. "Dear me," she added to herself, as she slowly made her way up-stairs to the plainly furnished but neat little bedroom that she shared with her sister, "dear me, how nice it would be to be rich, and have nice pretty luncheons instead of these terrible early dinners, so hot and fussy, and all the children crowding round the table! Dear me—"

But she took off her bonnet and shawl and went down with a cheerful face to help in the distribution of the roast mutton, bright and merry and very fair to look upon, as was her wont.

Mary had waited a moment at the hall door with her father. They stood looking out at the autumn landscape; there came a sudden gleam of sunshine through the trees, lighting up the grass with a yellow radiance, and lingering gently on the many-coloured stones of the venerable church.

"It's a nice old place, after all, child, is it not?" said Mr Western.

"Yes, indeed, father," replied the girl.

"I, for my part, am very content to think that I shall spend my life here, and rest peacefully over there in the shadow of my old church, when the time comes," continued the Rector; "but for you young people I suppose it's different somehow," and he sighed a little.

"How do you mean, father dear?" said Mary, softly, and she came closer to him and slid her hand into his arm. "What makes you speak that way to-day?"

"I don't exactly know, my dear," he replied. "Possibly the sight of those strangers in church set me considering things. I should like you girls to have a few more—well, advantages I suppose they are in a sense, after all—I should like to see Lilias and you as nicely dressed as that pretty girl this morning, eh, Mary?"

"Dear father?" said Mary, affectionately. "But we're very happy, papa. I am, at least, and Lilias tries to be anyway. But I dare say it's harder for her than for me—she *might* get so very much admiration, and all that sort of thing, you know."

Mr Western smiled—there *were* people in the world, he thought to himself, who would see something to admire in the eager face beside him too; but he said nothing, and just then the dinner-bell rang, and a hurry of approaching footsteps told that to some at least of the Rectory party it was not an unwelcome sound. Mary fled up-stairs, her father followed the hungry flock into the dining-room. And the Sunday meal that day was considerably enlivened by discussions about the mysterious strangers. Who were they?—whence had they come, and wherefore?—and, "Will they come again next Sunday?" said little Frances, a question which her eldest sister very summarily answered in the

negative.

“They have given you all something to talk about, children, anyway,” said Mrs Western.

“Yes,” said Basil, who, on the strength of having left school three months ago, considered himself a man of the world, “it’s ridiculous how people get excited about nothing at all, when they live such shut-up lives. I bet you the whole neighbourhood’s full of it. All the old women will be discussing these unfortunate people over their tea-tables at this very moment.”

“Not over their *tea*, Basil,” said little Brooke. “They don’t have tea till four o’clock.”

Chapter Three.

The Colour of the Spectacles.

> “Mais, il faut bien le reconnaître, tout est relatif en ce monde, et les choses nous affectent toujours dans la mesure de l’éducation que nous avons reçue et du milieu social où nous avons été élevés.”
> Enault.

Mrs Western’s views of life differed considerably from those of her husband—she had quite another stand-point. She was not ambitious, nothing in her experience had ever tended to make her so, and though by nature she was far less “easy-going” than the Rector, yet her thoughts concerning the future of her children were not by any means so harassing and dissatisfied as his. Had she seen anything to worry about, she *would* have worried about it, but she did not see that there was. Her boys and girls were infinitely better off, better cared for, better educated than she had been, and happier far than she ever remembered herself before her marriage, and she saw no reason why, if they turned out good and sensible, as they mostly promised to do, they should not all get on fairly well in life, without feeling that their start in the great race had been weighted with undue disadvantages.

Yet the Rector’s wife was not a *peculiarly* reasonable woman; circumstances mainly had made her appear so, or rather, perhaps, had never called forth the latent *unreasonableness* which we are told, by authority we dare not question, is a part of every feminine character. When she married Mr Western, she was only a governess in a family where she was not unkindly treated, but where no special thought was bestowed upon her. She was not discontented, however; for the kindness she received she was sincerely grateful, and considered herself, on the whole, a fortunate girl. She was not remarkably pretty, but pleasing and gentle, and with a certain sedateness of air and manner not without a charm of its own. People spoke of her, when they did speak of her, which was not often, as “a very sensible girl;” in point of fact, she was more than sensible; she had both intellect and originality, neither of which was ever fully developed—in one sense, indeed, hardly developed at all. For her youth had been a depressing one; from her earliest years she had been familiar with poverty and privation, and she only was not altogether crushed by them because personally she had had experience of nothing else.

Her father had been one of the several younger sons of a rich and well-born man. But neither the riches nor the good birth had helped him on in life. He quarrelled with his parents by refusing to enter the profession designed for him; he made bad worse by a hasty and imprudent marriage; he hopelessly widened the breach by choosing to resent on his own people his young wife’s speedy death, and declining to accept any help in the bringing up of his motherless little daughter. And then his old parents died, and the brothers and sisters, married and scattered, and absorbed in their individual interests, learned to forget, or to remember but with a sore reproach worse than forgetting, this hot-headed, ungrateful “Basil,” who had not condoned by success in his self-sought career the follies of his youth. And before many more years had passed, poor Basil Brooke died himself, nursed, and comforted, and sorrowed for by but one little solitary being, his thirteen-years-old Margaret, for whom at the last he had managed to scrape, together a tiny sum that left her not absolutely destitute, but was enough to pay for her schooling till, at eighteen, she went out into the world on her own small account as one of the vast army of half-educated girls who call themselves governesses.

But if Margaret Brooke’s pupils obtained no very great amount of so-called “book-learning” from their young teacher, at least they learned no harm, and indirectly no small amount of good. For she herself was good—good, and true, and healthy-minded, perfectly free from self-consciousness, or morbid repining after what had not fallen to her lot. Once in her governess life she came across some members of her dead father’s family. Being really gentlefolks, though self-absorbed and narrow-minded, it did not occur to them to ignore their poor relations. They even went out of their way to show her some little kindness, which the girl accepted pleasantly and without bitterness; for, young as she was at the time of her father’s death, she had yet been able to discern that the family estrangement had been mainly, if not altogether, of his own causing. So the rich Brookes spoke favourably of poor Margaret, and though it was taken for granted among them that the fact of her existence was a mistake, she was, on the whole, regarded with approval as doing her part towards making the best of an unfortunate business. And when, two or three years later, Margaret, to her own inexpressible astonishment, found herself actually fallen in love with by the most charming and unexceptionable of young curates, a curate too with every prospect of before long becoming a rector, and when this prospect was ere long fulfilled, and Margaret, in consequence, became Mrs Western, her Brooke cousins approved of her still more highly, to the extent even of sending her a tea-pot, cream-jug, and sugar-basin of the best electro-plate as a wedding present.

But all that was now nearly a quarter of a century ago—the generation of Brookes who had seen Margaret in her youth, who had some of them been contemporaries of her father, had mostly died out—they were not a long-lived race—and the old relationship had grown to seem more of a legend than a fact. A legend, however, which, little as the young Westerns knew of the far-off cousins who now represented their mother’s people, was not likely to be allowed by them to sink into oblivion. They were too well-bred and right-minded to be ashamed of their mother’s

position when their father wooed and won her, but, nevertheless, half unconsciously to themselves, perhaps, the knowledge of this fact made it all the more agreeable to be able to say to each other, with dignity and satisfaction, "Though mamma was poor when she was a girl, her family was quite as good, if not, indeed, better than papa's."

And "papa" himself was the first always, on the rare occasions when such subjects came under discussion, to remind his girls and boys of the fact, but Mrs Western herself thought little about it. She lived in the present, even her lookings forward to the future were but a sort of transference of her own life and experience to others. She hoped that her daughters, if they married at all, would marry as happily as she had done, and beyond this she was not ambitious for them, and conscientiously tried to check Lilias's good-tempered murmurings at the monotony of their life by platitudes, in which she herself so entirely believed that they sometimes carried with them a certain weight.

Mrs Western was less interested than the rest of the Rectory party in the mysterious strangers who had so disturbed the Hathercourt devotions this Sunday morning. She did not like strangers; she had a vague fear of them—not from shyness, but from a sort of apprehensiveness which her early life, probably, had caused to become chronic with her. When Lilias snubbed little Frances's inquiry as to whether these ladies and gentlemen would come to church again next Sunday, in her heart the mother hoped the elder sister's "no, of course not," would be justified by the event, and, secretly, she chafed at the talk that went on round the table, talk in which even Mr Western was interested, as she could see.

"You remember Romary, Margaret?" he said, across the table, "that splendid place near Withenden?"

"Yes, I remember it," replied Mrs Western, "but I don't like splendid places," she added, with a little smile.

"Nor splendid people?" said Lilias, half mischievously. "Isn't mother funny—odd I mean, in some ways—difficult to understand?" she said afterwards to Mary, "she seems so afraid of our ever going the least out of the jog-trot, stupid way."

"She is over-anxious, perhaps," said Mary.

"No, I don't think it is that exactly," said Lilias. "I think papa is the more anxious of the two. I sometimes wish mamma were a little more, not anxious exactly—I don't know what to call it—a *little* more worldly, perhaps." Mary laughed.

"You would have liked her to invite those fine people to luncheon last Sunday, and then, perhaps, they would have taken a fancy to us, and invited us to go to see them?" she said, inquiringly.

"Nonsense, Mary! Do leave off talking about those people. I am tired to death hearing about them," replied Lilias, impatiently. "Invite them to luncheon—to roast mutton and rice pudding, and a dozen children round the table!—Mary, I wish you wouldn't say such silly things."

"You are difficult to please, Lilias. Only the other day you told me, if I would be silly sometimes I should be almost perfect," said Mary, dryly.

And then Lilias kissed her, and called herself "cross," and there was peace again. But somehow, after this, the subject of the strangers was scarcely alluded to.

And "next Sunday" came and went, and if Mary descried some little attempt at extra self-adornment on Lilias's part, she was wise enough not to take notice of it; and if Mr Western preached his new sermon in the morning instead of the afternoon, I question if any one discovered the fact. For, with these possible exceptions, the day was not a marked one in any way, and with a little sigh, and a smile too at her own folly, Lilias decided, as she fell asleep, that as yet there was little prospect of a turning-point in her life being at hand.

The week that followed this uneventful Sunday was a date to be remembered, and that had been tremulously anticipated by one heart, at least, among those of the Rectory party. It was to see the eldest son started on his career in life, and calm enough though she kept herself to outward appearance, to the mother this parting was a painful crisis. Her "boy Basil" was leaving her forever, for "boy" she could not expect him to return. He was going up to town for a few months in the first place, having been lucky enough to obtain a junior clerkship in a great mercantile firm, with a prospect—the few months over—of being transferred to the branch house abroad, where his chances of success, said the authorities, "if he behaved himself," were pretty certain in the long run, though not, in the mean time, bewilderingly brilliant. He was a good sort of a boy in his way, and family affection among the Westerns was fairly and steadily developed; but nevertheless, with the exception of his mother, none of the household lost a night's rest on account of his approaching departure, and Lilias openly avowed her conviction that Basil was greatly to be envied, and that it would be far pleasanter for him to pay home visits now and then, when he knew something of the world, and could make himself entertaining, than to have a great hulking hobbledehoy always hanging about, and getting into mischief. Mary, too, agreed that "it was a very good thing for Basil," and nobody cried when he said good-bye except poor Francie, whose seven years were innocent of philosophy or common sense, and who only realised that her big brother was going "far, far away."

But still, when he was fairly gone, there fell over them all a certain depression—a sort of blank and flatness, which every one was conscious of, though no one would own it to another. It was a dull afternoon, too, threatening to rain, if not actually doing so, and, to suit Basil's convenience, they had had dinner at half-past twelve, a whole hour earlier than usual, so that by four o'clock Lilias declared she felt ready to go to bed.

"You are suffering from suppressed excitement, after all, I suspect," said Mary, looking up from Alexa's German translation, which she was correcting. "There is a sort of excitement in thinking poor Basil is really started, though we are glad of it."

“I am not excited; I wish I were,” said Lilias, listlessly. “I am only idle and stupid!”

“Get something to do then,” replied Mary. “There, I have finished the school-room affairs for to-day. I wonder if mamma has anything she would like us to do—I can’t ask her; she is up in her own room, and I don’t like to disturb her yet. It is too dull to go out. Supposing we practice that duet, Lilias?”

“Supposing in the first place we make this room tidy,” said Lilias, looking round her reflectively. “Supposing now, Mary—just *supposing* any one were to come to call, what would they think of this room?”

“They wouldn’t think ill of the poor room,” answered Mary, laughing, and setting to work energetically as she spoke to “tidy up;” “they would probably reserve their thoughts for the careless people who lived in it. There now, that looks better; let us poke up the fire a little, and draw the sofa near it for poor mother when she comes down, and I’ll tell you what—I’ve got a thought, Lilias. Supposing we make the children have tea by themselves in the dining-room for once, and we have it in here for mother on a little table?”

“Yes, do,” said Lilias, heartily; “it would be quite a treat for her.”

“And I know the children will be good,” said Mary; “they understand that mother is dull about Basil’s going. We are to have a light supper at eight, you know, as papa will be back by then, so we can have tea earlier than usual.”

“If there is any meal I dislike more than an early dinner,” said Lilias, as she stood on the hearth-rug surveying the room, which, thanks to her own and her sister’s efforts, now looked neat and comfortable, “it is ‘a light supper.’ The room doesn’t look so bad now, Mary; somebody may come to call if he or she likes.”

It was really a pretty room; it was prettily shaped, and the look-out upon the old church through a long, rather narrow window at one end, evidently purposely designed, was striking and picturesque. Pretty and graceful, too, was the wide, low bow-window at the other end with a cushioned seat running all round, and in summer a pleasant view of the best kept bit of the Rectory garden. Even now in late autumn there was a bright, fresh look about the room, notwithstanding the extreme simplicity of the furniture and its unmistakable evidences of age; and when Mary had stirred up the fire into a brisk little blaze, and with her own hands arranged the tea-things on a small table beside the sofa, she felt very fairly satisfied with the aspect of the whole.

“Won’t mamma be pleased, Lilias, when she comes down?” she exclaimed. “I have made the tea; it’s all ready. Will you go up-stairs and ask her to come down, or shall I?”

“You deserve to go; it was your idea,” Lilias was beginning, when an unexpected sound made her suddenly stop short “Mary,” she exclaimed, “that’s the front door bell! What a bother—just as we have got all so comfortable for mamma! It must be old Miss Bury—nobody else would come to call on such a day; it seems like a judgment upon me for joking about visitors.”

“We can’t help it,” said Mary. “I only hope Ann will hear the bell and answer it quickly. She is sometimes so slow, and Miss Bury doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“There she is,” exclaimed Lilias, as the sound of feet crossing the hall was heard. “Who can it be, Mary? It doesn’t seem like Miss Bury’s voice.”

“Some one for papa, perhaps,” replied Mary; but almost as she spoke the door was thrown open, and Ann, muttering something too indistinct to be understood, ushered a gentleman into the quickly gathering darkness of the room.

He came in quietly, evidently not expecting to find any one in the room, for in fact he believed himself to be entering Mr Western’s study, there to await the result of Ann’s inquiries as to the hour at which her master was expected home. Nevertheless, in one respect he had the advantage of the two girls, for the hall whence he emerged was even darker than the drawing-room, whereas the sisters, standing together on the hearth-rug in the full light of the newly-stirred fire, were by him at once and easily recognised.

“I am afraid I am disturbing you—I must really apologise,” he began, his face, had they been able to see it, lighting up with pleasure as he spoke. “I only asked for Mr Western, and I am sorry—” he hesitated.

“Papa is out,” said Mary, though quite in the dark physically and mentally as to whom she was addressing; “but if it is anything we can tell him—” she turned to her sister, surprised at her silence, but her appeal was disregarded—“if it is anything we can tell him—or—or would you like to see mamma? Won’t you sit down, and I will get a light?” she went on, without giving him time to answer.

“Thank you,” said the gentleman, coming forward a little; “but I am really ashamed—” he was repeating, with increased hesitation, when Mary again interrupted him.

“It is Captain Beverley,” she exclaimed. “I had not the least idea who you were, for I did not recognise your voice. Lilias,” she continued, turning to her sister, this time so pointedly that Miss Western was obliged to come to her assistance, “you generally recognise voices more quickly than I do—did you not know that it was Captain Beverley?”

“You give me credit for greater acuteness than I possess, Mary,” said Lilias calmly, bowing with dignified ease to the intruder; “it is not easy to recognise a voice one has not heard more than once or twice. But if you will come nearer the fire, Captain Beverley, we shall feel less mystified; and, Mary, do ring for lights.”

The calmness, and the dignity, and the ease were all lost upon the young man, and Lilias, had she been able to read his thoughts, would have been saved a good deal of constraint. He was only thinking how very pretty, how beautiful she was—this tall, fair, lily-like girl, as she stood in the firelight, her face and bright hair thrown into strong relief by the dusk of the rest of the room; and had she allowed herself simply at once to acknowledge her recognition, he

would have been conscious of nothing but honest gratification. As it was, he really did feel awkward and uncomfortable; it seemed to him he had intruded without proper justification, and somehow this disagreeable sensation was increased by all he saw about him. It was not in the least what he had expected; the pretty, graceful-looking room, whose deficiencies the friendly gloom concealed, and whose best points were shown to advantage by the flickering, dancing light, the little tea-table so neatly set out, and the two girls themselves—the one with the bearing of a princess, and the other with a sort of straightforward unconsciousness worth all the "manners" ever taught or talked about—it was not in the least what he had expected, and he felt that he had been guilty of gross presumption in thus making his way into Mrs Western's drawing-room. Once he had seen Lilias before, and admired her more than he had ever admired any one in his life, and when he had suddenly decided that, for the local information he was in quest of, there was no one to whom he could so fitly apply as to the Rector of Hathercourt, he had been conscious in the very bottom of his heart that, if he went over to see Mr Western, there would be a chance of seeing his daughter too. But he had not fancied he would see her in this sort of way—so he felt all his former ideas confused and unsettled.

Still it was very pleasant to find himself in the Rectory drawing-room; the outside chill and dreariness made the cheerful indoors all the more attractive, and, though feeling by no means sure that he had any business to be where he was, he had not the strength of mind to tear himself away, to get up from his low chair by the fire and the prospect of a cup of tea, and, with a proper amount of apology for his intrusion, to leave a message with the girls for their father and set off on his solitary, uncomfortable walk back again to Hathercourt Edge. So he sat still, and by thus doing, little though he knew it, passed the Rubicon.

Mary had disappeared, to return in a minute with a lighted lamp which she placed on a little table, her way of obeying her sister's injunction to "ring for lights." Then she stopped for a moment, hesitating, and Captain Beverley half rose from his chair.

"Shall I tell mamma tea is ready, Lilias?" she said, "and that Captain Beverley is here?"

"Yes, please do," replied her sister, graciously. "My mother is not very well to-day," she continued, turning to the young man, and almost for the first time directly addressing him, "at least, she has been rather upset by my brother's going away, but I have no doubt she will come down, if you would like to see her."

"Thank you," said Captain Beverley, growing uncomfortable again, and yet feeling increasingly reluctant to take his departure. "I should be very sorry to disturb Mrs Western, but if she is coming down in any case," he glanced at the tea-table, "perhaps—I should like to explain to her what I wanted to see Mr Western about.—I should like you to understand that I did not mean to come forcing my way here without a proper reason," was the real thought in his mind, and somehow Lilias instinctively half divined it, and her dignity abated a little.

"Mary, please go and ask mamma to come down, if she can," she said to her sister, and Mary went off on her errand.

"I have been leading a very lonely life the last few days," said Captain Beverley, when he found that Miss Western was in no hurry to start a subject of conversation.

"Indeed," said Lilias.

"Yes," he continued, "very lonely and not particularly comfortable, as you can fancy, when I tell you where my present quarters are. I am living in the farm-house at Hathercourt Edge, with an old woman to 'do for me,' and she does 'do for me' I can assure you," he added, with a hearty, boyish laugh.

In spite of her grand resolutions, Lilias could not help laughing too.

"I know that old-woman, I think," she said; "we often see her when we pass that way. She was old John Birley's housekeeper, wasn't she?—at least, she 'did for him.' I do pity you, but I wonder you stay there."

"Needs must," replied Captain Beverley, "and there is good in everything, they say. My uncomfortable life makes me appreciate civilisation doubly when I return to it. You don't know what a treat it is to find myself in this cheery room, and how much I shall enjoy—" he stopped short.

"What?" said Lilias.

"A cup of good tea, if you will give it me, I was going to say, only it suddenly struck me it was a very impertinent suggestion to be made by a stranger who has no business to be in your drawing-room at all, Miss Western. The fact of the matter is, I find it difficult to recollect I am a stranger, for ever since I met you that evening two years ago, I have remembered you so distinctly that I could fancy I have seen you often since. It was your first ball, was it not?"

"No," said Lilias, "I had been at two before."

"Ah, well," he replied, "that's much the same thing,"—little understanding that to poor Lilias a ball counted for a year, and that therefore, having made her *début* at Brocklehurst at nineteen, she already numbered twenty-one summers, or winters, when he first met her. "It's much the same thing," he went on, without giving her time for the explanation which her honesty was on the point of volunteering; "it has always seemed like my first ball to me, for I had only returned from India the week before, and I wasn't much in the way of balls there."

"Yes, I remember your speaking of India," said Lilias, "but I think you said you were going back there again, did you not?"

"I did think so then," he replied, "but things have changed. I sold out a few months ago, otherwise I should not be here now. And an unexpected piece of good luck befell me just then. You may have heard of old John Birley's strange

will?”

Before Lilias could reply, the door opened, and Mrs Western and Mary made their appearance.

Chapter Four.

A Cup of Tea.

> “I have no ambition to see a goodlier man.”
> *Tempest*.

“I am so very much obliged to you for seeing me. I am afraid it is very inconvenient and uncomfortable for you—in fact, as I have been telling your daughters, I am altogether ashamed of myself,” was the apology with which Captain Beverley met Mrs Western.

“But you need not be so, I assure you,” she answered, quietly, as she sat down on the sofa by the fire. “I have been a clergyman’s wife too many years not to be quite accustomed to act as my husband’s deputy when he is out of the way; and Mary—my daughter, I mean,” she added, glancing towards the girls, “tells me you wanted particularly to see Mr Western. Is it anything in which I can do instead of him, or will you leave a message? I fear he will not be home till late.”

Notwithstanding the perfect courtesy of this speech, there was something in it which made Captain Beverley regret again what he had done. He grew hot when he remembered that not two minutes ago he had been making interest with the beautiful Miss Western for a cup of tea, and now her mother made him feel that he was expected to give his message and take his departure—the sooner the better.

“How completely Cheviott has been mistaken about these people!” he thought to himself; but though Mary, who was standing nearest him, could not read this reflection, she perceived the quick change of expression in his open, good-tempered face, and she felt sorry—sorry for him, and a little tiny bit vexed with her mother.

“Mamma,” she broke in, before Mrs Western had time to say any more, “you must really have tea at once; it will be getting cold. Shall I pour it out, Lilias, or will you?”

“I will, thank you,” said Lilias, not quite sure if she appreciated her sister’s tactics, but seating herself before the tea-table as she spoke. “Mother, dear, stay where you are, do,” seeing that Mrs Western was getting up from her seat.

“I was only looking to see if there were cups enough, my dear. Captain Beverley, you will have a cup of tea?” said Mrs Western, her natural instinct of hospitality asserting itself in defiance of her dislike to strangers.

“Thank you,” he replied, gratefully; “I really cannot resist the chance of a cup of *good* tea. My old woman has been giving me such a horrible decoction. What do people do to tea to make it taste so fearful, I wonder?” he continued, seriously. “It seems the simplest thing in the world just to pour hot water over a spoonful or two, and let it stand for a few minutes.”

The girls laughed, and Mrs Western smiled.

“It is evident you are a bachelor, Captain Beverley,” she said. “There is nothing that depend more on *how* it is made than tea. For instance, hot water is not necessarily *boiling* water as it should be, and the ‘standing a few minutes’ should not mean brewing by the fire for half an hour or more.”

“I see,” said Captain Beverley. “I wonder if it would be any use trying to teach old Mrs Bowker how to make tea properly.”

“Mrs Bowker!” repeated Mrs Western in surprise.

Lilias laughed again at the bewilderment in her mother’s face.

“How prettily she laughs,” thought Captain Beverley, “I wish Laurence could see her. He declares not one woman in a hundred can laugh becomingly.”

“Captain Beverley is staying at old Mrs Bowker’s, mamma,” she exclaimed—“at least, at John Birley’s farm.”

“Or, to be perfectly correct,” said Captain Beverley, “old Mrs Bowker is staying with *me*, though I am quite sure she does not see the arrangement in that light at all. I was just telling Miss Western,” he continued, turning to the mother, “that Hathercourt Edge—that is to say, the old farm-house and, what is of more importance, a considerable amount of land—has just become my property; the last owner, John Birley, left it to me as the oldest lineal descendant of the *name*—of the Beverleys of Hathercourt. He had no near relations, and had always been proud of his own descent from the Beverleys; he came straight down from a John Beverley who owned all the land about here early in the seventeenth century, I believe, but whose eldest son sold a lot of it, so that in process of time they came to be only farmers.”

“That John Beverley must have been ‘Mawde’s’ husband, Lilias,” said Mary.

Captain Beverley looked up with interest.

“Do you mean the ‘Mawde’ about whom there is a tablet in the church here?” he said.

“Yes,” replied Mary. “Mawde Mayne, who married John Beverley of Hathercourt.”

“Ah! yes, that’s the same Mawde,” said Captain Beverley. “She is our common ancestress—poor old John Birley’s and mine, I mean. I come from another of her sons, who left these parts and married an heiress, I believe, but his descendants have had nothing to do with this place from that time to this. Isn’t it strange that Hathercourt, a part of it at least, should come back to me after all these generations?”

“It is very nice, I think,” said Mary. “I should be so proud of it, if I were you.”

Her eyes sparkled, and her face brightened up eagerly. For the first time it struck Captain Beverley that there was something very “taking” about the second Miss Western. But his glance did not rest on her; it travelled on to where Lilias sat behind the tea-tray, with a half-unconscious appeal to her for sympathy in what he was telling. Lilias, looking up, smiled.

“Yes,” she said, softly, “it is very strange.”

“Then,” began Mrs Western, with some little hesitation, “are you, may I ask, Captain Beverley, going to live altogether at Hathercourt Edge? You can hardly do so, though, in the house as it is at present. It is barely habitable, is it?”

“Very barely,” replied the young man. “You never saw such a place. But I must not grumble; poor old John kept the land up to the mark, though he spent nothing on the house. I don’t mean to settle here,” (Mrs Western breathed a sigh of relief), “I have another place which is let just now, but will soon be free again, and my cousin advises me to live there and farm it myself. All I mean to do here is to build a good farm-house, and establish some trusty man as bailiff, and then I can easily run down now and then—I am often at Romary—and see how things are going on. And this brings me to what I wanted to see Mr Western about. I want to ask his opinion of a young man here who has been recommended to me for my situation.”

“Mr Western will be very glad to tell you all he can, I am sure,” said the Rector’s wife. “I dare say he will be able to walk over to Hathercourt Edge to-morrow to see you, for about such a matter it would be better for you to speak to himself.”

“Thank you,” said Captain Beverley. “But I couldn’t think of giving Mr Western so much trouble. I can easily come over again, and if he is out it doesn’t matter—it is only a pleasant walk—and—and if I am not a great trouble, I shall be only too grateful to have some one to speak to, for I am dreadfully tired of the old farmhouse, and I must be here alone another fortnight. By then my cousins will be back at Romary, and I can take up my quarters there. You know Romary, of course?”

“No,” said Lilias, to whom the question seemed to be addressed, her colour rising a little; “at least, I have only been there once.”

“It is some miles from here, and we have no carriage,” said Mrs Western, simply. “Old Mrs Romary called on me when we first came here, but I never saw any more of them. We know very few of our neighbours, Captain Beverley, for we are not rich, and we live very quietly.” Mary looked up at her mother admiringly. Lilias glanced at Captain Beverley. His colour, too, had deepened a little.

“Then I must thank you all the more for being so kind to me,” he said, impulsively. “And, Mrs Western, if, as I shall really be your very nearest neighbour, you will let me be to some extent an exception to the rule, I shall thank you still more,” he added, with a sort of boyish heartiness which it was difficult to resist.

He had got up to go, and stood looking down at his hostess as he spoke with such a kindly expression in his honest blue eyes, and—he was so undeniably handsome and gentlemanlike that Mrs Western’s cold manner thawed.

“The thanks will, I think, be due from us to you if you come to see us now and then when you are in the neighbourhood; that is to say, at Hathercourt Edge. Romary is too far off for us to consider its inhabitants neighbours,” she replied. “And I don’t quite understand, but Romary is not your home, is it?”

“Oh dear, no,” he replied, evidently a little surprised at the question. “Romary belongs now to my cousin, Mr Cheviott. It has been his ever since his uncle’s death, but he has only lately come to live there. He was my guardian, and the best and wisest friend I have ever known, though not more than ten years older than myself,” he added, warmly.

“And that young lady—we thought her *so* pretty,” said Lilias—“she is Miss Cheviott, then, I suppose?”

“Yes, she is his sister. I am glad you think her pretty. She is a dear little thing,” he replied, looking pleased and gratified. “But I am really detaining you too long. Will you be so kind as to tell Mr Western that I shall hope to see him in a day or two? Good-bye, and thank you very much,” he said, as he shook hands with Mrs Western and her daughters, Lilias last.

“For a cup of tea?” she said, laughing.

“Yes, Miss Western, for a cup of tea,” he repeated.

“I like him,” said Mary, when the door had closed on their visitor; “he is honest, and unaffected, and kindly.”

“He is very boyish,” said Lilias; “somehow he seems more boyish than when I saw him two years ago.”

“When you saw him two years ago?” repeated Mrs Western. “I did not know you had ever seen him before.”

“Yes, mamma. I met him at my second Brocklehurst ball. Mary remembers my mentioning him,” replied Lilias, meekly enough. “I did not know where he had come from, or whom he was staying with, or anything about him, and indeed I had forgotten all about him till the other day when he came to church.”

“He is a pleasant-looking young man,” said Mrs Western.

“Pleasant-looking, mother?” exclaimed Mary. “I call him *very* handsome.”

Lilias smiled, but her mother looked grave.

“Well, well,” she said, “I dare say he is handsome; but in my opinion, my dears, there is great truth in the old saying, ‘handsome is that handsome does,’ and we do not know anything at all about this Captain Beverley’s doings, remember.”

“At least we know nothing ‘*un*handsome’ about them,” said Mary, who seemed in an unusually argumentative mood.

“Oh dear, no. I have no reason to say anything against him. I know nothing whatever about him,” said Mrs Western, calmly; “but I do not like making acquaintance too quickly with young men. One cannot be too careful. And you know, my dears, I have always said if ever you do marry I hope and trust it will be some one quite in your own sphere.”

“Mamma!” exclaimed Lilias, growing scarlet, and with a touch of indignation in her tone, “why should you allude to such a thing? Just because a gentleman happens to have called to see papa on business—as if we could not have spoken two words to him without thinking if we should like to marry him.”

“You need not fire up so, Lilias,” replied her mother. “You very often speak about marrying, or not marrying, and I have heard you maintain it was gross affectation of girls to pretend they never thought about their future lives.”

“Yes,” said Lilias, “I know I have said so, and I think so, but still there is a difference between that and—Well, never mind. But, mother,” she went on, with returning playfulness, “I must warn you of one thing. If by ‘our own sphere’ you mean *curates*, then the sooner, as far as I am concerned, I can get out of my own sphere the better.”

Mrs Western did not laugh.

“Lilias,” she began, gravely, but the rest of her remonstrance was lost, for at that moment the drawing-room door opened softly, and a pair of bright eyes, surmounted by a shag of fair hair, peeped in, cautiously at first, then, their owner gathering courage, the door opened more widely, and a tall thin girl, in a brown stuff skirt and scarlet flannel bodice, made her appearance.

“Josey, what do you want? Don’t you know it is very rude to come peeping in like that? How did you know we were alone?” said Mary, somewhat peremptorily.

“Then he’s gone?—I thought he was,” answered Josephine, composedly. “All right, Alexa, you can come in,” she turned to call to some one behind her, and, thus encouraged, a fourth Miss Western—the third as to age, in point of fact—followed Josephine into the room.

“Is mamma better? I have really done my best, Mary, to keep them all quiet,” she began, plaintively, “but George and Josey do *so* squabble. They wanted to find out who was calling, and I could hardly prevent them coming to peep in at the door. Yes, Josey, you needn’t make faces at me like that. It’s quite true—you know it is.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” said Josey, “but there are more ways than one of telling the truth. Somebody else was just as inquisitive as ‘George and Josey,’ but *she* was far too lady-like to do such a thing as peep. She would let other people peep for her—that is *her* way of doing things she shouldn’t,” the last words uttered with withering contempt.

Alexa was a pretty, frightened-looking little creature of sixteen. She had soft, wistful-looking dark eyes, which filled with tears on the smallest provocation.

“Mamma,” she exclaimed, “it isn’t true! I only said I would like—”

“I do not want to hear any more about it, Alexa,” interrupted Mrs Western with decision. “I do think you and Josephine might have some little consideration for me to-day, instead of quarrelling in this way.”

The culprits looked ashamed of themselves; but in two minutes Josephine’s irrepressible spirits had risen again.

“You might tell me if it really was Captain Beverley,” she said to her elder sisters. “What did he come for?—why did he stay such a time?”

“Don’t answer her, Mary,” said Lilias, hastily. “Josephine, I can’t understand how you can be so unladylike.”

“Come up-stairs with me, Josey,” whispered Mary, who saw the storm-clouds gathering again on her young sister’s handsome face. “Do remember that mamma is tired and dull to-night, and we should all try to comfort her. I will read aloud to you all for half an hour, if you like, and leave mother and Lilias in peace.”

But Lilias’s spirits seemed to have received a check. She remained unusually quiet and depressed all the evening, and Mary felt puzzled.

“She cannot really have taken to heart what mother said,” she thought to herself. “Mamma has often said things of that sort without Lilias minding.”

And when bed-time came and she was alone with her sister, she set to work to find out what was wrong.

“What has made you so dull this evening, Lilias?” she asked, gently.

“Nothing, or rather, perhaps, I should say everything,” replied Lilias. “Mary,” she went on; she was sitting in front of the looking-glass, her beautiful fair hair loosened and falling about her shoulders, and as she spoke she put her hands up to her face, and leaning with her elbows on the table gazed into the mirror before her—“Mary, don’t think me conceited for what I am going to say—I wouldn’t say it to any one but you. Do you know, I think I wish I wasn’t pretty.”

“Why?” said Mary, without, however, testifying any great astonishment.

“If I could tell you exactly why, I should understand myself better than I do,” she replied. “I fancy somehow being pretty has helped to put me out of conceit of my life; and after all, what a poor, stupid thing it is! A very few years more, I shall be quite *passée*—indeed, I see signs of it coming already. I want to be good and sensible, and sober, and contented like you, Mary, and I can’t manage it. Oh, it does makes me so angry when mamma talks that way—about our own sphere and all that!”

“You shouldn’t be angry at it, it does not really make any difference,” said Mary, philosophically; “poor mamma thinks it is for our good.”

“But it isn’t only that; it is *everything*. Mary, people talk great nonsense about poverty not necessarily lowering one; it does lower us—that I think is the reason why I dislike mamma’s saying those things so. There is truth in them. We are rapidly becoming unfit for anything but a low sphere, and it is all poverty. Did you ever see anything more disgraceful than the younger girls’ manners sometimes?—Alexa’s silly babyishness, and Josephine’s vulgar noisiness? They should both be sent to a good school, or have a proper governess.”

“Yes,” said Mary, looking distressed, “I know they should.”

“I can’t bear shamming and keeping up appearances,” continued Lilias, “it is not *that* I want, that would be worse than anything, but I do feel so depressed about things sometimes, Mary. It is a sore feeling to be, in one sense, ashamed of one’s home. I hope Captain Beverley will not come again.”

“He is almost sure to do so,” said Mary. “I wish you would not feel things quite as you do, Lilias; I can sympathise with you to a certain extent, but, after all, there is nothing to be really ashamed of. And if Captain Beverley, or any one, judges us by these trifling outside things, then I don’t think their regard is worth considering.”

“But it is just by these things that people *are* judged, and that is where the real sting of poverty like ours lies,” persisted Lilias.

And Mary, who sympathised with her more than she thought it wise to own to, allowed that there was a great deal of truth in what she said. “But must it not be harder on papa and mamma than on us?” she suggested.

“I don’t know,” said Lilias, “not in the same way I fancy. Papa feels it more than mamma, I sometimes think, only he is naturally so easy-going. And poor mamma, even if she does feel it, she would not show it. She is so unselfish; and how hard she works for us all! I don’t think she could work so hard if she felt as depressed as I do sometimes—especially about the younger ones.”

“But you do work hard also, Lilias,” said Mary, “and you are nearly always cheerful. You are unselfish too. Oh! Lilias, I should so like to see you very, very happy!”

Chapter Five.

In the Balner Woods.

> “And so at length with the fading year;
> There comes a tender time once more,
> And the year clings more fondly to life and light,
> Now that its labour is over and done.
> And the woods grow glorious with purple and red,
> As bright as the flowers of spring.”
>
> *Songs of Two Worlds*.

The next morning was dull and rainy. It was dull enough at Hathercourt Rectory, but far worse at Hathercourt Edge, and even Arthur Beverley’s unfailing good spirits felt the influence of the outside dreariness.

“I wish I hadn’t gone over to the Rectory yesterday,” he said to himself, “it would have been something to do to-day. I can’t go again till to-morrow, at soonest, and it is so horribly dull here. I wonder what those girls do with themselves on such a day as this. Their life must be very monotonous, though they look happy enough. I can’t understand why Laurence doesn’t like them. I wonder if that old fool is going to give me any breakfast?” He turned from the window to look at the table; it was covered with a very crumpled and coarse cloth, the forks and spoons, etc, were of the homeliest description, there was nothing in the shape of eatables but the half of a stale loaf, and an uninviting-looking lump of evidently salt butter, on a cracked plate. Captain Beverley eyed it all rather disconsolately. Then he went to the door—he had to stoop to avoid knocking his head on the lintel—and called down the narrow, red-tiled passage leading to the kitchen.

"Mrs Bowker, I say. Aren't you going to give me any breakfast this morning?"

No Mrs Bowker appeared in answer to his summons, but out of the depths of the kitchen a voice replied:

"I'm a-bringin' it, sir."

"And what is it? Bacon?"

"No, sir—heggs," was the reply.

"Heggs," he repeated, as he turned back again into the parlour, "of course. I might have known, by this time, if it wasn't bacon it would be 'heggs.' I declare, if I were that Mrs Western, and she I, I wouldn't be so inhospitable. She might have asked me to go to breakfast, or luncheon, or something. I am sure those nice girls would if they could. Ah! well, here comes the heggs, and letters, too!—What's going to happen, Mrs Bowker? The postman's not above half an hour late this morning!"

"May be he walks fast to get out of the wet," Mrs Bowker suggested, composedly, as she left the room.

There were three letters, two manifestly uninteresting, and Captain Beverley tossed them aside. The third had the postmark "Paris." It was from Mr Cheviott, and his cousin opened and read it eagerly. It was rather a long letter, once or twice he smiled, and once, when he came to a passage close to the end, a slight frown contracted his good-humoured face.

"Laurence takes up such unreasonable prejudices," he said to himself, with some irritation. "What can he know about it?"

This was the passage that annoyed him: "I hardly think the man you mention would be experienced enough for your situation—in any case I would not, if I were you, consult the Hathercourt clergyman about him, for by all accounts *he* is far from a practical person as to such matters, and I rather fancy there is nothing superior about the Rectory family. They are desperately poor for one thing, but, of course, you will not need to make friends with them; it is not as if Hathercourt were to be your head-quarters."

Captain Beverley ate his breakfast and pondered over his letter. Then he got up and went to the window, and looked out at the rain.

"It is very annoying of Cheviott to have taken up this prejudice against Owen," he thought. "I believe he is the very man for me, and, at any rate, it is necessary to hear all I can about him. And as for what Cheviott says about the Westerns I think nothing of it whatever, and he himself would be the first to own he had been mistaken if he saw the sort of people they really are. I can understand their not being popular well enough; they are proud and won't stand being patronised."

His meditations ended in his deciding to walk over again to Hathercourt that very afternoon—it would not do to put off hearing about Owen and settling the matter, and this he could easily explain to Mr Western, as an excuse for troubling him about it. And, having arrived at this decision, things in general began to look considerably less gloomy—he got out the plans for the new farmhouse, and examined them critically, rolling them neatly up again, when the idea struck him that it would be well to take them with him to the Rectory, in the afternoon.

"Mr Western may like to see them," he thought, "and, as he is the clergyman of the parish, it will gratify him to be consulted."

Then he answered Mr Cheviott's letter, saying nothing about his visit to Hathercourt, and merely mentioning that he was making further inquiries about the man Owen, ending with a description of Mrs Bowker for Alys's benefit, and a hearty wish that they were all back at Romary.

This important task accomplished, he looked at his watch and saw that it was eleven o'clock, so he sauntered out for a stroll round the farm and a talk with his head man. The rain was ceasing, and there was no sort of reason why he should not walk over to the Rectory in the afternoon; besides, to-morrow would be Saturday, a day on which clergymen, proverbially, dislike to be interrupted. So, having dispatched a couple of rather tough mutton chops, which was all Mrs Bowker condescended to allow him in the way of luncheon, by half-past two o'clock Captain Beverley found himself more than ready for his second expedition to Hathercourt. It was really too early to call, however, but the day had grown pleasant out of doors, and inside the old farm-house he felt it impossible to kill any more time. A "happy thought" occurred to him—why not go round by the Balner woods? It was a long walk and he might probably lose his way, but if he did he could but try to find it again—anything was better than hanging about Hathercourt Edge doing nothing.

It was November now, but who that has really *lived* in the country—lived in it "all the year round," and learned every change in the seasons, every look of the sky, all the subtle combinations of air, and light, and colour, and scent, which give to outdoor life its indescribable variety and unflagging interest, who of such initiated ones does not know how marvellously delicious November can sometimes be? How tender the clear, thin, yellow tone of the struggling sunbeams, the half frosty streaks of red on the pale blue-green sky, the haze of approaching winter over all! How soft, and subdued, and tired the world seems—all the bustle over, ready to fall asleep, but first to whisper gently good night! And to *feel* November to perfection, for, after all, this shy autumnal charm is not so much a matter of sight, as of every sense combined, sound and scent and sight together, lapsing into one vague consciousness of harmony and repose—the place of places is a wood. A wood where the light, faint at the best, comes quivering and brokenly through the not yet altogether unclothed branches, where the fragrance of the rich leafy soil mingles with that of the breezes from the not far distant sea, where the dear rabbits scud about in the most unexpected places, and the squirrels are up aloft making arrangements for the winter—oh! a wood in late autumn has a strange glamour

of its own, that comes over me, in spirit, even as I write of it, far, far away from country sights and sounds, further away still from the long-ago days of youth and leisure, and friends to wander with, in the Novembers that then were never gloomy.

Arthur Beverley was by no means sentimental—he whistled cheerily as he went along, and thought more of the probable amount of shooting in the Balner woods than of the beauty around him, yet he was not insensible to it.

“How jolly it seems after the rain,” he said to himself. “After all, there’s nowhere like England, fogs and all—it’s fresh, and wholesome, and invigorating, even in murky weather, like what we’ve had lately,” and he stood still and looked round him approvingly.

Suddenly a sound, a faint sound only, caught his ear. He listened. It came again. This time he distinguished it to be that of cheerful voices approaching him, then a merry laugh, a little exclamation, and the laugh again. Arthur Beverley’s face lighted up with interest; he felt sure he knew that laugh. He hastened on and, after a few moments’ quick walking, a little turn in the path brought him in sight of a group of figures just in front of him; they were the Western girls, the Western girls in great force, for, besides the two he knew already, there were the younger ones, Alexa and Josephine, and little Francie. And the laugh had been Lilias’s—he was not mistaken.

She was standing with her back towards him, and so was Mary, but the tiny girl beside them drew their attention to his approach.

“A gentleman, sister,” she exclaimed, pulling Miss Western’s skirt. And Lilias, turning round, met his hearty look of pleasure.

“I thought it was you,” he said, as he shook hands, “I heard you laugh.”

“How do you know it *was* my laugh?” said Lilias, smiling.

“I recognised it,” he said, quietly.

And Mary glanced up at him brightly. “Yes,” she said, “it was Lilias. She was laughing at Alexa, who screamed because a rabbit ran across the path. That’s not like a country girl, is it, Captain Beverley?”

“Alexa screams if a butterfly settles on her,” said Josephine, disdainfully, trying to balance herself on the hooked handle of her umbrella, which she was holding upside-down for the purpose.

Captain Beverley looked at her and at Alexa with good-humoured curiosity. Alexa looked pretty and frightened, but Josey, her long thin legs emerging from a shabby waterproof, her “touzled” fair hair tumbling out from under a still shabbier hat, was rather a remarkable object.

“These are your younger sisters, I suppose?” he said, turning to Lilias.

“Yes,” she answered, rather shortly; “we all came out for a ramble as soon as the rain cleared off. It is so miserable to be shut up in the house all day.”

“Just what I have been feeling,” he replied. “Not that I mind the rain, but still one can’t exactly set off for a walk in it unless one has something to do or somewhere to go. It is very lucky for me that I met you; I was just making up my mind to losing my way.”

“I dare say we can direct you,” said Lilias, “but we are not going your way. We are going home; it must be about half-past three now, and we have been out ever since dinner-time. Mary, don’t you think we should be going home?—it is a good walk from here, you know. You can direct Captain Beverley to Hathercourt Edge better than I, I think.”

“But I don’t want to be directed to Hathercourt Edge,” said Captain Beverley, with a very slight touch of annoyance in his tone. “I have just come from there. Of course, if you won’t let me walk with you, I must submit; but I *was* bound for Hathercourt Rectory. I am very anxious to see Mr Western, and thought I might again take my chance of finding him at home. That is to say, if he will not think me very troublesome.”

“Of course he will not,” answered Mary, heartily; “he was very sorry to have missed you yesterday, and I know he will be at home all this afternoon. Which way shall we go back, Lilias—by the Southmore road, or all the way through the wood?”

“By the wood decidedly, *I* should say,” answered Captain Beverley. “Miss Western,” he went on, quickly, “you have got *such* a bramble on your skirt—there, now, I have got him—step forward, please—yes, that’s it.”

By this manoeuvre he had managed to get Lilias and himself a little in front of the others, and he maintained his ground by walking on beside her. Francie was at her other side, so the arrangement into threes seemed to come about quite naturally, Mary following with Alexa and Josephine. By degrees Lilias lost the slight constraint which her manner had shown at first, and became her usual happy, winning self. The sound of her voice, and now and then of her laugh, was enough to make Mary happy too, and well content to keep behind at a reasonable distance, so that Lilias should not be annoyed by the exhibition before a stranger of Alexa’s foolish shyness or Josey’s uncalled-for remarks.

The sun came out more brightly, and gleamed and quivered down the wood alleys before them. What did they talk of, those two, as they walked on quietly, little Francie beside them, trotting along, lost in her own pretty baby dreams of fairies and brownies and the like, with which her small head was filled, all unconscious of the old, old drama beginning once more to be re-enacted in the old, old way that is ever new? What did they talk of? Could they have told, or did it matter? All about everythings and nothings, no doubt, so called “small talk,” which yet seemed full of

interest, nothing very wise or weighty—so much, at least, is certain—but certain too that the walk through the Balner woods that sweet November afternoon was neither wearisome nor long to Lilias Western and the new owner of the old Edge farm.

The sunshine had tempted Mr Western out too. He was walking about the garden when his five daughters, escorted by Captain Beverley, reached the Rectory. A momentary expression of surprise crossed his face as he came forward to meet them, at first sight of the stranger, but it was succeeded by a look of gratification and pleasure, which quickly set the young man's mind quite at rest, and left him no doubt of being welcome.

"I was quite intending to walk over to Hathercourt Edge to see you, to thank you for the friendly visit yesterday, which I was sorry to have missed," said the Rector, with a slight touch of old-fashioned formality, not unbecoming to his tall, thin, refined-looking figure and gentle face, as he shook hands with Captain Beverley, "and now I see I must thank you also for taking care of my girls."

"We don't need to be taken care of that way, papa," said Josephine, "we were only in the Balner woods, and Captain Beverley was coming here, anyhow."

"He only tookened care of Lily and me," said Francie, importantly, but the observation was a happy one. It was impossible not to laugh at it, and Josey's abruptness passed unrebuked.

"I certainly deserve no thanks," said Captain Beverley. "My visit yesterday was a selfish one, and as for to-day—why, all my thanks are due to you, Francie! I should have been lost in the woods, and perhaps eaten up by Red Riding-hood's wolf if I had not met you, and been shown the way here."

"But that wolf was killed long ago, Lily says," said Francie, staring up with great bewilderment in her blue eyes. "It couldn't have eatened you up when it was killed itself."

"Indeed. I am very glad to hear it," replied Captain Beverley, gravely, "then I needn't be afraid of coming through the Balner woods; it is a good thing to know that. It is a much pleasanter walk than by the road," he went on, turning again to Mr Western. "I really was on my way here when I met your daughters. I am afraid you will think me very troublesome."

His manner was certainly boyish, but not in the least awkward. That Mr Western was "taken" with him was quickly evident.

"Indeed, no," he said, heartily. "Living here so completely out of the world, as you see, it is very seldom that we have the pleasure of showing even the little hospitality we have in our power. But, such as it is, I hope you will accept it. Lilias, Mary," he continued, turning to his daughters, the younger ones having by this time disappeared, "tell your mother that Captain Beverley is here."

"I will," said Mary, hastening away with a great excitement in her thoughts, "I do believe papa is going to ask him to stay to tea. What will mamma say?" and not knowing whether she was pleased or distressed, she hurried in to break the momentous tidings to her mother, and to consult the cook.

Lilias was following her, but her father called her back. "You need not both go, my dears," he said with sudden remembrance of unwritten letters awaiting him in his study, which must be seen to before four o'clock post-time. "Perhaps Captain Beverley would like to have a look at the church again, if you will take him to see it. I will follow you in a few minutes, but I have a letter or two I must finish, which I was forgetting."

"*Pray* don't let me interrupt you," exclaimed Captain Beverley, with anxiety almost disproportionate to the occasion. "I should very much like to look at the church, for there are some tablets there I want to examine. And if Miss Western will explain them a little, I shall be very much obliged."

Lilias hesitated. "Mary understands them better than I do," she began, but her father interrupted her.

"I will send her after you, if you go on, and I will finish my letters as quickly as I can, and then, Captain Beverley, I shall be at your service. Mrs Western tells me you want to hear about Joseph Owen. You will stay and—I can't say *dine* with us—we are very uncivilised, you see; we have a mongrel meal at six!"

He spoke with a slight nervousness, which made Lilias's cheek grow hot. "Poor dear father!" she ejaculated, mentally. But the guest seemed blissfully unconscious of his host's hesitation.

"You are very kind indeed," he said, eagerly. "I should very much like to stay, if I shall not be a trouble. It is so wretchedly dull and uncomfortable at the Edge, I don't think I could have stood it much longer, unless—if you had not taken pity on me," he added, laughingly, as Lilias led the way across the grass to the old church.

Mary joined them there in a few minutes, and while Captain Beverley was examining the old coat-of-arms on the tablet in memory of his ancestress, she found time to whisper to her sister,—

"Mamma knows that papa has asked him to stay to tea. I don't think she minds much."

"But what will there be for tea?" said Lilias, in consternation.

"Oh! that will be all right," replied Mary, reassuringly.

And, somewhat to Lilias's surprise, her mother showed herself far more amiably disposed for Captain Beverley, on further acquaintance, than might have been anticipated.

“Though, indeed,” said Mary, when, at night, they were talking over in their own room the pleasant evening they had had, “it would be difficult *not* to feel amiably disposed to him! He is so unaffected and hearty, and yet not by any means a goose. He liked talking to papa about sensible things, I could see.”

“He talked sensibly to me, too,” said Lilias, dryly, “though, of course, I cannot answer for what he may have said to you.”

“Lilias!” exclaimed Mary, “don’t be so silly. You know—”

“What do I know?”

“That I am not the sort of girl likely to have anything but sensible things said to me, especially when *you* are there.”

Lilias laughed merrily. “Really, Mary, you are very complimentary. You trust to me to absorb all the nonsense, and leave the sense for you! I think I shall keep out of the way, if Captain Beverley comes here again.”

“Then he wouldn’t come any more,” said Mary. “Lily, I’m sleepy, say good-night, please.”

“Good-night, though I am not sleepy at all,” said Lilias, cheerfully.

What had become of all her low spirits? thought Mary, with a little bewilderment Lilias was not usually so changeable. The evening had certainly been a very pleasant one; even the younger girls had somehow shown to advantage; and Captain Beverley had not merely ignored, he had seemed perfectly unconscious of the homeliness of their way of living—the crowded tea-table, the little countrified waiting-maid, the absence of the hundred and one small luxuries which to him could not but be matters of course. And his unconsciousness had reached favourably on his entertainers; Mr Western lost his nervousness, Mrs Western her gentle coldness, and every one seemed at ease and happy. Any stranger glancing in would have thought them all old friends, instead of new acquaintances, of the handsome young man who was the life and soul of the party.

“Mary,” said Lilias again, just as Mary was falling asleep, “Captain Beverley will be at the Brocklehurst ball this year. He is to be staying at Romary.”

“I thought you said you were never going again,” said Mary, who had her wits about her, sleepy though she was.

“But you would hot like to go without me, I know,” replied Lilias, meekly. “Oh, Mary, I do wish we could have new dresses for once!”

Mary did not consider this observation worth waking up to answer. But her dreams were a strange medley—Captain Beverley dancing at a ball with his great grandmother Mawde, dressed all in scarlet, as if she were Red Riding-hood, but with a face like Lilias’s. And what Lilias’s dreams were, who can say?

But the Brocklehurst ball was three weeks off as yet, and there was no lack of opportunities of discussing it with Captain Beverley.

Surely November this year must have been an exceptionally fine one, for there seemed few days on which Arthur Beverley did not find his way through the woods, or by the road, to the Rectory, with some excuse in the shape of further plans to be shown to Mr Western, or a book to lend to the girls or their mother, or without any, save the sight of his own bright face, and an eager proposal that they should all set off on a long ramble somewhere or other, instead of wasting one of the few fine days of late autumn, moping in the house. And by degrees it came to be a matter of course that, if the owner of Hathercourt Edge chose to drop in at any or every meal, he should be welcome, and that if he stayed away he should be missed, and Mrs Western’s fears and vague apprehensions gradually softened, now that this terrible wolf had actually taken up his quarters in the midst of her flock without, so far, any of them being the worse!

“He seems like a sort of elder brother among them all,” she said to her husband. “I wish Basil had been at home—contact with such a man would have done him good.”

Mr Western agreed with her, for he, too, had greatly “taken” to the young stranger. It was pleasant to him to find that he had not altogether fallen out of the ways of his class, that cares, and small means, and living out of the world had not crusted over his former self past recognition. Arthur Beverley had not been at college, but he, as well as his host, had been an Eton boy, and poor George, to whom the name of Eton was that of a forbidden Paradise, listened with delight to the many reminiscences in common of his father and his guest, notwithstanding the quarter of a century which divided their experiences. So everybody in his or her own way felt pleased with Captain Beverley, and his coming seemed to have brought new life and sunshine into the Rectory. Lilias alone spoke little of him, and Mary sometimes lay awake at night “thinking.”

Chapter Six.

Marrying or Giving in Marriage.

> “If there’s no meaning in it,” said the king, “that saves a world of trouble, as we needn’t try to find any. And yet I don’t know.”
> *Alice in Wonderland*.

November was not bright everywhere, however. In Paris everything, out of doors, that is to say, was looking extremely dull, and Alys Cheviott many times, during the four weeks her brother had arranged to stay there, wished

herself at home again at Romary. For Paris, though people who have only visited it in spring or summer (when the sunshine, and the heat, and the crowds, and the holiday aspect of everything are almost overwhelming) can hardly perhaps realise the fact, *can* be exceedingly dull, and hotel life at all times requires bright weather, and plenty of outside interests, to make it endurable. Alys did not care particularly about balls or parties; she was too young to have acquired much taste for such amusements, though young enough to enjoy heartily the two or three receptions at which Mr Cheviott had allowed her to "assist." But it was the day-time she found so long and dreary. She wanted to go out, to shop and to look about her, and to take long walks in the Bois de Boulogne in the morning, and drives with her brother in the afternoon, and every day the weather put all expeditions of the kind out of the question. It rained incessantly, or, at least, as she complained piteously, "when it didn't rain it did worse—it looked so black and gloomy that no one had the heart to do anything." Alys had been in Paris several times before, she had seen all the orthodox lions, and had not, therefore, the interest and excitement of the perfect novelty of her surroundings to support her, and as day after day passed, with no improvement to speak of, she began sorely to regret having teased her brother into allowing her to accompany him on this visit, in this case necessitated by the business arrangements of a friend.

"I'll never come with you again, Laurence, *anywhere*, when it has anything to do with business," she declared.

"Who is 'it'?" inquired Mr Cheviott, calmly.

"Laurence, you are not to tease me. I am too worried to stand it, I am, really," she replied.

"'It' again! Alys, you are growing incorrigible. I really think my best plan would be to send you to a good school for a year or two—the sort of place where 'young ladies of neglected education' are taken in hand."

He spoke so seriously that for a quarter of a second Alys wondered if he could be in earnest. She turned sharply round from the window against which she had been pressing her pretty face in a sort of affectation of babyish discontent, staring out at the leaden sky, and the wet street, and the dreary-looking gardens in the distance.

"Laurence!" she exclaimed. But Laurence's next remark undeceived her.

"You should not flatten your face against the window-pane. You will spoil the shape of your nose, and you have made it look so red," he observed, gravely. "Would you care to live, Alys, do you think, if you had a red nose?"

Alys gently stroked the ill-treated member as she answered, thoughtfully:

"I hardly think I should. Laurence, do you know there *have* been times when I have been afraid they might run in the family."

"What?" asked Laurence, philosophically.

"Red noses," answered Alys, calmly. "Aunt Winstanley has one, you know. She says its neuralgia, but *I* feel sure it is indigestion."

Laurence looked up at her with a smile, which broke into a laugh as he observed the preternatural gravity of her expression.

"Come and sit down and have some breakfast, you absurd child," he said. He was already seated at the table.

Alys walked slowly across the room, and took her place opposite him. She looked blooming enough notwithstanding all the trials she had had to endure. As the Western girls had pronounced her, such she was, very, *very* pretty—as pretty a girl as one could wish to see. Her soft dark hair grew low, but not too low, on the white, well-shaped forehead; her features were all good, and gave promise of maturing into even greater beauty than that of eighteen; her blue eyes could look up tenderly as well as brightly from under their long black eyelashes, for their colour was not of the cold steel-like shade that is often the peculiarity of blue eyes in such juxtaposition. But the tenderness was more a matter of the future than the present, for hitherto there had been little in her life to call forth the deeper tones of her character; she was happy, trustful and winning, full of life and vigour; incapable of a mean thought or action herself, incapable of suspecting such in others.

Mr Cheviott looked at her critically as she sat opposite him.

"Alys," he said at last, "I am afraid I have not brought you up well."

"What makes you think so all of a sudden, Laurence?"

"I am afraid you are spoiled. You are such a baby."

Alys's eyes flashed a little.

"Are you in earnest, Laurence?"

"A little, not quite."

"I think you have got into the habit of thinking other people babies, and it's a very bad habit. You like them to do just exactly what you tell them, and yet you laugh at them for being babies. You think Arthur is a baby too."

"There are babies and babies," Mr Cheviott replied. "Some do credit to those who bring them up, and some don't."

"Well, *he* does, whether I do or not," said Alys, "he is as kind, and good, and nice, and sensible as he can be. And do

you know what I think, Laurence? If there are different kinds of babies, there are different ways of being spoiled, and I sometimes think *you* are spoiled! I do," she continued, shaking her head solemnly. "Arthur spoils you, and aunt of course does. I believe I am the only person that does not."

"And how do you manage to steer clear of so fatal an error?"

"You are not nice, indeed you are extremely disagreeable when you speak like that," said Alys, "but still I think I will tell you. I don't spoil you because I don't think you *quite* perfect as everybody else does," and she glanced up at him defiantly.

Mr Cheviott laughed. He was just going to answer, when there came an interruption in the shape of his manservant.

"Letters!" exclaimed Alys, "I do hope there are some for me; they will give me something to do. Are there any for me, Laurence?"

"Yes, two, and only one for me."

"From aunt and from Arthur," said Alys. "I will read aunt's first, there is never anything in hers. She just tells me over again what I told her, and makes little comments upon it. Yes, 'so sorry, dearest Alys, that the weather in Paris has so spoiled the pleasure of your visit, and that during the last week you have scarcely been able to get out, except in a close carriage, for a miserable attempt at shopping. And so you enjoyed Madame de Briancourt's ball on the whole, very much, and your pink and white grenadine looked lovely, and Clotilde did your hair the new way.' Did you ever hear anything so absurd, Laurence? It is like reading all I have written over again in a looking-glass, only then the letters would be all the wrong way, wouldn't they?"

But Mr Cheviott did not answer, and Alys, looking up, saw that he had not heard her; he was busily reading his own letter, and its contents did not seem to be satisfactory, for a frown had gathered on his brow, and, as he turned the first page, a half-smothered exclamation of annoyance escaped him.

"What is the matter, Laurence?" said Alys. "You don't seem any better pleased with your letter than I am with mine?"

"How do you mean? What does he say to you?" inquired her brother, quickly.

"Who? Oh, Arthur, you mean. I haven't opened his yet. I was saying how stupid aunt's letters are. So yours is from Arthur, too, is it?" said Alys, pricking up her ears, "what's the matter? Is he going to be married? I do wish he were."

"Alys!" exclaimed Mr Cheviott, with real annoyance in his tone, "do be careful what you say. You are too old to talk so foolishly. It is unbecoming and unladylike."

"Why? What *do* you mean?" said Alys, opening wide her blue eyes in astonishment. "Why shouldn't I talk of Arthur's being married? I have noticed before that you seem quite indignant at the thought of such a thing, and I don't think you have any right to dictate to him. It's just what I was saying, he has spoiled you by giving in so, and the more inches he gives you the more ells you want to take."

"I have spoiled *you*, Alys, by allowing you to speak to me as you do. It is most unjustifiable; and the way you express yourself is worse than unladylike, it is vulgar and coarse."

He got up and left the room. Never in all her life had Alys been so reproved before, and by him of all people, her dear, dear, Laurence—her father and mother and brother in one, as she often called him. She could not bear it; she threw aside the unlucky letters which in some way or other she felt to have been the cause of her distress, and burst into tears. She cried away quietly for some time, till it occurred to her to wonder more definitely in what way she had really displeased her brother, and the more she thought it over the more convinced she became that Arthur's letter had been the primary cause of his annoyance, and her own remarks nothing worse than ill-timed and unwise.

"For I *very* often say much more impertinent things, and he only laughs," she reflected.

There was some comfort in this. She dried her eyes and resolved to try to make peace on the first opportunity. "Laurence is very seldom angry or unreasonable," she thought; "but, of course, as I was saying just now, he is not *perfect*. But I am sure he does not really think me 'coarse and unladylike.' What horrible words!" And the tears came back again.

Just then her glance fell on Captain Beverley's unopened letter. "I wonder if I shall find out, from what he says to me, how he has managed to vex Laurence so," she thought to herself, tearing open the letter, and quickly running through its contents. It was a pleasant, cousinly letter, amusing and hearty, but with nothing that would, to Alys, have distinguished it from others she had, from time to time, received from Arthur, had not her eyes been sharpened by her brother's strange annoyance. Instinctively she hit upon the cause of offence; two or three times in the course of the letter allusion was made to the Western family, to their "kindness and hospitality," their general "likeableness," and a far less quick-witted person than Miss Cheviott would have been at no loss to discern Captain Beverley's growing intimacy with the Rectory household, and to suspect the existence of some special attraction, though possibly as yet unsuspected by the young man himself.

"I am sure it is about the Westerns that Laurence is annoyed," said Alys to herself. "I have noticed that he does not like them, and he is afraid of Arthur falling in love with one of them. But why shouldn't he? I can't understand Laurence sometimes. I am sure if ever *he* marries it will be to please himself, and nobody else. What is the good of a man's being rich if he can't do that? And Arthur is rich enough! Yes, the more I think of it the more sure I am that it was something about the Westerns that made Laurence angry."

She was not long left in doubt. The door opened and Mr Cheviott made his appearance again. He looked grave and

preoccupied, but as calm as usual. When, however, his glance fell on Alys's flushed cheeks and tearful eyes, his expression grew troubled. He came behind her chair and putting his hand on her head, turned her face gently towards him.

"Do you think me very harsh, Alys?" he said, kindly. "I did not mean to be so, but I was annoyed, and, besides that, I cannot bear that habit of joking about marrying, and so on, especially the sort of way girls do so nowadays. It is very offensive."

"But I wasn't joking, Laurence. I had no thought of it," replied Alys. "I will never speak about anything of the kind at all, if you dislike it; but truly you misunderstood me. I don't think what I said would have annoyed you if you had not been vexed about something else."

"Perhaps not," said Mr Cheviott, kindly. "Well, dear, I am sorry for making you cry, but you will forgive me, won't you?"

Alys smiled up through the remains of her tears.

"Of course," she replied. "You know you could make me think it all my own fault, if you liked, Laurence. And I understand what you mean about disliking joking about marrying, and so on, but indeed I was quite in earnest. I should very much like Arthur to marry, and I cannot imagine why you should so dislike the idea of it."

She glanced at her brother questioningly as she spoke—her curiosity strengthening as her courage revived—but his expression baffled her.

"Why do you so much wish Arthur to marry?" he inquired. "You have never seemed to dislike him, Alys."

"Dislike him!" she repeated, innocently. "Dislike Arthur! *Of course* not. I like him more than I can tell; indeed, I think I love him next best to you of everybody in the world. How could I dislike him? And if I did, how could that possibly have anything to do with my wishing him to marry? Why, I want *you* to marry, but I have given it up in despair."

Mr Cheviott looked slightly self-conscious at his sister's cross-questioning, but turned it off as lightly as he could.

"You might want to get rid of him," he said, carelessly. "Of course, if he were married, we should not see so much of him. Why do you want him to marry?"

"Just because it would be nice, that is to say, if his *wife* were nice, and I don't think Arthur would marry any one that wasn't," said Alys. "She would be in a sort of way like a sister to me, you know, Laurence."

"Those dreams are seldom realised," observed Mr Cheviott, cynically. "As nature did not give you a sister, I would advise you to be content with what she did give you, even though it is only a very cross old brother. But what has put all this of Arthur's marrying into your head just now, Alys? Has he been taking you into his confidence about any nonsense—falling in love, or that kind of thing, I mean?" And he eyed Arthur's letter suspiciously.

"Oh! dear no. Read his letter for yourself, and you will see there is nothing of the kind," replied Alys. But she watched her brother's face rather curiously, as she added, "He seems to like the family at Hathercourt Rectory very much—those pretty girls, you know, that we saw that Sunday. He says they have been very civil to him."

"Very probably," said Mr Cheviott, dryly, as he took up the letter. "Pretty girls, do you call them, Alys? One was handsome, but the other wasn't."

"I liked them both," persisted Alys. "One was beautiful, and the other had a sort of noble, good look in her face, better than beauty."

"What a physiognomist you are becoming, child!" said her brother, from the depths of Arthur's letter. He read it quickly, and threw it aside; then he went to the window, and stood looking out for a minute or two without speaking. "Alys," he said at last, so suddenly that Alys started, "you said just now that it was very dull here; so it is, I dare say, for no doubt the weather is horrible. You would not mind, I suppose, if I arranged to go home rather sooner than I intended?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't mind at all," replied Alys, looking surprised; "but, Laurence, I thought you couldn't possibly get your business finished sooner than you said."

"I think I might manage it," he said. "Indeed, I fancy I am needed on the other side of the water quite as much as here. I may have to come back again before long, but that's easily done. I'm going out now, Alys, but I shall be in by one, and if it's at all fine this afternoon, we might pay the calls we owe, especially if we are leaving sooner. I can tell you certainly what I fix by luncheon-time."

"Very well," replied Alys. "I shall not be sorry to go home, and for one thing, Laurence, I should like to be at home in time for the Brocklehurst ball."

"*What* a reason!" exclaimed Laurence, as he left the room. "Now that you have reminded me of it, it is almost enough to tempt me to stay away to escape it."

At luncheon-time he returned, telling her that he had fixed to leave in two days.

"And just out of contradiction," said Alys, "I believe it is going to be bright and fine;" for a gleam of positive sunshine, as she spoke, made its way into the room.

"All the better for our calls," said Laurence.

The gleam strengthened into steady brightness, and when Alys found herself, wrapped in the most becoming of attires, velvet and furs, seated beside her brother in a very luxurious carriage, behind two very respectable horses, the young lady began to feel that it might have been very possible to enjoy herself, if only the fine weather had been quicker of coming. It was a little—just the very least little bit in the world—provoking that now, just as it *had* come, Laurence should make up his mind that they must go.

She looked at him doubtfully as the thought crossed her mind. The sunshine did not seem to have any exhilarating effect upon him; he looked dull and more careworn than since they had been in Paris.

"Laurence," she said, hesitatingly, "I suppose you have *quite* made up your mind to leave on Friday?"

"Quite," he said, gently. "Are you beginning to regret it?"

"A little; it is nice when it is fine, isn't it? Paris forgets the rain so quickly."

"Paris forgets all disagreeable experiences far too quickly."

Alys gave a little shiver.

"Oh, please don't put revolutions, and barricades, and guillotines in my head, Laurence," she said, beseechingly. "Even the names of the streets are associated with them, if one begins thinking of such things. One must do at Rome as the Romans do, so let me be thoughtless in Paris."

"Still, on the whole, you prefer England. You would not like to marry a Frenchman, would you, Alys?"

"*Of course* not," replied Alys, "and of all things I would not like to be married in the French way, hardly knowing anything about the man I was to marry. Ermengarde de Tarannes, Laurence, that pretty girl whom we saw at the Embassy, is to be married to a Marquis something or other, Mrs Brabazon told me, whom she has *really* only seen three times, for he is now in Italy, and will only return the week before the marriage. Fancy how horrible!"

Mr Cheviott smiled.

"You are a regular little John Bull, child," he said; "still I understand your feeling. There is something to be said, however, in favour of the French way of arranging such things, where the parents or guardians of a girl are sensible people, that is to say. Perhaps a union of both ways would be perfection."

"How do you mean?" asked Alys.

"Supposing a case where a girl had known a man nearly all her life, and had got to care for him unconsciously almost, and that at the same time he was the very man of all others whom, for every reason, her parents, or whoever stood in their place, wished her to marry, would not such a case be pretty near perfection?"

"Rather too perfect," said Alys. "The chances are that the hero would spoil it all by not wanting to marry *her*."

Mr Cheviott looked annoyed.

"Don't be flippant, Alys," he said; "of course that part of it I was taking for granted."

"I didn't mean to be flippant," said Alys, penitently; "I never want to vex you, Laurence. I'd do anything to please you. I'm not sure that I would not even marry to please you, if you want to try an experiment of the French way."

She looked up in her brother's face with a smile, and he could not help returning it.

"If you promise never to marry to *dis*please me, I shall be satisfied," he answered. "But, after all, it's a difficult question. I have known some English marriages turn out quite—ah, surely *more* miserable than ever a French one could."

"But what has put marrying so much into your head to-day? This morning you were distressing yourself about Arthur's prospects, and now you are worrying yourself about mine?"

"Not *worrying* myself. It is only natural I should think about your future sometimes. And if your memory is not very capricious, Alys, I think it will tell you that it was yourself, not I, who first began talking about marriage this morning, when Arthur's letters came. Do you remember?"

"Yes; but still—"

"Here we are at Madame de Briancourt's," interrupted Mr Cheviott.

"Madame" was at home, and the brother and sister made their way across the spacious entrance, along a corridor, then through a suite of rooms, hardly so beautiful by daylight as when Alys had last seen them on the evening of a grand reception, to a small boudoir at the very end of all. As she passed along, Alys's thoughts continued in the same direction.

"But still," she repeated to herself, "I don't understand Laurence. I am sure he has got something in his head—about Arthur—or about me; still *perhaps* it is not that: he may have been annoyed about something quite different, and Arthur's letter may not have anything to do with our going away in such a hurry. Anyway, I can leave it to Laurence; I am not going to bother my head about it, for there may be nothing in it, after all."

And, two minutes afterwards, her head was full of other things, for there was what, to Alys's eyes, looked quite a crowd of gayly dressed ladies and gentlemen when the door at the end of the long suite was thrown open, and the brother and sister found themselves, for the moment, the observed of all observers.

Chapter Seven.

This Very Little World.

> Alonzo.—What is this maid with whom thou wast at play?
> Your eldest acquaintance cannot be three hours.
>
> *Tempest*.

For the beautiful Miss Cheviott, little though she had been seen in Paris, had been seen enough to make a considerable sensation, especially as rumour, in this case with somewhat more foundation than usual, added the epithet *heritière* to the rest of Alys's charms. Parisian papas and mammas sighed at the perversity of the British customs, which forbade their entering the lists on behalf of their eligible Adolphes and Gustaves, and the representatives of the English upper ten thousand, then in Paris, would have been very ready to make great friends with the brother and sister. But their advances were hardly reciprocated; Alys's inexperience failed to appreciate them, and Mr Cheviott's somewhat "stand-off" manner was not encouraging. Ill-natured people made fun of him for "mounting guard over his sister," more amiably inclined observers pronounced such brotherly devotion to be really touching, but one and all fell short of attaining to anything like intimacy with the owner of Romary or the reputed heiress.

So some amount of curiosity, added to the interest inspired by the two Cheviotts and the buzz of conversation in Madame de Briancourt's boudoir, perceptibly subsided for a minute or two on their first appearing. Alys, in her simplicity, hardly observed this, or, if she did so, was not struck by it as anything unusual, but Mr Cheviott noticed and was a little annoyed by it.

"I would not have called here this afternoon, if I had known we should find Madame de Briancourt 'at home' in such force," he said to an English lady of his acquaintance after paying his respects to his hostess.

"Ah, you have not been long enough in Paris to be quite *au fait* of everything," said Mrs Brabazon, good-naturedly. "There is always a great crowd here on Thursdays. But why should you object to it? It is all the more amusing."

"I am not fond of crowds, and, as for my sister, she is quite unaccustomed to anything of the kind. She is hardly 'out'," he added, with a smile.

Mrs Brabazon smiled too. "I can quite believe it," she replied, "and I can, too, prophesy very certainly that, in her present character as your sister, she will not be 'out' *long*."

She looked up at Mr Cheviott expecting to see that the inferred compliment had pleased him. But, to her surprise, far from testifying any gratification the expression of his face seemed rather to tell of annoyance, and, being a good-natured woman, Mrs Brabazon felt sorry, and began wondering what there could have been in her harmless little speech so evidently to "rub him the wrong way." Alys, sitting at a little distance talking to a young lady to whom Madame de Briancourt had introduced her, happened at this moment to look round and caught sight of her brother's face.

"Laurence is vexed at something," she thought, and, moving her chair a little so as to bring herself within speaking distance of her brother and Mrs Brabazon, she tried to think how she could give a turn to the conversation which so evidently was not to Mr Cheviott's taste. The "turn" came from another direction. A tall, thin boy of sixteen, or thereabouts, a boy with a somewhat anxious and almost girlishly sweet expression of face, came softly and half timidly across the room in Mrs Brabazon's direction.

"Aunt," he said, hesitatingly, "I think it is getting rather late—that is to say, if you are still thinking of a drive."

"I was just thinking so myself, Anselm. Just you find out, my dear boy, if the carriage has come; it was to follow us here, you know, and I shall be ready in a moment."

The boy turned away to do as she asked.

"That is my *other* nephew—Anselm Brooke," she explained to Mr Cheviott. "Basil you know?"

"Oh, yes," said Alys's brother, with evident interest. "How is he, poor fellow? I was just going to ask you. Better, I hope?"

Mrs Brabazon shook her head, and the tears filled her eyes.

"There will be no real 'better' for him, I feel sure," she said, sadly. "Yet my brother will not believe it, or rather persists in saying he does not. I can understand it; I remember how obstinately incredulous I was when Colonel Brabazon's illness became hopeless. But it is sad, is it not? You remember what a fine young fellow Basil was only last year?"

"Yes," said Mr Cheviott, kindly. "It is very sad."

"And poor Anselm, it is really piteous to see his devotion to Basil. He has always looked up to him as to a sort of

superior being, and indeed Basil has been treated as such by us all. Anselm has always been so delicate and backward—a frail staff to lean upon, but my mind misgives me that before long his father will have no other.”

“Do the doctors think as you do?”

“They do not *say* so, but I feel sure they think so.”

“I should like to see Basil again before I leave. May I call, do you think?”

“By all means; it would please him very much. Are you going straight home when you leave Paris—to Meadshire, I mean, for that is ‘home’ now to you, I suppose.”

“Yes,” replied Mr Cheviott, “we go straight to Romary. You must come and see us there some time or other, Mrs Brabazon.”

“Thank you,” she said, with a sigh, “I must make no plans just now. My time belongs entirely to my brother and the boys. But talking of Meadshire reminds me—is it anywhere near Withenden that you live?”

“Very near—within a mile or two.”

“Have you ever heard of a place called Hathercourt near there?” inquired Mrs Brabazon, with interest. “You don’t happen to know anything of the clergyman of Hathercourt, or rather of his family? West, I think, is the name.”

“Western,” interrupted Alys close by. “Oh, yes, they are such pretty girls. I am sure they are nice.”

“How can you possibly judge, Alys?” said her brother, coldly. “You only saw them once in your life, and just for a mere instant.”

But Alys’s eager, flushed face, and warmly-expressed admiration of the Western sisters, had absorbed Mrs Brabazon’s attention; she hardly heard what Mr Cheviott said, or, if she did, she gave no heed to it.

“So you know them, then, Miss Cheviott?” she said, cordially, smiling at Alys as she spoke. “Do tell me all you know about them. ‘Girls,’ you say—are they all girls, then—no sons?”

“Oh, yes,” said Alys, “I think there are sons—indeed, I feel sure there are. But it was the girls I noticed, one was *so* pretty.”

The eagerness died out of her voice, for the expression of her brother’s face told her that again she had managed to displease him.

“How unlucky I am to-day,” she said to herself, and the change in her manner was so complete that Mr Cheviott was afraid Mrs Brabazon would notice it.

“It is a case of ‘all kinds’ in the Western household,” he said, with a slight laugh. “Alys and I only saw them once in church—there seemed to be girls and boys, of every size, down to little mites—a regular poor parson’s family.”

“But what sort of people are they?” asked Mrs Brabazon. “Being such near neighbours, you must hear something about them.”

“They are not such very near neighbours of ours. Withenden is the nearest railway station to Hathercourt, and we are only three miles from Withenden, but Hathercourt again is four miles the other way. Of course I take some interest in Hathercourt now, on Arthur Beverley’s account. You heard of his romantic legacy?”

“Oh! yes,” said Mrs Brabazon. “He wrote all about it to Basil. But I wish you would tell me anything you do know or have heard about these Westerns.”

“Which is very little. They are not in any sort of society.”

“How could they be, if they are so very poor?”

Mr Cheviott slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“I did not say they could be,” he answered, with a smile. “I was only, at your bidding, telling the very little I know about them. They are not in any society, not only because they are very poor, but because people know nothing about them. The father is not a man who has distinguished himself in any way, and I believe he married beneath him—a poor governess, or something of that kind—so what can you expect?”

Mrs Brabazon gave a curious smile.

“Oh! indeed,” she said, dryly. “So the *on dit* of Meadshire is that the Rector, or Vicar—which is he?—of Hathercourt married beneath him. Thank you; I am glad to know it. Here comes Anselm, I must go! You said these Western girls were pretty, did you not, Miss Cheviott?” she went on, turning to Alys. “Their beauty must be of the dairy-maid order, I suppose?”

Alys felt that her brother’s eyes were fixed upon her, but she answered sturdily nevertheless.

“On the contrary, they are particularly refined-looking girls. The eldest one especially has the sort of look that—that—” she hesitated.

“That a princess of the blood royal might have,” suggested Mrs Brabazon, laughingly.

Alys smiled, and so, to her relief, did her brother. Then Mrs Brabazon and the boy Anselm took their departure, and not long after, Madame de Briancourt having overwhelmed them with her pretty regrets and desolations at their leaving Paris so abruptly, the brother and sister bade their hostess farewell, and drove off again on their round of calls.

“Laurence Cheviott is evidently prejudiced against these Westerns. I wonder why, for I think him a reasonable sort of man, on the whole,” said Mrs Brabazon to herself. “Can it be possible that he has fallen in love with this very magnificent Miss Western, whom his sister admires so much, and that she has snubbed him? *That* I can quite believe he would find it hard to forgive. But, oh! no, that is quite impossible. I remember he said he had only seen them once. I think I shall get Basil, poor fellow, to write to Arthur Beverley; he may know something of them. I would like to see them, and it would be a satisfaction to Basil too.”

“What possible reason can Mrs Brabazon have for wanting to know anything about those Westerns? I am afraid she is something of a busybody after all. Surely Arthur cannot have been writing anything about them to Basil Brooke? Oh, no, it can’t be that, for if he had written anything of consequence, it would have been confidentially, and he would hardly be likely to trouble Brooke about anything of *that* kind now,” thought Mr Cheviott, when he found himself in the carriage again beside his sister, driving rapidly away from Madame de Briancourt’s.

Alys noticed his abstraction.

“What are you thinking of, Laurence?”

“Only what a very little world this is!”

“I know,” exclaimed Alys, not sorry to draw the conversation round to a point where her mind was not at rest. “You are thinking how strange it was that we should twice in one day hear Hathercourt Rectory spoken of—at least, not twice spoken of, but I mean mentioned, in Arthur’s letter, and again by Mrs Brabazon. Laurence, were you vexed with what I said of the Westerns? Did it seem like contradicting you?”

“Oh, no, you could not help saying what you thought—nor could I,” he added, after a little pause.

“I did think those girls *so* pretty, especially the eldest one, and not only pretty, but something more—good and nice.”

“I don’t see how they *can* be superior, however, considering their disadvantages,” said Mr Cheviott, musingly. “I don’t agree with you in admiring the elder one more than the other. There was something not commonplace about that younger girl,” and a curious feeling shot across his mind as he recalled the young face with the kindly honest eyes and half shy smile that had met his glance that Sunday morning in the porch of the old church—a feeling almost of disloyalty in the words and tones with which he had replied to Mrs Brabazon’s inquiries—a ridiculous feeling altogether to have in connection with a girl he had only seen once in his life, and that for not more than five minutes. But the vision of Mary Western’s face had imprinted itself on his memory, and refused to be effaced.

Alys fancied that the prejudice she had suspected was passing away; it could not have been very deep after all. She determined to take a bold step, and one that she had been meditating for some time.

“Laurence,” she said, “when we go back to Romary I wish you would let me know those girls. I can’t tell you why I have taken such a fancy to them, but I *have*. You could soon judge by seeing a little more of them if they are nice girls, and I am *sure* you would find they are. I have never had many companions, and it is dull sometimes—rather dull, I mean.”

She looked up in his face appealingly. It was very grave.

“Surely,” he was saying to himself, “the Fates are dead against me. What can have put it into the child’s head to want to set up a romantic friendship with these Westerns? Can Arthur have to do with it? Can he possibly have written anything to Alys besides what I saw?”

“You are vexed with me, Laurence,” she said, deprecatingly, as he did not speak. Then he looked at her and felt ashamed of his suspicions, and his tone was gentle when he answered:

“No, I am not vexed with you, but a little disappointed, perhaps, at your asking anything so foolish. Just reflect, dear, what *can* you know of those girls to make you wish to choose them for friends—”

“They have such nice faces.”

“And what I know of the family is not to their advantage,” pursued Mr Cheviott, without noticing the interruption. “None of the Withenden people speak cordially of them, or indeed seem to know anything about them.”

“And you call that to their disadvantage, Laurence!” exclaimed Alys—“you who have so often said what a set of snobs the Withenden people are. Of course it is very easy to see why the Westerns are disliked; they won’t be patronised by the county people, and they are too refined for the Withenden set, and so they keep to themselves, and the girls’ beauty makes everybody jealous of them.”

She looked up in her brother’s face triumphantly, feeling that she had the best of it, and so, too, in his heart, felt Mr Cheviott. But he could not afford to own himself vanquished, and took refuge in being aggrieved.

“Very well, Alys,” he said, coldly, “I cannot argue with you; you will be of age in three years, and then you can choose your own friends, but while you are under my guardianship, I can but direct you to the best of my judgment, however

you may dislike it."

Alys's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Laurence, don't speak to me like that; I am so unlucky to-day. I did not—indeed I did not mean to vex you; I should never want to go against your wishes—*never*, not if I live to be a hundred instead of twenty-one. Laurence, do forgive me!"

And Laurence smiled and "forgave," though wishing she were convinced as well as submissive, for somewhere down in the secret recesses of his consciousness, there lurked a misgiving which shrank from boldly facing daylight as to whether his arguments had altogether succeeded in convincing himself.

"I am very sorry to hear of Basil Brooke being so ill," he said by way of changing the conversation.

"Is that one of Mrs Brabazon's nephews?"

"Yes, the elder; they have come to Paris to try some new doctor, but it is no use. I thought so when he first got ill; and now what his aunt says shows it is true. Poor fellow!"

"Have you known him long? I don't think I ever heard you speak of him before," said Alys.

"He was more a friend of Arthur's than mine; they were in the same regiment. But here we are at Mrs Feston's."

On the whole, Alys enjoyed these few last days in Paris much more than the weeks which had preceded them. She was touched by her brother's evident anxiety that she should do so. Never had she known him more indulgent and considerate, but yet he was less cheerful than usual—at times unmistakably anxious and uneasy. There came no more letters from Captain Beverley, but Alys was not sorry.

"It was something in that letter of Arthur's that annoyed Laurence so the other day," she thought to herself; "and fond as I am of Arthur, I couldn't let him or any one come between Laurence and me."

And she was not quite sure if she felt pleased or the reverse when her brother told her that, in all probability Captain Beverley would be their guest almost as soon as they reached Romary.

"You haven't written to tell him when we are going home, have you, Alys?"

Alys looked up from her letter to Miss Winstanley in surprise at the inquiry.

"I?" she said; "oh dear, no. I leave all that to you of course. I have not answered Arthur's letter at all; there seems to have been so much to do this last day or two."

Her brother seemed pleased and yet not pleased.

"It is just as well. I don't think I shall tell him either. We'll take him by surprise—drive over to see him in his bachelor quarters at the farm-house the day after we get home, eh?"

"Oh, yes, do," exclaimed Alys, eagerly. "We'll say we have come to luncheon! What fun it will be; for Arthur has about as much notion of housekeeping as the man in the moon, and he will look so foolish if he has to tell us he has nothing in the house but eggs!"

"You don't suppose he has been living on nothing but eggs all this time, do you?"

"He may have had a chop now and then for a change," observed Alys; "but from what he said in his letter, I don't fancy he has had to depend much on himself. He seems to have been a great deal with his friends at the Rectory."

There was intention in the allusion. Alys stole a look at her brother's face to see if the effect was what she half anticipated. Yes; the amusement had all died put of his expression, to be replaced by annoyance and anxiety. Alys's conscience smote her for trying experiments at the cost of her brother's equanimity.

"Poor Laurence!" she reflected. "I wish he would not worry himself so much about other people's affairs. Arthur is quite able to take care of himself. But evidently it *is* about him and the Westerns that Laurence is in such a state of mind. I really do wonder why he should care so much."

And the next morning the Cheviotts left Paris.

Chapter Eight.

Plans.

> "Se'l sol mi splende, non curo la luna."
>
> *Italian Proverb*.

"*Man proposes, but the weather interposes*," is a travesty of the well-known old saying, which few people would dispute the truth of. Directly the delay in the Cheviotts' return home was traceable to other agencies, but indirectly the weather was at the bottom of it after all. The journey to London was accomplished without let or hindrance by the way; the let and the hindrance met the brother and sister on their arrival at Miss Winstanley's house, where they

were to spend the night, in the shape of a letter for one thing, and of a bad sore throat of their hostess for another. And all that was wrong was the fault of the weather! Miss Winstanley had caught cold through getting her feet wet the Sunday before, when the morning had promised well and turned out a base deceiver by noon; and the letter was from the housekeeper at Romary, written in abject distress at the prospect of her master and mistress's return home sooner than she had expected them. More than distress, indeed; the letter closed an absolute entreaty that they would not come for ten days or so. It was "a terrible upset with the pipes," she wrote, that was the cause of her difficulty—an upset caused by a complete overhauling of these mysterious modern inventions of household torture, the necessity for which had been revealed by some days of unusually heavy rains, by which "the pipes" had been tested and found wanting, and the Withenden plumbers being no exception to their class, long celebrated as the most civil and procrastinating of "work-people," had already exceeded by several days the date at which the business was to have been concluded.

"Pipes is things as can't be hurried," wrote Mrs Golding, pathetically, "and, as everybody knows, it's easy getting work-people into a house to getting them out again; but what with the pipes and the men, the house is in that state I cannot take upon myself to say what my feelings would be for you and Miss Alys to see it."

Now Mrs Golding was an excellent servant; she had been Alys's nurse, and though her grammar was far from irreproachable, and her general appearance not more than respectable and old-fashioned, she was thoroughly well qualified for the somewhat onerous post to which, on her master's accession to Romary, he had at once promoted her. But she had two faults—she had feelings and she had nerves.

The letter came at breakfast-time. Alys and her brother were by themselves, Miss Winstanley's sore throat preventing her coming down as early as usual. Mr Cheviott read it, and tossed it across the table to his sister.

"So provoking!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Alys, "it is tiresome just when you were so particularly anxious to go home. But I see no help for it; when nurse takes to her 'feelings,' what can we do? No doubt the house is in a terrible mess, and if we persisted in going down at once, I really believe she would have a fit. If we wait a few days, as she suggests, you may trust her to have everything ready for us; and indeed, Laurence, I was thinking just before nurse's letter came that it seemed hardly kind of me to go away when aunt is ill and all alone. She will be able to come with us to Romary in a week, she says, if we can wait till then."

Mr Cheviott did not at once answer.

"It is unlucky," he said at last; "but, as far as I am concerned, I must not put off going home, and Mrs Golding's feelings must just make the best of it. But you had better stay here a week or so, Alys, I see that, so you can tell my aunt so."

"Thank you," said Alys; "but I wish you could stay too."

But "No, it is really impossible," was her brother's reply, and soon after he went out.

Alys did not see him again till about an hour before dinner-time.

"Is my aunt up yet?" he inquired, as he came in, and even in the tone with which he uttered the two or three words she could perceive a cheerfulness which had not been his in the morning.

"No," she replied, "but she says she will come into the drawing-room after dinner. She is much better."

"Ah, well, then, if I am not to see her till after dinner, you must tell her from me that I have taken the liberty of inviting a friend to dinner in her name. Fancy, Alys, almost the first person I ran against this morning was Arthur. He only came up to town yesterday for a few days to settle something about this new farm-house that his head's running upon—so lucky we met!"

"Yes, very. I shall be so glad to see him," said Alys, heartily. "But what a pity, Laurence, that you have to go just as he has come. It would have been so nice for all of us to go home together."

Mr Cheviott hesitated.

"I am not, after all, perfectly certain that I shall go down to Romary quite so soon as I said. Part—in fact, the chief part—of my business was with Arthur, and if he stays in town a few days too, we may all go down to Romary together, as you wish."

"That's very nice of you, Laurence. I really think my training is beginning to do you good. Aunt, of course, will be delighted to see Arthur, but I will go and tell her about it now."

She was leaving the room when her brother called her back. "Remember," he said, "I haven't *promised*," but Alys laughed and shook her head, and ran off.

"I can manage Arthur," she thought, "if it depends on him. But I am sure there is something Laurence has not told me that has annoyed him lately, though he looks happier to-night—I wonder what it is all about."

Captain Beverley was a great favourite with Miss Winstanley, whose affection for her nephew—her half-brother's son—Laurence Cheviott, was considerably tempered with awe. But with Arthur she always felt at ease.

"It is not that I mind being laughed at, now and then," she would confide to Alys, pathetically, "but with Laurence I really never feel sure if he is laughing at me or not. Of course he is never wanting in real respect, and he is the best

of nephews in every way, but I can't deny that I am frightened of him, and, however *you* laugh at me, my dear, you can't laugh me out of it. I always have been afraid of Laurence, ever since he was a baby, I believe. He has had such a dreadfully *superior* sort of way of looking at one, and saying, 'What for does you do that?'"

"What a dreadful baby he must have been! I always tell him he was never snubbed as much as would have been for his good," Alys would reply, upon which her aunt would observe, with a sigh, that it was "far too late in the day to think of anything of the kind *now*."

Her spirits rose greatly when she heard that Arthur was coming to dinner.

"I really think I feel well enough to dine with you, after all," she said to Alys. "It would certainly seem more hospitable, as Arthur is coming, and I don't like to get the character of exaggerating my ailments," and Alys agreed with her that if she were "well wrapped up," the exertion of going down two flights of stairs to the dining-room was not likely to do her any harm.

"But you know, aunt, you mustn't eat too much at dinner," said Alys, gravely, "for if you feed a cold you'll have to starve a fever. A little soup and a spoonful of jelly—anything more might be very dangerous."

"Naughty girl, *you* are laughing at me now," remonstrated poor Miss Winstanley, but Alys assured her solely that she was "quite, quite in earnest."

And the *partie carrée* was a very cheerful one. Laurence seemed more light of heart than he had been for some time; Arthur, whose state of spirits was, to give him his due, seldom such as to cause his friends much anxiety, was even gayer and merrier than usual, almost feverishly so, it seemed to Alys once or twice, and yet again, when she caught his eyes fixed upon her with a sort of appealing anxiety in their expression that she never remembered to have seen in them before, she could have fancied, were such a fancy possible in connection with so light-hearted and thoughtless a being, that he, in his turn, had something on his mind. Could the mantle of Laurence's recent anxiety have fallen upon him? she asked herself. It seemed so strange to associate anxiety of any kind with Arthur that she tried to dismiss the idea, and told herself that she must have grown morbid from being so much alone with Laurence, and fancying he was vexed or annoyed whenever he looked dull.

"Then it is all nicely settled about our staying in town, and going down to Romary together. It all depends on you, Arthur."

Captain Beverley looked surprised.

"On *me*!" he exclaimed, "how do you mean? I thought it all depended on Miss Winstanley's sore throat."

"Oh! no. Laurence's staying has nothing to do with aunt. He said he had business with you, but that you could settle it in town as well as at Romary, if you could stay—and so you will stay, won't you? It would be so much nicer to go down all together."

Captain Beverley looked increasingly mystified.

"I don't understand—" he was beginning, but Mr Cheviott, whose attention had been caught by the sound of his own name, interrupted him.

"It is Alys herself who does not understand," he said, good-humouredly, but not without a little constraint. "If you had been still at that delightful farm-house of yours, Arthur, I would have joined you there, and talked over these improvements. But that can wait, I dare say, and if you care to go into the financial part of it, we can do that in town as well. You are not in a hurry to go back to your new quarters, are you? You will wait and go back with us to Romary, as Alys wishes, won't you?" Captain Beverley looked a little surprised, and a little disconcerted. He was not prepared for his cousin's sudden interest in his improvements at Hathercourt, and hardly understood it, for hitherto Mr Cheviott had looked somewhat coldly on the schemes Arthur was full of, and he was still less prepared to be cross-questioned as to his length of stay in town, which in his own mind he had decided was to be a very short one.

"Thank you," he said, with a little hesitation. "I should like to go over the plans for the Edge with you very much. But as to my staying in town another week, I really can't say. I only ran up for a couple of days, and there are lots of things waiting for me to settle about at Hathercourt."

"You are becoming quite a man of business, I see," and Alys fancied that Arthur winced a little.

She felt sorry that she had said anything about their plans till she could have seen Arthur alone, for somehow she had managed to cause an uncomfortable feeling—the cheerfulness of the little party seemed to have flown; Laurence grew silent and abstracted; Alys tried nervously to hit upon a safe subject of conversation. Fortune favoured her.

"By-the-bye, Arthur," she said, suddenly, "have you heard anything about the Brocklehurst ball? When it is to be, I mean. Some one said something about its being earlier than usual, and I shall be rather glad, for it will be less likely to interfere with other things than when it is so near Christmas time."

Captain Beverley looked up in surprise.

"It is to be in a fortnight—in less than a fortnight, indeed, on the fourth, and to-day is the twenty-third," he replied. "Did you not know? I supposed you had made all your arrangements."

"Oh! I am so sorry!" exclaimed Alys. "I had all sorts of plans in my head, and now it will be too late."

"What will be too late? What are you talking about?" said Mr Cheviott; and when Alys explained, he looked rather

ashamed of himself.

“I should have told you, Alys, but I completely forgot about it. I found a letter here last night when we arrived, asking us to go to Cleavelands on the twenty-second, and go to Brocklehurst with a party from there. You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

But Alys’s face did not brighten up as he expected.

“I thought you liked the Cleaves so much,” he said.

“Yes, I do. I like young Mrs Cleave very much. It isn’t that. It is only that I had set my heart on going from Romary, and asking nice people to go with us.”

“So we might have done, but for this visit to Paris,” said Mr Cheviott. “But it can’t be helped. There will be more balls in the neighbourhood before the winter is over.”

“Arthur,” said Alys, suddenly, but in a low voice, when, later in the evening, she had got Captain Beverley to herself in a corner of the drawing-room—“Arthur, do you know what I had set my heart on for the Brocklehurst ball.”

“What sort of dress, do you mean?” said her cousin. “No, I certainly do not know, and I am perfectly sure I couldn’t possibly guess. So you had better tell me.”

“I don’t mean a *dress*,” said Alys, contemptuously, “I meant a *plan*.”

Captain Beverley did not at once answer.

“A *plan*, I say, Arthur, don’t you hear?” repeated Alys, impatiently.

“I beg your pardon,” exclaimed Arthur, rallying his attention. “A plan to show me, did you say? For my new farm-house? It is very good of you to trouble about it.”

“Oh! Arthur, how provoking you are! What is the matter with you?” exclaimed Alys. “Of course it wasn’t that sort of plan I was talking of. It was a plan of mine—one that I had made in my head, don’t you understand? It was about the Brocklehurst ball. I wanted to coax Laurence into letting me call on the Westerns, Arthur, the Westerns at Hathercourt, you know, and then I would have got him to let me ask them—the girls, of course, I mean—to come to stay at Romary for two or three days, and go to the ball with us. Wouldn’t it have been nice, Arthur? It would have been a treat for them, as the children say. They are such pretty, nice girls, and I am sure they don’t have many ‘treats’.”

She looked up in Arthur’s face with eager, sparkling eyes, and this time she had no need to recall his attention. His eyes were sparkling too, his colour rose, his voice even seemed to her to shake a little with suppressed excitement as he replied to her:

“Alys, you are the best and nicest girl in the world. It was just like you, you dear good child, to think of such a thing, and I thank you—I always shall thank you for it with all my heart. I felt sure,” he went on, more quietly—“I felt sure I should find I might count upon you, and now I know it. I have a great deal to tell you, Alys, and I—”

But at this moment Mr Cheviott’s voice was heard.

“Alys,” he was saying, “are you not going to play a little? What mischief are Arthur and you concocting over there?”

He came towards them as he spoke. Captain Beverley had laid his hand on Alys’s in his eagerness, his face was flushed, his whole manner and air might easily have been mistaken for those of an accepted or would-be lover, and the start with which he threw himself back on his own chair as his cousin approached, increased the apparent awkwardness of the situation. But Alys, though her cheeks were rosier, her eyes brighter than their wont, answered quietly and without confusion:

“We are not concocting mischief, Laurence,” she said; “we are too wise and sensible for anything of the kind, as you might know by this time. We’ll have another talk about our *plans* to-morrow, Arthur. Come and sing something now to please aunt, as she made an effort to do you honour by coming down to dinner.”

And the *tête-à-tête* between the cousins was not renewed that evening, nor, as Alys had proposed, “to-morrow,” for Arthur did not make his appearance at Miss Winstanley’s the next day at all. Mr Cheviott saw him and went with him to the architect’s, and brought back word that he was over head and ears in model pig-sties and shippons.

“And in farm-houses too,” he said. “I think it very foolish of him to lay out money on doing much to the house itself. It is quite good enough as it is for the sort of bailiff he should get.”

“Oh, then, he does not intend to live at Hathercourt Edge himself,” remarked Miss Winstanley.

Mr Cheviott turned upon her rather sharply.

“Live there himself!” he exclaimed, “of course not. What could have put such an idea in your head, my dear aunt? At the most, all the income he can possibly hope to make out of Hathercourt will be within three hundred a year, and he has quite three thousand a year independent of that; he could have no possible motive for settling at Hathercourt.”

“But is there not some condition attached to Arthur’s fortune?” said Miss Winstanley, vaguely. “I remember something about it, and he said the other day that he would not be of age for two years.”

"No; by his father's will he is not to be considered of age till he is twenty-seven."

"Then I should say it would be a very good thing for him to settle down at Hathercourt for two years and learn farming before he has to manage Lydon for himself," said Alys.

"*Nonsense*, Alys," said her brother, severely. "What can you possibly know about anything of the kind?"

But Alys did not appear snubbed.

"I rather suspect Arthur has some plan of the kind in his head, whether Laurence thinks it nonsense or not," she remarked to her aunt, when they were by themselves in the drawing-room. "By-the-bye, aunt, what did you mean about there being some sort of condition attached to Arthur's getting his property? I never heard of it."

"Oh, I don't know, my dear. I dare say I have got hold of the wrong end of the story—I very often do," said Miss Winstanley, nervously, for something in Mr Cheviott's manner had made her suspect she was trenching on forbidden ground. "And besides, if you have never been told anything about it, it shows that, if there is anything to hear, Laurence did not wish you to hear it."

"Laurence forgets sometimes that I am no longer a child," retorted Alys, drawing herself up. "However, it doesn't matter. If Arthur looks upon me as a sister, it is best I should hear all about his affairs from himself. But, Aunt Fanny," she continued, in a softer tone, "was there not something unhappy about Arthur's parents? Laurence has alluded to it sometimes before me, and I have often wondered what it was."

"It was just everything," replied Miss Winstanley, sadly, "the marriage was a most foolish one. They were utterly unsuited to each other, and it was just misery from beginning to end."

"Was Arthur's mother not a lady?" asked Alys.

"Oh, yes; you could not have called her unladylike," replied Miss Winstanley. "It was not that—she married Mr Beverley without any affection for him, entirely for the sake of his position. She was older than he, and her people were very poor, and scheming, I suppose, and he was infatuated."

"And then he found out what a mistake he had made?"

"Oh, it was most miserable. And Edward, Arthur's father, you know, was no one to make the best of such a state of things. He was always so hot-headed and impulsive, and he had offended all his friends by his marriage. Your mother, Alys, poor dear, was the only one who stood by him. And he was grateful to her; yes, he certainly was."

"But she died," said Alys. "How sad it all sounds!"

"Yes, she died, but Edward did not long survive her. He was never a strong man, and he was utterly disappointed and broken down. The last time I saw him, Alys, was with you in his arms—a tiny trot you were—and Arthur playing about. Poor Edward was trying to see some likeness to your mother in you, and he was impressing upon Arthur that he must take care of you, and be very good to you always."

"And so he has been—always," replied Alys. "Next to Laurence, aunt, I do not think there is any one in the world I care for more than for Arthur. I would do anything for him, *anything*, just as I would for Laurence."

"What are you saying about me, eh, Alys?" said Mr Cheviott, catching her last words as he entered the room.

"No harm," said Alys. "We have not been speaking about you at all till just this minute. I was asking Aunt Fanny about Arthur's father and mother, and why they did not get on happily together."

An expression of surprise and some annoyance crossed Mr Cheviott's face.

"It is not a pleasant subject," he said, coldly.

"I dare say not," said Alys, fearlessly, "but one must come across unpleasant subjects sometimes in life. And, I think, Laurence, you forget now and then that I am no longer a child. All the same you needn't look daggers at poor aunt. She hasn't told me anything, hardly—and it is natural I should wish to hear; for whatever concerns Arthur must interest me."

Mr Cheviott's brow relaxed.

"I did not mean 'to look daggers,' as you say, at Aunt Fanny or you either. Of course it is natural, and some day I shall probably tell you more about it," he said, kindly. "It's a queer thing," he added, with apparent irrelevance, almost as if speaking to himself, "that people who make mistakes in life are punished more severely than actually unprincipled people.—I have written to Mrs Cleave, accepting her invitation," he continued, with a sudden change of tone. "Don't you want some new dresses, Alys? You had not much opportunity for shopping in Paris, after all, you know."

"But I made the best use of what I had. I am very well stocked for the present. If I remember anything I want I'll get Arthur to go shopping with me to-morrow."

To-morrow came and went, and no Arthur made his appearance. Nor was anything seen of him the next day, or the day after that either. It was not till the Tuesday following that he called again, two days only before that fixed for their journey home.

"We thought you had gone back to Hathercourt without waiting for us," said Mr Cheviott, eyeing his cousin somewhat

curiously as he spoke. But Alys, whom Arthur's absence had hurt and disappointed more than she would have cared to confess, said nothing; only she, too, looked at him, and so looking, it seemed to her that his colour changed a little, and forthwith her indignation melted away, to be replaced by anxiety and concern. And these feelings were not decreased by his manner of excusing himself.

"I was afraid you would be thinking me very rude," he said, with a sort of nervous deprecation new to him, "but I have really been very busy."

"Then I don't think being very busy can agree with you," remarked Mr Cheviott, "you look thoroughly done up."

"*Have* you been ill, Arthur?" said Alys, kindly.

Arthur started. "Ill; oh dear, no," he exclaimed; "never was better in my life;" but he smiled at Alys in his old way as he spoke, and seemed grateful for her cordiality.

But Alys was not satisfied about him. She determined to have "a good talk" with him, and did her best to make an opportunity for it; but somehow the opportunity never came. Neither that day nor the next, nor the day on which they all travelled down to Withenden together could she succeed in executing her intention. And at last it suddenly dawned upon her that Arthur was purposely avoiding ever being alone with her, and, hurt and perplexed, she determined to take his hint, and interfere no more in his affairs. Girl-like, she went at once to the extreme, till, in his turn, Captain Beverley was wounded by the marked change in her behaviour.

"What have I done to offend you, Alys?" he asked, one or two mornings after their arrival at Romary, when Miss Cheviott and he happened to be by themselves in the breakfast-room before the others had made their appearance.

"Nothing," said Alys; "you have done nothing, only you seem to have changed to me, Arthur. I used to think you looked upon me quite as a sister, and now when I see you have something on your mind, something you should be glad to consult a sister about—and you did tell me a little, you know, Arthur, that evening in town—you repel my sympathy, and tell me, your *sister*, Arthur, nothing."

She looked at him reproachfully, but his answer was scarcely what she had expected.

"How I wish you *were* my sister, Alys," was all he said.

All, perhaps, that he had time to say, for just then Mr Cheviott's step was heard in the hall.

"That would not make it any better," said Alys, with a sigh, in a low voice; "if I were your sister I could not care for you more, and you don't care for me now."

"It isn't that," said Arthur, hastily. "I do care for you just the same as ever, Alys, but—"

He stopped abruptly as his cousin came in.

Chapter Nine.

"What Made the Ball so Fine?"

> "But come; our dance, I pray:
> She dances featly."
>
> *A Winter's Tale*.

The ball at Brocklehurst was this year anticipated with more than ordinary interest. It was to be an unusually good one, said the local authorities; all the "best" houses in the neighbourhood were to be filled for it; the regiment at the nearest garrison town was a deservedly popular one, and at least three recognised beauties were expected to be present.

All these facts were discussed with eagerness by the young people round about Brocklehurst, to whom a ball of any kind was an event, to whom this special ball was *the* event of the year. And in few family circles was it more talked about than in the isolated Rectory at Hathercourt, by few girls was it looked forward to with more anticipation of enjoyment than by the Western sisters. Yet it was not the first, nor the second, nor, in the case of Lilias, the third Brocklehurst ball even, at which they had "assisted," and only a few weeks previous Miss Western had been seriously talking of declining for the future to take part in the great annual festivity. And here she was now, the week before, as interested in the question of the pretty fresh dresses, which, by an extra turn or two of the screw of economy, the mother had managed to provide for her girls, as if she were again a *débutante* of seventeen; and, more wonderful still, the excitement had proved infectious, for Mary, sober-minded Mary, was full of it too. She could think of little else than what Lilias was to wear, how Lilias was to look—but for Lilias, the consideration of what *Mary* was to wear, how *Mary* was to look, would have been very summarily dismissed.

It is not easy, even with the most unselfish and "managing" of mothers, with the most—theoretically, at least—indulgent of fathers; with two pair of fairly clever hands, and two or three numbers of the latest fashion books, it is not *easy*, out of what a girl like Alys Cheviott would have thought a not extravagant price for a garden-hat, or a new parasol, to devise for one's self a ball-dress, in which to appear with credit to one's self and one's belongings, on such an occasion as a Brocklehurst ball. And at first the difficulties had appeared so insuperable that Mary had proposed that the whole of the funds should be appropriated to the purchase of a dress for Lilias only.

“You could get one really handsome dress—handsome of its kind, that is to say—for what will only provide two barely wearable ones,” she said, appealingly, “and, Lilias, you should be nicely dressed for once.”

“And you?” said Lilias, aghast.

Mary blushed, and stumbled over a proposal that she should wear some mythical attire which “really might be made to look decent,” out of the remains of the tarletans which had already done good duty on two, if not three previous occasions, “or,” she added, still more timidly, “if you don’t think I *could* go in that, Lilias, I don’t see why I should go at all this time. You know my pleasure, even selfishly speaking, would be far greater if you alone were to go, *comfortably*, than if we both went, feeling half ashamed of our clothes! It would spoil the enjoyment—there is no use denying it, however weak-minded it sounds to say so.”

“Of course it would,” said Lilias, promptly. “I am not at all ashamed of saying so. But I don’t despair yet, Mary—only listen to me. I will not go without you—do you hear, child?—I *won’t* go without you, and we shall be dressed exactly alike. Your dress must be precisely and exactly the same as mine, or I won’t go. There, now you know my decision, and you know that you’ll have to give in.”

She sat down as she spoke on the side of the bed in her room, on which was displayed such modest finery as was in their possession, and in presence of which the weighty discussion was taking place—she sat down on the side of the little bed, and looked Mary resolutely in the face.

“Mary,” she repeated, “you know you will have to give in.”

And Mary gave in on the spot.

That had been three weeks ago. Now it was within two or three days of the ball. How they had managed it, I cannot tell; what good fairy had helped them, I cannot say—none, I suspect, but their own light hearts and youthful energy, and love for each other—but Lilias’s prophesy had proved correct. The two dresses were ready, simple, but not shabby, perfectly suited to their wearers. “A dress,” thought Lilias, “which must make every one see how really pretty Mary is.”

“A dress,” thought Mary, “which Captain Beverley need not be afraid of his grand friends criticising, if, as they must, they notice him dancing with Lilias.”

They were in the midst of their admiration of the successful achievement, when there came an interruption—a noisy knock at the door, and Josey’s noisy voice.

“Lilias! Mary! let me in!” she exclaimed. “Mamma says you are to come down at once. Captain Beverley’s here; he has come back from London, and has walked over all the way from Romary. Come quick!”

Mary turned to Lilias. Lilias had grown scarlet.

“I don’t know that I shall go down,” she said. “I must put away all these things, and I wanted you to help me to fold these dresses, Mary. But mother will be vexed if one of us does not go. Josey, send Alexa up to help me—tell mother Mary is just coming, but that I am very busy.”

“I’ll tell Captain Beverley so,” said Josephine, maliciously.

Mary said nothing, but set to work at folding the dresses, and Lilias assisting her, they were all carefully disposed of before Alexa made her appearance.

“Now, Lilias, be sensible, and come down with me,” said the younger sister. “He has walked all the way from Romary, you hear, and I think its very nice of him. He hardly expected to be able to see us again before the ball, and it looks like affectation not to give him a cordial reception.”

But still Lilias hesitated.

“It isn’t affectation,” she said at last, “but—Mary,” she went on, suddenly breaking off her sentence, “I think it is horrid to talk of such things before there is actually anything to talk of, but to you I don’t mind. I cannot understand Captain Beverley quite; that is why I said I was not sure that I should go down. I don’t understand why—why he has never yet said anything definite. He has been on the verge of it a dozen times at least, and then he has seemed to hesitate.”

Mary looked at her sister anxiously.

“Perhaps he is not sure of *you*,” she said. “You know, Lilias, what a way you have of turning things into jest very often.”

Lilias shook her head. “No,” she said, “it isn’t that. He *knows*,” she hesitated, and again her fair face grew rosy, “he *knows* I like him. No, it is as if there were, some difficulty on his side—his friends perhaps.”

“It can’t be that,” said Mary, decidedly. “He has no parents, no very near friends. He must be free to act for himself, Lilias. I think too highly of him to doubt it, for it has been all so entirely his own doing—from the very first—and if he were in any way not free, it would have been shameful;” her face darkened, and a look came into her eyes which told that Mary Western would not be one to stand by silently and see another wronged, whatever powers of endurance she might have on her own account. But it cleared off again quickly, and she smiled at her sister re-assuringly.

“I am fanciful where you are concerned, Lilias,” she said. “There is no reason for misgiving, I feel sure. I think Captain

Beverley is good and true, and it will all be right. Come down-stairs now—mother will not like our leaving her so long alone.”

Lilias made no further objection, and they went down together to the drawing-room, where it would be difficult to say which of the two, Mrs Western or Captain Beverley, was the more eagerly expecting them.

It was only three or four days since the young man had been at the Rectory, for the period of his mysterious absence from Miss Winstanley’s house had really, little as the Cheviotts suspected it, been spent at Hathercourt.

But during those three or four days he had been to town and back again, and now he had left the Edge and taken up his quarters at Romary. A great deal seemed to have happened in these few days, and, in her secret heart, Lilias Western had looked forward to them as to a sort of crisis.

“He will, probably, have been talking over things with his cousin, Mr Cheviott,” she said to herself, “and, naturally, he wishes to have some points settled before speaking to papa or me.”

And it was, therefore, with a sort of expectancy, half hope, half timidity, that added an indefinable charm to her whole bearing and expression, that Lilias met her all but declared lover this afternoon. He felt that she was more attractive than ever, “she grows lovelier every time I see her,” he said to himself, with a sigh, and then tried to forget that he had anything to sigh about, and gave himself up to the pleasure of being again beside her—to the consciousness that his presence was not distasteful to her, and smothered all misgivings with a vague, boyish confidence that, somehow or other, things would all come right in the end.

There could be no doubt about it—he was more devoted than ever—what nineteenth century *preux chevalier* could give greater proof of his devotion than a ten miles’ walk on a dull December day, for the sake of an hour’s enjoyment of his lady-love’s company, and a cup of tea from her fair hands? Yet when their guest rose to go—he had arranged, he told them, for a dog-cart from Romary to meet him at the Edge Farm—Lilias was conscious of a chill of disappointment. True, he had not been alone with her, but had he sought any opportunity of being so? And Mr Western was at home, sitting reading, as usual, in his study; nothing could have been more easily managed than an interview with him, had Captain Beverley wished it. But a word or two that passed, as he was saying good-bye, again put her but half-acknowledged misgivings to flight.

“Then when shall I see you again?” he said, as he held her hand in his for an instant, unobserved in the little bustle of taking leave.

Lilias glanced round hastily; her mother and Mary were hardly within hearing.

“I really cannot say,” she replied, somewhat coldly, drawing her hand away as she spoke. “I *suppose* Mary and I will go to the ball on Thursday, with Mrs Greville, but—”

“Suppose,” repeated Captain Beverley, hastily interrupting her. “Are not you *sure* of going? I should not have promised to go had I not thought you were certain to be there.”

“Are you going to the ball from Romary?” asked Mary, coming up to where they were standing, before Lilias had time to reply.

“I don’t know exactly,” replied Captain Beverley. “I am not sure what I shall do.”

Mary looked up in surprise, and Lilias saw the look.

“Mary and I will have a very long drive,” she said. “You know we are going with Mrs Greville from Uxley.”

Captain Beverley’s face cleared.

“I shall get there somehow,” he said, brightly, “and you must not forget the dances you have promised me, Miss Western.” And then he said good-bye again, and really took his departure. Lilias’s good spirits did not desert her through the evening, and Mary was glad to see it, and tried to banish the misgivings that had been left in her own mind by her conversation with her sister. But she did not succeed in doing so quite effectually.

“I wonder,” she said to herself—“I wonder why Captain Beverley did not order the dog-cart to come *here* to meet him. And I wonder, too, why he says so little about the Cheviotts. Under the circumstances, it would be only natural that we should know something of them—he has so often said Miss Cheviott was just like a sister to him.”

“Miss Cheviott is to be at the ball, I suppose,” she said to Lilias the next day. “Does she count as one of the three beauties we heard about, do you think?”

“I suppose so,” said Lilias, rather shortly.

“Did Captain Beverley not say anything about her going?” persisted Mary.

Lilias turned round sharply.

“You heard all he said,” she exclaimed. “He was speaking to you quite as much as to me. I don’t think he mentioned the Cheviotts at all, and I don’t care to hear about them. It is not as if they were Captain Beverley’s brother and sister.”

“I didn’t mean to vex you, Lilias,” said Mary, and then the subject dropped.

Mrs Greville was a very good sort of person to be a *chaperon*. She was her husband's second wife, a good many years his junior, and she had no daughters of her own. She was pretty well off, but owing to Mr Greville's delicate health, her allowance of amusement was, even for a clergyman's wife, moderate in the extreme, and she had very little occupation of any kind; there were no poor people in the very well-to-do parish of Uxley, and her two boys were at school. She liked chaperoning the Western girls, Lilias especially, as her beauty was sure of receiving attention, and both she and Mary were quickly grateful for a little kindness, unexacting, and ready to be pleased. So, all things considered, she looked forward to the Brocklehurst ball with scarcely less eagerness then the sisters themselves.

"I am so pleased that you have got such pretty dresses this year," said Mrs Greville, when she and her charges found themselves fairly launched on the eventful evening. She had chartered the roomiest of the Withenden flys, as much less damaging to their attire during a seven miles' drive than her own little pill-box, in which, carefully wrapped in innumerable mufflers and overcoats, Mr Greville followed meekly behind. "Yes, I am particularly pleased you have got such pretty dresses, for I quite think it is going to be a very brilliant ball. You have heard that there are to be three beauties—*noted* beauties, have you not? There's young Mrs Heron-Wyvern, the bride, you know; she is of Spanish origin; her father was a General Monte something or other, and they say she is lovely; and Sir Thomas Fforde's niece, Miss—oh, I always forget names, but she is very pretty—handsome, rather—she is not so very young; and then there is Miss Cheviott of Romary. I have not seen her since she was quite a little girl, but she was pretty then, even."

"Are the Cheviotts at Romary now?" asked Mary, when she got a chance of speaking.

"Oh, yes, I believe so, and very much liked, I hear," replied Mrs Greville. "There was an impression that Mr Cheviott was stiff and 'stuck up,' but I believe it's not at all the case when you know him. I hear Romary is likely to be one of the pleasantest houses in the county. I dare say Miss Cheviott will be making some grand match before long, though I *have* heard—"

But just at this moment the sudden rattle of the wheels upon the unmistakable cobble stones of Brocklehurst High Street distracted Mrs Greville's attention.

"Here we are, I declare!" she exclaimed, "How quickly we seem to have come! I do hope the brougham is close behind, for Mr Greville has all the tickets;" and, in the bustle that ensued, what she had heard as to Miss Cheviott's prospects or intentions was never revealed.

They were very early. Mrs Greville liked to be early, "to see all the people come in." Hitherto, on such occasions, this weakness of her friend had been a sore trial to Lilias, but this year, for reasons of her own, she had made no objections to it, and had not, as formerly, exhausted her energies in search of some cleverly-laid scheme for making Mrs Greville late in spite of herself. And if Lilias was content, it never occurred to Mary to be anything else; so they all sat down together "in a nice corner out of the draught," and listened to the discordant preliminaries of the band, and watched the gradually filling of the bare, chilly rooms, two hearts among the four caring for little but the confidently looked-for approach of a tall, manly figure, with a bright fair face, to claim his partner for the first two dances.

But time wore on; the first quadrille was a thing of the past, and still Lilias and Mary sat decorously beside their *chaperon*, each thinking to herself that "surely the Romary party was very late." But when the second dance, a Waltt, had also come to an end, Lilias's air changed; a proud flush of colour overspread her cheeks, and when Frank Bury, a Withenden curate of rather unclerical tastes, but decided in his admiration for Miss Western, begged for "the honour of the third dance," she accepted at once—so much more amiably, and with so much sweeter smiles than usual, that the poor young man grew crimson with astonishment and delight. Mary longed, yet dared not, to interfere; there was "a look" in Lilias's face as she walked away on Frank Bury's arm that made Mary's heart burn with anxiety for the possible issues of this evening.

"Oh," said she, to herself, "if he were to come just now and think she would not wait for him!"

And she sat still in fear and trembling, longing for, yet dreading Captain Beverley's appearance.

The dance was not half over when there came a little bustle at the principal door-way. Those nearest it stood back, and even through the music one discerned a slight hush of expectancy. Some new-comers were at hand; new-comers, too, of evident importance. Mrs Greville's ears and eyes were equally wide awake.

"The Cleavelands party," she whispered to Mary, "and I hear all the three beauties come with them! The Heron-Wyverns are staying there, and so are the Ffordes, and the Cheviotts. It looks as if it had been arranged on purpose to make a sensation."

Mary would have cared little but for one thought. "Then there has been no party at Romary?" she asked.

"I suppose not—evidently not, for see, there is Mr Cheviott coming into the room with Sir Thomas's niece on his arm—what a handsome couple! but he has a forbidding expression. Then that must be the bride, I suppose—oh, yes, look, Mary, she is going to dance with her husband, young Heron-Wyvern—he has reddish hair—and how, I wonder what has become of the third beauty, Miss Cheviott."

But at this moment an acquaintance of Mrs Greville happening to take the vacant seat on her other side, her attention was distracted, and Mary's eyes were left free to roam in search of one familiar figure. Her heart was beating fast with excitement and anxiety, her sight surely was growing confused, for could *that* be he? Over on the other side, through a bewilderment of faces, she espied the one she was in search of, gazing about in quest of Lilias, or disconsolately observing her defalcation. Ah no, Captain Beverley's face was bent to meet the upturned glance of a beautiful woman on his arm she was smiling up at him; he, down upon her, "just," thought Mary, with a thrill of something very nearly approaching agony, "*just* as I have seen him look at Lilias hundreds of times." Never had he appeared to greater advantage, never had his fair, handsome face looked brighter or more attractive—and the lady—

yes, in another instant, Mary was sure of it, recognised fully the slight, graceful figure, the peculiar "set" of the haughty little head, and the glance of the pretty violet eyes. Yes, they were nearer her now, the young lady was his cousin, the beautiful Miss Cheviott! In another instant his arm was round her waist, they were dancing together. And Mary, for the first time in her life, felt as if it might be possible to *hate* good-natured Mrs Greville, when a succession of lady-like nudges having compelled her attention, her *chaperon* whispered, triumphantly, "Look, Mary, quick, child, or you won't see them—*there* is Miss Cheviott, isn't she lovely? And she is dancing with her cousin, Captain Beverley. And Mr Knox tells me—he has just heard it on the best authority—they are *engaged* to each other."

"You forget that I know Captain Beverley," Mary could not help rejoining, coldly; "he has called at the Rectory several times when he has been staying at the Edge Farm."

"Ah, yes, to be sure. I wish he would come and ask you to dance," said Mrs Greville, carelessly.

But Mary felt as if "the dance had all gone out of her." Her mental tremors now took a new form—dread of her sister's return, and, more in cowardice than because she had the slightest wish to move, she accepted Mr Greville's offer of a convoy across the room "for a change; Mr Knox will look after my wife till your sister comes back," he said, good-naturedly.

"Across the room," Mary met with an unexpected invitation to "join the dance." The major of the 210th was an old friend of Mr Greville's, and being a quiet, retiring man, the number of his acquaintances at Brocklehurst was not large. He did not care much about dancing, but after chatting to Mr Greville for a minute or two, he discovered that the girl on his friend's arm had a nice face and an undoubtedly beautiful pair of eyes, and, before Mary knew what she was about, she was dancing with Major Throckmorton, and engaged to him for the quadrille to follow. Between the dances her partner proposed that they should walk up and down the long corridor into which the ball-room opened, and Mary, caring little—so completely were her thoughts absorbed with Lilias—where she went, absently agreed. Major Throckmorton was so shy himself that he naturally attributed to the same cause the peculiarity of the young lady's manner, and liked her none the less on account of it. But before the quadrille had reached the end of its first figure, his theory had received a shock. For suddenly his partner's whole manner changed. She smiled, and talked, and laughed, and seemed interested; where before he had only succeeded in extracting the most indistinct of monosyllables, she now answered with intelligence and perfect self-possession, hazarding observations of her own in a way which proved her to be by no means the timid, ill-assured country maiden he had imagined her.

"What a curiously changeable girl!" he said to himself. "Five minutes ago I did not feel sure that she took in the sense of a word I said to her, and now she is as composed and rational as possible, and evidently a well-educated girl. What queer creatures women are!"

His glance ran down the lines of faces opposite them. Among them one arrested his attention. "What a beautiful girl," he exclaimed; "the most beautiful in the room, in my opinion. Do you happen to know who she is, Miss Western?"

Mary's eyes followed willingly in the direction he pointed out—whither, indeed, they had already been frequently wandering—and her whole face lighted up with a happy smile.

"*Do* you think her the most beautiful girl in the room?" she said. "I am so glad, for she is my sister. Do you know the gentleman she is dancing with?"

Major Throckmorton glanced at Lilias's partner. "No," he said, "I don't think I do. I know so few people here. He is a good-looking fellow, and," he hesitated, and glanced again in Miss Western's direction, then added with a kindly smile, "it is evident *he* would agree with my opinion as to who is the most beautiful girl in the room."

Mary smiled too, and blushed a little, and decided that her partner was one of the pleasantest men she had ever met. And poor Major Throckmorton thought how pretty she looked when she blushed, and said to himself that before long, very probably, some other fellow would be appropriating her, as her beautiful sister evidently was already appropriated, and he sighed to think that, not withstanding his eighteen years' service, such good luck had never yet come in *his* way! For it was a case of "uncommonly little besides his pay," and beautiful girls were not for such as he.

Chapter Ten.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet.

> "The marvel dies, and leaves me fool'd and trick'd.
> And only wondering wherefore play'd upon!
> And doubtful whether I and mine be scorn'd."
>
> *Gareth and Lynette*.

Major Throckmorton took Mary back to Mrs Greville, and after engaging her for another dance, later in the evening, strolled away again, considerably to her satisfaction, for she was now as anxious to see Lilias, and hear the explanation of Captain Beverley's inconsistent behaviour, as she had before been to avoid her.

"Have you seen Lilias?" she asked Mrs Greville, eagerly, for no Lilias was as yet at the rendezvous. "She was near us in that last quadrille, but then, somehow, I lost sight of her in the crowd."

"She is very content, wherever she is, I can assure you," said Mrs Greville, significantly. "I don't fancy either you or I will see much more of her for the rest of the evening. It is as clear as daylight," she went on. "Why didn't you tell me, Mary?"

“Tell you what, dear Mrs Greville?” said Mary, opening her eyes, and rather taken aback.

“Of course you know. Don’t pretend you do not,” said Mrs Greville, good-humouredly. “Of course I mean about Captain Beverley’s unmistakable admiration for Lilias. No one could have doubted it who saw the way he came up after that dance with Frank Bury. She looked cold and haughty enough at first, but he whispered something that put it all right, I could see. And only fancy Mr Knox telling me he was engaged to Miss Cheviott!”

“But,” said Mary, hesitatingly, and blushing a little as she spoke, “Lilias isn’t—there is nothing settled; they are not *engaged*.”

“Oh! I dare say not publicly, at present, but of course such attention as he is paying her to-night will soon make it public. I am so delighted—such a capital thing it will be for you all—I cannot tell you how pleased—but, hush! here they come,” said Mrs Greville, stopping abruptly.

And Mary, looking round, saw Lilias close at hand, and what a Lilias! Sunshine seemed to be playing about her, so bright and sweet and happy did she look—flushed not merely with her own inner consciousness of happiness, but with an innocent sense of triumph that her lover had been tested, and not found wanting; that in the eyes of all the assembled “somebodies” of Meadshire he was eager to do her homage; she felt that she had reason to be proud of him!

He only stayed to shake hands with Mary, and then hurried off, with a parting reminder to Lilias of her promise for the next dance but one. For the very next she was already engaged to a brother in arms of Major Throckmorton, and there was little time for any conversation between the sisters. Only Lilias whispered it was “all right.” “He” had explained why he was so late, and she was engaged to him for two more dances. Mary might feel quite happy about her. But was Mary enjoying herself too? she inquired, anxiously, as her partner appeared to carry her off. And in the sight of that radiant young face Mary could indeed with all honesty reply that she was. She would have thought and believed it the most charming ball in the world, even if she had spent the whole evening on the bench in the corner of the room beside Mrs Greville; and this would have been far more amusing than having to dance with Mr Bury, which she was now obliged to do. For the poor young man’s high spirits had suddenly deserted him; he was extremely depressed, not to say cross, and Mary, knowing the cause of the change, could not but find it in her heart to pity him, though her relief was great when her penance was over. She danced next with Frank’s elder brother, an occasional visitor only to the Brocklehurst part of the world, and a fairly amusing partner, and as Lilias and Captain Beverley were their *vis-à-vis*, Mary enjoyed the quadrille exceedingly.

A little further down the room a set composed entirely of the Cleavelands party attracted her attention. There stood the “three beauties” in close proximity. Mary glanced at them again and again, and once or twice it seemed to her that she and her sister were the objects of attention to some members of the party. That Miss Cheviott gazed admiringly at Lilias, and made some remark about her to her partner, Mary felt sure, and thought it not surprising; but, besides this, she two or three times caught Mr Cheviott’s observant eyes fixed on her sister and herself with a curious expression, which half annoyed her. And once, in turning suddenly, she fancied that Captain Beverley, too, noticed this peculiar expression with which his cousin was regarding them, and, Mary felt by instinct, resented it.

“You should by rights be dancing over there, should you not?” a sudden impulse urged her to say to her sister’s partner, when one of the figures in the dance brought them for an instant into juxtaposition.

“Over where?” he asked, the next time they met.

Mary bent her head slightly in the direction of the Cleavelands “set,” but she had not time to see how Captain Beverley liked her explanation. His answer was reserved for the next round.—It was quite ready.

“What could have put such an idea into your head?” he said, not without a touch of haughtiness in his tone. “I am perfectly free to dance where and with whom I choose.”

Mary smiled, but in her heart she felt a slight uneasiness. The bloom seemed by this little incident to have been rubbed off her satisfaction.

“It will be disagreeable for Lilias,” she said to herself, “if his friends are in any way prejudiced against her. She is so proud, too; she would never go out of her way to win them.”

Thus thought Mary when she again found herself in her corner by Mrs Greville. Her dances, so far as she knew, were over for the evening, but Lilias had not yet returned to her *chaperon’s* wing. Mrs Greville was beginning to wonder what o’clock it was.

“Not that I am in the least tired,” she said. “As long as Lilias is enjoying herself I am quite pleased to stay, and you, too, my dear. Are you not going to dance any more?”

“I think not,” Mary was replying when a voice behind her made her start.

“Miss Western,” it said, “if you are not engaged for this dance, may I have the honour of it?”

The voice was not altogether unfamiliar, when had she heard it before? It was not an unpleasing voice, though its tone was cold and very formal. Mary looked up; there, before her, stood Mr Cheviott.

In utter amazement, Mary partially lost her head. She rose mechanically, and, murmuring something in the shape of an assent, took Mr Cheviott’s arm, and had passed some little way down the room before she quite realised what she was doing. Then it all flashed upon her; the extreme oddness of the whole proceeding, and she grew confused and uneasy in trying to think how otherwise she should have done. Mr Cheviott had never been introduced to her! Those

two or three words in the church porch two months ago were all that had ever passed between them. Yet his manner had been perfectly, even formally respectful, and the glow of indignation that had mounted to Mary's cheeks at the mere notion of anything but respect being shown to her father's daughter, faded as quickly away. One glance at Mr Cheviott's grave, preoccupied face was enough completely to dispel it, and she, thereupon, solved the enigma in another manner. It was all on Lilias's account! Mr Cheviott, doubtless in his cousin's confidence, wished, naturally enough, to know something of her relations, and had, with almost unconscious disregard of conventionality, chosen this way of making friends. On second thoughts, Mary quite decided that she liked him all the better for it, and congratulated herself that her instincts had been in the right, that she had not, with misplaced prudery, chilled and repelled his first overtures of kindliness and interest.

It was a round dance, but Mr Cheviott marched on down the room as if perfectly oblivious that dancing of any kind was in question. Suddenly he stopped.

"Do you like balls?" he asked, abruptly.

"I don't *dis*like them," answered Mary, quietly.

Mr Cheviott, in spite of himself, smiled, and Mary, looking up, was again struck, as she had been the first time she saw him, by the effect of a smile on his somewhat sombre countenance.

"That is, and isn't, an answer to my question," he said. "Perhaps I should have worded it differently, and said, 'do you like dancing?'"

"Sometimes," said Mary, quietly still.

Mr Cheviott smiled again.

"One thing, I see, you do *not* like," he said, "and that is, being catechised. I asked you if you liked dancing because, I fear, I do not dance well, and if you were *fanatica* on the subject I should be afraid of displeasing you. However, suppose we try?"

He did not dance badly, but with a certain indifference which Mary found provoking. This, and a suspicion of patronising in his last words, inspirited her to take a different tone.

"I do not think you dance ill," she said, when they stopped, "but any one could tell that you do not care about it."

"How?" he said, if truth be told, ever so slightly nettled—for what man likes to be "damned with faint praise," by a girl in her teens, whoever she may be?

"Oh I can't tell you. It would be quite different if you liked it. There is no *verve* in your dancing," she replied.

She could see he was annoyed, and somehow she was not sorry for it. He took refuge again in a patronising tone.

"Do you speak French?" he inquired, with a slight air of surprise.

"Do you speak Italian?" she retorted.

"Why do you ask?" he said, coolly. "Are you offended by my inferring a possibility of your *not* speaking French?"

"No," she replied; "but I thought it an uncalled-for question. You used an Italian word just now for the same reason, probably, that I used a French one—that we could not find an English word to express our meaning equally well—"

"The only reason," interrupted Mr Cheviott, eagerly, "that can ever excuse one's doing so."

"But," continued Mary, "you did not give me the credit of this good reason, as I did you. I did not suppose you used an Italian word for the sake of showing off that you knew Italian."

"And I said nothing to lead you to suppose that I thought you were wanting to show off your French," retorted Mr Cheviott, laughing a little in spite of himself, and yet manifestly annoyed. "I was only—a little—surprised, perhaps."

"Why?" asked Mary. "Is it so unusual nowadays to find people who have learned French?"

"Oh dear, no, of course not; but I understood you had been brought up very quietly, and had always lived in the country, and all that sort of thing. I don't want to offend you, but very probably you would be more offended if I did not answer you plainly."

"Very probably," said Mary, smiling. "But don't you see that just because we have lived so quietly as you say, we have had the more time for 'lessons'? And there were grave reasons why, in our case, we should learn all we could—practical reasons, I mean."

Mr Cheviott did not at once reply; he seemed as if reflecting over what she had said.

"I wonder what he is thinking about," thought Mary. "He must know we are poor. We have made no secret of it to Captain Beverley."

"Shall we try again?" said Mr Cheviott, suddenly. "If I do my best, there is no saying but that, in time, I may catch a little of your *verve*, Miss Western."

"You think I have a superabundance of it," said Mary, good-humouredly; and, "Yes," she added, when they stopped

again, “that is better, decidedly.”

But again the look of preoccupation had come over Mr Cheviott’s face; he did not seem elated by her praise.

“Your sister likes dancing too, I suppose?” he said, after a little pause.

“Yes,” replied Mary, “she is very fond of it, and she dances very well.”

“I dare say she does,” said Mr Cheviott, “but she is too tall to dance with most men. I see,” he added, slowly, as if he had some little difficulty in going on with what he had to say—“I see she has been dancing a good deal with my cousin, Captain Beverley. *He* dances very well, in fact, better than he does anything else, I was going to say.”

Something in the words and tone roused Mary’s ire.

“I don’t see that dancing well need prevent a man’s doing other things well too,” she observed, coldly.

Mr Cheviott raised his eyebrows; he was quite his usual self again now, cool and collected, and satisfied that he was going to have the best of it.

“I quite agree with you,” he replied, dryly.

“Then,” said Mary, getting more angry, “why should you praise Captain Beverley’s dancing in that sort of way, as if you were *dis*praising everything else he does? I think he has it in him to do many things well—more, probably, than have as yet come in his way.”

“I dare say you are quite right,” said Mr Cheviott. “For a man,” pursued Mary, somewhat mollified, “he is still very young.”

“Peculiarly so,” said Mr Cheviott; “he is very young for his actual years. You must have seen a good deal of him, Miss Western, to judge him so correctly.”

“I have said very little about him,” said Mary, bluntly, looking up in her companion’s face with a questioning expression in her eyes, before which Mr Cheviott quailed a little—yet what pretty, gentle, brown eyes they were!—“but I *have* seen a good deal of him,” she went on, frankly. “He has been a great deal with us lately, while he was staying at the Edge Farm, you know.”

Almost as she pronounced the words, she became conscious of the annoyance they were causing her companion, and she felt that her worst misgivings were realised. “Why did I dance with him?” was the first form in which her hot indignation expressed itself in her thoughts.

“Yes,” replied Mr Cheviott, coldly, “I heard that Mr and Mrs Western had been very hospitable to my cousin, and no doubt he is very grateful to them. He is an extremely sociable person—cannot bear being alone. As you have seen so much of him, Miss Western, I dare say you have discovered that he is very impulsive and impressionable, very ready to amuse himself, without the least thought of the after consequences.”

Mary remained perfectly silent.

“You agree with me?” said Mr Cheviott. “I am very glad of it, for I see you will not misunderstand me. There are some kinds of knowledge not so easily acquired as French,” he added, with an attempt at carrying off what he had been saying lightly, “but I see your good sense stands you in lieu of what is commonly called knowledge of the world, and—and, for your sister’s sake especially, I am very glad indeed that you have so much perception.” He did not look at Mary as he spoke, but now she suddenly turned towards him, and he was obliged to face her. Every ray of their usually pretty colour had faded out of her cheeks; she looked so very pale that for an instant he thought she was going to faint, and a quick rush of pity for the poor child momentarily obliterated all other considerations. But Mary saw the softening expression that came over his face, and smiled slightly, but bitterly. And then Mr Cheviott saw that her paleness was not that of timidity or ordinary agitation, but of intense, wrathful indignation, and he thereupon hardened his heart.

“Why,” said Mary, after a little pause, and her voice, though low, was distinct and clear—“why, may I ask, do you say that it is especially on my sister’s account that you are glad to find that I possess what you so kindly call so much power of perception?”

Her words, to herself even, sounded stilted and almost absurd, but, had she tried to speak easily and naturally, she felt that in some way she would have broken down. And Mr Cheviott did not notice the stiltedness of her tone and speech; cool as he looked he was feeling intensely uncomfortable, and little inclined to see any humorous side to the situation.

“I would rather not say why,” he replied, “and, besides, it’s unnecessary. You would, afterwards, regret asking me to say more than I have done.”

“But having said so much, supposing I *insist* on your saying more,” said Mary, unwisely. “Supposing I tell my father, and that he asks you to explain why you have spoken to me this way—supposing—” she stopped, for her voice failed her. Anger inclines some women to tears more readily than grief!

Mr Cheviott smiled; it was, in reality, a nervous, uneasy smile, but Mary thought it insulting and insufferable.

“Miss Western,” he said, “you are really exciting yourself about nothing at all. I do not think that any reasonable person would see cause of offence in the two or three remarks I have made about my cousin, and, fortunate as he is

in possessing so eager an advocate as yourself, it is impossible you can know him as well as I do. But I think we have discussed him quite sufficiently, and, in *my* opinion at least, the less said the better."

He looked at her with a sort of veiled inquiry. Mary stood perfectly silent. It was true; she had been *very* foolish, very undignified to have expressed herself as vehemently as she had done; she had no right to resent Mr Cheviott's hinted warnings, for Arthur Beverley had *not* committed himself in such a way as to give her any. "Oh," she thought, "if I could but look up in his face and say, 'Your cousin is engaged to my sister, and I decline to hear anything you have to say about him; your opinion has not, and never will be asked,' oh, how different it all would be! How different it *will* be when it is all settled, and no one can interfere!" But in the mean time; yes, certainly, the less said the better.

She felt that she trusted Captain Beverley, even now; already she felt that Mr Cheviott's opinion was of no *real* consequence, and she could afford to despise it, much as, for Lilias's sake she regretted that the connection was not likely to find favour in the eyes of Arthur's proud relations.

"But that will not *really* matter," she repeated to herself, and, fortified with this reflection, she turned quietly to reply to Mr Cheviott's last speech.

"Yes," she said, "I was very foolish to take up your remarks about your cousin so hotly. For, though I have known him such a short time, I think, in some ways, I already know him far better than you do. And now I shall be obliged if you will take me back to my friends."

She looked up in Mr Cheviott's face with fearless eyes, and no trace of agitation, but a somewhat deeper colour than usual in her cheeks, and the shadow of a quiver on her lips. But Mr Cheviott read her rightly; the gauntlet of defiance was thrown down, and her resolution staggered him.

"*Can* they be already really engaged?" he said to himself. "I could almost find it in my heart to wish they were, to get rid of all this! How unbearable it is—how horribly I am, and must be, misunderstood, even by this girl!"

And as he escorted Mary across the room, and, with a formal bow, deposited her in her old corner beside Mrs Greville, he made no effort to hide his gloom and annoyance. For the moment a species of recklessness seemed to have taken possession of him; he felt as if he cared little what was said or thought of him.

"Even Alys," he thought to himself, "when, or if, she comes to hear of my attempt at interference, will find no words hard enough for me. Why can't a man start clear in life, I wonder, without being weighted with the follies of those before him?"

Mrs Greville was all excitement and curiosity.

"My goodness, Mary," she exclaimed, "wonders will never cease! Lilias's conquest is nothing to yours. Mr Cheviott of Romary himself! You are very cunning, you naughty child; you never even told me you knew him."

"I hardly do know him. I would not have danced with him if he had not asked me so suddenly that I had not presence of mind enough to refuse," explained Mary.

"And why should you have refused? Of course, as I say, you have made a conquest. Why should you be ashamed of it?" said Mrs Greville.

"It is not that, it is nothing of the kind, I *assure* you, Mrs Greville," said Mary, deeply annoyed. "Dear Mrs Greville," she went on, beseechingly, "I do beg you not to say any more about it. There is Lilias coming, *please* don't say anything about it."

Mrs Greville saw she was in earnest, and gave in. "But you are the strangest girl I ever came across," she added, with a tone of good-natured annoyance.

Then Lilias came up, on Captain Beverley's arm, and Mrs Greville's attention was distracted.

"I am not going to dance any more," she said, smiling. "I am quite ready to go home now, Mrs Greville, if you like, and poor Mary looks tired to death."

"And poor Mrs Greville must be tireder still, as Francie says," said Mary, trying to laugh, and look as usual. "Yes, I think we should be going."

"Good-night, Captain Beverley," said Lilias, disengaging her hand from his arm.

But he would not allow it.

"You will let me see you to your carriage," he said, in a low voice. "You have no other gentleman with you." And Lilias made no further objection.

And Mary, as they crossed the room, thus escorted, said to herself that she hoped Mr Cheviott's eyes were edified by the spectacle. Yet she was conscious of a sudden tremor when, close to the door, hemmed in for a moment or two by the stream of departing guests, which had already begun to flow, they came upon the object of her thoughts. He was standing looking the other way, with a lady on his arm, and as she approached them nearly, Mary saw that the lady was his sister. She happened to turn at this moment, and her glance fell on the advancing group. Instantly a smile lit up her beautiful face, a smile, there could be no manner of doubt, of hearty, pleased recognition. Mary happened to be the nearest to her, and Miss Cheviott leaned slightly forward.

"How do you do, Miss Western?" she said, brightly. "I have been seeing you and your sister in the distance all the

evening, but never near enough to speak to you. Have you enjoyed the ball? I think it has been such a nice one."

Mary murmured something in the way of answer, but her words were all but inaudible. The grateful glance of her brown eyes, however, was not lost upon Alys.

"What nice good eyes that second Miss Western has?" she observed to her brother, when they were out of hearing. "But she does not look as well as she did; she was quite pale, and her eyes had a troubled look."

"What did you speak to her for?" said Mr Cheviott, gruffly, "there was no reason for it, and—you cannot have forgotten what I said about the Westerns, Alys?"

"Forgotten; no. Of course, I remember your saying I was not to call on them and make friends with them, but as for not speaking to them when we were jammed up close together in a door-way no, I certainly *had* forgotten that you wished me to be unkind and uncivil, Laurence," replied Alys, with considerable indignation.

And Mr Cheviott thought it wisest to hold his peace. His sister was evidently in ignorance of the apparently glaring inconsistency of which he himself had been guilty in not only speaking to, but actually dancing with the younger Miss Western, and devoutly he hoped that in this desirable ignorance she might remain. But there was no saying how she might come to hear of it, and, therefore, the less said on the disputed subject the better.

There was silence for some time in the fly containing Mrs Greville and her two young friends, as it wended its slow way back to Hathercourt. Mrs Greville was tired, and a little anxious about the effects of the cold night air on her husband; Lilias was absorbed in a content which asked not for words; Mary—poor Mary, was suffering from a strange complication of discomfort. Indignation, mortification, fear, hope, defiance, and intense anxiety chased each other round, her brain. It was a relief when Lilias spoke.

"We are very selfish, dear Mrs Greville," she said, suddenly—"at least, I am; Mary is never selfish. I have never thanked you for taking us to-night and being so kind; I have enjoyed it so much, and I do thank you so sincerely."

Notwithstanding the heartiness and cordiality, there was an indefinable something in the tones of the pretty voice which effectually stifled any expression of curiosity on Mrs Greville's part. Whether or not Lilias had anything to tell, there and then it was evident she had no intention of telling it, so Mrs Greville just answered, kindly:

"I am very glad you have had a pleasant evening. It is always a pleasure to me to take you."

And in a few minutes more the fly stopped at the Rectory gate.

There was no one sitting up for them. That had been a proviso of Lilias's, and, in spite of Alexa's entreaties and "mother's" misgivings, Lilias had carried the day.

"We are sure to come home sleepy, and cross, and dilapidated-looking after a seven miles' drive. Do all go to bed comfortably and wait to hear our adventures till the morning," she said; and Mary, as they let themselves quietly in with a latch-key, felt what a comfort it was that there were no anxious questioning eyes to meet.

Since Basil's departure, Mary had taken possession of his little room, leaving Lilias sole mistress of what had formerly been their joint quarters. But to-night she lingered long beside her sister, making one excuse after another for not leaving her room.

"But Mary, dear, you must really go to bed now," said Lilias, at last; "don't trouble about putting away anything till the morning."

"Yes," agreed Mary, "I'm going now. Good-night, Lilias. You said you had enjoyed the ball very much—I'm so glad you did. But, Lilias," she added, wistfully, "I wish you would tell me—you don't mind my asking, do you?—is—is anything *settled*—explained, I mean?" Lilias's cheeks flushed.

"It is all right," she said, hastily—"I am *sure* it is all right. There is nothing to explain; I trust him thoroughly, and—and I don't mind its not being what you call 'settled' just yet. It is nice keeping it just to ourselves."

"Only," said Mary, with some reluctance, "it *isn't* being kept to yourselves. Every one must have noticed him to-night, and that was why I was so anxious to hear if it was all understood and settled."

"Then *don't* be anxious any more," said Lilias, reassuringly, as she kissed her—"*I* am not; I could not be happier than I am. But I understand your feeling—I would have it for you, I dare say. Just set your mind at rest; you may ask me about it again—let me see—yes, this time to-morrow, if you like, and I think I shall be able to satisfy you."

"'In to-day already walks to-morrow,'" said Mary, laughing. "*My* 'spirit' is 'striding on before the event,' anyway, and the best thing I can do is to let you go to sleep. Kiss me again, Lilias; it's to-morrow already, you know."

"I wish Lilias hadn't said that about this time tomorrow," she thought to herself. "I wish she were not so confident, and yet how can she be less so if she trusts him? How could I *bear* to see her trust broken?"

Chapter Eleven.

A Cul-de-Sac.

"... It became a proverb, when what ought to be your election was forced upon you, to say, 'Hobson's

choice.'"
Spectator, Number 509.

There was silence in the Romary carriage too as it made its way home, with considerably more speed than the Withenden fly, after the ball. It had been arranged that Mr Cheviott and his sister were not to return to Cleavelands that evening, but to drive straight back to Romary, and it had been arranged, too, that Captain Beverley should accompany them. Arthur would not, on the whole, have been sorry to upset this plan, but there was no help for it. As to how much, or how little of his conduct in the ball-room, had been observed by his cousins, he was in ignorance, and he fancied that he did not care. He told himself that he had acted with deliberate intention, that it was best to bring matters to a crisis, and have done at all costs with the restraint which of late he had found so unendurable; but in so speaking to himself he was not stating the real facts of the case. From first to last his behaviour to Lilias Western had been the result of no reflection or consideration; he had never fairly looked his position in the face, and made up his mind as to what he was justified in doing, or how far he had a right to go; he had simply yielded to the charm of her society, and thrown care to the winds, trusting, like a child, that somehow or other things would come right—something would "turn up."

And it was the secret consciousness of the defencelessness of such conduct that made him uneasy in Mr Cheviott's presence, and made him dread the explanation which he now fully realised must shortly take place between them.

Alys's mood, as respects the Western sisters, was, as has been seen, verging on the defiant. Yet a quick sensitiveness to the unexpressed state of feelings of her two companions warned her that, at present, any allusion to the subject was best avoided.

"I will stand by Arthur if he is in earnest," she said to herself, resolutely, "and were Laurence twenty times over my elder brother I would *not* support him in any narrow-minded piece of class prejudice, or interference with Arthur's right to please himself. But if I am to do any good I must first be sure that Arthur *is* in earnest, and, till then, I had better take care how I irritate Laurence by meddling."

So Alys cogitated, lying back in her corner of the carriage, and saying nothing.

Suddenly Mr Cheviott's voice roused her; to her surprise he spoke very cheerfully.

"Well, Alys, are you very tired? I think it was a mistake of the Cleaves to have that carpet dance last night. It prevented our feeling as fresh as might have been the case to-night."

"Yes," said Alys, "I think it was. But I did not feel tired, except just at first, and then I was all right again."

"Carpet dances are *always* a mistake," observed Captain Beverley, rousing himself with some effort to join in the conversation. "People talk rubbish about their being more 'enjoyable'—what an odious word 'enjoyable' is!—than any others, but it's all nonsense. They take more out of one than twenty balls."

"I don't think last night could have taken much out of you, Arthur. You danced so little—not half as much as to-night," said Alys, thoughtlessly.

"No," said Mr Cheviott, markedly, "not a quarter as much, I should say."

Arthur said nothing, and Alys, feeling rather guilty, tried to lead the conversation into safer channels. In this she might not have succeeded had not her brother done his best to help her. But Arthur remained silent, and all three were glad when at last the long drive was over and the carriage turned in at the Romary gates.

"Good-night, Alys," said Mr Cheviott at once, and Alys obediently kissed him and said good-night.

"Good-night, Arthur," she said, lingeringly. She felt so sorry for Arthur somehow; she would so have liked to have seen him by himself for a few minutes.

"Good-night, dear," he replied, but without any of his usual sunny brightness. And Alys felt sure she heard him sigh, as, in accordance with Mr Cheviott's suggestion that they might as well have a cigar before going to bed, he followed his cousin into the library.

"Laurence is going to give him a 'talking to,' as the boys say," thought Alys, as she went slowly up-stairs. "And what has he done to deserve it, and why should he submit to it? Unless, indeed, he is *not* in earnest, and only amusing himself, and that Laurence knows it—but I'm sure it is not that. I cannot understand Arthur. I never before thought him wanting in spirit."

But the more she reflected, the more puzzled she grew, so Alys, not being deficient in common sense, decided that she could do no good by sitting up and tiring herself. She undressed and went to bed, and to sleep; but, though not a principal in the drama which was being enacted in her sight, her dreams that night were scarcely less disturbed and troubled than those of another even more intensely interested spectator, eight or nine miles off. On the whole, *Lilias's* sleep that night was far more peaceful than that of her sister Mary, or of Alys Cheviott.

For Lilias's heart was full of faith and hope, and to such dreamers there come no uneasy visions.

Mr Cheviott led the way through the library into his own private sitting-room beyond. The fire had been carefully attended to, and was blazing brightly; the room looked a picture of comfort. Many and many a time Arthur would have liked nothing better than an hour's *tête-à-tête* over their pipes with his cousin—the cousin who, to him, represented father and brother in one—to whom he owed all that he had ever known of "home" and its saving associations, "all the good that was in him," as he himself had often expressed it, for Laurence's care and affection for the boy had been great, and he had exerted them wisely. He had won Arthur's confidence and respect; he had

never so acted as to cause him to fret and chafe under what, in less judicious hands, he might have been made to feel an unnatural authority.

And not a small part of Captain Beverley's present discomfort arose from the consciousness of having deeply disappointed his cousin. He told himself he had done no wrong, but he knew he had, thoughtlessly and impulsively, done that, or been on the point of doing that, which would greatly add to the difficulties and perplexities of a life much of which had been devoted to his welfare.

And acknowledging even thus much, where was the gratitude he had so often expressed?

He made no effort to conceal his gloom. He sat down on the first chair that came in his way, he muttered something about his pipe being up-stairs, "not unpacked," and declined the cigar which his cousin hospitably offered him in its stead. Mr Cheviott quietly, filled and lighted his own pipe, drew his chair to the fire, with even more deliberation than usual, for his cousin's demeanour somewhat disconcerted him.

He would have found it easier to go on with what he had to do, had Arthur continued indifferent or even defiant. But it is hard to strike a man that is down; it is extremely difficult to "lecture" or remonstrate with a man who is evidently more disgusted with himself than you can possibly be with him. For Laurence knew that Arthur was genuinely distressed and suffering; he knew his cousin to be as incapable of sulky or resentful temper as of dissimulation or intentional treachery.

"Arthur," he said, at last, after smoking for a minute or two in silence, "I wish you wouldn't look so unlike yourself; it makes it harder for me. You must have known that this sort of thing couldn't go on—that you were running willfully into an entanglement which, sooner or later, must necessitate an explanation with me. You have no right to punish *me* for your own acts by looking as you are doing. Now the time has come to have it out with me, there is only one thing to do—face it."

"I am perfectly ready to face it," said Arthur, coldly, but with a decided and sudden increase of colour in his cheeks, and sitting up erectly on his chair.

"So much the better," said Laurence, dryly, adding to himself, "I am glad I have roused him; we shall understand each other now.—I was going," he continued, aloud—"I was *going* to have prefaced what I have to say by asking you whether you are losing your senses or your honour and high principle, for except by supposing one or the other I cannot, considering all, explain the way you have been going on. I was *going* to say so, I say, but I don't now think I need, for I see you think as badly of yourself as I could do."

"I do nothing of the kind," replied Arthur, firing up. "I don't ask you to tell me how badly you think of me—you could hardly infer worse than you have already expressed—but I altogether deny that I am either mad or bad, to put it shortly. And, what's more, I have done nothing to justify you, or any one, in speaking of me as you have done."

"You can't mention 'me' and 'any one' together," said Mr Cheviott, coolly. "I am the only person living, except a lawyer or two, who understands your position, therefore I am the only person who can judge whether you are doing right or wrong in making love to a girl without letting her perfectly comprehend what you have to offer her."

"And how do you know that I have not put it all before her?" exclaimed Arthur, fiercely still.

"Because you could not do so without breaking your word," said Mr Cheviott, "and because, too, no girl who understood your position would encourage your suit. If she were a high-principled, unselfish girl, she would not allow you to ruin yourself for her sake, and if she were a calculating, selfish girl, she would have no wish to share your ruin."

"Yes," said Arthur, bitterly, "you put it very neatly. I am regularly caught in a net, I know. Whichever way I turn, it is equally ruinous."

"Then what on earth did you run your head into the net for?" said Mr Cheviott, impatiently. "You had your eyes open, you knew what you were about."

"I did *not*," said Arthur, "I never, till now, realised how unnatural and unbearable my position was. But you misunderstand me—I mean that my father's absurd will entangles me hopelessly—I was not alluding to my—my acquaintance with Miss Western—that is to be blamed for nothing but causing me to realise the truth."

"Well, then, I wish you had not realised the truth," said Mr Cheviott. "I think, Arthur, you forget strangely that in all this you are not the only sufferer. Do you think *my* position is a pleasant one?"

"No," said Captain Beverley, "I don't, but I think you exaggerate matters. In any case, there is no question of my *ruining* myself, or any one else."

"How do you make that out? For by 'any case' I suppose you mean in the case of your proposing to Miss Western and her accepting you (you may have done so already, for all I know), and your marriage following. I don't think ruin is much too strong a word to use for what this would bring upon you."

"You forget Hathercourt," said Captain Beverley, with some hesitation.

"Hathercourt," repeated Mr Cheviott, looking puzzled, "I don't know what you mean."

"The Edge. Hathercourt Edge—my farm, I mean," explained Arthur, still with a sort of hesitation in his manner.

Mr Cheviott turned upon him with more asperity than he had yet shown.

“Really, Arthur, you are too foolish,” he exclaimed. “Do you mean to say that you could live at the Edge on about fifty pounds a year—certainly not more—for the interest of the money that was raised to pay your debts three years ago would fully take the rest of the two or three hundred a year that is the most you could make out of the farm, even if you managed it far better than you are likely to do. And I have no power to clear you from these debts out of what should be, what surely will be, your own before very long?” He looked at Arthur anxiously as he spoke.

“If it’s ever becoming mine depends upon the marriage that my father set his heart on taking place, it never will be mine—”

“But—” began Mr Cheviott.

“Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say. I may change, you think, as I have changed before, but I never shall, Laurence. I never was really in earnest before—my flirtations, even you must allow, were very harmless; *this* is very different, and I cannot give it up. And—and even if I have to go away for two years—till Alys is of age—and take my chance of *her* remembering me, I could not owe my inheritance to a legal quibble—I could not go through the farce of asking Alys to marry me, even though *sure* of her refusal, when I was heart and soul devoted to another. And even if she—Miss Western—were married to some other fellow by that time, it would be no better. I could not marry any one else; and even if I could, as far as my feelings went, I could not, in honour, refrain from telling Alys all, and—” he stopped to take breath.

“Well, what then?” said Mr Cheviott.

“Could I insult Alys by asking her to accept me *without* my caring for her as she should be cared for? As I now know, I never could care for her, for she is just like the dearest of sisters to me, but *only* that.”

Mr Cheviott smiled.

“Why in the world did you not see all this two years ago, when you persuaded me into agreeing to your selling out and setting you straight again? Do you not remember how confident you were about never wanting to marry any one else?”

“Any one at all, you should say. I never realised the marrying Alys. I was sure *she* would not wish it, and that seemed to make it all safe; but I never, in the faintest degree, imagined my caring for any one in *this* way—a way which makes it simply impossible to think of ever marrying any one else.”

“You think so just now,” observed Mr Cheviott, cynically, “but—”

“No, it is no passing feeling—you misjudge me altogether, Laurence; you seem quite unable to understand me, and therefore there’s no more to be said.”

“I don’t see that—even supposing I am incapable of understanding your present frame of mind—though being in love, you must allow, is not such a very uncommon condition as you seem to think it; taking for granted, however, that I cannot understand you, still the practical side of the question has to be considered, and you have no one to consult but me. In two words, what do you mean to do?”

Arthur turned his face away for a moment; then he set his elbows on his knees and leaned his head on his hands, staring gloomily into the fire.

At last, “Laurence,” he broke out, “I don’t know *what* to do. There, now you have it all; you may despise and sneer at me as you like, I can’t help it. I deserve it, and yet I *don’t* deserve it, but that’s the long and the short of it. I do not, in the very least, know what to do, or what is right to do.”

To his surprise, Mr Cheviott suddenly leaned forward, took his pipe out of his mouth, and held out his hand. Half mechanically Arthur took it, and Laurence grasped his cousin’s hand warmly.

“We shall understand each other now,” he said, heartily. “When it comes to wishing to do right *now*, whatever mistakes you have made before, we come upon firm ground. Shall I tell you, Arthur, what seems to me the only thing for you to do?”

“What?” said Arthur, listlessly.

“Go away—quite away, for two years at least, if not more.”

“But not without explaining the reason to—to the Westerns?” said Captain Beverley, looking up quickly.

“Explaining!” repeated Mr Cheviott, with a shade of contempt in his tone, “what in this world could you explain? Think of the position you would put the girl in by letting her understand the real state of the case! What *could* she say or do? Her promising to wait for you would be ruin to you, and her throwing you over, should you distinctly propose to her, would seem to her—if she be what you believe her—shameful. I suppose you have *not* done anything definite? You are not engaged to her?”

“No,” said Arthur, reluctantly. “She couldn’t exactly bring me up for breach of promise, if that’s what you think her capable of,” he went on, with a half-bitter laugh; “but I consider myself *more* bound to her than if we were engaged. Then I should have given her a right to assert herself, then she could insist on my explaining myself. My going away, as you propose, Laurence, seems to me the meanest, most dishonourable attempt at sneaking out of the whole affair—and, good Heavens, what will they think of me?”

“Hardly so badly as they will think of *me*,” thought Mr Cheviott, while a vision of the pale indignation of Mary

Western's honest face flashed before his eyes. But he said nothing.

"Laurence, I say, what *will* they think of me?" repeated Arthur, impatiently.

Mr Cheviott took his pipe out of his mouth again, and, in his turn, stared into the fire.

"It can't be helped; it's the only thing to do," he replied, decidedly.

Captain Beverley got up and walked excitedly up and down the room.

"What will Alys, even, think of me?" he exclaimed. "She knows enough to suspect more. Laurence, is there nothing—are you certain there is nothing that can be done to get me out of this cursed complication? Would there be no use in getting another opinion upon the will?"

Mr Cheviott shook his head.

"None whatever. You know that as well as I do," he replied. "There is only one thing that would free you."

"What?" exclaimed Captain Beverley, eagerly, stopping short and facing his cousin.

"Alys's death," said Mr Cheviott.

Arthur shuddered.

"For shame, Laurence," he said, angrily. "Do you think it's good taste, or good feeling either, to sneer in that way when you must—when you cannot but see what all this is to me?"

"It is not *pleasant* to myself," observed Mr Cheviott, "which never seems to occur to you, as I said before. My allusion to Alys's death should remind you of this. As things are, nothing—really nothing else than the death of the creature dearest to me on earth can clear *me* from the odious position I am placed in."

Arthur looked at his cousin, first with surprise—it was so seldom Laurence talked of himself or of his own feelings—then gradually with a dawning of sympathy in his kindly eyes.

"Laurence," he exclaimed, softly. That was all, and for a few moments there was silence.

"Did no one know of what my father was doing when he made that insane codicil? Could no one have prevented it—he was with your father at the time?" said Arthur, presently.

"No one knew of it," replied Mr Cheviott, "not even his own lawyer; he must have had a consciousness that it would be disapproved of. I think the idea of saving you from the sort of marriage he had made himself had become a monomania with him—that, and the wish to repay to his sister's child, in some way, what she had done for him. He knew little Alys would not be rich (her coming into Aunt Bethune's money was never thought of then), and he was so extraordinarily fond of the child."

"Couldn't he have left her half his money unconditionally?"

"I wish he had—*now*," said Laurence.

"But what do you mean by a wish to repay to his sister what she had done for him?"

"You know surely that my mother made over nearly all she had to him? Long ago, before your uncle's death gave him Lydon and all his money. He was foolish as a young man, foolish and desperately extravagant, and but for what my mother did to save him, I don't believe Lydon would ever have been his. His brother was just the sort of man to have passed him over, had there been any sort of disgrace."

"What an unlucky set we have been!" said Arthur.

"And then he finished up by that wretched marriage," pursued Laurence, without noticing his cousin's remark, "and in that again my mother was the only one to stand by him. He had reason enough for gratitude to her, if only he had taken a different way of showing it."

"Does Alys know *anything* of all this?" asked Arthur. "*Nothing*; and she never must. It has been my great aim to prevent it. *However* things turn out, she must never know. You see that, Arthur, surely? I can depend upon you?" said Mr Cheviott, speaking more eagerly and vehemently than he had yet done.

"You have my promise; what more would you have?" replied Arthur, regretfully. "Yes," he continued, after a pause, "I suppose it would never do for her to know, but it is frightful to think how she will misjudge me—almost as bad as to think of the others. Laurence," he went on, "I must do one thing—I must write to say good-bye to Mrs Western; they have been awfully kind to me—at least, I may say I am *obliged* to go away."

Mr Cheviott smiled grimly.

"I am to have my full share of the credit of this nice piece of work, I see," he said to himself. "Well, so best, perhaps."—"Oh, yes, I suppose you must say something of the kind," he added, aloud, and at these words Arthur felt a slight sensation of relief. What might he not contrive to say by *not* saying, in this note he had obtained permission to write? What might not Lilias, as clearheaded as she was true-hearted, Lilias, clairvoyant with "the eyes of the mind," read between the lines of this poor little note on which so much was to hang; yes, for a minute or two Arthur felt a shade less hopelessly wretched.

"Laurence," he said, after a little pause, and with some energy in his tone, "you will not, at least, coerce me in any way as to where or how I spend these two years?"

"How do you mean?" said Mr Cheviott, cautiously, with perhaps even a shade of suspiciousness in his tone. But Arthur did not resent, if he perceived it; he looked up into his cousin's face, and somehow the sight of his own plead more in his favour than any words. All the comeliness and colour, all the boyish heartiness, seemed to have faded away out of his features as if by magic; in their stead there was a pale, almost haggard look of anxiety which touched Mr Cheviott inexpressibly. He turned away uneasily.

"It's altogether too bad," he muttered to himself; "it is altogether wrong. Here am I made to feel almost as if it were all *my* doing, and Arthur with all the heart and spirit crushed out of him, poor fellow! And, after all, he has not done anything wrong—all the result of his father's folly; it is altogether too bad. Far better have left him penniless from the beginning."

But Mr Cheviott was not in the habit of allowing his feelings, however righteous, to run away with him. In a moment or two he replied quietly to his cousin's question.

"I have no wish to coerce you about anything," he said, weariedly; "I only want to decide how to make the best of a bad business. Where would you like to go?"

"*Like* to go? Nowhere," said Arthur, bitterly. "Where I would have a chance of doing any good is the question. I was thinking I might do worse than take to studying farming, and that sort of thing, systematically—go to Cirencester or one of those agricultural colleges, eh?"

"With a view to settling down at the Edge?" said Laurence, maliciously.

"No, but with a view to getting an agency—the agency of an estate, I mean, once Alys is of age. I don't see anything unreasonable in that. If Alys doesn't sell Lydon, perhaps she will take me into consideration."

"Don't sneer, Arthur; it is not Alys's fault," said Mr Cheviott. "I don't think your idea *is* an unreasonable one," and relieved to find his cousin so practically inclined, he went on to discuss the rival merits of the various agricultural colleges.

It was daylight, or dawn, at least, before the cousins separated, but, tired as he was, Captain Beverley did not go to bed till he had written and rewritten half a dozen times the conceded note of farewell to Mrs Western.

And in the end he, in despair, copied over the first and decided to send it.

"It is merely catching at a straw," he said to himself. "Far better give up every hope of her at once, but I *cannot*."

He left Romary the following afternoon, but his note was not sent to Hathercourt Rectory till late that evening.

Chapter Twelve.

"Have I made it worse?"

> "Give me good fortune, I could strike him dead,
> For this discomfort he hath done the house!"
>
> *Elaine*.

So it was not really for from "this time to-morrow" that Lilias had so confidently anticipated, when Mrs Western opened the envelope, addressed to her by Captain Beverley, and read its contents.

"What can it mean? I cannot understand," she said to herself, tremulously, for she was alone at the time. Then a second thought struck her, and the tremulousness gave place to hot indignation.

"Can he have been playing with her only? My child—my poor Lilias, is it *possible*?" she exclaimed aloud in her agitation. "What shall I do? How can I tell her?"

Just then a light, firm step sounded along the passage. Mrs Western shivered.

"If it is Lilias!" she whispered.

But it was not Lilias.

"Oh, Mary, my dearest, how thankful I am it is you!" she cried, as her second daughter entered the room. "Mary, what does this mean? Read it. How can we ever tell Lilias?" and as she spoke she held out the paper that trembled in her hands.

Mary trembled too, for an instant only, however. Then she drew herself together, as it were, by a vigorous effort, and read:

> "*Romary*, February 19.
> "My Dear Mrs Western,—
> "I hardly know how to find words in which to apologise sufficiently for the ingratitude and discourtesy of which I shall *appear* guilty when I tell you that this note is to bid you all good-bye. For a time only, I trust

and believe, but a time which seems terribly long for me to look forward to—for I am absolutely obliged to leave this neighbourhood at once, and for *two years*. I do not know how to thank you for all your goodness. I have never, in all my life, been so happy as under your roof, yet I have no choice but to go, without even bidding you all farewell in person.

"Will you think of me as kindly as you can, and will you *allow* me to send, through you, my farewell to Miss Western and her sisters, and the rest of the family? and believe me,—

"Yours most gratefully and truly,—

"Arthur Kenneth Beverley."

Mary stood motionless. Her face grew pale, her lips compressed, but she did not speak.

"What does it mean? Mary, speak, child, tell me what it means," said Mrs Western, with the petulance born of extreme anxiety. "It cannot be that Lilias has refused him?"

"No, mother, it is not that," said Mary, "I wish it were."

"What is it, then? *Can* he be so utterly base and dishonourable?"

"Not of himself," replied Mary, bitterly; "weak fool that he is, he is not so bad as that. No, mother, he is not, or has been made to think he is not, his own master; it is all that man—that *bad* man's doing."

"*Whose* doing?" said Mrs Western, bewilderedly. "That Mr Cheviott—Mr Cheviott of Romary. Don't you see the note is dated from there? I see it all; he found it out at the ball. Very likely he went there for the purpose of finding it out, having heard rumours of it, and at once used all his influence, whatever it is, to make that poor fool give it up. And yet he *isn't* a poor fool! That is the worst of it; there is so much good in him, and Lilias cares for him—yes, *that* is the worst of it. Mother, she does care for him. Will it break her heart?"

And Mary, in her innocence and ignorance, looked up to her mother who had gone through life, who must know how it would be, and repeated, wistfully, "Mother, will it break her heart?"

Mrs Western shook her head.

"I do not know—I cannot say; she is so proud. Either it will harden or break her utterly. Oh, Mary, my dear, my instincts were right. Do you remember how I dreaded it from the first?"

"Yes, mother, you were right; nowadays if people are poor, they must forget they are gentle-people. It would be well to bring up Alexa and Josey not to 'look high,' as the servants say; a respectable tradesman—Mr Brunt, the Withenden draper's eldest son, for instance, is the sort of man that girls like us should be taught to encourage—eh, mother?"

"Mary, don't; you pain me. It is not like you to talk so. If what you say *were* true, it would make me go back upon it all and think I was wrong to marry your father. He might have done so much better—he, so attractive and popular as he was; he might have married some one rich and—"

"Hush, mother—*dear* mother, hush," said Mary, kissing her; "it is wicked of me to pain you," and in saying these words she determined to tell her mother nothing of her own personal part of the affair, her bitter indignation at the way in which Mr Cheviott had tried to win her over to take part against her sister; and for this reticence she had another, as yet hardly understood, motive—a terrible misgiving was creeping upon her. Was *she* to blame? Had her plainly expressed defiance and indignation raised Mr Cheviott to more decisive action than he had before contemplated? She could not tell.

"But so mean as he has shown himself, it is perfectly possible that it is so," she reflected. "He is small-minded enough to be stung into doing what he has by even my contempt, yet how could I have spoken otherwise? though for Lilias's sake I could *almost* have made a hypocrite of myself."

But as yet she was not at leisure to think this over; she only felt instinctively that it was better it should not be told, and thus deciding, her mother's voice recalled her to the present.

"Mary," she repeated again, "how are we to tell Lilias?"

"Leave it to me, mother dear," she replied, for a moment's consideration satisfied her that nothing in the shape of sympathy or pity—not even her mother's—was likely to be acceptable to her sister at the first.

"She may soften afterwards, but she is sure to be hard at first," Mary said to herself, "and, dear mother," she went on, aloud, "the less notice we seem to take of his going, to the others, the better, don't you think? Not even to papa. If he sees Lily looking much the same as usual—and you may trust her to do that—he will not think anything about it, and Alexa and Josey must just be well snubbed if they begin any silly chatter. And you will leave Lilias to me?"

"Yes, dear; but can I do nothing? If we could arrange for her to go away somewhere for a while, for instance?"

"After a time, perhaps, but not at first. Mother, you will try not to take *any* notice of it at first, won't you? Just allude to it in a commonplace way; it will be far the best and easiest for Lilias."

"Yes, I understand."

"It is so horrible!" said Mary, with a little shudder, "so utterly *horrible* that a girl should be exposed to this—that even you and I, mother—mother and sister though we are to her, should be discussing her feelings as if we were doctors and she a patient! Oh, it is *horrible*!"

Lilias was not in her room; she was down-stairs in the drawing-room practising duets with Alexa, while Josey hovered about chattering, and interrupting, and trying to extract gossip from her elder sister on the subject of last night's ball.

"Josey," said Mary, as she came in, "it is past your bed-time, and you, too, Alexa, had better go I think. Mamma is in the study, so go and say good-night to her there."

"Is mother not coming in here again?" asked Lilias. "I hate the evenings papa has to go out; we all seem so unsettled and straggling. Yes, do go to bed, children. I am beginning to feel a little tired, Mary; aren't you?"

"No—yes, a little. I really don't know," said Mary.

Lilias laughed merrily.

"Why, I believe you are half asleep, child!" she exclaimed. "We are evidently not intended to be fine ladies, if one ball knocks us up so. I wonder what all the people who were there last night are doing with themselves now? Very likely they are having carpet dances tonight, and all sorts of fun. The Cleavelands party is broken up, though. The Cheviotts were going back to Romary last night."

"Yes," said Mary.

"No note has come for me, I suppose?" asked Lilias, with a little hesitation. "I did not like to ask you before the girls, but one of them said something about a groom on horseback having been at the stable door a little while ago."

"There was no note for you," said Mary, her voice sounding even to herself set and hard, "but there was one for mamma. She told me to bring it to you. Here it is."

Lilias took it, but something in Mary's manner startled her.

"What is it?" she said, hastily. "Why do you look so strange, Mary?"

"Read the note, Lily, please," said Mary. "I'm going back to mamma—I won't be a minute," and as she spoke she turned to leave the room.

"Don't go, Mary!" cried Lilias, but Mary had already gone.

Ten minutes after she returned to the drawing-room, but no Lilias was there. Mary's heart failed her.

"Was I wrong to leave her?" she said to herself. "I thought it would be so horrid for me to seem to be watching how she took it."

She flew up-stairs to her sister's bedroom. The door was shut, but not locked. Mary knocked.

"Come in," said Lilias's voice, and hardly knowing what she was going to see, Mary entered.

There stood Lilias in the centre of the room, her beautiful fair hair all loosened, hanging about her like a cloud, her face pale, but eyes very bright—brighter than usual it seemed to Mary.

"Lily!" she exclaimed.

"Why do you say 'Lily,' and look at me like that?" replied her sister, sharply. "There's nothing the matter. I'm tired, and going to bed early, that's all. Please tell mamma so, and do ask her not to come to say goodnight to me. No, don't kiss me, please, Mary. I'm cross, I suppose, just say good-night."

"Very well," said Mary, submissively.

She turned sadly to go, but had not reached the door when her sister's voice recalled her.

"Oh! Mary," it cried, and the sharp accent of pain which rang through the two little words went straight to Mary's heart, "don't misunderstand me. I want to be unselfish and brave, and just now it seemed to me that, if any one seemed to feel for me, I could not manage to get on. But I don't want to *make you* unhappy, and you may talk to me if you like."

Mary gently closed the door, then she came back to her sister, and drew her down on to a seat.

"What am I to say Lily? I wish I knew."

"Anything," replied Lilias; "you may say *anything*, Mary, except one thing."

"And what is that?"

"Blame of *him*," said Lilias, her eyes sparkling, "that, Mary, is the one thing I could not bear. I have made up my mind absolutely about this—if—if it is *never* explained, I will still keep to it, he is, in some way, not his own master."

"But if it is so, Lilias, it still does not free him from blame, though it alters the kind. If he is not his own master, he should not have let himself got to care for you, and, still worse, have taught you to care for him."

"Oh! yes, I dare say that is true enough—at least, it sounds so," said Lilias; "but in some way or other it isn't true, though I can't explain it, and can't argue about it. Besides, Mary," she went on, with some hesitation, her pale face flushing crimson as she spoke, "it isn't as if he had said good-bye for ever. He says distinctly, 'two years'."

“Ah! yes, and that is *the* mean bit of it,” said Mary, indignantly; “he had no right to allude to any future at all. He should leave you absolutely free, if he cannot claim you openly—leave you, I mean, absolutely free for those two years, even if he really expects to be able to return at their end. What right has he to expect you to waste your youth and happiness for him? If you were engaged a separation of two years would be nothing, or if even he had said that at the end of the time he would be free to ask you to marry him.”

“But that would have been binding me unfairly, most people would say,” replied Lilias, softly. “I believe he means to leave me quite free, but that he could not help catching at a straw, as it were, and therefore said that about two years.”

“I don’t believe in the two years,” persisted Mary; “even if he does not come into his property for two years, you might have been engaged, though not marrying for that time. No, I see no sense in it—it is some clever pretext of that—” “that scheming Mr Cheviott’s,” she was going to have said, but she stopped in time.

“Mary,” said Lilias, drawing away the hand which her sister had held in hers, “I told you I would not let you speak against him.”

“Forgive me. I won’t,” said Mary, penitently.

“Whatever the future brings—if he marry some one else within the two years,” said Lilias, “I shall still always believe in the Arthur Beverley I have known. He may change—circumstances and other influences may change him, but the man *I* have known is true and honourable, and has wished and tried to act rightly. This I shall always believe—till I am quite an old woman—an old maid,” she added with an attempt at a smile.

“Lily,” exclaimed Mary, with a touch of actual passion in her tone—“Lily, don’t. You are so beautiful, my own Lily, why should you be so tried? So beautiful and so good!” And Mary, Mary the calm, Mary the wise, ended up her attempt at strengthening and consoling her sister by bursting into tears herself.

It did Lilias good. Now it was her turn to comfort and support.

“I am not an old woman yet, Mary,” she said, caressingly, “and I don’t intend to become one any sooner than I can help. My hair isn’t going to turn grey by to-morrow morning. To-morrow, oh! Mary, do you remember what I said yesterday about ‘this time to-morrow’? I was so happy this time yesterday, and he said he would be here to-day—it was the very last thing he said to me. What *can* have happened to change it all?”

Again the misgiving shot through Mary’s heart. Had she done harm? She said nothing, and after a moment’s pause Lilias spoke again:

“The great thing you can do to help me just now, Mary, is to prevent any of the others thinking there is anything the matter. Outside people may say what they like—I don’t care for that—but it is at home I couldn’t stand it. Besides, we have so few neighbours and friends, we are not likely to be troubled with many remarks. Except Mrs Greville, perhaps, I don’t suppose any one has heard anything about Captain Beverley’s knowing us.”

“Only at the ball,” said Mary, hesitatingly; “he picked you out so.”

“Yes,” said Lilias, smiling sarcastically, “no doubt all the great people said I was behaving most unbecomingly; but they may say what they like. I know I don’t care for that part of it. Mary, you will say something to mother to prevent her asking me about it.”

“Yes,” said Mary. “Lilias, would you like to go away from home for a while?”

“I don’t know. How could I? There is nowhere I could go, unless you mean that I should be a governess, after all, and —” She stopped, and her face flushed again.

“And what?”

“I don’t like to say it; you will not enter into my feelings—I don’t like to do anything *he* would not like.”

Mary looked at her sadly.

“Poor Lilias!” she thought, “is ‘he’ worthy of it all?”—“I was not thinking of that,” she said aloud. “I meant, if it could be arranged, for you to go away for a visit for a little. Mrs Greville’s sister asked you once.”

“Yes, but ever so long ago, and I wouldn’t on any account propose such a thing to Mrs Greville just now.”

“Very well,” said Mary.

Then they kissed each other, and said good-night.

“Two years—two long years!” were the words that Lilias said to herself over and over again that night—words that mingled themselves in the dreams that disturbed such sleep as came to her. “Two years!—what can it all mean? But I will trust you, Arthur—I *will* trust you!”

“Two years!” thought Mary. “That part of it *can* be nothing but a pretext. And if Lilias goes on trusting and hoping, it will make it all the worse for her in the end. She has never had any real trouble, and she thinks herself stronger to bear it than she really is. I have always heard that that terrible sort of waiting is worse for a girl than anything. Oh! Lily, what can I do for you? And *have* I made it worse? If I had been gentler, perhaps, to that hard, proud man—there was a kind look in his eyes once or twice; he cannot know that it is no piece of idle flirtation—he cannot know how

Lilias cares. If I could see him again! I feel as if I could say burning words that would make him realise the wretchedness of separating those two.”

Chapter Thirteen.

A Tempting Opportunity.

> “Thou troublest me; I am not in the vein.”
>
> *Richard III*.

The days went on, and things at Hathercourt Rectory looked much the same as usual. But not many had passed before, to Mary’s watching eyes, it seemed that Lilias was flagging. She had kept up, as she said she would, she had seemed as cheerful, *almost*, as usual, she had not overacted her part either, there had been no excitement or affectation about her in any way. But, all the more, it had been hard work, very hard work, and Mary’s heart ached when she saw the first signs of physical prostration beginning to show themselves.

“She looks so pale and so thin, and her eyes haven’t the least of their old sparkle,” said Mary to herself, “if it goes on, she will get really ill, I know.”

And, in truth, Lilias was beginning herself to lose faith in her own strength and self-control. She had been buoyed up by a hope she had not liked to allude to to Mary. A hope which, long deferred, has made many a heart sick besides Lilias Western’s—the hope of a letter!

There was no reason, which she knew of, why Arthur should not write to her.

“He might say in a letter what, perhaps, he would have shrunk from saying directly,” she thought, forgetting that the same strong influence which had sent Arthur away would have foreseen and guarded against his writing to her. And as day by day came and went, and every morning the post-bag was opened without her hopes being fulfilled, Lilias’s heart grew very weary.

“If I had known him anywhere but *here*,” she said to Mary one day, “I don’t think it would have been quite so hard. But here, at home, he seemed to have grown already so associated with everything. And, Mary,” she went on, with a sort of little sob, “it wasn’t all only about myself I was thinking. He is rich, you know; and I couldn’t help fancying sometimes it might be a good thing for us all—for you and the younger girls, and for mother. *He* even encouraged this, for he more than once made little allusions to the sort of things he would like to do if he dared. One day, I remember, when mother was tired, he said to me ‘how he would like to choose a pony carriage for her that she could get about in, and have more variety without fatigue.’ We were walking up and down the terrace—it was late in the afternoon, and there was red in the sky that shone through the branches of the group of old oaks at the end—do you remember that afternoon, Mary? The sky looks something the same to-day, but not so bright—it was that that reminded me of it.”

“No,” said Mary, “I don’t remember that particular afternoon. But I do know that he was always kind and considerate, especially to mother, and I cannot believe that it was not sincere.”

She gave a little sigh as she spoke; they were standing together at the window, and as Lilias leaned against the panes, gazing out, her attitude so languid and hopeless, the sharpened lines of her profile, all struck Mary with a chill misgiving.

“Lilias,” she said, suddenly, “you must go away from home for a while. What you have said just now about the associations here strengthens my feeling about it. You must have some change.”

“I don’t think it is possible, and I would much, very much rather stay at home,” said Lilias.

And till she had some definite scheme to propose, Mary thought it no use to contradict her.

But morning, noon, and night she was thinking of Lilias, always of Lilias and her troubles, and revolving in her head over and over again every possible and impossible means of making her happy again.

Two mornings after the conversation in the window the postboy brought a note for Lilias from Mrs Greville. It was at breakfast-time that it came. They were all together at the table.

“A letter for you, Lilias,” said her father, as he handed it to her.

Now letters for the Western girls were a rarity. They had few relations and almost fewer friends, for they had never been at school, and seldom left home. So when Mr Western’s apparently most commonplace announcement was made, six pair of eyes turned with interest, not to say curiosity, in Lilias’s direction, and even her mother and Mary glanced towards her with involuntary anxiety.

“A letter for Lily,” cried Josey, darting up from her seat. “Do let’s see it. Who’s it from?”

“*Josephine*!” exclaimed Mary, severely, “how *can* you be so unladylike? Mother, do speak to her,” and the little bustle of reproof of Josey that ensued effectually diverted the general attention.

Mary’s little ruse had succeeded, and her mother understood it. But for this, even little Francie could hardly have failed to notice the deathly paleness which, at her father’s words, overspread poor Lilias’s face. For an instant only;

one glance at the envelope, and the intensity passed out of her eyes.

"A note from Mrs Greville," she said, carelessly, as soon as she felt able to control the trembling in her voice. "She wants Mary and me to go to stay there for two nights—she expects one or two young friends from somewhere or other, and wants us to help to entertain them, I suppose."

"It is very kind of her to think of the variety for you, *I* think," said Mr Western. "Why should you be so ungracious about it, Lilias?"

The girl's face flushed painfully.

"I don't mean to be ungracious, father dear," she said, gently, "but I don't care about going."

Mr Western was beginning to look, mystified, when Mary's voice diverted his attention.

"*I* shall go," she said, abruptly, "that is to say," she added, colouring a little in her turn, "I should like to go, if I can."

"Dear me," said her father, "how the tables are turned! It used to be always Lilias who was eager to go, and Mary to stay at home."

"But there is no objection to Mary's going, if she likes," interposed Mrs Western, hastily.

"Objection, of course not. There is no objection to their both going that I can see," said Mr Western.

"Well, we'll talk about it afterwards," said Mrs Western. "Girls, you had better go to the school-room. We are later than usual this morning."

They all rose, and Lilias was thankful to get away; but as Mary and she left the room together, they overheard a remark of their father to the effect that Lilias was not looking well, had not her mother observed it?

"I dare say she would be the better for a thorough change," replied Mrs Western. "It is so long since she left home."

"Oh, yes!" said her father, with a sigh. "They would *all* enjoy a change, and no one needs it more than yourself, Margaret. It makes me very anxious when I think about these girls sometimes."

"But, at the worst, they are far better off in every other way than I was at their age," said Mrs Western, "and see how happy I have been."

"Ideas of happiness differ so," said her husband. "I fear a quiet life in a country parsonage on limited means would hardly satisfy Lilias. As to Mary, I somehow feel less anxiety. She takes things so placidly."

"Not always," said Mrs Western, under her breath; but she was glad that her husband did not catch the words, and that little Brooke's running in with some inquiry about his lessons interrupted the conversation—for it was trenching on dangerous ground.

"I am afraid papa thinks there is something vexing me," said Lilias, when Mary and she were alone together for a little.

"You have yourself to blame for it," said Mary, with some asperity; "why did you speak so indifferently of Mrs Greville's invitation? Usually you would have been very pleased to go."

"Oh, Mary, don't scold me," said Lilias, pathetically. "I *couldn't* go to Uxley—you forget how near Romary it is—I should be sure to hear gossip about him—perhaps that he was going to be married, or some falsehood of the kind. I could not bear it. I almost wondered at your saying you would like to go."

"It will only be for a couple of days," said Mary.

"But you are not intending to make any plan with Mrs Greville for my leaving home, I hope, Mary?" said Lilias, anxiously. "It may be better for me to go away after a while, but not yet. And if you came upon the subject with Mrs Greville *in the very least*, she would suspect something. Promise me you will not do anything without telling me."

"Of course not," said Mary. "I would not dream of doing such a thing without telling you."

But her conscience smote her slightly as she spoke. Why?

A design was slowly but steadily taking shape in her mind, and Mrs Greville's note this morning had strangely forwarded and confirmed it. Practically speaking, indeed, it had done more than confirm it—it had rendered feasible what had before floated in Mary's brain as an act of devotion scarcely more possible of achievement than poor Prascovia's journey across Siberia. And though Mary was sensible and reasonable, there lay below this quiet surface stormy possibilities and an impressionability little suspected by those who knew her best. Her mind, too, from dwelling of late so incessantly on her sister's affairs, had grown morbidly imaginative on the point, though to this she herself was hardly alive.

"I am not superstitious or fanciful—I know I am not. I never have been," she argued, "yet it does seem as if this invitation to Uxley had come on purpose. If I *were* superstitious I should think it a 'sign.'"

And who is not superstitious?—only for no other human weakness have we so many names, so many or such skilfully contrived disguises!

Two days later, "the day after to-morrow," found Mary on her way to Uxley Vicarage. Mrs Greville had sent her pony-carriage to fetch her. The old man who drove it was very deaf and hopelessly irresponsive, therefore, to the young lady's kindly-meant civilities in the shape of inquiries about the road and commendation of the fat pony, so before long she felt herself free to lapse into perfect silence, and as they jogged along the pretty country lanes—pretty to-day, though only February, for the sky was clear and the air mild with a faint odour of coming spring about it—Mary had plenty of time to think over her plan of action.

But thinking it over, after all, was not much good, till she knew more of her ground.

"I must to some extent be guided by circumstances," she said to herself, but with a strong sense of confidence in her own ability to prevent circumstances being too much for her. She had never before felt so certain of herself as now, when about, for the first time in her life, to act entirely on her own responsibility, and the sensation brought with it a curious excitement and invigoration. She had not felt so hopeful or light-hearted since the day of the Brocklehurst bail, and she was thankful to feel so, and to be told by Mrs Greville, when she jumped out of the pony-carriage and was met by her hospitable hostess at the gate, that she had never seen her looking so well in her life.

"There is no fear of her suspecting anything about Lilias," thought Mary, with relief, "if she thinks me in such good spirits."

"And how are you all at home, my dear?" said Mrs Greville, as she led Mary into her comfortable drawing-room, and bade her "toast" herself a little before unfastening her wraps. "Your poor dear mother and all?"

"They are all very well, thank you," Mary replied. "Mamma is quite well, and so pleased at Basil's getting on so well—we have such good news of him."

She always felt inclined to make the *very* best of the family chronicle in answer to Mrs Greville's inquiries, for though unmistakably prompted by the purest kindness her want of tact often invested them with a slight tone of patronage which Lilias herself could scarcely have resented more keenly than her less impulsive sister. The "poor dear mother," especially grated on Mary's ears. "Mamma," so pretty and young-looking, was no fit object for the "poor dears" of any one but themselves, thought Mrs Western's tall sons and daughters.

But of course it would have been no less ungrateful than senseless to have taken amiss Mrs Greville's well-meant interest and sympathy, even when they directed themselves to more delicate ground.

"And what about Lilias, Mary dear?" she inquired next. "I had been longing to hear all about it, and *wishing* so I had authority to contradict the absurd rumours that I have heard about Captain Beverley. I was dreadfully disappointed at Lilias's not coming, but consoled myself by thinking you would tell me all about it."

"But what are the rumours, and what have they to do with Lilias?" asked Mary.

"That's just what I want to know," replied Mrs Greville. "Captain Beverley has left Romary suddenly—of course you know that—and some people say he has made a vow never to return there because Miss Cheviott refused him the night of the Brocklehurst ball. That story *I* don't believe, of course. Others say it was not Miss Cheviott, but another young lady, whose name no one about here seems to know, but whom he was seen to dance with tremendously that night, who refused him."

Mrs Greville stopped and looked curiously at Mary, who smiled quietly, but said nothing, and felt increasingly thankful that Lilias had not accompanied her to Uxley.

"And there are stranger stories than these even," pursued Mrs Greville. "You will think me a terrible gossip, Mary, but in a general way I really don't listen to idle talk, only I felt so interested in Captain Beverley after what I saw, and I can't believe any harm of him."

"Who can have said any harm of him?" inquired Mary. "I should have thought him quite a general favourite; he is so bright, and kindly, and unaffected."

"Yes, I thought him very nice," said Mrs Greville. "But there are dreadful stories about, as to the reason of his leaving Romary so suddenly. One is that he has been gambling so furiously that he is embarrassed past redemption, and that he will only come into his property for it to be sold; and another is that Mr Cheviott found out that he had secretly made some low marriage, and turned him out of the house on that account, it having been always intended that he should marry Miss Cheviott." Mary was standing by the fire looking down on it as Mrs Greville spoke—the reflection of its ruddy glow hid the intense paleness which came over her face, and explained, too, the burning flush which almost instantly succeeded it. She felt obliged to speak, for silence might have seemed suspicious.

"What a shame of people to say such things!" she exclaimed, looking up indignantly. "No, I certainly don't believe them, but I am glad to know about it all, for it shows what disagreeable gossip there might have been about Lilias had her name been mixed up with it."

"Yes, indeed, but my dear child, you are scorching your face to cinders—you should not play such pranks with your complexion, though that brawny pink skin of yours is a very good kind to wear, and quite as pretty in my opinion, as Lilias's lilies and roses—but what was I saying? Oh, yes, by-the-bye, I do wish you would tell me—I shall be as discreet as possible—*is* Lilias engaged to him?"

Mary hesitated a moment, then she said, gently:

"Dear Mrs Greville, I wish you wouldn't ask me, for I *can't* tell you."

"Ah, well, never mind," said her hostess, good-naturedly. "You'll tell me whenever you can, no doubt, and I hope it

will all come right in the end, however it stands at present."

"Thank you," said Mary, with sincerity.

Then they went on to talk of other things. Mrs Greville described to Mary the "young people" who were staying with her, two girls and their brother, cousins of Mr Greville's first wife, and counselled her to make herself as pretty and charming as possible, to fascinate young Morpeth, who would be a conquest by no means to be despised.

"He is nothing at present," she said; "he has a thousand a year, and his sisters the same between them. They are orphans and have had no settled home since their mother's death. Vance Morpeth is talking of going into the cavalry for a few years, but his elder sister is against it, and he will be too old if he isn't quick about it. They have been abroad all the winter. Now remember, Mary, you are to do your best to captivate him, unless, indeed," she went on, as Mary was turning to her with some smiling rejoinder—"unless *you* have some little secret of your own too, with that haughty-looking Mr Cheviott for its hero."

The smile died out of Mary's face.

"Don't joke about that man, *please*, Mrs Greville," she said, beseechingly. "You do not know how I dislike him. I have never regretted anything more in my whole life than dancing with him that night."

And just then the time-piece striking five, she was glad to make the excuse that she would be late for dinner unless she hurried up-stairs to get her things unpacked, for fashionable hours had not yet penetrated to Uxley.

"Yes, go, my dear," said Mrs Greville. "Fancy, we have been a whole hour talking over the fire. I hear the Morpeths coming in—they must have been a very long walk, and it's quite dark outside. I cannot understand why people can't go walks in the morning instead of putting off till late in the afternoon, and then catching colds and all sorts of disagreeables. Run off, Mary. I dare say you would rather not see them till you are dressed."

Which Mary, who cared very little for seeing "them" at all, rightly interpreted as meaning, "I don't want Mr Morpeth to see you till you are nicely dressed, and looking to the best advantage."

Her powers of looking her best depended much more on herself than on her clothes, for her choice of attire was limited enough. But the suppressed excitement under which she was labouring had given unusual brilliance to Mary's at all times beautiful brown eyes, and a certain vivacity to her manner, in general somewhat too staid and sober for her age. So she looked more than "pretty" this evening, though her dress was nothing but a many-times-washed white muslin, brightened up here and there by a little rose-coloured ribbon.

"I thought you told me that it was not the *pretty* Miss Western that you expected?" said Mr Morpeth to Mrs Greville in a low voice, after the introductions had been accomplished.

Mrs Greville glanced up to the young man as she answered. There was a puzzled expression in his innocent-looking eyes; she saw that he was quite in earnest, and, indeed, she felt sure he was too little, of a man of the world to have intended his inquiry for a compliment.

"Does that mean that you think this one pretty?" she asked.

"Of course it does. I think she's awfully pretty, don't you?" he said, frankly.

Mrs Greville felt well pleased, but the announcement of dinner interrupted any more talk between them. Mr Morpeth had to take Mrs Greville, but *she* took care that Mary should sit at his other side.

"How would you define 'awfully pretty,' Mary?" she said, mischievously, when they were all seated at table, and the grace had been said, and nobody seemed to have anything particular to talk about.

"Awfully pretty," repeated Mary. "Awfully pretty what?"

"An 'awfully pretty' girl was the 'what' in question," said Mr Morpeth, shielding himself by taking the bull by the horns, with more alertness than Mrs Greville had given him credit for.

Mary smiled.

"I could easily define, or point out to you rather, what, if I were a man, *I* should call an awfully pretty girl in this very neighbourhood," she said, turning to Mrs Greville.

"I know whom you mean," replied her hostess. "Miss Cheviott, is it not? Yes, she is *exceedingly* pretty. You have not seen her, Frances," she went on to the eldest Miss Morpeth. "I wish you could."

"Shall we not see her at church on Sunday?" said Miss Morpeth. "Are not the Cheviotts the principal people here, now?"

"Yes," said Mrs Greville, "but they are a good deal away from home." Here Mary's heart almost stopped beating—this was what she had been longing yet dreaded to inquire about—what would become of all her plans should Mr Cheviott be away? But it was not so. "They are a good deal away from home," Mrs Greville went on, "and there is another church nearer Romary than ours, where they go in the morning. But they *very* often—indeed, almost always the last few weeks, come to Uxley in the afternoon—Mr Cheviott likes Mr Greville's preaching better than the old man's at Romary Moor."

"That's not much of a compliment, my dear," said Mr Greville from the end of the table, "considering that poor old

Wells is so asthmatic that you can hardly catch a word he says now.”

A little laugh went round, and under cover of it Mary managed to say gently to Mr Greville:

“Then Mr Cheviott is at Romary now?”

“Oh, yes; saw him this morning riding past,” was the reply.

Mary gave a little sigh of relief, yet her heart beat faster for the rest of the evening.

“I wonder if I must do it to-morrow,” she said to herself, “or not till the day after. I have only the two days to count upon, and supposing he is out and I have to go again! I must try for to-morrow, I think.”

“Romary is just two miles from here, is it not?” she said, in a commonplace tone.

“Not so much,” replied Mr Greville. “Have you never seen it? It is quite a show place.”

“I was there once—some years ago,” said Mary.

“It is very much improved of late. If the family had been away we might easily have driven you over to see it,” said Mr Greville, good-naturedly. “However, some other time, perhaps, when your sister is here too. You must come over oftener this summer,” he added, utterly forgetting, if ever he had quite taken in, all his wife’s confidences about the Western girls’ wonderful successes at the Brocklehurst ball, and her more recent misgiving that something had “come between” Lilias and “that handsome Captain Beverley.”

“Thank you,” said Mary; and after this no more was said about Romary or the Cheviotts.

Chapter Fourteen.

Mr Cheviott’s Ultimatum.

> ”‘But methinks,’ quoth I, under my breath,
> ‘’Twas but cowardly work.’”
>
> *Songs of Two Worlds*.

The next morning gave promise of a fine day, and Mary felt that she must be in readiness to seize any favourable opportunity for her meditated expedition.

“For to-morrow,” she said to herself, while she was dressing, “may be wet and stormy, and I must not weaken my position by making myself look ridiculous, if I can help it. And I certainly should look the reverse of dignified if I trudged over to Romary in a waterproof and goloshes! I very much doubt if I should get a sight of Mr Cheviott at all in such a case.”

She was trying to laugh at herself, by way of keeping up her spirits, but of real laughter there was very little in her heart. Even yesterday’s excitement seemed to have deserted her, and but for a curious kind of self-reliance, self-trust rather, which Mary possessed a good deal of, the chances are that she would have given up her intention and returned to Hathercourt and to Lilias, feeling that the attempt to interfere had been impossible for her.

“But I foresaw this,” she said to herself, reassuringly. “I knew I should lose heart and courage when it came to close quarters—but close quarters is not the best position for deciding such an action as this. I must remember that I resolved upon what I am going to do deliberately and coolly. It seemed to me a right thing to do, and I must have faith in my own decision. At the worst, at the *very* worst, all that can happen to me will be that that man will think I am mad, or something like it, to take such a step—perhaps he will make a good story of it, and laugh me over with his friends—though I must say he hasn’t the look of being given to laugh at anything! But why need I care if he does? I care nothing, *less* than nothing, what he thinks of me. I can keep my own self-respect, and that is all I need to care about.”

And so speaking to herself, in all sincerity, with no bravado or exaggeration, Mary more firmly riveted her own decision, and determined to go back upon it no more.

But she was paler than usual this, morning when she made her appearance at Mrs Greville’s breakfast-table, and her eyes had an unmistakable look of anxiety and weariness.

“Have you not slept well, my dear Mary?” asked Mrs Greville, kindly. “You look so tired, and last night you looked so *very* well.”

Mary’s colour rose quickly at these words and under the consciousness of a somewhat searching glance from Mr Morpeth, who was seated opposite her.

“I am *perfectly* well, thank you,” she replied, to her hostess, “but somehow I don’t think I did sleep quite as soundly as usual.”

“Miss Western’s room is not haunted, surely?” said Mr Morpeth, laughing. “All this sounds so like the preamble to some ghostly revelation.”

“No, indeed. There is no corner of this house that we could possibly flatter ourselves was haunted. I wish there were

—it is all so *very* modern," said Mrs Greville. "At Romary, now, there is such an exquisite haunted room—or suite of rooms rather. They are never used, but I think them the prettiest rooms in the house. It *is* so provoking that the Cheviotts are at home just now. I should so have liked you and Cecilia to see the house, Frances—and you, too, Mary, as you had never been there, and we can get an order from the agent any time."

"I think the outside of the house as well worth seeing as any part of it," said Mr Greville. "It is so well situated, and seen from the high road it looks very well indeed. By-the-bye, I shall be driving that way this afternoon if any of you young ladies care to come with me in the dog-cart? I am going on to Little Bexton, but if you don't care to come so far, I could drop you about Romary, and you could walk back. The country is not pretty after that. Would you like to come, Frances? Cecilia has a cold, I hear."

"Yes," said Cecilia, "but not a very bad one. But I don't think either of us can go, Mr Greville, for Miss Bentley is coming to see us this afternoon, and we must not be out."

"Mary, then?" said Mr Greville.

Mary's heart was beating fast, and she was almost afraid that the tremble in her voice was perceptible as she replied that she would enjoy the drive very much, she was sure.

"But I will not go all the way to Little Bexton, I think, if you don't mind dropping me on the road. I should like the walk home," she said to Mr Greville, and so it was decided. And for a wonder nothing came in the way.

It was years and years since Mary had been at Romary. When Mr Greville "dropped her" on the road, at a point about half a mile beyond the lodge gates, all about her seemed so strange and unfamiliar that she could scarcely believe she had ever been there before. Strange and unfamiliar, even though she was not more than ten miles from her own home, and though the general features of the landscape were the same. For to a real dweller in the country, differences and variations, which by a casual visitor are unobservable, are extraordinarily obtrusive. Mary had lived all her life at Hathercourt, and knew its fields and its trees, its cottages and lanes, as accurately as the furniture of her mother's drawing-room. It was strange to her to meet even a dog on the road whose ownership she was unacquainted with, and when a countryman or two passed her with half a stare of curiosity instead of the familiar "Good-day to you, Miss Mary," she felt herself "very far west" indeed, and instinctively hastened her steps.

"It is a good thing no one does know me about here," she said to herself; "but how strange it seems! What a different life we have led from most people nowadays! I dare say it would never occur to Miss Cheviott, for instance, to think it at all strange to meet people on the road whose names and histories she knew nothing of. Young as she is, I dare say she has more friends and acquaintances than she can remember. How different from Lilias and me—ah, yes, it is *that* that makes what her brother has done so awfully wrong—so *mean*—but will he understand? Shall I be able to show it him?"

Mary stopped short—she was close to the lodge gates now. She stood still for a moment in a sort of silence of excitement and determination—then resolutely walked on again and hesitated no more. These Romary lodge gates had become to her a Rubicon.

It was a quarter of a mile at least from the gates to the house, but to Mary it seemed scarcely half a dozen yards. As in a dream she walked on steadily, heedless of the scene around her, that at another time would have roused her keen admiration—the beautiful old trees, beautiful even in leafless February; the wide stretching park with its gentle ups and downs and far-off boundary of forestland; the wistful-eyed deer, too tame to be scared by her approach; the sudden vision of a rabbit scuttering across her path—Mary saw none of them. Only once as she stood still for an instant to unlatch a gate in the wire fence inclosing the grounds close to the house, she looked round her and her gaze rested on a cluster of oaks at a little distance.

"When I see that clump of trees next," she said to herself, "it will be over, and I shall know Lilias's fate."

Then she walked on again.

The bell clanged loudly as she pulled it at the hall door—to Mary, at least, it sounded so, and the interval was very short between its tones fading away into silence and the door's being flung open by a footman, who gave a little start of astonishment when Mary's unfamiliar voice caught his ear.

"I thought it was Miss Cheviott; I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, civilly enough, and the civility was a relief to Mary. "Is it Miss Cheviott you wish to see?"

"No, thank you," said Mary, quietly. "I want to see *Mr* Cheviott, if he is at home—on a matter of business, perhaps you will be good enough to say."

The man looked puzzled, and, for a moment, hesitated.

"If it is anything I could say, perhaps," he began. "Unless it was anything very particular. My master is very busy to-day, and gave orders not to be disturbed."

"It is something particular—that is to say, I wish to see Mr Cheviott himself. Perhaps you will *inquire* if he is to be seen," said Mary, more coldly.

The man looked at her again, and Mary felt glad she had not her old waterproof cloak on. As it was, she was prettily, at least not unbecomingly, dressed in a thick, rough tweed and small, close-fitting felt hat. Her boots were neat, and her gloves—the only new pair she had had this winter—fitted well. There was nothing about her attire plainer or poorer than what would be worn by many a girl of her age, "regardless of expense," for a country ramble. And Mr

Cheviott's servant was not to know it was all her Sunday best! Then she was tall! An immense advantage, now and then, in life.

"Certainly, ma'am, I will inquire at once," said the man. He was a new-comer who had served a town apprenticeship to the dangers of indiscriminate admittance, and felt, despite appearances, he must be on his guard against a young woman who so resolutely demanded a personal interview with a gentleman. A man in disguise—what might she not be? But something in Mary's low-toned "thank you" re-assured him.

"Will you step into the library while I ask?" he said, amiably, and Mary judged it best to do as he proposed.

There was no one in the library, and one of Mary's but half-acknowledged wild hopes faded away as she entered the empty room. She had had a dream of perhaps meeting with Alys in the first place—the girl with the beautiful face and bewitching smile—of her guessing her errand, and pleading on her side.

"She looked so sympathisingly at me that night at Brocklehurst," thought Mary—"almost as if she suspected my anxiety. Oh! if only I could talk to *her*, instead of that proud, cold brother of hers!"

But there was no Alys in the library, and an instant's thought reminded Mary that of course she, a stranger calling on "business," would not have been ushered except by mistake into Miss Cheviott's presence, and she gave a little sigh as she mechanically crossed the room and stood gazing out of the window.

The servant's voice recalled her thoughts.

"Your name, if you please, ma'am?" he was asking.

Mary was prepared for this.

"It would be no use giving my name," she said quietly. "If you will be so good as to say to Mr Cheviott that I am only in this neighbourhood for a day or two, and have called to see him purely on a matter of business, I shall be much obliged to you."

The man left the room. He went into Mr Cheviott's Study by another door than the one by which it communicated with the library, but through this last, firmly closed though it was, in a moment or two the murmur of voices caught Mary's quick ears, then some words, spoken loudly enough for her to distinguish their Sense.

"*Where*, do you say—in the library? A lady! Nonsense, it must be some mistake."

Then the servant's voice again in explanation. Mary moved away from the vicinity of the treacherous door.

A minute or two passed. Then the man appeared again.

"I am sorry, ma'am," he began, apologetically, "but particularly obliged by your sending my master your name. He is so much engaged to-day—would like to understand if it is anything very particular, and—" He hesitated, not liking to repeat his own suggestion to Mr Cheviott that very likely the young lady was collecting for the foreign missions, or a school treat, and might just as well as not send her message by him.

"It *is* something particular," said Mary, chafing inwardly not a little at the difficulty of obtaining an audience of Mr Cheviott—"as if he were a royal personage almost," she said to herself. "You can tell Mr Cheviott that the business on which I wish to see him is something particular; and my name is Miss Western."

Again the envoy disappeared. Again the murmuring voices through the door, then a hasty sound as of some one pushing back a chair in impatience, and in another moment the door between the rooms opened, and some one came into the library. Not the man-servant this time, nor did he, lingering behind his master in the study in hopes of quenching his curiosity, obtain much satisfaction, for Mr Cheviott, advancing but one step into the library, and catching sight of its occupant, turned sharply and closed the door in the man's face before giving any sign of recognition of his visitor—before, in fact, seeming to have perceived her at all. Then he came forward slowly.

Mary was still standing; as Mr Cheviott came nearer her, she bowed slightly, and began at once to speak.

"I can hardly expect you to recognise me," she said, calmly. "I am Miss Western, the *second* Miss Western, from Hathercourt."

Mr Cheviott bowed.

"I had the pleasure of being intro—I had the honour of meeting you at one of the Brocklehurst balls," he said, inquiringly.

"Yes," said Mary, "and once before—at Hathercourt Church one Sunday when you and your friends came over to the morning service. Before that day I do not think I ever heard your name, and yet I have come to your house to-day to say to you what it would be hard to say to an old friend—to ask you to listen while I try to make you see that you have been interfering unwarrantably in other people's affairs; that what you have done is a cruel and bad thing, a thing you may sorely repent, that I believe you *will* repent, Mr Cheviott, if you are not already doing so?"

She raised her voice slightly to a tone of inquiry as she stopped, and, for the first time, looked up, straight into Mr Cheviott's face. She had been speaking in a low tone, but with great distinctness and without hurry, yet when she left off it seemed as if her breath had failed her, as if her intense nervous resolution could carry her no further. Now she waited anxiously to see the effect of her words; she had determined beforehand to plunge at once, without preamble, into what she had to say, yet even now she was dissatisfied with what she had done. It seemed to her that she had

made her appeal in an exaggerated and theatrical fashion; she wished she had waited for Mr Cheviott to speak first.

She looked at him, and for an instant there was silence. His countenance was not so stern and impassive as she had once before seen it, but its expression was even more unpromising. It bespoke extreme annoyance and surprise, "disgusted surprise," said Mary to herself; "he thinks me lost to all sense of propriety, I can see."

She could *not* see her own face; she was unconscious of the pale anxiety which overspread it, of the wistful questioning in the brown eyes which Mr Cheviott remembered so bright and sunny; she could not know that it would have needed a more than hard heart, an actually cruel one, not to be touched by the intensity in her young face—by the pathos of her position of appeal.

At first some instinct—a not unchivalrous instinct either—urged Mr Cheviott to refrain from a direct reply to Mary's unmistakably direct attack.

"Will she not regret this fearfully afterwards?" he said to himself. "When she finds that I remain quite untouched, when she decides, as she *must*, that I am a brute! I will give her time to draw back by showing her the uselessness of all this before she commits herself further."

But Mary saw his hesitation, and it deepened the resentment with which she heard his reply.

"Miss Western," he said, "you must be under some extraordinary delusion. I will not pretend entire ignorance of what your words—words that, of course, from a lady I cannot resent—of what your words refer to, but pray stop before you say more. I ventured once before to try to warn you—or rather another through you, and this, I suppose, has led to your taking this—this very unusual step," ("what a mean brute I am making of myself," he said to himself, "but it is the kindest in the end to show her the hopelessness at once")—"under, I must repeat, some delusion, or rather complete misapprehension of my possible influence in the matter."

Mary was silent.

"You must allow me to remind you," continued Mr Cheviott, hating himself, or the self he was obliged to make himself appear, more and more with each word he uttered, "that you are very young and inexperienced, and little attentions—passing trivialities, in fact, which more worldly-wise young ladies would attach no significance to, may have acquired a mistaken importance with you and your sister. I am very sorry—*very* sorry that any one connected with me should have acted so thoughtlessly; but you must allow, Miss Western, that I warned you—Went out of my way to warn you, as delicately as I knew how, when I saw the danger of—of—any mistake being made."

Mary heard him out. Then she looked up again, with no appeal this time in her eyes, but in its stead righteous wrath and indignation.

"You are not speaking the truth," she said, "at least, what you are *inferring* is not the truth. If it were the case that Captain Beverley's 'attentions' to my sister were so trifling and meaningless—such as he may have paid to other girls scores of times—*why* did you go out of your way to warn us? It could not possibly have been out of respect for us; you knew and cared as little about us as we about you, and if you had said it was out of any care for us, the saying so would have been an unwarrantable freedom. No, Mr Cheviott, you knew Captain Beverley was in earnest, and your pride took fright lest he should make so poor a marriage. That is the truth, but I wish you had not made matters worse by denying it."

The blood mounted to Mr Cheviott's forehead; his dark face looked darker. That last speech of his had been a false move, and Mary knew it, and he knew it; still his presence of mind did not desert him.

"Believing what you do, then, Miss Western—I shall not again trouble you to believe anything *I* say—may I ask how, supposing my cousin to have been, as you express it, in earnest, you explain his not having gone further?"

"How I explain it?" exclaimed Mary. "You ask me that? I explain it by the fact that brought me here; *you* stopped his going further."

"Influenced, no doubt, by the pride you alluded to just now."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mary, dejectedly. "Influenced, at least, by some motive that blinded you to what you were doing. A girl's broken heart is a trifle, I know, but the loss of a good influence over a man's life is not a trifle, even you will allow. Captain Beverley thinks he owes you a great deal; I strongly suspect he owes you a great deal more than he at present realises. Mr Cheviott, do you not *know* that what you have done is a wrong and bad thing?"

Again her eyes took the pleading expression. Mr Cheviott turned away to avoid it. Then he said, very coldly:

"It is extremely unpleasant to have to say unpleasant things, but you force me to it. Supposing, for argument's sake—supposing things were as you believe, I should certainly act as you believe I have acted. I should by every means in my power, endeavour to prevent my cousin's making a marriage which would be utterly ill-advised and unsuitable, which would destroy his happiness, and which I cannot believe would be for the happiness of any one concerned."

Mary's face grew white as death. It was all over, then. She had lowered herself to this man for nothing. In the misery of thoroughly realising her defeat—the downthrow of all the hopes which unconsciously she had been cherishing more fondly than she had had any idea of—she, for the moment, forgot to be angry—she lost sight, as it were, of Mr Cheviott; in the depth of her disappointment, he became simply the incarnation of a cruel fate.

But he, at this juncture, was very far from losing sight of Mary. Her silent pallor frightened him, he thought she was going to faint, and he felt as if he were a murderer. A rush of pity and compunction roused his instinct of hospitality.

"Miss Western," he said, gently, and with a look in his eyes of which Mary, when she afterwards recalled it, could not altogether deny the kindness and sympathy, "I fear you have overtired yourself. This wretched business has been too much for you. Will you allow me to get you a glass of wine?"

Mary hastily shook her head, and the effort to recover her self-control—for she felt herself on the point of bursting into tears—brought back the colour to her cheeks.

"I will go now," she said, turning towards the door.

Mr Cheviott interrupted her.

"Will you not allow me to say one word of regret for the pain I have caused you?" he said, anxiously, humbly almost, "will you not allow me to say how deeply I admire and—and respect your courage and sisterly devotion?"

Mary shook her head.

"No," she said. "I could not believe you if you said anything of the kind, knowing you now as I do. And I earnestly hope I may never see you and never speak to you again."

The words were childish, but the tone and manner gave them force, and their force went home. Mr Cheviott winced visibly. Yet once again he spoke.

"You may resent my saying so at present," he said, "but afterwards you may be glad to recall my assurance that no one shall ever hear from me one word of what has been said just now."

Mary turned upon him with ineffable contempt.

"I dare say not," she said. "For your own sake you will do well to keep silence. For *mine* you may tell it where and to whom you choose."

Again Mr Cheviott's face flushed.

"You are a foolish child," he said, under his breath. Whether Mary caught the words or not he could not tell, but in a gentler tone she added, as she was passing through the door-way, "I think, however, I should tell you that no one—my sister, of course not—*no one* knows of my coming here to-day."

Mr Cheviott bowed.

"I am glad to hear it," he said, with what Mary imagined to be extreme irony.

He crossed the hall with her, and opened the large door himself. But Mary did not look at him as she passed out. And, when she had got some way down the carriage-drive in sight of the dump of oak trees, she burst into a flood of bitter tears. Tears that Mr Cheviott suspected, though he did not see them.

"Poor child," he said, as he returned to his study, "I trust she will meet no one in the park. Those gossiping servants—Well, *surely* I can never have a more wretched piece of work to go through than this! What a mean, despicable snob she thinks me!" he laughed, bitterly. "Why, I wonder, is it the fate of some people to be constantly doing other people's dirty work? I have had my share of it, Heaven knows; but I think I am growing quite reckless to what people think of me. What eyes that child has—and how she must love that sister of hers! If it had been *she* that Arthur had made a fool of himself about—"

Chapter Fifteen.

"Doing" Romary.

> "She told the tale with bated breath—
> 'A sad old story; is it true?'"

There was no good, there seldom is any, in crying about it. And Mary's tears were those rather of anger and indignation than of sorrow. The sorrow was there, but it lay a good deal lower down, and she had no intention of letting any one suspect its existence, nor that of her present discomfort, in any way. So she soon left off crying, and tried to rally again the temporarily scattered forces of her philosophy.

"Well," she reflected, "it has been a failure, and perhaps it was a mistake. I must put it away among the good intentions that had better have remained such. I must try to think I have at worst done Lilias's cause no harm—honestly I don't think I have—nothing that I could say would move that man one way or the other. And any way I meant well—my darling!—I would do it all over again for you, would I not? My poor Lily—to think how happy she might have been but for *him*. As for what he thinks of me I do not care, deliberately and decidedly I do not care, though just now it makes me feel hot,"—for the colour had mounted in her face even while she was asserting her indifference—"or perhaps, to be quite truthful, I should say I shall not care, very soon I shall not, I know. I shall not even care what he says of me—except—it would be rather dreadful if Lilias ever heard of it! but I do not think he will ever speak of it—he has what people call the instincts of a gentleman, I suppose."

Mary walked on, she was close to the lodge gates now. Suddenly a quick clatter behind her made her look round—a girl on horseback followed by a groom was passing her, and as Mary glanced up she caught sight of the bright, sweet face of Alys Cheviott. One instant she turned in Mary's direction, and, it *seemed* to Mary—conscious of red eyes and a

half guilty sensation of having no business within the gates—eyed her curiously. But she did not stop, or even slacken her pace. “She cannot have recognised me,” said Mary.

“And to-morrow,” she thought, with a sigh, half of relief, half of despair, “I shall be home again, and Lilias will be asking me if I came across any of the Romary people, or heard anything about Arthur Beverley.”

And when she got back to Uxley and Mrs Greville’s afternoon tea, she had to say how very much she had enjoyed her walk, and how pretty Romary Park looked from the road.

“Only,” repeated Mrs Greville, “I do so wish the Cheviotts had been away, and that I could have taken you all to see through the house and gardens and everything,” and Mary agreed that it was a great pity the Cheviotts had not been away, thinking in her heart that it was perhaps a greater pity than Mrs Greville had any idea of.

How seldom to-morrow fulfills the predictions of today! On Wednesday evening Mary was so sure she was going back to Hathercourt on Thursday morning, and on Thursday morning a letter from Lilias upset all her plans. It had been arranged that Mr Western should walk over to Uxley on Thursday to lunch there, and be driven home with Mary in Mrs Greville’s pony-carriage; but Wednesday had brought news to Hathercourt of the visit of a school inspector, and Mr Western’s absence was not to be thought of.

“So,” wrote Lilias, “mother and I have persuaded him to go on Friday instead, if it will suit Mrs Greville equally well. If not, we shall expect you home to-morrow, but do stay till Friday, if you can, Mary, for I can see that poor papa has been rather looking forward to the little change of a day at Uxley, and he has so few changes.”

Mary was longing to be home again, but her longings were not the question, and as Friday proved to be equally convenient to Mrs Greville, the matter was decided as Lilias wished.

“But you look rather melancholy about it, Mary,” said Mrs Greville. “Are you homesick already?”

Mary smiled. Mr Morpeth was looking at her with some curiosity.

“Not exactly,” she said, honestly.

She glanced up and saw a smile pass round the table.

“What are you all laughing at me for?” she said, smiling herself.

“You are so dreadfully honest,” said Mrs Greville.

“And unsophisticated, I suppose,” said Mary, “to own to the possibility of anything so old-fashioned as homesickness.”

“It must be rather a nice feeling, I think,” said Mr Morpeth. “I mean to say it must be nice to have one place in the world one really longs for. I have never known what that was—we were all at school for so many years after our father’s death—and since we have been together we have been knocking about so, there was no chance of feeling anywhere at home.”

“It must be dreadful to be homesick when one is very ill and has small chance of ever seeing home again,” said Cecilia Morpeth. “We used to see so much of that at Mentone and those places. Invalids who had not many days to live, just praying for home. Do you remember that poor young Brooke, last winter, Frances?”

“*That’s* it,” exclaimed the elder Miss Morpeth, emphatically.

Everybody stared at her.

“What *is* the matter? What are you talking about, Frances?” asked her brother and sister.

Miss Morpeth laughed.

“You must have thought I was going out of my mind,” she said, “but it has bothered me so, and when Cecilia mentioned the Brookes, it flashed before me in a moment.”

“*What*?” repeated Cecilia.

“The likeness—don’t you remember we were talking about it, last night, in our own room? A curious likeness in Miss Western’s face to some one—I could not tell who. Don’t you see it, Cecilia? Not to Basil Brooke, but to the younger brother, Anselm—the one that used to ride with us.”

“Yes,” said Cecilia, “I see what you mean. It is especially when Miss Western looks at all anxious or thoughtful.”

“It is curious,” said Mary. “If we had any cousins, I should fancy these Brookes you are talking of must be relations. My eldest brother’s name is Basil, and the second one is George Anselm, and my mother’s name was Brooke. But I think she told me all her family had died out—anyway, your friends can only be very distant relations.”

“But the likeness,” said Miss Morpeth. “It is quite romantic isn’t it? I suppose you are like your mother, Miss Western?”

“Yes,” said Mary.

“It is to be hoped the likeness goes no further than the face,” said Cecilia, thoughtlessly. “These Brookes are

frightfully consumptive. I beg your pardon," she added, seeing that Mary looked grave, "I should not have said that."

"I was not thinking of ourselves," said Mary. "I know *we* are not consumptive. I was trying to remember if I had ever heard mother speak of any such cousins."

"The consumption comes from their mother's side," said Miss Morpeth. "I remember their aunt, Mrs Brabazon, telling me so. She was a Brooke, and she was as strong as possible."

"Basil Brooke is dead," said Mr Morpeth. "I saw his death in the *Times* last week, poor fellow!"

"I will tell mother about them," said Mary, and then the conversation went off to other subjects.

An hour or two later, when Mary and the Morpeths were sitting in the drawing-room together, and Mrs Greville was attending to her housekeeping for the day, she suddenly re-appeared, with a beaming face.

"Frances, Mary, Cecilia," she exclaimed, "*such* a piece of good luck! Mr Petre, Mr Cheviott's agent, has just been calling here to see Mr Greville about some parish business, and I happened to say to him that I had friends with me here who had such a wish to see Romary. And what *do* you think? Mr Cheviott and his sister *are* away! They went yesterday evening to pay a visit, somewhere in the neighbourhood, for three days. And Mr Petre was so nice about it—he says he has perfect *carte blanche* about showing the house when they are away, and Mrs Golding is always delighted to do the honours. So it is all fixed—we are to go this afternoon—we must have luncheon a little earlier than usual. So glad you are not going home to-day, Mary."

Mary *felt*—afterwards she trusted she had not *looked*—aghast. What evil genii have conspired to bring about such a scheme? To go to see Romary—of all places on earth, the last she ever wished to re-enter—to go to admire the possessions of the man who had done her more injury and caused her deeper mortification than she had ever endured before!

"Oh, Mrs Greville," she exclaimed, hastily. "It is very good of you, but I don't think I care about going—you won't mind if I stay at home?"

"If you stay at home!" said Mrs Greville, in amazement. "Of *course* I should mind. I made the plan quite as much for you as for Frances and Cecilia; and only yesterday—or day before, was it?—you seemed so interested in Romary, and so anxious to see it, you were asking ever so many questions about it. I did not think you were so changeable."

Mary's face flushed.

"I did not mean to be changeable or to vex you, dear Mrs Greville," she began, "only—"

"Only what?"

Mary had left her seat and come over to where Mrs Greville was standing.

"It is a very silly reason I was going to give," she said in a low voice, trying to smile. "You remember my saying before how *very* much I dislike that Mr Cheviott."

Mrs Greville could not help laughing.

"Is that all?" she said. "Come now, Mary, I had no idea you could be so silly. I have always looked upon you as such a model of good sense. I began to think there must be some mystery you had not explained to me about Lilias's affairs, of course, I mean," she added, in a whisper, glancing at Mary with re-awakened curiosity in her eyes.

Mary kept her countenance.

"It is just as I said," she replied. "I can't give you any better reason for not wanting to go than my dislike to that man."

"Very well, then, you *must* come. That might prevent your liking to see *him*; it need not prevent your liking to see his house. Your not coming would quite spoil our pleasure."

Mary hesitated. Suddenly there flashed into her mind some of Lilias's last words of warning.

"Whatever you do, Mary," she had said, "don't let Mrs Greville get it into her head that there has been anything mortifying to us—that Arthur has behaved ill, I mean. I couldn't stand that being said."

And Mary turned to Mrs Greville with a smile.

"Very well," she said. "I won't be silly, and I will go."

"That's all right," said Mrs Greville, and Mary wished she could have said so too.

After all, why not? It was entirely a matter of personal feeling on her part; there was nothing unladylike or unusual in her going with the others to see the show house of the neighbourhood; and yet the bare thought of her doing so by any possibility coming to Mr Cheviott's ears made her cheeks burn.

"That horrible man-servant!" she said to herself—"supposing he recognises me!"

But there was no good in "supposings." She determined to make the best of the unavoidable, though it was impossible altogether to refrain from fruitless regrets that her return home had been delayed.

Nothing came in the way of the expedition. The afternoon turned out very fine, remarkably fine and mild for February, and the little party that set out from the Vicarage would have struck any casual observer as cheerful and light-hearted in the extreme.

“Do you care about this sort of thing?” said Mr Morpeth to Mary, when in the course of the walk they happened to fall a little behind the others.

“About what?” said Mary, absently. Her thoughts had been far away from her companions; she now recalled them with some effort.

“Going to see other people’s houses,” replied the young man. “I hate it, though I have had more than my share of it, knocking about from place to place, as we have been doing for so long.”

“Why do you hate it?” inquired Mary, with more interest. The mere fact of Mr Morpeth’s aversion to such expeditions in general seemed congenial, smarting as she was with her own sore repugnance to this one in particular. And even a shadow of sympathy in her present discomfort was attractive to Mary to-day.

Mr Morpeth kicked a pebble or two out of his path with a sort of boyish impatience which made Mary smile.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he replied, vaguely, “I always think it is a snobbish sort of thing to do, going poking about people’s rooms, and all that. And if it’s a pretty house, it makes one envious, and if it’s ugly, what’s the good of seeing it?”

Mary laughed.

“I like seeing old houses—really old houses,” she said.

“Not ruins, but an old house still habitable enough to enable one to fancy what it must have really been like ‘once upon a time.’”

“Yes,” said Mr Morpeth, “I know how you mean. But even that interest goes off very quickly. We once lived near an old place that nearly took my breath away with awe and admiration the first time I went through it. But very soon it became as commonplace as anything, and I hated to hear people go off into rhapsodies about it.”

“What a pity!” said Mary. “I don’t know that I envy you people who have travelled everywhere and seen everything. You don’t enjoy little things as we do who have seen nothing.”

“But you don’t enjoy going to see this stupid place today,” persisted Mr Morpeth. “I know you don’t, for I was in the drawing-room this morning when you were all talking about it; I came in behind Mrs Greville, and sat down in the corner, though you didn’t see me.”

“Then if you heard all that was said you must have heard my reason for disliking to go to see Romary,” said Mary, in a tone of some annoyance.

“Yes,” said Mr Morpeth, coolly, “*I* did. I wonder why you dislike that unfortunate Mr What’s-his-name so? For before you came Mrs Greville entertained us with a wonderful story about a ball and a very grand gentleman who never looks at young ladies at all, having quite succumbed to—”

“Mr Morpeth,” exclaimed Mary, stopping short and turning round on her companion with scarlet cheeks, “I shall be *very* angry if you speak like that, and I don’t think Mrs Greville should have—”

“Please don’t be angry. I didn’t mean to vex you, and Mrs Greville was not telling any secrets,” said Mr Morpeth. “Only I have been wondering ever since why you should have taken such a dislike to the poor man. You must be very unlike other girls, Miss Western?”

He looked at her with a sort of half innocent, half mischievous curiosity, and somehow Mary could not keep up her indignation.

“Well, perhaps I am,” she said, good-naturedly. “All the same, Mr Morpeth, you have got *quite* a wrong idea about why I dislike Mr Cheviott. Don’t let us talk about him any more.”

“*I* don’t want to talk about him, I’m sure,” said Mr Morpeth. “I only wish he didn’t live here, or hadn’t a house which people insist on dragging me to see. *I* have no other ill-will at the unfortunate man.”

“Only you won’t leave off talking about him,” said Mary, “and we are close to Romary now. See, that is the lodge gate—on there just past the bend in the road.”

“Oh, you have been here before. I forgot,” said her companion, simply. But innocently as he spoke, his remark sent the blood flying again to Mary’s cheeks.

“What shall I do if that horrible footman opens the door?” she said to herself.

But things seldom turn out as bad as we picture them—or, rather, they seldom turn out as we picture them at all. The horrible footman did not make his appearance—men-servants of no kind were visible—the house seemed already in a half state of *deshabille*; only old Mrs Golding, the housekeeper, came forward, with many apologies and regrets that she had not known before of Mrs Greville’s and her friends’ coming. “Mr Petre had only just sent word,” and the carpets were up in the morning-room and library! So sorry, she chatted on, but she was thankful to take advantage of her master’s and Miss Cheviott’s absence, even for a day of two, to get some cleaning done.

“For a house like this takes a dell,” She added, pathetically, appealing to Mrs Greville, who answered good-humouredly that to be sure it must.

“But the best rooms are not dismantled, I suppose?” she inquired. “The great round drawing-room and the picture-gallery with the arched roof? Just like a Church,” she observed, parenthetically, to her companions; “that is what I want you so much to see. And the old part of the house, we are sure to see that, and it is really so curious.”

There was no “cleaning” going on in the great drawing-room, and Mrs Golding led the way to its splendours with unconcealed satisfaction. It was much like other big drawing-rooms, with an even greater air of formality and unusedness than is often seen.

Mary, who was not learned in old china, its chief attraction, turned away with little interest, and wished Mrs Greville would hasten her movements.

“What splendid old damask these curtains are,” she was saying to Mrs Golding. “One could not buy stuff like this nowadays.”

“No, indeed, ma’am,” said the housekeeper, shaking her head. “They must have been made many a long year ago. But they’re getting to look very dingy—Miss Alys’s always asking Mr Cheviott to refurnish this room. But it must have been handsome in its day—I remember being here once when I was a girl and seeing it all lighted up. I did think it splendid.”

“There are some *very* old rooms, are there not?” said Mary.

“Yes, miss, the tapestry rooms,” said Mrs Golding. “There’s a stair leading up to them that opens out of the picture-gallery—the only other way to them is through Mr Cheviott’s own rooms, and he always keeps that way locked, as no one else uses it. The stair runs right down to the side door on the terrace, so it’s a convenient way of getting in from the garden,” continued the communicative housekeeper. “But there’s not many in the house cares to go near those rooms, for they say the middle one’s haunted.”

“Dear me, this is getting interesting,” said Mr Morpeth. “What or whom is it haunted by, pray?”

Mrs Golding looked up at him sharply, then with a slight smile she shook her head.

“You would only make fun of it if I told you, sir,” she said, “and somehow one doesn’t care to have old stories made fun of, silly though they may be.”

“No,” said Mary, “one doesn’t. I think you are quite right,” and the old woman looked pleased.

“You won’t prevent my seeing the haunted room, though you won’t tell me its story?” said Mr Morpeth, good-naturedly. So Mrs Golding led the way.

They passed along the arched picture-gallery, which in itself merited Mrs Greville’s praises, though the pictures it contained were neither many nor remarkable.

“I like this room,” said Mary, approvingly. “It is much less commonplace than the drawing-room—not that I have seen many great houses,” she added, with a smile, to Mr Morpeth, who was walking beside her, “but this is a room one would remember wherever one went.”

“Yes,” said Mr Morpeth. “It is a room with a character of its own, certainly. Frances will be calling it romantic and picturesque and all the rest of it. I am so tired of all those words.”

“I am afraid you are tired of most things,” said Mary. “See what an advantage we dwellers at home have over you travelled people!”

Her spirits were rising. So far there had been nothing at all in the expedition to arouse her fears, and she began to think they had been exaggerated.

“Which is the way to the haunted room?” asked Mr Morpeth, when they were all tired of admiring the picture-gallery.

Mrs Golding replied by opening a door at the further end of the room from that at which they had entered. It led into a little vestibule up one side of which ran a narrow staircase.

“Up that stair, sir,” she said to Mr Morpeth, “you get into a passage with two doors, one of them leads into the new part of the house and one into the old tapestry rooms—it is one of those rooms that is haunted.”

“Let us see if we can guess which it is,” exclaimed Mr Morpeth, springing up the staircase. His sister and Mrs Greville followed him, but Mary lingered a little behind.

“What is the story of the haunted room?” she said, in a low voice, to the housekeeper.

Mrs Golding smiled. She had somehow taken a liking to this quietly-dressed, quietly-spoken young lady, with the pretty eyes and pleasant voice.

“To tell you the truth, miss,” she answered, “I do not very rightly know, it myself. It was something about a lady from foreign parts that was brought here sorely against her will by one of the old lords—I think I have heard said they were once lords—of Romary. He wanted her to marry him, but she would not. Whether he forced her to give in or not I can’t tell, but the end of it was she killed herself—I fancy she threw herself out of the window of the room where he

had imprisoned her. And since then they say she is to be seen there now and then.”

“Was it very long ago?”

“I couldn’t say. It was at the time, I know, when there was wars in foreign parts, and that was how the squire of Romary had found the lady. Miss Alys knows all the story—that’s our young lady. Miss Cheviott I should say. It is a sad enough story anyway.”

“Yes,” said Mary, “ghost stories always are, I think. It is queer that the people who have been the most miserable in this world are always the ones who are supposed not to be able to rest without returning to it.”

But just then a voice from above interrupted them.

“Miss Western,” it said, “do come up. This is the jolliest place of the whole house.”

So Mary ran up the staircase. Mr Morpeth was waiting for her at the top.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Haunted Room.

> “Startled by her own thoughts, she looked around:
> There was no fair fiend near her.”
>
> *Shelley*.

It was really a very respectable attempt at a haunted room.

“Something like, isn’t it?” said Mr Morpeth, looking round him with approval, while Miss Morpeth shivered and declared she would not care to spend a night in it, and Miss Cecilia laughed at her and said she would like nothing better than to stay there till to-morrow morning, to see what was to be seen.

“Nonsense, my dear,” said Mrs Greville. “You would be as frightened as possible long before it got dark.”

“She would be in hysterics in half an hour,” said her brother, politely.

“I am *sure* I wouldn’t,” protested Cecilia. “Miss Western, you wouldn’t be afraid to spend the night here, would you?”

“I don’t know,” said Mary, doubtfully. “I almost think I should be. Those faces in the tapestry are so ghostly. I suppose,” she went on, simply, “if I *had* to stay here—I mean if there were any good reason for it, I should not be frightened—but I shouldn’t feel inclined to try it just as a test of bravery.”

“As a piece of foolish bravado, *I* should call it,” said Mrs Greville.

“It would be an awkward place to be shut up in,” said Mrs Golding, “for the door is in the tapestry, you see, ladies,”—she closed it as she spoke—“and it opens with a spring, and unless one knows the exact spot to press, it would be very difficult to find. The other door, which leads into the new part of the house, is hidden in the same way.”

She crossed the room, and, almost without hesitation, pressed a spot in the wall, and a door flew open. It led into another room, something like the first, but rather more modern in its furniture. All the party pressed forward.

“There is nothing particular to see here,” said Mrs Golding, “but this room opens again into the white corridor, where my master’s own rooms are. There is a very pretty view from the window at the end, if you would come this way, and we can get round to the front of the house again.”

A sudden impulse seized Mary.

“Mrs Greville,” she said, “I would like to go out into the garden by the door at the foot of the stair we tame up. Mayn’t I go back? I will meet you at the front of the house.”

“Very well,” said Mrs Greville. “You are such an odd girl, Mary,” she added, in a lower voice, “I suppose your dislike to Mr Cheviott prevents your liking to see his rooms!”

Mary laughed, but coloured a little too.

“Then I’ll meet you at the front of the house,” she said, as she turned away.

“Let me go with you,” put in Mr Morpeth—the others, under Mrs Golding’s guidance, had already passed on—“it wouldn’t do for you to go prowling about those ghostly rooms all by yourself, Miss Western. Who knows what might happen to you?”

Mary laughed again—this time more heartily.

“It’s not dark enough yet to be frightened,” she said, as they re-entered the haunted chamber, where already the heavy old hangings had toned down the afternoon light into dimness.

“Hardly,” said Mr Morpeth, carelessly, stepping forward to the window as he spoke. Mary was following him when a

slight sound arrested her.

“Mr Morpeth,” she exclaimed, “it is to be hoped we can get out by the other door, for the one we have just come in by was shut behind us; I heard it click; it is my fault. I never thought about its being a spring door, and I let it swing to.”

She looked startled and a little pale. Mr Morpeth was surprised at her seeming to take it so seriously, and felt half inclined to banter her.

“We never meant to go back by the door we came in by,” he said. “What would have been the good of that? We’ll find the other in a minute—sure to; don’t look so aghast, Miss Western. At the worst we can ring the bells and alarm the house till some one comes to let us out. You are surely not afraid that we shall have to get out by the window?”

As he spoke he crossed over to the side of the room where, to their knowledge, the second door *was*, if only they could find it! Mr Morpeth, at first, began feeling about in a vague way, as if expecting to light upon the spring by a happy accident. But no such result followed; he began to look a little more thoughtful.

“Let’s see,” he said, consideringly, “whereabouts was it we first came into the room?”

Mary stepped backwards close to the wall, and then moved slowly along, keeping her back to it.

“It must have been about here, I think,” she said, stopping short. “I remember the first thing I caught sight of was that cabinet, and it seemed just opposite me; and Mrs Greville standing in front of it seemed to shut out that narrow pane of the window. Yes,” as Mr Morpeth put himself in the position she described—“yes, she was standing just there; the door *must* be hereabouts.”

They turned to search more systematically, but in vain. Peer as they would into every square inch of the musty tapestry hangings within a certain radius, feel as they would, up and down, right and left, higher up than Mrs Golding could possibly have reached, lower down than any door within the memory of man ever locked; it was all in vain. Then they looked at each other.

“It must be a spring pressing inwards—flat on the surface,” said Mr Morpeth. “I thought there would have been a little knob of some kind. However, let’s try again.”

He moved his hand slowly around the wall, pressing carefully, anxiously endeavouring to detect the slightest inequality or indentation, and Mary followed his example till their patience was exhausted. Then again they stopped and looked at each other.

“Would it be any good trying to find the spring of the other door?” said Mary, at last.

“I don’t fancy it would,” said Mr Morpeth. “You see, we’re quite in the dark as to what sort of spring it is; we may have touched it twenty times, but not pushed or pressed it the right way. Don’t you think we’d better just not bother for a little? They’re sure to miss us before long, and then that old party will hunt us up.”

But Mary looked by no means disposed to take things so philosophically.

“I don’t know that they *will* miss us so quickly,” she said. “It will take them some time to go all over the front of the house, and if they don’t find us in the grounds they are sure just to think we have walked on. I am sure Mrs Greville will think so, any way; she always takes things so comfortably,” she added, with an uneasy reflection that Mrs Greville would probably be rejoicing at the success of her amiable scheme for throwing herself and “young Morpeth” together. “I *wish* I had not left the others.”

Mr Morpeth smiled.

“I really think you are wasting a great deal of unnecessary energy on our misadventure,” he said. “*I* don’t see anything so very desperate about it. If we were in a box now, like that girl at Modena, Guinevere—no, Genevieve—no, bless me, I can’t remember. You know whom I mean—we *might* be rather uneasy. But at the *very* worst we cannot be left here more than an hour or two. I dare say the housekeeper will be coming back to look for us immediately, for she will know how awkward these doors are.”

“Yes,” said Mary, “I do think that is not unlikely. She did not hear us speak of going back to the gardens though, did she? she had gone on in front.”

“But she is pretty sure to miss us, and ask what had become of us—she’s not a stupid old lady by any means. Just let’s wait here comfortably a few minutes, and see if she doesn’t come.”

Mary tried to take his advice, but as the minutes passed she grew more and more uncomfortable.

“I say,” exclaimed Mr Morpeth, “supposing we try to make ourselves heard somehow. I never thought of that. Very likely there are offices—pantries, or kitchens, and so on under these rooms. There’s no bell, but supposing we jump on the floor and scream—I’ll jump, if you will be so good as to scream—some one will be sure to hear us and rush up to see what’s happening in the haunted room.”

But at this proposal Mary grew literally white with anxiety.

“Oh, *please* don’t, Mr Morpeth,” she said, so beseechingly that the young man looked at her with more concern than he had yet shown.

"What a queer girl she must be to take it to heart so!" he said to himself.

"*Please* don't," she repeated. "It would make such a to-do. I should be so dreadfully annoyed—oh, *please* don't."

"That horrible footman" was the great terror in her mind; "if he came up and saw me he would be sure to tell his master. What would Mr Cheviott think of me if he heard of my being here, prying about his house the very day after?"

"Very well. *I'm* very comfortable. I'm quite content to wait till some one comes to let us out," said Mr Morpeth. "It was you, Miss Western, that was in such a hurry."

Which was true enough. Mary did not know what to say—only her uneasiness increased. It began to grow dusk too—outside among the trees it was getting to look decidedly dusk.

"What shall we do?" she exclaimed at last, in a sort of desperation. "Evidently they are not missing us, and will not do so till they get home, and then there will be *such* a fuss! Oh, Mr Morpeth," she went on, as a new idea struck her, "do you think you could possibly get out of the window?"

She said it so simply, and was evidently so much in earnest, that Mr Morpeth gave up for once his habit of looking at the ludicrous side, and set to work to discover how this last suggestion could be carried out. The window was much more easy to deal with than the doors. It opened at once, and, leaning over, Mr Morpeth descried a little ledge below it, leading to the top of the porch above the side-door into the shrubbery.

"I can easily get out," he said, turning back to Mary, "but once I am out what do you want me to do? You don't want any fuss, but I must tell somebody to come and get you out."

"Oh, yes, of course—if you could find Mrs Greville and ask her to tell the housekeeper of the door's having shut to, she would come and open it," said Mary. "If you could just tell her in a matter-of-fact way, you know. What I don't want is a great rush of all the servants and people about the place to see me locked up here; it would be so uncomfortable. I'll wait here quite patiently once I know you've gone, for you'll be sure to find them."

"I'll do my best," said Mr Morpeth, quietly, "and of course if I *should* break my neck or my arms or anything, there will be the satisfaction of knowing it was in a good cause."

Mary started forward.

"You don't mean that there is really any risk for you," she exclaimed. "No, I am sure there isn't," she continued, after looking out of the window, and examining it for herself, "of course, if there was, I shouldn't want you to go. You are laughing at me because you think me very silly—I am very sorry, but I can't help it. I do *so* wish I hadn't come here—I wish I could get out of the window too!"

"No, indeed, it would not be safe for you at all," said Mr Morpeth, hastily, concealing his private opinion that the feat was not so easy as it looked. "I am a good climber and I've had plenty of practice. It is nothing for me, but it would be quite different for you—promise me, Miss Western, you will not try to get out of the window while I am away. I shall be as quick as I can, but I may not be able to find the others all at once."

"Very well," said Mary. "I do promise. Not that I ever meant to get out of the window, I assure you."

Mr Morpeth clambered out successfully. Mary watched him groping along the ledge, holding on first by a projecting window sash, then by a water-pipe, then by what she could not tell—somehow or other he had made his way to the roof of the door porch, and was hidden from her sight. But, in a minute, a whistle and a low call of "all right" satisfied her as to his safety.

"He is very good-natured," thought Mary. "He called out softly on purpose not to attract attention. What a silly girl he must think me, to make such a fuss about such a simple thing! But I can't help it."

She drew back from the window and sat down on one of the straight-backed, tapestry-cushioned chairs, and began to calculate how long she would probably have to wait. Ten minutes at most—it could not take longer to run round to the front of the house and find Mrs Golding.

"They will come back by that door," said Mary, to herself, directing her eyes towards the invisible entrance by which she and Mr Morpeth had returned to the haunted room. "How glad I shall be when I see it open! How I wish I had a watch! It would pass the time to count the minutes till they come—but I could hardly see the minute hand on a watch even now. How dark it is getting! It is those great trees outside—in summer, no light at all can get in here I should think."

She got up and turned again to the window, fancying that looking out would be a little less gloomy than sitting staring at the old furniture and the shadowy figures on the walls, growing more and more weird and gruesome as the light faded. But, standing there at the window, there returned to her mind the tragic story of which Mrs Golding had given, her the outlines, and, despite her endeavours to think of something else, her imagination persisted in filling in the details. "She had thrown herself out of the window in despair," Mrs Golding had told of the unhappy prisoner, and Mary recalled it with a slight shudder.

Was it much to be wondered at? Any one would grow desperate shut up within these four gloomy walls—gloomy now, and gloomy then, no doubt, for the tapestry was *very* old—older, probably, than the date of the story—and the room had ever since been left much as it was at that time. It was a ghastly story, as much for what had preceded the final tragedy as for the catastrophe itself.

"It is so *very* horrible to think of any one's having been shut up in this very room for days, and weeks, and months,

perhaps," thought Mary. "And to think that her only way out of it was to many a man she hated! Still, whoever she was, she must have been brave; the only inconsistent part of the story is her being supposed to haunt the place she must have had such a horror of. Dear me, how dark it is getting!—how I do wish they would come, and how I wish I had not heard that story!"

Mary left the window again, and sat down on one of the hard, high-backed chairs. In spite of her anxiety and excitement, she was growing very tired, and once or twice she almost felt as if she were getting sleepy. But she was determined not to yield to this.

"It would be far worse if I fell asleep, and woke to find myself all in the dark," she said to herself. "If I have to stay all night, I must keep awake, and, indeed, it begins to look very like having to stay all night. What can have become of Mr Morpeth? I am sure he has been gone half an hour."

She listened till her ears were strained, but there was no sound. Then again the confused, sleepy feeling came over her; she dozed unconsciously for a minute or two, to be awakened suddenly by what in her sleep had seemed a loud noise. Mary started up, her heart beating violently, but she heard nothing for a moment or two. Then there came a faint creaking sound, as of some one coming up the staircase and along the passage outside. It was not the side from which she was looking for assistance, and, besides, whoever it was was approaching in perfect silence.

"Mr Morpeth would be sure to call out if it was he," she reflected; "besides, Mrs Golding would be with him, and they would come the other way. Who can it be? Oh! supposing—just *supposing* the ghost were to come in, what should I do? I should always be told it was a dream; but I am not dreaming. And *something* must have been seen, otherwise there would not be the story about it."

All this flashed through her mind in an instant. She got up from her chair with a vague intention of escaping, hiding herself somewhere, anywhere, but sat down again, as the steps came nearer and nearer, with a feeling of hopelessness. How could she escape? Where could she hide herself? There was no cupboard or recess, not even a curtain, in the bare, half-furnished room; she must just wait where she was, whatever happened, and, as if fascinated, poor Mary sat gazing on that part of the wall where she knew the door to be. Another moment—it seemed to her hours—and she heard the slight click of the concealed spring, and, thank Heavens, it was no ghost in flowing white, but a gentleman in a great-coat! Thus much Mary could discern, dusk though it was, even at the first glance, to her inexpressible relief.

"Mr Morpeth," she exclaimed, "is it you? Oh, I am so thankful! But why—"

The voice that interrupted her was not Mr Morpeth's.

"Who is there? Is it you, Mrs Golding? What is the matter?" exclaimed the some one whose approach had so terrified her.

An instant's pause; Mary's wits, beginning to recover themselves, were all but scattered again as a frightful suspicion dawned upon her. Was she dreaming, *could* it be that her very worst misgiving was realised? Who was it standing in frowning bewilderment before her? Ghost, indeed—at that moment it seemed to her she would rather have faced twenty ghosts than the living man before her.

"Mr Cheviott!" she ejaculated, feebly, hardly conscious of speaking.

Mr Cheviott came forward a little, but cautiously, and in evident astonishment and perplexity. Something in the tone of the half whisper struck him as familiar, though it was too dark for him to distinguish at once anything but the general outline of poor Mary's figure.

"Who is it? I don't understand; does Mrs Golding know of your being here?" he asked, confusedly, with a vague idea that possibly the mysterious visitor was some friend of the housekeeper.

"No—oh, yes, I mean," replied Mary; "I got locked in by mistake, and—and—"

There was an end for the time of all explanation; Mary burst into unheroic tears; but not before an exclamation, to her ears fraught with inexpressible meaning, had reached her from Mr Cheviott.

"Miss Western, *you* here!" was all he said, but it was enough.

Though from the first of his entrance she had had no hope of escaping unperceived, yet the hearing his recognition expressed in words seemed to make things worse, and for the moment exaggerated almost beyond endurance the consciousness of her ignominious position. She cried as much from a sort of indignation at circumstances as from nervousness or timidity.

Mr Cheviott stood silent and motionless. Wild ideas were hurrying through his brain to the exclusion for the time of all reasonable conjecture. Had she been locked up here since the day before? Had she come with a frantic idea of winning him over even now to approve of an engagement between Arthur and her sister? If not, what *was* she doing here? And now that he had discovered her, what could he do or say that would not add to her distress?

Suddenly Mary looked up. Her tears somehow or other, had restored her self-control; the very shame she felt at Mr Cheviott's hearing her sobs reacted so as to give her confidence.

"Why should I be ashamed? It is very natural I should cry after all the worry I have had the last few days; and who has caused it all? Who has broken Lily's heart and made us all miserable? Why should I care what such a man as that thinks of me?"

She left off crying, and got up from the chair on which she had sunk down at the climax of her terror. She turned to Mr Cheviott, and said calmly, though not without the remains of an uncontrollable quaver in her voice:

“If you will be so good as to open the door, I should very much like to go.”

Mr Cheviott took up the cue with considerable relief. Any amount of formality was better than tears.

“Certainly,” he said, quietly. Then, almost to his own astonishment, the ludicrous side of the position suddenly presenting itself to him, a spirit of mischief incited him to add, “you must allow, Miss Western, *I* am in no way to blame for this disagreeable adventure of yours. And, if you will pardon my asking you, I must confess before I let you out I should very much like to know how you got in.”

Mary flamed up instantly.

“You have no right,” she began,—“no right,” she was going to say, “to ask me anything I have not chosen to tell you,” but she stopped short. She was in Mr Cheviott’s own house—how could she possibly refuse to tell him how she had got there? “I beg your pardon,” she said instead. “I—I came here with Mrs Greville and some people who wanted to see the house. *I* did not want to come,” she could not resist adding, with a curious little flash of defiance, “but I could not help it.”

“Ah! indeed, I understand,” said Mr Cheviott, turning to open the door, but to which part of her speech his observation was addressed, Mary was left in ignorance.

Mr Cheviott stopped.

“Which way do you wish to go out?” he asked.

“Out to the garden, if you please,” said Mary, eagerly. “That is the way Mr Morpeth—the gentleman that was with me, I mean—will be coming back. At least, I don’t know,” she went on, growing confused; “it depends on where he finds the housekeeper. But anyway, I would rather meet them all outside.”

“How on earth did ‘the gentleman that was with her’ get out?” thought Mr Cheviott—“or was it through some foolery of his that she got locked in?” But he was determined to ask no more questions.

He turned again to the wall, pressed the concealed spring without an instant’s hesitation, and the door flew open—flew open, and Mary, without a glance behind her, flew out.

Chapter Seventeen.

Mary Tells Stories.

> Florizel—“Fortune speed us!—
> Thus we set on, Camillo, to the sea-side.”
>
> Camillo.—“The swifter speed the better.”
>
> *Winter’s Tale*.

She flew out of the room, across the passage, down the little stair, and out at the door, still standing slightly ajar, for a moment thinking of nothing but the delight of being liberated at last. But it was dusk outside among the trees, and her hesitation which way to go recalled her to herself. She stopped short, and then turned back again.

“I should have thanked him. He really must think me mad,” she said to herself, with a hot flush of shame, hardly knowing what she ought to do.

But she was not long left in doubt. Mr Cheviott had followed her down-stairs; he was standing at the door.

“I am ashamed of not thanking you for letting me out,” she said, hastily.

“I hardly see that I could have done less,” he replied, dryly. “I merely followed you now to direct you how to get round to the front, as I believe you wish. You must keep that path to the left till it meets a wider one, which will bring you out at the foot of a flight of stone steps. These will take you up to the side terrace, and you can then easily see your way to the front of the house. It is not really dark yet; it is only the trees here which make it seem so, even in winter. They are so thick.”

“Thank you,” said Mary. “I am very much obliged to you, and I should have said so before, but—I did not think I was so silly—the feeling of being shut up in that room must have made me forget, it was so horrible,” and she gave a little shiver.

Mr Cheviott stepped forward a little, but it was too dark for Mary to see the concern in his eyes.

“Would you like me to go with you till you meet your friends,” he said, very gently.

“Oh, *no*, thank you,” exclaimed Mary, with great vehemence.

Mr Cheviott drew back.

“I see,” he said, with the slightly satirical tone Mary seemed to know so well and hated so devoutly. “It is bad enough to be still in the precincts of the ogre’s castle, but the presence of the ogre himself is quite too much for your nerves. Good-evening Miss Western.”

He raised his hat and re-entered the house before Mary had time to reply. She stood still for a second.

“Have I been rude to him again?” she said to herself, with a little compunction. “However, it really does not matter. No two people could dislike and despise each other more thoroughly than he and I do. I could never, in any circumstances, have liked him; but still, for Lily’s sake, I could have been civil to him. But *now*! I only hope, oh, ever so earnestly, that I shall never see him again—and what he thinks or does not think of me really is of less than no consequence.”

Nevertheless, the thought of the afternoon’s adventure made her cheeks tingle hotly, and she hurried on as fast as she could in the uncertain light. Mary Western seemed strangely unlike her usual philosophical self. She even seemed to find a relief to her irritation in trampling unnecessarily on the dry brushwood lying about here and there—the “scrunch” worked off her disgust a little. Once, after jumping on the top of a small raked-up heap, she stood still and laughed at herself.

“What a baby I am! I need never laugh at poor Josey’s ‘tantrums’ again,” she said to herself. “But the truth is that man has thoroughly mortified me, and I can’t stand mortification. It is my thorn in the flesh.”

Just then it seemed to her that she heard a faint sound in the path behind her. It was too dark to see anything, but Mary’s heart began to beat faster, and jumping down from the heap she hurried on more quickly than before.

“I dare say it’s only a rabbit,” she thought; “but still all round here has a sort of haunted feeling to me.”

She was glad when at last she came upon the flight of steps Mr Cheviott had described. Running up them, the first object that met her sight was Mr Morpeth hastening towards her.

“Miss Western! did you get out of the window? It was frightfully rash,” he exclaimed.

“I did *not* get out of the window,” replied Mary, shortly. “But that I did not try to do so is no thanks to you, Mr Morpeth.”

“Why, what’s the matter? I have done my very best, I can assure you,” he replied good-naturedly. “I was as quick as I could be, considering all your directions—I don’t think it can be more than half an hour since I left you.”

“Half an hour,” repeated Mary, indignantly. “You talk coolly of not much more than half an hour, but just fancy what that seemed to me. Shut up alone in that horrible room, and in the dark, too!”

“I’m very sorry, but I couldn’t help it.”

“It would not have taken *me* half an hour, I know,” pursued Mary, “to have run round to the front of the house and find the housekeeper.”

“Yes,” replied Mr Morpeth, “it certainly would, if, when you had run round to the front of the house, you had *not* found the housekeeper, and had been told instead that she had had to hurry off to her master, who had arrived unexpectedly—and if you had had to explain all to Mrs Greville, and beg her not to rouse an alarm and so on—all this in deference to the special commands of a certain young lady, whom I mistakenly imagined I was trying to serve.”

Mary felt rather ashamed of herself.

“Did you not find the housekeeper after all?” she inquired, meekly.

“Yes, Mrs Greville managed it, but I would not let her go back through the house to let you out, as I knew you would so dislike possibly meeting that fellow—what’s his name?—the man himself, I mean, whom you hate so. So I got a key; look what a queer one,” holding out a quaint looking object, which Mary could, however, hardly distinguish, till she took it in her own hands, “it opens the spring door from the outside, you see.”

“But did *you* see Mr Cheviott?” asked Mary.

“Oh, no! he stopped at his bailiff’s, or somewhere, and sent on his groom to say he had come back about some business, and would stay all night. Then off flies Mrs Silver, or whatever her name is—and nobody thinks any more of us two unfortunate wretches.”

“Yes, I see. I understand it all now,” said Mary, “and—”

“You do, but I don’t,” interrupted Mr Morpeth. “I want to know how you got out of the room. You could never have found the spring, after all, and in the dark too.”

Mary did not answer.

“*Did* you?” persisted her companion. “Come now, Miss Western, I do think I deserve a civil answer.”

“Well, then, I *didn’t*,” replied Mary.

“Do you call that a civil answer?” inquired Mr Morpeth.

“No,” said Mary, half laughing, “I don’t know that I do, but—”

“But what?”

“The truth is, I don’t want to tell you how I got out of the room, and I shall be exceedingly, infinitely obliged to you if you will say no more about the affair.”

“A short time ago you said you would be exceedingly obliged, or eternally grateful, or something of the kind if I would climb out of that window and find the housekeeper.”

“And so I was—so I am,” said Mary.

“Looks like it,” observed Mr Morpeth.

Then they walked on a few steps in silence, Mary feeling still uneasy, and somewhat conscience-smitten.

“Mr Morpeth,” she said at last, “what are you thinking?”

“Would you really like to know?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I was thinking that girls are all the same—very little satisfaction to be got out of any of them.”

“That means me, I suppose,” said Mary, slightly nettled.

“Perhaps,” replied Mr Morpeth, coolly. “You see, Miss Western, I did think you such a particularly sensible girl.”

“I dislike being considered a sensible girl more than anything you could say to me,” interrupted Mary.

“There you go!” said Mr Morpeth. “As I was saying, I thought you, till to-day, a very sensible girl—not like my sisters, who are forever flying out about something or other—and this afternoon you have really been so very uncertain and queer-tempered—”

“I know I have,” interrupted Mary again, stopping short as she spoke. “Mr Morpeth,” she went on, “we shall be meeting the others again directly. Will you be really so *very* kind as to say nothing more about this afternoon and all the trouble I have given you? I don’t think I am generally uncertain and queer-tempered, but I have really been a good deal worried and troubled lately, and—and I think if I could explain all you would say there was a little excuse for me.”

There was something very like the glistening of tears in the brown eyes; it was almost too dark to see, but the voice suggested enough to soften Mr Morpeth’s heart—far more boyish and impressionable than he would have liked to own to. A new idea struck him.

“Perhaps, after all, she had some reason for disliking that fellow,” he thought—“perhaps she knows more of him than she allows, and he has fallen in love with her—she is really awfully pretty—and is pestering her to marry him though she hates him. And her people are so poor, Mrs Greville says—”

He turned to Mary with a change of tone.

“Miss Western,” he said, earnestly, “I promise you to say no more about it, and I will do my best to prevent Mrs Greville or any one bothering you—I really will, and I’m sorry I said you were bad-tempered.”

“Thank you, thank you very much,” said Mary, cordially.

And in a few minutes they rejoined Mrs Greville and the Misses Morpeth, the former fortunately too much taken up with a more recent occurrence to have any thought to spare for Mary’s misadventures.

“Fancy, my dear,” she began, “what an escape you have had! Mr Cheviott has just left us; he has been showing us the pictures himself. So *very* kind and attentive! You have only just missed him.”

“How fortunate for me!” said Mary, dryly.

It was quite dark when they got back to Uxley, and the next morning Mr Western came over as arranged, and took Mary home again the same afternoon.

It seemed to her as if she had been away weeks or months instead of days. She was glad to be home again, and yet now, if she could have deferred her return, she would. Lilias asked her no questions, but still, either in Mary’s imagination or in fact, there was a tacit disappointment in her manner when she found Mary had nothing to tell.

“*I* was hopeful of some good result from what I had in my head,” thought Mary, “and Lily is so quick, though she had not the least idea of my doing such a wild thing. I fancy she knew by instinct that I *was* hopeful.”

“You did not hear anything of those people—the Romary people, I mean?” asked Lilias, at last, timidly, but with a sudden rush of colour into her face, which made Mary feel inclined to cry. It was about two days after she had come back.

“Yes,” she replied, “I did. I could not help hearing a good deal about them; they seem the staple subject of conversation in the neighbourhood.”

“About Captain Beverley—did you hear anything about him?” said Lilias, hastily. “Mary, you are concealing

something from me—he is going to be married?”

“No, indeed. I heard nothing of that sort, Lily, I assure you. If I had, I would have told you about it at once; you know it is not my way to shirk such things—I am rather over-hasty the other way, I fear,” said Mary, with a little sigh. “And, indeed, I think I should almost have been *glad* to hear it. It would have been a stab and done with.”

“Mary, you are awfully hard,” said Lilias. Her voice was low and quivering.

“Hard!” repeated Mary, with amazement in her tone. *She* hard to *Lilias*! What fearful injustice—for a moment she felt too staggered to speak—how *could* Lilias misjudge her so? What a world it must be where such near friends could make such mistakes! Had *she* ever so misjudged any one? And, by an association of ideas which she herself could not have explained, her mind suddenly reverted to that never-to-be-forgotten scene in the Romary library, and the look on Mr Cheviott’s face which she had determined *not* to recognise as one of pain. Was it possible that in the cruel, almost insulting things she had said to him she had been influenced by some utter misjudgment of *his* motives?—was it possible that they were good and pure and unselfish?—could his cousin be a bad man, from whom he was chivalrously protecting Lilias’s innocence and inexperience? No, that was impossible. No man with Arthur’s honest eyes *could* be a bad man; but, if not this, what other motive could Mr Cheviott have that was not a mean and selfish one? Mary felt faint and giddy as these thoughts crowded upon her; the mere far-off suggestion of the tremendous injustice she might have done him, a suggestion born of the sharp pain of Lilias’s words to herself, seemed to confuse and stun her; all her ideas lost their proportion; all the data upon which her late actions and train of thought had been based suddenly failed her. And so swiftly had her mind travelled away from what had first started these misgivings that Lilias had spoken once or twice, in reply to her ejaculation, before the sense of her words reached her brain.

“Mary, Mary, listen to me. Don’t look so white and miserable,” Lilias was beseeching her. “I didn’t mean hard to *me*—I don’t even exactly mean hard to *him*—I mean hard about the whole, about the way it affects me. You don’t understand, and I don’t want you to think me a sentimental fool, but can’t you understand a little? Nothing would be so frightful to me as to have my faith in him destroyed, and, don’t you see, if it could be proved to me that he had been trifling with me, deceiving me, in fact—that all the time he had been caring for some one else more than for me—don’t you see how frightful it would be for me? It would be a stab indeed, but a stab that would kill the best part of me—all my faith and trust, Mary, do you see?”

“Yes,” said Mary, sadly, “I see.”

And she saw more—she saw that, for the sake of Lilias’s health and peace of mind, it was time that something should be done.

“She will grow morbid about it, and it will kill her youth and happiness, if not herself,” thought Mary. “I suppose it is on account of the isolated life we have had that this has taken such a terribly deep hold of her. For, after all, perhaps it is *possible* that, without being actually a bad, cruel man, Captain Beverley was not so much in earnest as she thought. *I* should call him a bad, cruel man, but I suppose the world would not—the world of which we know so little, as Mr Cheviott kindly reminded me! But what can I do for Lily?”

“Mary,” said Lilias, “what are you thinking about?”

“I am thinking that something must be done for you,” said Mary. “Lilias, I think it would be better for you to go away from home for a while.”

“Yes,” said Lilias. “I am almost beginning to think so myself. But I don’t see how to manage it, unless I advertise as a governess. We seem to have no friends.”

“By-the-bye,” said Mary, “that reminds me. Those Miss Morpeths at Uxley were talking about some Brookes who they think must be cousins of mother. I meant to have asked her about them, but I forgot.”

“They’re not likely to be much good to us, even if they are cousins of ours,” said Lilias, half bitterly. “None of mother’s rich relations have troubled themselves about her.”

And no more was said about the possible cousins just then.

A few days passed. Mary got back into home ways, from which even so short an absence as that of her visit to Uxley seemed to have separated her, and all was much as it had been before—much as it had been before that Sunday, now more than six months ago, when the little party of strangers had disturbed the equanimity of the Hathercourt congregation—before the still more fatal afternoon when Arthur Beverley had come over to see the Rector on business, and in his absence had stayed to tea with his wife and daughters in the Rectory drawing-room—much the same, but oh, how different! thought Lilias, wearily, as she tried her best to look as cheerful as of old—to take the same interest in daily life and its occurrences, which to a healthy mind is never wanting, however monotonous the daily life may be. She succeeded to some extent; she made herself believe that, at least, her trials were kept to herself, and allowed to shadow no other’s horizon. But she was mistaken. Her mother began to hope her child was “getting over it;” her father, who had but dimly suspected that anything was wrong, felt dimly relieved to hear her laugh, and joke, and tease as usual again; Alexa and Josey had their own private confabulations on the subject, deciding that either their eldest sister was a heartless flirt, or that, “between themselves, you know,” everything was satisfactorily arranged, though for some mysterious reason for a time to be kept secret, as any way it was clearly to be seen “that Lily was not in low spirits.” Only Mary, ignorant as she was and professed herself to be of all such misfortunes as are involved by falling in or out of love, was undeceived.

“Lilias is trying her best, but she is breaking her heart all the same,” she said to herself. “If only I could get her away for a while among new people and new scenes, there might be a chance for her.”

In the end it was kind Mrs Greville again who came to the rescue, and that, to Mary's great relief, without any intervention of hers. Her one piece of concealment from Lilias had cost her dear; she had no wish to try again any independent action. What Mrs Greville did or did not suspect, Mary could not tell, but had their kindly friend known all, she could not have acted with greater consideration and tact. She was going to town for a fortnight, she wrote, most unexpectedly, to consult a famous doctor about some new symptoms in her husband's chronic complaint. She was hopeful, yet fearful of the result. Should it be unfavourable, she would find it hard to "keep up" before her husband, away from home and all her friends. Would Mrs Western spare one of the girls to go with them and not exactly limit the time of her absence, as *in case* the doctor thought well of Mr Greville they might go on to Hastings, or somewhere for a month? Lilias, or Mary either, would be of the greatest comfort to her, but if she might venture to say so—Mary was too sensible to be offended—she would, *if anything*, prefer Lilias. She was such a special favourite of Mr Greville, and it was he, of course, who was to be the one most considered just now.

"Well, girls?" said Mrs Western, inquiringly, for there was silence when Mrs Greville's note was first read in the conclave of three. Silence on Lilias's part of mingled relief and repugnance. On Mary's part the silence of caution, of fear lest her intense anxiety that Lilias should fall in with Mrs Greville's proposal should injure its own cause by impulsive advocacy. "Well girls?"

"I think Mary had better go," said Lilias.

"But you see what Mrs Greville says about preferring you," suggested Mrs Western, gently, with some faint, instinctive notion of what was passing in her second daughter's heart.

"Yes, but that's rubbish," said Lilias, the colour rising slightly in her cheeks. "Mr Greville likes us both. It is only that I chatter more than Mary, and, like all quiet, indolent men, he likes to be amused with the least possible trouble to himself. Mary is not so amusing, perhaps, because there is generally a large sprinkling of sense in her remarks, and even when, on rare occasions, she mixes it up with nonsense it is more fatiguing to separate the two than to take it all in comfortably, as pure, unadulterated nonsense like mine."

"You are certainly giving us a specimen of it just now," said Mary, parenthetically. "But seriously, mamma," she went on, "I think we should consider what Mrs Greville says about preferring Lilias. I am speaking *partly* selfishly, for though I should have liked it well enough at another time, just now I should not like it at all. It would unsettle me altogether—I have just got all the things I want to do before the summer nicely arranged. Don't be vexed with me or think me very selfish, Lilias," for her sister was regarding her with an expression she did not quite understand.

To her surprise, Lilias, by way of answer, threw her arms around her and hugged her violently.

"Think you selfish! Mother just listen to her," she exclaimed. "Fancy me thinking Mary selfish." Then she hugged her again, and Mary *felt* there were tears in her eyes. "Selfish indeed! No, but I wouldn't say as much for your truthfulness, you little humbug! Do you think I don't see through all your unselfish story-telling," she added in a lower voice.

"Then don't disappoint me," whispered Mary, and when at last she disengaged herself from Lilias's embrace, she said aloud, quietly indeed, but firmly enough to carry her purpose, "it is not story-telling, it is *true*. I should not, in the very least degree, enjoy leaving home just now. And, what is more, I just *won't* go, so, dear friends, you see my mind's made up."

And so it was settled, to be followed as was inevitable with these girls when any scheme of the kind was in prospect, by a solemn and momentous discussion as to ways and means—in other words, as to dresses and bonnets and ribbons! But Lilias brightened up wonderfully under the impetus of this discussion, and seemed, for the time, so like her old self that Mary began to take heart about her, and to hope everything from the change in prospect.

Chapter Eighteen.

What Happened in the Primrose Lane.

> "Wee mortal wights whose lives and fortunes bee
> To common accidents still open layd,
> Are bownd with commun bond of frailtee
> To succour wretched wights..."
>
> *Faery Queen*.

It was within a few days of Lilian's going. The bustle of preparation—of "doing up" the two white muslin evening dresses, the joint property of herself and Mary, but which Mary insisted on resigning to her sister; of "turning" the black silk skirt which had already done good service; and—most important of all—the cutting out and making the one new dress which the family finances had been able to afford—all was over. Everything was ready, and only not packed because it was a pity to crush the garments prematurely. Lilias's temporary excitement, now that there was nothing more to do, was already on the wane. She was gentleness and sweetness itself, but with a look in her eyes that Mary did not like to see, and a clingingness in her manner which made both mother and sister wish that the day for her going were actually come and the parting, such as it was, fairly over.

It was a lovely afternoon—spring was really coming, or thinking of it anyway.

"The birds are talking about their new houses, aren't they, Mary?" said little Francie, as she trotted along beside her sister. They had walked part of the way to Withenden with Lilias and Josey, who were bent on an expedition to the

one village shop in quest of some wool for their father's next winter socks, the knitting of which was to be Lilias's "fancy work" while away from home. Mary had been glad when the idea struck Lilias, as her practical belief in the efficacy of a good long walk for low spirits of every kind was great.

"I wish I could go with you," she had said to Lily, "but some one must take Francie out, and Alexa and Josey always get into scrapes unless one of us is with them. You had better take Josey, she is always ready for a long walk, and Alexa may potter about the garden with mother, just what she likes."

"Very well," said Lilias, "but you and Francie might come part of the way with us. Josey is considerably more agreeable out of doors than in the house, but two hours and a half of her, unalloyed, is about as much as I can stand. I am tired, Mary, horribly tired—'not in my feet,' as Francie says, but in my own self; and oh, I'm so sorry to have been such a plague to you all this time—it makes me feel as if I *couldn't* go away."

Her voice was dangerously tremulous, and of all things Mary dreaded a break-down, now at the last.

"Now, Lilias," she said, in what Lilias sometimes called her "make-up-your-mind-to-it" tone, "you are not to begin talking rubbish. Do you hear, child? If you want to please me, there's just one thing to do—go away with Mrs Greville and try to enjoy yourself. This will be the most unselfish thing you can do; and even if you feel at first as if you couldn't enjoy yourself, it will come—you'll see if it doesn't. Now let us set off at once, or you and Josey will not be back by tea-time."

They skirted the Balner woods in going, but coming home, Mary, not being pressed for time, yielded to Francie's entreaty that they might choose the primrose lane, thereby saving herself a good deal of future discussion, as nothing but "ocular demonstration" would convince the child that there might not be a few primroses out, "just two or three, perhaps, as it was such a werry fine day."

"But it is six weeks from now, at least, before they ever come out, Francie, dear," said Mary, for the twentieth time; "they are not like little boys and girls, you see, who are there in the house all ready to come out the minute the sun shines and the fine weather comes. The primroses have all their growing to do first, and they need the sun and the spring rain to help them to grow, every year."

"But is them never the same primroses?" said Francie, in some perplexity. "Is them new every year—never the same?"

"No," said Mary, "they are never the same."

But as she said the words their sound struck her. "Never the same," nay, indeed, say rather, "ever the same," she thought. "'Pale primroses,' as pretty Perdita called them three hundred years ago! They must have looked up in our great-great-*great*-grandmothers' faces just as they do in ours now—just as they will, centuries hence, smile at the Francies that will be looking for them then. What a strange world it is! Ever the same and never the same, over and over again."

"What are you thinking about, Mary? Tell me," said Francie.

"Nothing you would understand, dear," Mary was saying, when the child interrupted her.

"Mary," she said, "I hear such a funny noise, don't you? It's like something going *very* fast—oh! Mary, couldn't it be one of the wild bulls running after us?"

Francie grew white with fear. Mary, hastily assuring her it could not be a wild bull, stood still to listen. Yes, Francie was right—there certainly was a sound to be heard of something rapidly nearing them, and the sound somehow made Mary's heart beat faster.

"It can only be a horse," she said; "I dare say its nothing wrong."

But her face and actions belied her words. There was a gate close by the spot where they stood. Mary unlatched it, and drew Francie within its shelter. Not a minute too soon—the rushing, tearing sound grew nearer and nearer, but a turn in the lane hid the cause of it till close upon them.

Then—"Oh! Mary," cried Francie, "it's a horse that's runned away—and look, Mary, there's a lady on it. Oh! I'm sure she will be tumbled off," and Francie burst out sobbing with mingled fear, pity, and excitement.

It was too true—though it all seemed to Mary to pass in an instantaneous flash—the horse dashed past the gate—how glad Mary afterwards felt that she had placed herself and her little sister too far out of sight for their presence to have been the cause of what happened—flew down the lane till an open gate and a cart just coming out of a field seemed to bring its terror to a climax. It swerved suddenly, how or why exactly no one could tell, and the slight, swaying figure in the saddle was seen to fall—heavily, lifelessly to the ground—but, thank Heaven, thought Mary, clear of the stirrup. There was not added to the spectacle, terrible enough as it was, the unspeakable horror of a prostrate figure dragged along the ground—of a fair face battered beyond recognition upon the stones.

No one seemed to be at hand to give any assistance—the horse continued for a while his headlong course down the lane; then, after the manner of its kind, having done all the mischief it could, stopped short, and in a few minutes was quietly nibbling the grass as if nothing had happened.

But Mary gave little attention to the horse, her whole thoughts flew to the motionless figure lying there in a dark heap, where it had been thrown—so still, so dreadfully still—that was all that Mary could distinguish, as, overcoming the first natural but selfish instinct which would have made her shrink away from a sight possibly of horror, certainly of sadness, she ran down the lane, closely followed by little Francie, who would not be left behind.

“Is the poor lady killed, Mary, does you think?” she said, when her sister had stooped to examine the face half hidden by the long habit skirt which had dropped over it in the fall.

“Run back, Francie. Stay over there by the gate, and be sure to tell me if you see any one coming. No, I don’t think she’s killed, but she’s very badly hurt, I fear,” said Mary, “and, oh, Francie, I know who she is. She’s that pretty lady that came to church that Sunday—do you remember? Mr Cheviott’s sister,” she murmured to herself. “How strange!”

Francie had already run off to her post of observation. Mary, afraid though she was of further complicating the unknown injury by anything she might ignorantly do to help poor Alys, yet could not bear to see the fair head lying on the careless ground. Slowly and cautiously she raised it on to her own knee, supporting the girl’s shoulder with one arm, while with the other she tenderly wiped away the dust and grass stains disfiguring the pallid cheek. The girl’s eyes were closed, to all appearances she was still perfectly unconscious, but in the moving, carefully though it was done, a slight spasm of pain contracted her features for a moment. Mary shivered at the sight.

“It may be her spine that is injured,” she thought to herself, “her arms are not broken, and I don’t think her head is hurt. Oh dear, oh dear, if only some one would come! If I had some water, or some *eau de cologne*, or anything—I don’t think I shall ever again laugh at Alexa for carrying about a scent-bottle in her pocket. Francie,” she called, softly. Francie was beside her in a moment.

“Nobody’s coming,” she whispered. “Oh, Mary, couldn’t I run home and fetch somebody? The horse wouldn’t run after me, would it?” with a little shudder of fright.

“You good little girl,” said Mary, approvingly. “No, dear, I don’t think you could run home. It is too far for you to go alone. But let me see—there must be some cottage or farm-house close to—Hilyar’s cottages are quite half a mile off—”

“Captain Bebberly lived near here, ’afore he wented away,” suggested Francie. “I came this way to his house once.”

“Of course,” exclaimed Mary, in a tone of relief, “the back way to the Edge Farm cannot be a quarter of a mile off. Look, Francie, dear, run back to the lane, and run on about as far as you can see from this gate. Then you’ll see another gate on your left—the other side from this—that gate will take you into a field which you must cross, and go through a stile, and *then* you’ll see Captain Beverley’s,”—even now she seemed to shrink a little from pronouncing the name—“Captain Beverley’s house. Go in and tell the first person you meet to come as quick as he can, and bring some water. Tell him it is Miss Cheviott that is hurt, and tell him where we are. Quick, darling, as quick as ever you can.”

Francie lingered for one instant.

“There won’t be none dogs, will there, Mary?” she said, her voice trembling a little.

“I think not,” said Mary. “And if there are, Francie, you must ask God not to let them hurt you. That’s what being brave means, dear.”

She said it, feeling that all her own nerve and bravery were being called for. If only she could have run across the fields with Francie—but to sit here, able to do nothing, watching the terrible stillness of the girl’s face—

It seemed hours before there came any change. At last a faint, gasping sigh reached Mary’s ears—a slight, very slight quiver ran through the form she held so tenderly, and Alys Cheviott opened her eyes—opened them, alas! but to close them again with a quick consciousness of pain.

“My back,” she whispered—“oh, my back! what have I done to it? Oh!”

Then she lay quiet for a minute or two, Mary not daring to move or speak—scarcely to breathe, till again Miss Cheviott opened her eyes.

“Where am I?” she said. “What has happened? Who is holding me? Laurence, is it you? I cannot move; it hurts me so. Where is Gypsy?”

“Gypsy is eating grass very comfortably in the lane,” said Mary, trying to speak in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone. “It is I that am holding you, Miss Cheviott—I, Mary Western. Gypsy was very naughty; she threw you off, and I was just a little way behind and saw you.”

“Gypsy threw me off,” repeated Alys, slowly. “Oh, yes, I remember; she ran away.” A little shudder ran through her. “It is my own fault. Laurence said she was too fresh for me to-day. And you are Miss Western—how strange!”

“*Mary* Western,” the girl corrected.

“Yes, I know; I know your voice. How strange it should be you! I am very thankful. How long might I not have lain here without any one knowing? But my back—oh! Mary, what can I have done to my back?”

“I hope it is only strained, or bruised, perhaps,” said Mary, very gently, touched by Miss Cheviott’s unconscious use of her first name. “I have sent to the farm—Edge Farm—your cousin’s house, you know, for help; we are close to it.”

“Oh, yes, I know. I wanted to see it, and I thought a long ride would take it out of Gypsy. Poor Arthur, how sorry he will be if I am badly hurt!”

Something in her words struck Mary. Could it be true, then, that Captain Beverley was engaged to this girl? But what a time for such speculations! Mary checked herself, with a feeling almost of horror.

“What can have become of Thwaites? My groom, I mean,” said Alys, suddenly. “He was close behind me when Gypsy started off.”

“He must have taken a wrong turn,” said Mary. “Most likely he dared not follow too close, and must have lost sight of you. I wish some one would come. Do you think I could hold you more easily anyhow?”

“Oh, no; no, thank you, I mean,” said Alys, nervously. “Don’t move; that’s the only thing you can do for me. Don’t move the very least, *please*. Miss Western.”

“I won’t, dear, not the very least,” said Mary, soothingly. “And she is seven miles from home,” she added to herself, in consternation.

Alys’s eyes closed again, and she grew so white that Mary feared she was going to faint.

“What *shall* I do?” she thought, almost in despair, when, to her indescribable relief, a sound of approaching footsteps made itself heard. She dared not even turn her head to see whose they were, but soon the new-comers stood before her. They were two men from the farm, one, the bailiff, the choice of whom had led to Arthur’s first introduction at the Rectory, a kindly middle-aged man, who looked down on the sad little group before him with fatherly concern.

“Shall I try to lift the young lady, do you think, miss?” he whispered to Mary, but Alys caught the words.

“No, no,” she moaned, “don’t move me. Whatever you do, don’t move me.”

It seemed to Mary that her head was beginning to wander. She glanced up at the bailiff in perplexity.

“She must be moved, miss,” he replied, with decision, in answer to her unspoken question, “and the longer we wait the fainter-like she’ll get. Not to speak of catching rheumatics from the damp, which would be making a bad job a worser, for sure.”

Mary bent her face over Alys’s.

“Dear Miss Cheviott—Alys,” she whispered, “I fear we *must* move you.”

Alys shivered, but resisted no longer.

“Hold my hand, then—all the way,” she murmured, without opening her eyes.

“I can carry her quite as easy as on a shutter, and it’s less moving in the end. My missus’ll have the downstairs bed all ready,” said the bailiff, encouragingly. “But first, miss, we brought a drop of brandy, as the Captain left, and some water. Will you please try for to get her to swallow a spoonful before we move her, poor lamb?”

With some difficulty Mary succeeded. Then came the lifting her, a terrible business, notwithstanding the infinite tenderness of the stalwart bailiff. And all along the lane, many times Mary would have thought her unconscious of all that was passing, but for the convulsive pressure of the little hand that clung to hers so helplessly.

Half way up the lane the sad little *cortège* was reinforced by Francie, still out of breath, and with great pity shining out of her big blue eyes, and further on still by. Thwaites, leading his own horse and naughty Gypsy, now perfectly subdued and serene.

“He must go for a doctor,” said Mary, at once, when she caught sight of him. “Tell him so,” she added, turning to the young farm servant who had accompanied the bailiff. “Let me see—yes, Mr Brandreth at Withenden is the nearest.”

“That’s him as we always have at the Hall,” said Thwaites, catching the words; and apparently thankful to be told what to do, he gave over Gypsy to the young man’s charge, and mounting his own horse, was off in a moment.

The “down-stairs bed” was ready, and clean and comfortable enough to make Mary rejoice that the accident had not happened in a still more isolated part of the country.

“You are very brave,” she whispered, when at last the agony of the movement was over, and Alys, with death-white cheeks and quivering lips, was laid in the easiest position their ignorance could achieve.

A faint smile flickered over the poor girl’s face.

“Am I?” she whispered. “I am so glad. Please tell Laurence—and—Mary, kiss me, please. Somehow I have always wanted to love you both—her too—she is so pretty,” she murmured, softly. “And fancy my being in Arthur’s house like this.”

Then for a while she lay silent, and Mary’s thoughts turned to her own position. What should she do? She was most anxious to get home as soon as possible; it was already past Francie’s tea-time, and before long her mother would be getting alarmed. Besides, how more than disagreeable it would be for her to meet Mr Cheviott again! How could she tell how he might look upon her presence beside his sister, and what she had done to help poor Alys?

She got up from her seat by the bed-side, and with soft steps moved towards the door. But, faint as it was, the sound roused Alys.

“Where are you going, Miss Western?” she said.—“Oh, you are not going away from me are you? You will not leave me alone here—oh, do at least wait till the doctor comes, and hear what he says.”

Mary felt that it would be barbarous to refuse.

"No," she replied, "I won't go away if you would like me to stay; I will only just send a note to my mother to tell her where I am, otherwise she will wonder what has become of us. I will get Mrs Wills to send a man with my little sister and the note to mamma."

"Oh, yes, your little sister—I remember seeing her standing by," said Alys, dreamily; "I am so sorry to trouble you so. How good you are! Please come and sit beside me. Couldn't Mrs Wills get you some tea?"

"Would *you* like some?" said Mary, eagerly catching at anything to break the weary suspense of waiting for the doctor's arrival.

"I am very thirsty—yes, I think I should," said Alys, faintly; so Mary hurried off to write her note, and bespeak some tea, though when ready, it was hard work to get Alys to swallow it. She seemed to shrink from the slightest movement with increasing and indescribable terror.

"It will be impossible to move her to Romary," thought Mary with dismay. "What will be done? I wonder if the groom will have the sense to fetch Mr Cheviott as well as the doctor? I almost wish he *would* come now—it seems such a responsibility. And if only the doctor would come!"

After all, Dr Brandreth came much sooner than could reasonably have been expected, long as the hour and a half or so of waiting seemed to Mary, for Thwaites met him on the way to Withenden. Mary had just gone, at the doctor's request, to borrow a pair of scissors from Mrs Wills, to cut off poor Alys's riding habit, so as to save her all possible suffering, when, passing the open front door on her return, the sound of wheels suddenly stopping at the gate made her pause. Yes, it was Mr Cheviott. Mary hesitated. What should she do? She had no time to decide. Mr Cheviott was at the door before she had thoroughly taken in his arrival.

Whether he was prepared to find her there or not, she could not tell. His face certainly expressed no surprise, but then, again, it expressed nothing, and her first quick instinct of pity and concern for the terrible anxiety he must be enduring died suddenly away. Never had she seen his face harder or colder—"more insolently arrogant," she said to herself, "as if he were indignant that accidents should happen to any one belonging to *him* as well as to other poor human beings."

Her indignation calmed her trepidation, and she stood her ground coolly. Mr Cheviott raised his hat. Mary bowed.

"May I ask—" he began. "I suppose," he went on, "it is here Miss Cheviott is?"

"Yes," said Mary, but not moving aside so as to let him pass. "She is here. The doctor is with her?"

"But I can go in?" he exclaimed, with unmistakable eagerness and anxiety in his tone now. "She is surely not very seriously injured—not—not—"

His lips grew white, and then instantly a dark red flush rose to his brow, as if ashamed of any signs of agitation. Mary was somewhat mollified.

"I think," she said, gently, "I had better tell her first that you have come, to prevent her being startled. She is quite conscious," she added, "and I *hope* it is nothing very serious, but the doctor has not said anything yet. There are no bones broken—it is her back she complains of."

"Her back," repeated Mr Cheviott, the red flush fading away to a sallow whiteness—"her back! Good God, I trust not!"

"It may be only severely bruised," said Mary, finding herself, despite her determination, already assuming the *rôle* of comforter. "I will tell her you are here if you will wait a moment." And when, in a minute or two, Mr Cheviott was summoned to his sister, to his astonishment it was to find her supported in Mary's arms, while Dr Brandreth was skilfully disentangling the wisps of muddy cloth from the poor girl's form.

"That will do—beautifully," he was saying. "Now, Miss Mary, lift her the least atom on the right side—*that* won't hurt you, my dear. Good-day, Mr Cheviott," for the first time noticing his presence. "A nice piece of work this, isn't it? Still not so bad as it might have been, by a long way."

"Laurence," said Alys, faintly, "it was all my own fault. You said Gypsy was too fresh."

"Hush, my darling. Never say any more about that part of it," said Mr Cheviott, in tones that Mary could scarcely have believed were his.

"Kiss me, and say you forgive me, then, and I won't," entreated Alys.

He could not refuse, even though in stooping to kiss her he could not avoid his head's brushing the sleeve of Mary's dress. But motionless as she sat, he was conscious, through the thick grey tweed, of a sort of thrill of shrinking—an instinctive withdrawal from his slightest touch.

"How that girl must hate me," he could not help thinking, even then.

"She has been *so* good and kind," whispered Alys. "Laurence, you will thank her, won't you?"

Chapter Nineteen.

Coals of Fire.

Benedick.—“Fair Beatrice, I thank you for your pains.”
Beatrice.—“I took no more pains for those thanks than you took pains to thank me.”
Much Ado about Nothing.

An hour or so later on this eventful afternoon—or evening, rather, it was fast growing dark—a cloaked and hooded figure was to be seen hastening along the lane which was the shortest way from Hathercourt Rectory to the Edge Farm. The figure had good need to be cloaked and hooded, in the waterproof sense of the term, and goloshed too, for the beautiful spring day had ended in, superficially speaking, very unbeautiful rain. It came pouring down—the footpath was a mass of mud already, and before long threatened to be indistinguishable from the road. Lilias—for it was she—had begun by picking her steps, but soon gave this up in despair. It was all she could do to get on at all, laden as she was with a rather cumbersome parcel under her cloak. But her step nevertheless was light and buoyant, and her face and eyes, had there been any one there to see them, or any light to see them by, would have told of eagerness and some excitement, instead of fatigue and depression, as, taking into consideration her seven miles’ walk to Withenden and back, and her present uncomfortable surroundings, might not unreasonably have been expected.

“It is horrible of me—I don’t understand myself,” she said, suddenly, aloud. Then she hurried on faster than before, pursuing, nevertheless, the same train of thought. “Why should I feel more buoyant and hopeful than I have done for long, just when such a terrible thing—or what may prove such a terrible thing—has happened to that poor girl? I *know* I am sorry for her—and even if I were not, I should be sorry to think how it will grieve Arthur; but yet—ah, yes, it is just the feeling of having, as it were, something to do with him again—of perhaps hearing him spoken of and of seeing the house where he was so lately. His own house?”

She had never been inside the farm-house. Often they had passed it in their walks with Arthur, and more than once he had tried to persuade the Rectory family to organise some sort of picnic party to his bachelor quarters; but to this Mrs Western had so decidedly objected that the project had never been fulfilled. So Lilias was rather in the dark, mentally as well as physically, as to the exact approach to the front door, if front door there was to a house whose three entrances were all much on a par, and in the end she hit upon the one which Mrs Wills decidedly considered the back door. It had the advantage, however, in the present state of the weather, of being near the kitchen, so her rap was answered without delay.

“My sister is still here, is she not? Miss Western—Miss Mary Western, I mean,” she explained, in reply to Mrs Wills’s mute look of bewildered inquiry.

“Oh, yes, miss, to be sure she is, and what we should have done without her I don’t know, and what we shall do now if she—”

She was interrupted.

“Shut that door, if you please, Mrs Wills,” a man’s voice called out, “it sets all the other doors in the house rattling,” and from an inner room Mr Cheviott came out to enforce his directions. He had almost shut the door in Lilias’s face before he perceived her. Then—“I beg your pardon,” he said instinctively, but, dim as the light was, Lilias felt certain he had recognised her.

“He will think he is going to have the whole Western family down upon him,” she thought, with a smile. Then she came forward a little.

“I am Miss Western,” she said, calmly, and something in the voice, a certain cheery yet half-defiant ring, reminded her hearer of Mary—he had never come into personal contact with Lilias before. “I have come for my sister—it was too stormy for my mother to come out, but she was getting uneasy, and my little sister could not quite explain. I hope Miss Cheviott is not seriously hurt?”

“Thank you,” he replied, “we can hardly tell. Will you be so good as to come in, and I will tell your sister you are here.”

Lilias came in, and depositing her parcel—bundle, rather—on the table, stood, nothing loth, beside the welcome blaze of the kitchen fire.

“How queer it is,” she thought, “Mary seems quite established here! In the very heart of the enemy’s camp, according to *her* opinion, at least, for she has always persisted that Mr Cheviott’s interference was to be blamed for it all. I don’t think it was. Arthur would not be so fond of him if he were that sort of man, and besides,” with an unconscious slight elevation of her pretty head, “*he* is not the sort of man to be interfered with.”

Then she glanced round the kitchen—a pleasant, old-fashioned farm-house kitchen, not unpicturesque as seen in the flickering firelight, alternately lighting up and hiding the dark rafters and the quaintly-carved oak settle, where for so many years old John Birley had sat and smoked his pipe, and mused on the fallen fortunes of his house. The last of the Hathercourt Beverleys, Mawde’s great-great-grandson, to have come down to the bent, blue-stockinged old farmer, whose figure, hobbling into church, Lilias had been familiar with ever since she could remember.

“Fancy Mawde Beverley, beautiful and refined as she almost certainly was—the Maynes of Southcote are said to have been very beautiful—*fancy* her looking forward along the centuries to that old rough man as one of her great-grandchildren!” thought Lilias. “If she could have looked forward to *Arthur*—what a difference! Life is a very queer thing—queer and sad too, I suppose. Still I am glad to be alive, and to take my chance of the goods and bads.”

Unconsciously to herself, hope was re-asserting itself in Lilias’s heart; she could not have spoken or felt thus a few days previously.

Her soliloquy was soon interrupted.

"Lily," exclaimed a voice behind her, and turning round Lilias saw Mary entering the kitchen. "I could hardly believe Mr Cheviott when he said you were here," Mary went on. "And all alone, too! Lily, I do believe he thinks us all half mad!" She gave a little laugh, but checked it suddenly.

Lilias looked at her in surprise.

"Why should he?" she said, quickly. "I don't see anything particularly mad in my coming down to look after you. I am your elder sister. Mother could not come. I don't think you are quite fair on that man, Mary."

"Long may you think so," said Mary, sarcastically.

Lilias's face flushed.

"Mary," she said, nervously, "you don't mean that—that there is anything indelicate in my coming here, to this house? It did not strike me so, or—"

"Indelicate!—no, of course not. It is very, very good of you to have come," said Mary, warmly; "only you see, I was so astonished."

"But what were you intending?—what were you going to do?" said Lilias. "You can't stay here all night without clothes, and you sent no message. We didn't know what to think."

"No," said Mary, "I was just beginning to wonder what I *should* do. At first, you see, I was so taken up about that poor girl I could think of nothing else."

"But she is not badly hurt," interrupted Lilias; "you were laughing a minute ago; you don't seem in bad spirits."

"I don't know," said Mary, her voice saddening. "I think I was laughing out of a sort of nervousness. I really do not know whether she is much hurt or not, and the doctor either would not or could not say. I suppose to-morrow will show. But, Lilias, what am I to do? She cannot bear the idea of my leaving her."

"Has she no maid with her?" asked Lilias.

"Yes, but she is a mere girl who has not been long with her. And the old housekeeper, Mrs Golding," continued Mary, with a curious tone in her voice, "has sprained her ankle or something and cannot leave Romary. It would seem almost barbarous for me to leave her—Alys—Miss Cheviott, I mean—to-night, any way."

"Don't then; there is no objection to your staying under the circumstances. Why do you look so unhappy about it?" said Lilias. "Is it all your dislike to her brother?"

"No," said Mary with some hesitation, "I don't think that would affect me one way or the other, and *as* her brother, he is some degrees less odious than I could have expected. No, my feeling is, *under the circumstances*, Lilias, an intense dislike to putting them—him, I should say, in a position of obligation to us. It is like forcing him to be civil to us."

"And why shouldn't he be?" said Lilias, "it is much better than forcing him to be uncivil to us, anyway."

"I don't know that it is," said Mary, smiling faintly. "I can't altogether explain my feeling, but it is most uncomfortable altogether. He hates my staying as much as I do, and yet I can't do a cruel thing. Why, I stayed up three nights in Bevan's cottage when Jessie broke her leg, without a second thought?"

"Of course you did," said Lilias, "and that's the right way to put it. Forget all about her being Mr Cheviott's sister, and just think of doing a kind thing. Mary, it's very queer, but somehow it seems as if my troubles had, in a sense, done you more harm than me. Your sympathy for me has made you morbid."

"Perhaps so," replied Mary. "And I dare say you are right. But all the same," she added, "I am not fond of 'coals of fire;' there always seems to me something mean in heaping them on."

"But suppose you have no choice between that and letting your enemy hunger?" asked Lilias. "But 'enemy' and 'coals of fire'—what absurdly strong expressions—only you *will* have it poor Mr Cheviott is the cause of it all."

"Poor Mr Cheviott!" repeated Mary.

"I must be going," said Lilias. "George is coming to meet me; he was to start just half an hour after me, so I cannot miss him, and I don't want your friend to offer to see me home, so good-night, dear. You'll find all you want in that bundle, and a good deal you won't want, for mother would put in all manner of things she thought might be useful for Miss Cheviott—from cotton-wool to a hop pillow, and no doubt you have got all you want from Romary."

"No," said Mary, "that maid has no sense, and forgot nearly everything she should have remembered. I am very glad of your *olla podrida*, Lily. Good-night, and thank you."

They kissed each other, and Lilias went out again into the rain and the darkness. Mary came back again into the kitchen, wishing, "dreadfully," as the children say, that she could have gone with her sister. She stood by the fire feeling dull and lonely, and, to tell the truth, though the Rectory was only a mile away, rather homesick! She was tired, too, which state of things has more to do with our moods of depression than we, in youth anyway, take into sufficient account.

"I must go back to Miss Cheviott," she said to herself; "how I do hope the doctor will think her better to-morrow. I

may as well see what Lily has brought. How kind poor mother is!"

She was turning to examine the bundle when the half-closed door was pushed open and Mr Cheviott came in.

"My sister seems to be falling asleep," he said. "Perhaps it will be as well if we leave her for a little. I promised her you would go back in half an hour, and in the mean time—why, has your sister gone, and alone?"

"My brother was to meet her, thank you," said Mary. "And you? Can you—are you really going to stay with Alys all night?"

"Yes," replied Mary. "My sister is going to explain to my mother."

"It is exceedingly kind of you," said Mr Cheviott; "but really—I feel ashamed."

"You need not feel so," said Mary, quietly. "I have—well not *often*, perhaps, but certainly several times—done far more for the poor people about here, and would do so again at any moment for *any* one in trouble."

Mr Cheviott was silent. Then his glance happening to fall on a basket standing unopened on a side table, he started and crossed the room to where it stood.

"I am forgetting," he said; and then, taking a small knife out of his pocket, he proceeded to cut the strings which fastened it, and to lift out its contents. It had all been a pious fiction of Alys's about fancying she would go to sleep better if left alone. She had been making herself unhappy about Mary's having had nothing to eat all the evening, and a basket of provisions having been sent from Romary by Mrs Golding, she had begged her brother to do the honours of the farm-house by unpacking them for Miss Western's benefit. She was full, too, of a secret wish that somehow or other a better understanding might be brought about between her brother and this girl, to whom from the first she had felt so strongly attracted.

"They are both so good," said Alys to herself, as she lay, far from sleeping, alas! poor girl, on Mrs Wills's best bed. "Laurence, of course, I do believe to be the noblest man in the world, except for his prejudices, and Mary, I can *feel*, is as good as gold. Why should they dislike each other so? For, though she tries to hide it from me, I can see that she dislikes him quite as much as he does her. And I am almost sure it was she whom I saw the other day coming down our avenue and crying. What can it all be? There is something I don't know about— at I'm sure of."

Then her thoughts took another flight.

"I wish Laurence would marry," she said to herself. "I wish he would marry just such a girl as Mary Western. How nice it would be for me! Or—supposing I don't get better from this accident—supposing I get worse and die—how dreadfully lonely Laurence will be! Poor Laurence—" and Alys's eyes filled with tears at the very thought.

In the mean time Mr Cheviott was unpacking the basket, and handily enough, as Mary, watching him with some curiosity, was forced to allow. All sorts of good things made their appearance—a cold ham, two chickens, a packet of tea, fine bread, wine, etc, etc. Mr Cheviott looked about him in perplexity.

"Are there no dishes of any kind to be had, I wonder?" he said, at last. "I don't like to disturb Mrs Wills—she is giving her husband his supper in the back kitchen, I see. Poor people, we have put them about quite enough already."

Mary could no longer stand aloof. She had felt half inclined to be nettled by Mr Cheviott's calm manner of ignoring what she could not but own to herself had been, in its inference at least, a rude speech.

"He still feels he *is* under an obligation to me," she had said to herself, hotly, "and therefore he won't resent anything I say. I don't agree with Lilias. I would much prefer his being uncivil, to civility of that patronising 'I couldn't-do-otherwise' kind." But the quiet good-nature with which he now turned to her for assistance appealed to something in Mary which could not but respond; the mixture of comicality too in the whole position was not without its attraction for her.

"You are not accustomed to kitchen arrangements," she said, smiling a little; "there are the dishes—lots of real willow pattern, 'all in a row'—just above your head. Stay, don't you see? I can reach them."

She stepped forward, put her foot lightly on a three-legged stool standing just under the shelf of dishes. But three-legged stools are cantankerous articles—they require to be treated with a certain consideration mysterious to the uninitiated. Mary, perhaps for the first time in her life, suffering from some amount of self-consciousness, gave no thought to the three-leggedness of the stool, and, light as was her spring upon it, it proved too much for its equilibrium; the stool tilted forward, and Mary would have fallen ignominiously—perhaps worse than ignominiously, for the kitchen floor was tiled with hard bricks—to the ground, had not Mr Cheviott darted forward just in time to catch her. Mary was exceedingly, ridiculously annoyed—she flushed scarlet, but before she had time to do more than spring back from Mr Cheviott's supporting arms, he said with a smile, in which, notwithstanding her mortification, Mary *could* not detect any approach to a sneer:

"*You* are not accustomed to three-legged stools, it is very evident, Miss Western. Thank you all the same for your kind intentions, however. I think *I* can reach the dishes—"

He stretched upwards and got down two or three. Mary, to hide her discomfort, was glad to help in the "dishing up" that ensued, till between them a very appetising sort of picnic supper was spread out on the table, and Mary, to tell the truth, being really hungry, did not refuse her host's invitation to fall to. He was hungry too, notwithstanding his anxiety, and for a few minutes the repast went on in silence. Then the ludicrousness of the scene struck Mary anew, more forcibly than ever. She could not restrain a smile, and Mr Cheviott, looking up at the moment, caught sight of it. He smiled too.

"What is it that amuses you so, Miss Western?" he asked.

"I don't know. Everything I think," she replied.

Mr Cheviott glanced round—then his eyes returned to the table.

"Mrs Golding has certainly sent us provisions enough to stand a siege," he said.

"I suppose she thinks you and Miss Cheviott would starve outright without her to take care of you," said Mary.

"Just exactly what she does think," he replied. "How do you—have you ever seen her?"

Mary wished her remark had remained unspoken, but judged it best to put a good face upon it. "Yes," she said, bravely, her traitorous cheeks flaming again, nevertheless; "I saw her that—that ill-starred day when I got locked up in your haunted room."

"Ah, yes, of course," said Mr Cheviott. Then he hesitated. "Why do you call it 'that ill-starred day'?" he asked, with some curiosity. "It did not do you any harm, did it? You were not so very frightened, surely?"

"I was *very* frightened—ridiculously frightened," replied Mary; "but I suppose my nerves, though I hate to speak or think of such things as nerves, were hardly in their usual order that day. I had had a good deal to try me. Yes, I was *very* frightened. When I heard your step approaching the door, I was nearly beside myself with fright." Here a half-smothered exclamation from Mr Cheviott, which, had it been from any one else, would have sounded to Mary marvellously like "poor child!" caused her to hesitate. She looked up at him—no, he was calmly filling his wine glass—she must have been mistaken. Still she hesitated, but only for a moment. Could she ever hope for such an opportunity again? Be brave, Mary, and make the most of it! "It was not on account of my fright that I so dislike the remembrance of that day," she went on, hurriedly. "It was because for the first—no, for the *second* time in my life, I felt that I had put myself into an utterly false, a most lowering position."

"How?" said Mr Cheviott, quickly. But there was nothing impertinent in the question—his tone of interest was too genuine.

"How?" repeated Mary; "don't you see how? If you do not, I am increasingly thankful to be able to tell you how—to show you how horrible it was for me to be forced into such a position. How? Why, of course, by re-entering a house where, only the day before, I had been so so—"

Mr Cheviott looked up, and again Mary saw the dark flush, not often seen there, rise to his forehead.

"So—so what? Do not speak hastily," he said. "Yet perhaps it is best to know the worst. You are not going to say 'so *insulted*'?"

"No," said Mary, "I was not. So *misjudged*, I think, was the word on my lips."

Mr Cheviott smiled—a bitter, sarcastic smile, it seemed to Mary, and perhaps she was right. It roused her to go on.

"I don't know why I should care—the matter can have less than no interest for you, as little as your opinion of it *ought* to have for me, and yet I do care—care exceedingly that you, Mr Cheviott, should, know that I was actually *forced* into going to your house that day—that nothing but the risk of possible disloyalty to others, to another, at least, made me give in to do so. But of course I never dreamed of my going there coming to your knowledge. I may be blunt and plain-spoken, but I am not capable of such coarse, obtrusive defiance as that would have been."

Mr Cheviott got up from his chair and walked about for a minute or two. "She thinks her position painful," he said to himself, "and to such a sensitive girl it must be so, I suppose. Nothing that I could say would ever make her believe the light in which what she did really appears to me. And still less can she know how infinitely, unspeakably more painful than hers *my* position is!" Then he came back to the table, and standing opposite Mary, he said, earnestly:

"I am glad you have told me what you have felt about it," he said; "but will you believe me, Miss Western, when I tell you that your coming again to Romary *never* struck me as you think. If I thought about it at all, it was to feel sure that, as you say was the case, you had been forced to come. It was not likely, was it," he went on, with considerable bitterness in his tone, "that I should imagine you would *wish* to come in my way after—well, never mind. It is enough for me to say," his voice resuming its earnest kindliness, "that nothing you could do would ever appear to me 'coarse, or obtrusive, or defiant,' or anything but brave and true and *womanly*."

Mary was mollified in spite of herself. But her prejudices and prepossessions were far too deep-rooted to have received more than a very passing shake. And alas! in her moment of triumph she forgot to be generous.

"I am unaccustomed to compliments," she said, coldly. "And I did not mean to ask you to *make allowance* for me. No doubt my disadvantages incline you to do so—just as you would have excused my ignorance of French the first time I spoke to you. You have misunderstood me, Mr Cheviott. I am not *ashamed* of what I did, I only regret the ignorance of the world which made me trust to not being misunderstood."

Again Mr Cheviott got up from his seat—this time more hastily.

"I wonder," he said, in a low, constrained voice,—"I wonder, Miss Western, if you are anxious to make me unsay some of the words I just now, in all honesty, applied to you?"

Mary did not reply.

"I have my wish," she said to herself, "I have succeeded in forcing him to be *un*civil."

And when her conscience smote her a little she silenced it by the old reflection that it was Lilias's enemy with whom she was doing battle. What question could there be of hurting the feelings of the man who had done his best to break her darling's heart?—who had even *avowed* his deliberate intention of destroying the happy prospects that might have been hers?

Chapter Twenty.

An Enforced Armistice.

> "... Yet he talks well
> But what care I for words? yet words do well
> When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
> ... But for my part
> I love him not, nor hate him not; and yet
> I have more cause to hate him than to love him."
>
> *As You Like It*.

There was not, however, much appearance of enmity by the following morning between these two thus strangely thrown together. All other feelings were for the time merged in increasing anxiety about poor Alys. For the night that followed her accident was a sadly restless and suffering one, and on the doctor's early visit the next day he detected feverish symptoms which clouded his usually cheery face.

"I can say no more as to what lasting—or, comparatively speaking, lasting—injuries she may have received," he said, in reply to Mr Cheviott's anxious inquiries. "What we have to do at present is to try to get her over the immediate effects of the shock. An attack of fever would certainly only complicate matters, and I cannot see that she *need* have it if only we can keep her perfectly quiet."

"Then there is no chance of moving her at present?" said her brother.

"It would be most unwise—bringing on the very risk I speak of," replied Mr Brandreth, decidedly. "She is comfortable enough—thanks to Miss Western."

"Yes," said Mr Cheviott, "thanks to Miss Western—but that is just the point."

"What?"

"I cannot expect Miss Western to turn into a sick-nurse to oblige absolute strangers—people who have no sort of claim upon her," replied Mr Cheviott, haughtily.

Mr Brandreth glanced at him with some curiosity.

("I wonder how much truth there was in those reports about Captain Beverley and Lilias Western," he said to himself.)

"She must be required at home—her time must be valuable—I cannot offer to *pay* her," continued Mr Cheviott, with increasing annoyance in his tone.

"They *might* be able to spare her. I believe they do keep a servant," said Mr Brandreth, dryly.

"Nonsense, Brandreth, don't joke about it," said Mr Cheviott, irritably. "You must understand what I mean—the extreme annoyance of having to put one's self under such an obligation to—to—"

"To people you know exceedingly little about, it is clear," said Mr Brandreth, severely. "If it be a right and Christian thing to do, Mr and Mrs Western will spare their daughter to nurse your sister, Mr Cheviott, just as readily as they spared her to nurse Jessie Bevan when she broke her leg."

"So Miss Western herself told me," observed Mr Cheviott.

"Ah, then you have come upon the subject?" said the doctor. "And evidently Miss Mary has rubbed his high mightiness the wrong way," he added to himself, with an inward chuckle.

"Not exactly. I never thought of having to ask her to stay longer than to-day. All that was said was when I was thanking, or trying to thank, her last night for what she had done, and I suppose I made a mess of it," said Mr Cheviott, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, I must be going," said Mr Brandreth, rising as he spoke.

"And what is to be done?" asked Mr Cheviott, helplessly. "Am *I* to ask her to stay?"

"You are certainly not to send her away," replied Mr Brandreth, greatly enjoying the situation; till, pitying Mr Cheviott's discomfort, he added, "I'll tell you what I'll do for you. I will tell Mary she is not to leave Miss Cheviott on any account till I see her again in the afternoon, and in the mean time I will see Mrs Western and explain it all to her, and let you know the result. I'll take it all on myself, if that will comfort you."

"You are very good," said Mr Cheviott, fervently.

"I am sure they will spare her for a fortnight or so—"

"A fortnight!" ejaculated Alys's brother, ruefully.

"*At least*," said Mr Brandreth, pitilessly, "and be thankful if the fortnight sees you out of the wood. Lilias Western is going away to-morrow, or the day after, but the mother's quite capable of managing without her daughters for once, and it will do Miss Alexa, the only fine lady of the family, no harm to have to exert herself a little more than usual."

"*Another* daughter," exclaimed Mr Cheviott. "Good Heavens! how many are there?"

"Five—and three sons. I've known them all ever since they were born."

"And the eldest one—Miss Western—the one here is the second, is she not?—the eldest is going away, you say?" inquired Mr Cheviott, indifferently, imagining he had quite succeeded in concealing the real curiosity he felt as to this new move in the enemy's camp.

"Yes," said Mr Brandreth, mischievously, "she is certainly going away, but where to I don't know. She is a beautiful girl—you have seen her?—I should not be surprised to hear of her marriage any day. There has been some amount of mystery about her of late—they are rather reserved people at all times—and I could not help wondering if there could be anything on the tapis. She seems in very good spirits, anyway."

"Ah, indeed!" said Mr Cheviott, carelessly. He hated gossip so devoutly that not even to satisfy the very great misgivings Mr Brandreth's chatter had aroused, would he encourage it further. "Then we shall see you again in the afternoon, and till then I am to do nothing about these arrangements?" he added, and Mr Brandreth felt himself dismissed.

It was not afternoon, however, but very decidedly evening before the doctor paid his second visit to the farm. In the mean time he had seen Mrs Western and explained to her the whole situation, and the result had been a note to Mary from her mother desiring her not to think of coming home that afternoon, as she had intended, and promising a visit from Lilias the following morning, when all should be discussed and settled. Concerning this note, however, Mary, not feeling it incumbent on her to do so, had made no communication to Mr Cheviott.

"It will be time enough to tell him what my mother says if he mentions the subject," she thought. "There is not much fear of his thinking I am staying here for the pleasure of his society."

And in her absorbing care of poor Alys, and anxious watching for abatement in the unfavourable symptoms of the morning, she really forgot, feeling satisfied that she was acting in accordance with her parents' wishes, any personal association of annoyance in her present surroundings.

Mr Cheviott marvelled somewhat at her calm taking-for-granted that she was to stay where she was; but, true to his agreement with Mr Brandreth, he said nothing. And the long, dull, rainy day passed, with no conversation between the two watchers but the matter-of-fact remarks or inquiries called forth by their occupation. By evening Alys's feverishness and excitability decreased, yielding evidently to Mary's scrupulous, fulfillment of the directions left with her.

"She has fallen asleep beautifully—she is as calm and comfortable as possible," the young nurse announced triumphantly to Mr Cheviott, as she came into the kitchen where he, manlike, sat smoking by way of soothing his anxiety.

He looked up. Mary stood in the door-way, her eyes sparkling, a bright smile on her face. Just then there could not have been two opinions about her beauty. Mr Cheviott rose quickly.

"You are a born sick-nurse, Miss Western," he said, heartily, speaking to her for almost the first time without a shadow of constraint in his voice. But, as he uttered the words, the smile faded out of Mary's face and a white, wearied look crept over it. She half made a step forward, and then caught at a chair standing close by, as if to save herself from falling.

"It's nothing," she exclaimed, recovering herself instantaneously. "Don't think I was going to faint. I *never* do such a thing. I was only giddy for an instant. I had been stooping over Al—Miss Cheviott's bed to see if she was really asleep."

"You have been doing a great deal too much, and I can never thank you enough—the truth is, I don't know how to thank you without annoying you by my clumsiness," said Mr Cheviott, remorsefully. But so genuinely cordial—almost boyish—was his way of speaking that Mary, even had she felt equal to warfare, could have found no cause of offence in his words.

"*Don't* thank me, then," she said with a smile, as she sat down in the old wooden arm-chair—the most comfortable the kitchen contained—which Mr Cheviott had drawn round for her to the side of the fire.

"I am too tired to discuss whether your 'clumsiness' or my 'touchiness'"—a slight cloud overspread her face at the word, but only for an instant—"is to blame for my ungraciousness yesterday. If Mr Brandreth pronounces your sister decidedly better when he comes to-morrow I shall be well thanked."

Mr Cheviott sat down without speaking, and looked at her. He could do so for the moment without risk of offence, for Mary's eyes were fixed on the fire, which danced and crackled up the chimney with fascinating loveliness. Her face, seen now in profile and without the distracting light of her brown eyes, whiter too than its wont, struck him newly by

its unusual refinement of lines and features.

“Where have those girls got their looks from?” he said to himself. “Alys was right that day that I was so cross to her in Paris, poor child; these Western girls might, as far as looks go, be *anybody*, to speak like a dressmaker! And where, too, have they learned such perfect self-possession and power of expressing themselves, brought up in the wilds of Hathercourt?”

“The fire looks as if it were bewitched,” said Mary, glancing up at last. “When we were children we always believed when it darted and crackled and *laughed*, as it were—just as it is now—we always thought fairies were playing at hide and seek in the flames.”

“Was it your own idea?” said Mr Cheviott.

“Not mine,” said Mary. “*My* fairies were all out-of-doors ones. Wood fairies were my favourites. Oh, dear! how dreadful it would be to live in a town?”

“Alys doesn’t think so,” observed her brother. “She often complains of the country being dreadfully dull.”

“Ah, yes—in *her* case I could fancy so,” said Mary, complacently. “No brothers or sisters, and a huge empty house. To enjoy the country thoroughly, it seems to me one must be one of a good large family.”

A faint remembrance flitted across Mr Cheviott’s mind of the half-contemptuous pity with which he had alluded to Mrs Brabazon to the overflowing numbers in Hathercourt Rectory. *Now*, Mary’s allusion slightly nettled him.

“Alys is not quite alone in the world,” he said, stiffly, hardly realising the fact that Miss Cheviott of Romary could be an object of commiseration to one of the poor clergyman’s numerous daughters. “She has a brother.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” allowed Mary. “But so much older than herself, you see. I can fancy her being dull sometimes.”

Mr Cheviott gave a slight sigh. Mary’s quick conscience pricked her.

“I should not have said that,” she thought. “Poor man, it would be dreadful for him just now, when she is lying ill, to think he has not made her life as happy as possible.”

She leaned her head on her hand and tried to think of some safe topic of conversation. These enforced *tête-à-têtes* she felt to be far the most trying part of her life at the farm. Mr Cheviott, looking up, observed her attitude.

“You are *very* tired, I fear, Miss Western,” he said, with the unconstrained kindliness in his voice which so softened and mellowed its tones.

Mary roused herself at once.

“Oh, no,” she said, “I am really not *very* tired. I am waiting rather anxiously for Mr Brandreth. I thought he would have been here before this. I must get something to do,” she went on, looking round. “I wish I had asked Lilias to send a few books.”

“Please don’t get anything to do,” said Mr Cheviott, eagerly. “You don’t know what a satisfaction it is to me to see you resting, and how glad I should be to do anything for you. Would you like—might I,” he went on, with a sort of timidity which made Mary smile inwardly at the idea of the unapproachable Mr Cheviott feeling any want of assurance in addressing *her*! “might I read aloud to you? I sent home for some books to-day. Alys is rather fond of my reading aloud,” he added, with a smile.

“I should like it very much indeed, thank you,” said Mary. “And if—just *supposing* the sound of your voice sent me sleep, you would not be very much offended, would you?”

Mr Cheviott laughed—he was already looking over some magazines which Mary had not before observed on the dresser.

“What will you have?” he said. “Poetry, science, fiction? Stay, here is a good review of H.’s last novel that I wanted to see. The German author, you know. Have you read it?”

He made the inquiry rather gingerly, being not without remembrance of the snub he had received *à propos* of the Misses Western’s knowledge of French.

“No,” said Mary, “I have not. But I have heard a good deal about it, and should like to hear more, so please read that review.”

It was a well written notice, and the subject of it one worthy of such writing. Mr Cheviott grew interested, and so did Mary. He read well, and she listened well; till some remark of the writer’s drawing forth from Mr Cheviott an expression of disagreement, Mary took up the argument, and they were both in the midst of an amicably eager discussion when the door opened and Mr Brandreth appeared on the threshold.

An amused smile stole over his face.

“Good news awaits me, I see,” he said, with some pomposity. “Miss Cheviott must be better, or her faithful nurse would not be chattering so merrily—eh, Miss Western?”

Mary looked up with a glimmer of fun in her eyes. “Yes,” she said, “she *is* better. That is to say, she is fast asleep, and has been for two hours. She is sleeping as quietly as a baby, quite differently from last night, and, as far as I

could judge before she fell asleep, the feverish symptoms had subsided wonderfully.”

Mr Brandreth rubbed his hands and came nearer the fire, where Mr Cheviott, having risen from his chair, was standing in an attitude of some slight constraint.

“I expected you earlier,” he said, in a low voice *not* intended for Mary’s quick ears, which, as might naturally be expected, it reached with marvellous celerity.

“Ah, yes—sorry to have disappointed you,” said Mr Brandreth, still rubbing his hands, but by this time with less energy and more enjoyment, as they gradually thawed in front of the blazing fire. “I could not help it, however, and my mind felt more at ease about things here after I had seen Mrs Western. But I am sorry to have kept you here waiting for me all day, Mr Cheviott. It must be very tiresome for you.”

“I did not intend returning to Romary to-day,” said Mr Cheviott, speaking now in his ordinary voice. “Of course it would have been impossible.”

“I don’t know that,” replied Mr Brandreth. “There is not much that you can do for your sister, and it must be dreadfully wearisome work for you hanging about here all day, particularly in the evenings,” he added, in a tone of special commiseration, “when you cannot even get out for a stroll.”

Mary glanced up quickly.

“How I wish he would go back to Romary?” she had been thinking to herself while Mr Brandreth was speaking. “I would not mind staying here at all, in that case.”

But something indefinable in Mr Brandreth’s voice just now roused her suspicions. Was he laughing at Mr Cheviott? If so, he was, in a sense, laughing at her too. Mary began to feel rather indignant. Lilias was right; there was a touch of coarseness about Mr Brandreth notwithstanding his real goodness and kindness, which hitherto had always prevailed with Mary to take his friendly bantering in good part. Something, she knew not what, she was on the verge of replying, when Mr Cheviott anticipated her.

“The *evenings*?” he said, simply, yet with a sort of dignity not lost upon either of his hearers—“this evening, at least, has been anything but wearisome, as Miss Western has kindly allowed me to read to her, and I fortunately lighted upon an article which interested us both. I may ride over to Romary to-morrow to see if I am wanted for anything; but I could not feel content to leave this, with Alys still in so critical a state. I have not been *very* troublesome, I hope, have I, Miss Western?” he added, turning to Mary with a smile. There was not a shade of constraint in his manner now, yet no “Clara Vere de Vere” could have desired to be addressed with more absolute deference and respect.

For the first time Mary experienced a sensation of real friendliness towards her host for the time being. Hitherto her most cordial feeling with regard to him had been a sort of pity—a slightly pleasurable consciousness of meriting his gratitude; and in such one-sided sentiments, no root of actual *friendliness*—of which the “give and take” element is the very essence—could exist. Now, for the first time, a flash of something like gratitude to him, of quick appreciation of his instinctive chivalry, lent a softness to her voice and a light to her eyes which Mr Cheviott, without taking credit to himself for the change, was agreeably conscious of, as she replied, gravely:

“You have been very considerate indeed, Mr Cheviott. And it seems to me that till your sister is decidedly better, it would not be well for you to go away.”

“Thank you,” said Mr Cheviott, simply, while in his own mind Mr Brandreth whistled. How the wind lay was beginning to puzzle him.

“You saw mamma?” said Mary, interrogatively, turning to Mr Brandreth. “I had a note from her this afternoon, telling me not to go home to-day, and that you would see me again.”

Mr Cheviott heard her with some surprise. This, then, supplied the key of her quietly remaining at the farm all day with no talk of quitting her post. What a more and more interestingly unusual study this girl’s character was becoming to him! So brave, yet so shrinkingly sensitive, so wise, yet so unsophisticated, so self-reliant and coolly determined, yet yielding in an instant to the slightest expression of parental authority!

“Yes,” said Mr Brandreth, oracularly, “I saw your mamma, Miss Mary, and explained the whole to her. Her views of the situation, as I felt sure would be the case, entirely coincide with mine. She will not hear of your leaving Miss Cheviott at any risk to her, for I fully explained that your remaining might do what we doctors seldom are called in time enough for—it may *save* your patient an illness instead of curing her of one. The greatest triumph of the two, in my opinion! Furthermore, your mother desires you not to worry about things at home. Miss Alexa and Master Josephine,” (reverting to a very threadbare joke on poor Josey’s hobbledehoyism) “are developing undreamed-of capabilities—Josey was very nearly packing herself into your sister’s box in her anxiety to take your place as her assistant—yes, you are not to worry about things at home, and—let me see—oh, yes, you are to take good care of yourself and not get knocked up, and—and—Miss Lilias will be here in the morning and tell you all that has happened since you left home—let me see, how many hours ago?”

Mary laughed cordially. This kind of banter she could take in the best part. And she really was glad to hear all about home. How well she could fancy poor Josey’s ineffectual attempts at helping Lilias to pack, and Lilias’s good-humoured despair at the results!—it seemed ages since she had seen them all.

“Then I am to wait here till further orders,” said Mary, “and those orders, in the first place, I suppose, will be yours, Mr Brandreth?”

"Probably," the doctor replied.

"And I? Whose orders am I to be under?" inquired Mr Cheviott.

"Miss Western's," said Mr Brandreth. "In my absence Miss Western is commander-in-chief."

But his little pleasantry fell harmless this time. Mr Cheviott and Mary only smiled. And then Mary took the doctor into the next room to see unconscious Alys sleeping, as her friend had said, as sweetly as a baby.

Chapter Twenty One.

Pledged.

> "Love, when 'tis true, needs not the aid
> Of sighs, or oaths, to make it known."
>
> *Sir C. Sedley*.

"To-morrow" was a fine day at last. And Lilias was up betimes. It was the day before that of her leaving home, and, notwithstanding the great preliminary preparations, there were still innumerable last packings to do, arrangements to be made, and directions given—all complicated by Mary's absence. Then there was Mary to see, and not wishing to be hurried in the long talk with her, without which Lilias felt it would really be impossible to start on her journey, she set off pretty early for the farm.

It was a great bore certainly, as Josey expressed it, that Mary should be away just at this particular juncture. Lilias missed her at every turn, and felt far from happy at leaving her mother without either of her "capable" daughters at hand, especially as Mr Brandreth had plainly given Mrs Western to understand that Mary's stay at the Edge, if it were to do real and lasting good, might have to be prolonged over two or three weeks.

"That poor girl will not know how she is till she gets over the first shock of her accident," he had said; "and if, as I much fear, there is any actual injury, she may be thrown back into a brain fever if there is no sensible, cheerful person beside her to help her over the first brunt of such a discovery."

"But do you think her *badly* hurt—crippled, perhaps, for life?" Lilias had asked, with infinite sympathy in her face. "What a fate!" she was saying to herself; "far better, in *my* opinion, to have been killed outright than to live to be an object of pity, and even, perhaps, shrinking, on the part of others. Fancy such a thing befalling me, and my being afraid of Arthur ever seeing me again!"

She gave an involuntary shiver as she made her inquiry of Mr Brandreth, who looked surprised.

"Why, Miss Lilias," he said, "you've not half your sister's nerve! What have you been doing to yourself, you don't look half so strong and vigorous as you used to."

"That is why she is going away," said her mother, quietly. "She has not been well lately. But tell us about poor Miss Cheviott, please."

"I do not think she will be crippled for life—nothing so bad as that—but she will probably have to lie and rest for a long time. The great point is to get her well over the first of it, and that is why I am so anxious for Mary to stay."

And so it had been decided, and somehow, in spite of her regret at its happening just at this time, Lilias could not bring herself to feel altogether distressed at Mary's remaining at the farm; and though she did not exactly express this to her sister, Mary did not remain unconscious of it.

"I wish I were not going away, then it would be all right," she said, when they were sitting together in the farm-house kitchen.

"I am most particularly glad you are going away," Mary replied. "I hardly know that I could have agreed to stay here, had you not been going away."

"Why?" asked Lilias, opening wide her blue eyes. "Because—because—oh! I can't exactly put it into words," replied Mary. "You might understand without my saying." But seeing that Lilias still looked inquiringly, she went on: "Don't you see—I don't want these people—*him*, I mean," (Mr Cheviott had ridden over to Romary),—"to think we would take advantage of this accident—this wholly fortuitous circumstance, not of their seeking, and assuredly not of ours, of my being thrown into their society, to bring about any intimacy, any possible endeavour to recall—you know whom I mean—to—to what we had begun to think might be."

"Your powers of expressing yourself are certainly not increasing, my dear Mary," said Lilias, with a smile, though the quick colour mounted to her cheeks. "I really do think you worry yourself quite unnecessarily about what Mr Cheviott thinks or doesn't think. I cannot believe, as I have always said—I cannot believe he has been to blame as much as you imagine. Don't you like him any better now that you have seen more of him?"

"I don't *want* to like him better," said Mary, honestly. "He is, of course, most courteous and civil to me—more than that, he is really considerate and kind, and certainly he is a cultivated and intelligent man, and not, in some ways, so narrow-minded as might have been expected. But I don't *want* to like him, or think better of him; whenever I seem to be tempted to do so it all rises before me—selfish, cold, *cruel* man, to interfere with your happiness, my Lily."

Mary gave herself a sort of shake of indignation.

“You are a queer girl, Mary,” said Lilias, putting a hand on each of her sister’s shoulders, and looking down—Lilias was the taller of the two—deep down into her eyes—blue into brown. The brown eyes were unfathomable in their mingled expression—into the blue ones there crept slowly two or three tears. But Lilias dashed them away before they fell, and soon after the sisters kissed each other and said good-bye.

“I wonder,” said Lilias to herself, as she stood still for a moment at the juncture of the two ways home, debating whether or not she might indulge herself by choosing the pleasanter but more circuitous path through the woods.

“I wonder if anything will have happened—anything of consequence, I mean—before I see Mary again, six weeks or so hence.”

An idle, childish sort of speculation, but one not without its charm for even the wiser ones among us sometimes, when the prize that would make life so perfect a thing is tantalisingly withheld from us, or, alas! when, in darker, less hopeful days, there is *no* break in the clouds about our path, and in the weariness of long-continued gloom we would almost cry to Fate itself to help us!—Fate which, in those seasons, we dare not call God, for no way of deliverance that our human judgment can call Divine seems open to us. Will nothing *happen*?—something we dare not *wish* for, to deliver us from the ruggedness of the appointed road from which, in faint-hearted cowardice, we shrink, short-sightedly forgetting that, to the brave and faithful, “strength as their days” shall be given.

But in no such weariness of spirit did Lilias Western “wonder” to herself; she was young and vigorous; there was a definite goal for her hopefulness; her visions of the future could take actual shape and clothing—and how much of human happiness does such an admission not involve? She “wondered” only because, notwithstanding the disappointment and trial she had to bear, life was still to her so full of joyful possibilities, of golden pictures, in the ultimate realisation of which she could not as yet but believe.

“Yes,” she repeated, as, deciding that a delay of ten minutes was the worst risk involved, she climbed the narrow stile into the wood—“yes, I *wonder* how things will be when dear Mary and I are together again? Such queer things have happened already among us. Who *could* have imagined such a thing as Mary’s being ‘domesticated’ with the Cheviotts? I wonder if Arthur Beverley will hear of it? Oh, I do, do wish I was not going away to-morrow!”

She stopped short again for a moment, and looked about her. How well she remembered the spot where she was standing! It was not far from the place where she and her sisters had met Captain Beverley that day when he had walked back with them to the Rectory. How they had all laughed and chattered!—how very long ago it seemed now! Lilias gazed all round her, and then hastened on again, and as she did so, somewhat to her surprise, far in front of her, at the end apparently of the wood alley which she was facing, she distinguished a figure approaching her. It was at some distance off when she first saw it, but the leafless branches intercepted but little of the light, which to-day was clear and undeceptive.

“It must be papa,” she said to herself, when she was able to distinguish that the figure was that of a man—“papa coming to meet me, or possibly he may be going on to see Mary at the farm.”

She hurried on eagerly, but when nearer the approaching intruder, again she suddenly relaxed her pace. Were her eyes deceiving her? Had her fancy played her false, and conjured up some extraordinary illusion to mislead her, or was it—could it be Arthur Beverley himself who was hastening towards her? Hastening?—yes, hastening so quickly that in another moment there was no possibility of any longer doubting that it was indeed he, and that he recognised her. But no smile lit up his face as he drew near; he looked strangely pale and anxious, and a vague misgiving seized Lilias; her heart began to beat so fast that she could scarcely hear the first words he addressed to her—she hardly noticed that he did not make any attempt to shake hands with her.

“Miss Western,” he said, in a low, constrained, and yet agitated tone, “I do not know whether I am glad or sorry to meet you. I do not know whether I *dare* say I am glad to meet you.” He glanced up at her for an instant with such appeal and wistfulness in his eyes that Lilias turned her face away to prevent his seeing the quick rush of tears that *would* come. “What you must have thought of me, I cannot let myself think,” he went on, speaking more hurriedly and nervously. “But you will let me ask you something, will you not? You seem to be coming from the farm—tell me, I implore you, have you by any chance heard how my poor cousin is? Is she still alive? She cannot—she *must* not be dead!”

His wildness startled Lilias. A rush of mingled feelings for an instant made it impossible for her to reply. What could be the meaning of it all? Why this exaggerated anxiety about Alys Cheviott, and at the same time this tone of almost abject self-blame? Lilias felt giddy, and almost sick with apprehension—was her faith about to be uprooted? her trust flung back into her face? Were Mary’s misgivings about to be realised? Was it true that Arthur, influenced by motives she could but guess at, had deserted her for his cousin?

Captain Beverley misinterpreted her silence. His face grew still paler.

“I see what you mean,” he said, excitedly. “She *is* dead, and you shrink from telling me. Good God, what an ending to it all!”

A new sensation seized Lilias—a strange rush of indignation against this man, so false, yet so wanting in self-control and delicacy as to parade his grief for the girl he imagined he had lost, to the girl whose heart he had gained, but to toss it aside! She turned upon him fierily.

“No,” she said, “she is not dead, nor the least likely to die. I have nothing more to say to you, Captain Beverley. Be so good as to let me pass.”

For he was standing right in front of her, blocking up the path. At her first words he drew a deep breath of relief and was on the point of interrupting her, but her last sentences seemed to stagger, and then to petrify him. He did not speak, he only stood and looked at her as if stupefied.

“Why are you so indignant?” he said at last. “Why should I not ask you how Alys is?”

“Why should you?” Lilias replied. “She is your own cousin. *I* scarcely know her by sight—we are not even acquaintances. Captain Beverley, I must again ask you to let me pass on.”

Half mechanically the young man stood aside, but as Lilias was about to pass him he again made a step forward.

“Miss Western—Lilias,” he exclaimed, “I shall go mad if you leave me like this. I had been thinking, hoping wildly and presumptuously, you may say, that, in spite of all, in spite of the frightful way appearances have been against me, you—you were still,” he dropped his voice so low that Lilias could scarcely catch the words, “still *trusting* me.”

Lilias looked up bravely.

“So I was,” she said.

“And why not ‘so I *am*’?” he said, eagerly, his fair fare flushing painfully.

Lilias hesitated.

“I don’t know,” she said at last. “I cannot understand you and—and your manner to-day.”

Captain Beverley sighed deeply.

“And I—I cannot, dare not explain,” he said, sorrowfully. “Don’t misunderstand me,” he added, hastily, seeing a quick, questioning glance from Lilias at the word “dare.”

“I mean I am bound for the sake of others not to explain. I have, indeed, I now see, been bound hand and foot by the folly of others almost ever since I was born! There is nothing I would not wish to explain to you, nothing that I should not be thankful for you to know—but I cannot tell it you! Was ever man placed in such a position before?” He stopped and appeared to be considering deeply. “Lilias,” he went on, earnestly, “it seems to me that I am so placed that I must do one or other of two wrong things. I must break my pledged word, or I must behave dishonourably to you—which shall it be? Decide for me.”

“Neither,” said Lilias, without an instant’s hesitation. “You shall not break your word, Arthur, for my sake. And you shall not behave dishonourably to me, for, whatever you do or don’t do, I promise you to believe that you have done the best you could; I have trusted you, hitherto, against everybody. Shall I, may I, go on trusting you?”

Arthur looked at her—looked straight into her eyes, and that look was enough.

“Yes,” he said, “you may.”

There was silence for a moment or two. Then Arthur added:

“Lilias,” he said, “I have not in the past behaved unselfishly—hardly, some would say, honourably to you. But it was out of thoughtlessness and ignorance; till I knew you, I did not know myself. I had no idea how I could care for any woman, and I had ignorantly fancied I never should. I cannot explain, but I may say one thing. Should you be afraid of marrying a poor man—a really poor man?”

Lilias smiled.

“I half fancied there was something of that kind,” she said. “No,” she went on, “I should not be afraid of marrying *you* as a poor man. I have no special love for poverty in the abstract. I know too much of it. And I am no longer, you know, what people call ‘a mere girl.’ I am two-and-twenty, and have had time to become practical.”

“It looks like it,” said Arthur, smiling too.

“But my practicalness *makes* me not afraid of poverty on the other hand,” pursued Lilias. “I have seen how much happiness can co-exist with it. My only misgiving is,” she hesitated—“you would like me to speak frankly?”

“Whatever you do I entreat you to be frank,” said Arthur, earnestly. “I don’t deserve it, I know, but Heaven knows I would be frank to you if I could.”

“I was only going to say—my people—my parents and Mary, perhaps, might be more mercenary *for* me—because they have all spoiled me, and I have been horribly selfish, and they might think me less fit for a struggling life than I believe I really am.”

“Yes, I can fancy *their* feelings for you by my own,” said Arthur, sighing. “And how I would have enjoyed enabling you to be a comfort to them—to your mother, for instance. Lilias, I am cruelly placed.”

“Poor fellow!” said Lilias, mischievously.

“Yes,” said Arthur, “I am indeed. Will you now,” he went on, “tell me about Alys? How is she, and where?”

Lilias told him all she knew.

"And your sister nursing her," said Arthur. "How extraordinary!"

Notwithstanding his surprise, however, Lilias could see that the idea of the thing was not unpleasing to him.

"But for that—but for Mary's being with her, you and I would not have met this morning," she said.

"You may go further and say that but for Alys's accident I should not have been here," said Arthur, while a shade fell over his sunny countenance. "It is too cold for you standing here. Let us walk on a little."

"Are you not going to the farm?" Lilias asked.

"No. Now that I have seen you I shall hurry back the way I came. You have told me all there is to hear. Poor Alys! Lilias, I *wish* I could explain to you why I felt so horribly, so unbearably anxious about her. I am *very* fond of her; but once lately when I was nearly beside myself with perplexity and misery, Laurence—her brother, you know—to bring me to what *he* would call my senses, I suppose, said something which has haunted me ever since I heard of her accident yesterday morning. If she had been killed I should have felt as if I had killed her."

He looked at Lilias, with a self-reproach and distress in his open boyish face which touched her greatly—the more as, now that the brightness had for the moment faded out of his countenance, she could see how much changed he was, how thin and pale and worn he looked.

"I think I can understand—a very little," she said, gently, "without your explaining. But you have grown morbid, Arthur. You *know* you would suffer anything yourself rather than wish injury to any one."

"I suppose I have grown morbid," he said. "Morbid for want of hope, and still more from the constant horrible dread of what you must be thinking of me. I shall not know myself when I get back to C. I may have dark fits of blaming myself for involving you in my misfortunes—but then to know that you trust me again! Surely, whatever the world might say, I have *not* done wrong, Lilias? To you, I mean?"

"You have given me back my life, and youth, and faith and everything good," she replied. "Can that be doing me wrong?"

They walked on a little way in silence. Then Arthur stopped.

"I must go, I fear," he said, reluctantly. "And I suppose we must not write to each other. No, it would not be fair to you to ask it."

"I should not like to write to you without my father and mother's knowledge," said Lilias.

"No, of course not. And, as I am placed—my difficulties involve others, that is the worst of it—I do not see that I can avoid asking you not to mention what has passed to your people, *at present*. Does that make you uncomfortable?"

Lilias considered.

"No," she said, "I do not see that it alters my position. Hitherto I have gone on trusting you, without saying anything about it to any one. Till I met you this afternoon, and your own manner and words misled me, I have never left off trusting you, Arthur, *never*. And so I shall go on the same way. But I couldn't write to you without them all knowing. I mean I should not feel happy in doing so. Besides, it would not be very much good. You see you cannot explain things to me yet, so we could not consult together."

"Not yet," said Arthur. "But as you trust me, trust me in this. If *any* effort of mine can hasten the explanation, you shall not long be left in this position. You are doing for me what few girls would do for a man—do not think I do not know that, and believe that I shall never forget it. Two years," he went on, in a lower voice, almost as if speaking to himself, but Lilias caught the words—"two years at longest, but two years are a long time. And if I take my fate in my own hands, there is no need for waiting two years."

"Do nothing rash or hasty," said Lilias, earnestly. "Do nothing for *my* sake that might injure you. Arthur," she exclaimed, hastily, as a new light burst upon her, and her face grew pale with anxiety—"Arthur, *I* am surely not to be the cause of misfortune to you? Your pledging yourself to me is surely not going to ruin you? If I thought so! Oh! Arthur, what would—what *could* I do?"

Arthur was startled. He felt that already he had all but gone too far, and Mr Cheviott's words recurred to him. "If the girl be what you think her, would she accept you if she knew it would be to ruin you?" Recurred to him, however, but to be rejected as a plausible piece of special pleading. "Ruin him," yes, indeed, if she, the only woman he had ever cared for, threw him over, then they *might* talk of ruining him. And were there no Lilias in the world, could he have asked Alys to marry him—Alys, his little sister—now that he knew what it was to love with a man's whole love?

"Lilias," he said, with earnestness almost approaching solemnity in his voice, "you must never say such words as those, *never*; whatever happens, you are the best of life to me. And even if I had returned to find you married to some one else, my position would have remained the same. That is all I *can* say to you. No, I will do nothing rash or hasty. For your sake I will be careful and deliberate where I would not be, or might not have been so, for myself."

"Can you not tell me where you are going, or what you are doing?" said Lilias, with some hesitation.

"Oh, dear, yes! Somehow I fancied you knew. I am at C, studying at the Agricultural College, studying hard for the first time in my life. My idea is," he added, speaking more slowly, "to fit myself, if need be, for employment of a kind I fancy I could get on in—something like becoming agent to a property—that sort of thing."

Lilias looked up at him with surprise and admiration. This, then, was what he had been busy about all these weary months, during which everybody had been speaking or hinting ill of him. Working hard—with what object was only too clear—to make a home for *her*, should the mysterious ill-fortune to which he alluded leave him a poor and homeless man! Lilias's eyes filled with tears—was he *not* a man to trust?

Then at last they parted—each feeling too deeply for words—but yet what a happy parting it was!

"To think," said Lilias to herself as she hurried home, "to think how I was wondering what might happen in the next six weeks—to think what has happened in the last half hour!"

And Arthur, all the way back to C, his heart filled with the energy and hopefulness born of a great happiness, could not refrain from going over and over again the old ground as to whether *something* could not be done—could not the Court of Chancery be appealed to? He wished he could talk it over with Laurence—Laurence who was just as anxious as he to undo the cruel complication in which they were both placed.

"Only then again," thought Arthur, "that foolish, ridiculous prejudice of his against the Westerns comes in and prevents his helping me if he could. And to think of Mary being there as Alys's nurse! How he will hate the obligation—If it were not so serious for poor Alys, I really could laugh when I think of Laurence's ruffled dignity in such a position!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

Alys's Brother.

> "In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
> Bring sad thoughts to the mind."
>
> *Wordsworth*.

Days passed—a week, ten days of Mr Brandreth's fortnight were over, but still he would say nothing definite as to the possibility of moving Alys to Romary. And Alys herself seemed marvellously contented—the reason of which she made no secret of to Mary.

"You see I have never had a really close friend of near my own age—and you are only two years older," she said one day. "And I never could have got to know you so well in any other circumstances—could I? You do understand me so well, Mary. It is perfectly wonderful. If I were never to see you again, I could not regret my accident since it has made me know you."

Mary was silent.

"Why don't you answer?" said Alys, anxiously. "Am I horribly selfish to speak so, when this time you have given up to me has kept you away from your dear home and all of them, and interfered with your regular duties?"

"No, dear," said Mary, "it isn't that at all. My being away from home has not mattered in the least; besides, I am near enough to hear at once if they really needed me. No, I was only thinking I could not say I did not regret your accident, because, though I am thankful you are so far better, I feel so anxious about you afterwards. Even though Mr Brandreth does not anticipate seriously-lasting injury, you may have a good deal of weariness and endurance before you. He told you?"

"Yes," said Alys, composedly. "I know I shall not feel strong and well, as I used, for a long time, if ever. I shall have to rest a great deal, hanging about sofas, and all that—just what I hate. But I don't mind. I am still glad it happened. It has done me good, and it has done some one else good too. Was that all you hesitated about, Mary?"

"Not quite."

"Well, say the rest—*do*!"

"I was only thinking that I could not respond as heartily as I would like to your affection, Alys, because I hardly see that my friendship *can* be much good to you in the future."

"Why?"

"Our lives are so differently placed—we are in such totally different spheres—"

"Oh! Mary," exclaimed Alys, reproachfully, "you are not going to be proud, and refuse to know us because we are rich and you are—"

"Poor," added Mary, smiling. "No, not on that account exactly."

"Why, then? Is it because you suspect that at one time Laurence discouraged my knowing you? You can afford to forgive that, surely, *now*. And it was his duty, I suppose, to be very careful about whom I knew, having no mother or sister, you know; and at that time he did not know you."

"No, he did not; and it *was* his duty, as you say, to be very careful. He did not know us, true, but at least he knew no harm of us, except that we were out of the charmed circle. And did *that* justify him in—Oh! Alys, dear, don't make me speak about it. Let us be happy this little while we are together."

“Mary, do you dislike Laurence?”

“I do not like unfounded prejudices,” replied Mary, evasively.

“That means Laurence, I suppose. But, Mary, people can outgrow their prejudices. I am not sure that you yourself are not at present partly affected by prejudice.”

“No,” said Mary, in a firm but somewhat low voice. “I am not, indeed. I cannot defend myself from the appearance of being so, but it is not the case, truly.”

Alys sighed.

“Don’t make yourself unhappy about it, dear,” said Mary.

“I can’t help it,” said Alys, dejectedly. “There is something I don’t understand. I don’t ask you to tell me anything you would rather not, but I am so disappointed. I wanted you to get to like Laurence. I know—I can see he likes you, and that was why I thought it had all happened so well. I did not mind the idea of being a sort of invalid for some time when I thought of your coming to see me often at Romary, and staying with us there. Mary, won’t you come? I was speaking to Laurence about it last night, and he said, if I could persuade you to come, he would be most grateful to you.”

“I don’t want him to be grateful to me,” said Mary, lightly.

“How can he help being so? What he meant was, of course, that if you came it would be out of goodness to me. You *must* know that he would consider it a favour.”

“Yes, I do. Mr Cheviott is not the least inclined to patronise people, I will say that for him,” said Mary, laughing.

“Then you *will* come to Romary?” said Alys, coaxingly.

Mary shook her head.

“I must be honest, Alys dear,” she said, “and to tell you the truth, I can’t imagine myself going to Romary ag—ever going to Romary, I mean, under any circumstances whatever.”

“How you must dislike Laurence!” said Alys. “Has he displeased you since you have been here?”

“Oh dear, no,” said Mary, eagerly. “He has been as kind and considerate as possible. I wish I could help hurting you, Alys. I can say one thing, I do like Mr Cheviott *as your brother*, more than I could have believed it possible I could ever like him.”

“Faint praise,” said Alys.

“But not of the ‘damning’ kind. I mean what I say,” persisted Mary. “And—perhaps you will think this worse than ‘faint praise’—since I have seen him in this way—as your brother—I cannot help thinking that circumstances, the way he has been brought up, have a good deal to answer for in his case.”

Alys’s face flushed a little, yet she was not offended.

“And why not in mine?” she said. “I have had more reason to be spoiled than poor Laurence. His youth was anything but a very smooth or happy one. My father was not rich always, you know.”

“Was he not? Still ‘rich’ is a comparative word. Mr Cheviott has always ‘moved in a certain sphere,’ as newspapers say, and he cannot have had much chance of seeing outside that sphere,” said Mary, with the calm philosophy of her twenty years’ thorough knowledge of the world in all its phases. “As for you, Alys, you are not spoiled, just because you are not. You are a duck—at least you have a duck’s back—it has run off you.”

And both girls were laughing at this when Mr Cheviott, just returned from his daily expedition to Romary, entered the room.

“You are very merry,” he said, questioningly. “By-the-bye, Miss Western,” he went on, with some constraint but, nevertheless, resolution in his voice, “I hope you have good news of your sister?”

“Excellent, thank you,” replied Mary, looking up bravely into his face. “She is as happy and well as possible.”

There was a ring of truth in her voice, and, indeed, Mr Cheviott would have found it hard to doubt the truth of anything that voice of hers said.

“There is no bravado in that statement,” he said to himself. “I cannot understand it.”

“And what were you laughing at when I came in?” he said, turning to Alys, as if to change the subject.

Alys looked at Mary.

“Mary,” she said, mischievously, “shall I tell?”

“If you like,” said Mary, quietly.

“Oh, Mary, was just giving me her opinion of us—of you and me, Laurence—the result of her observations during the

last ten days," said Alys.

Mary looked up quickly.

"Alys," was all she said; but Alys understood her. Mr Cheviott was listening attentively.

"Well," Alys went on, "perhaps that is not putting it quite fairly. I must confess, Laurence, I forced the opinion out of her, and it took a good deal of forcing, too."

"And what was the opinion—favourable or the reverse? May I not hear that?" asked Mr Cheviott.

"It was *pretty* favourable," Alys replied. "On the whole, taking everything into consideration, the enormous disadvantages of our up-bringing, etc, etc, Miss Western is disposed to think that, on the whole, mind you, Laurence, *only* 'on the whole,' we are neither of us quite so bad as might have been expected. But then we must remember, for fear of this verdict making us too conceited, you see, Laurence—upsetting our ill-balanced minds, or anything of that sort—we must remember that it is not every day we can hope to meet with a judge so wide-minded, and philosophical, and unprejudiced, *absolutely* unprejudiced, as Miss Western."

During this long tirade Mary remained perfectly silent, only towards its close her face flushed a little.

"Alys," she said, when Alys at last left off speaking, the colour deepening in her face—"Alys, I don't think that is quite fair."

"Nor do I," said Mr Cheviott, suddenly, for he too had been sitting silent, in apparent consideration. "But, Miss Western, I know Alys's style pretty well. I can pick out with great precision the grains of fact from amongst her bewildering flowers of rhetoric, so, on the whole, mind you, Miss Western, *only* 'on the whole,' I feel rather gratified than the reverse by what she rails your verdict."

"I am sorry for it," said Mary, dryly.

"Why so?"

"I should think poorly of myself were I to feel any gratification at being told that, on the whole, I was not as bad as I might have been. There is no one hardly, I suppose, so bad but that it might be possible to conceive him worse."

"That was not quite Alys's wording of your opinion," said Mr Cheviott. "Nor, I venture to say, quite the sentiment of the opinion itself. But in another sense I agree with you; there is hardly any one—no one, in fact—of whom we might not say, if we knew all the circumstances of his or her history—of his or her existence, in fact—that it was a wonder he or she was so good—not so bad."

"That is taking the purely—I don't know what to call it—the purely human view of it all," said Mary, growing interested and losing her feeling of discomfort. "My father would say we are forgetting what should be and may be the most powerful influences of all, in whatever guise they come, on every life—the spiritual influences, I mean. And these can never be reduced to calculation and estimate, however wise men become."

"Yes, but think of the terrible forest of ill-growing weeds, the awful barrier of evil, individual and inherited, these influences have to make their way through!"

He rose from his chair and went across the room to the fire-place, where he stood contemplating the two girls. Mary, in her plain grey tweed, unrelieved by any colour, except a blue knot at the throat, but fitting her tall figure to perfection. Her "browny-pink" complexion, hazel eyes, and bright chestnut hair, all speaking of youth and strength and healthfulness, contrasting with Alys, who lay loosely wrapped in the invalid shawls and mantles Mary had carefully arranged about her—prettier, more really lovely, perhaps, than her brother had ever seen her, her dark hair and eyes seeming darker than their wont, from the unusual whiteness of her face. She looked too lovely, thought Mr Cheviott, with a sigh, her fragility striking him sharply, in comparison with the firmness and yet elasticity of Mary's movements, as she leaned over Alys to raise her a little. How natural, how strangely natural it all seemed! Mr Cheviott sighed.

"Laurence," exclaimed Alys, "what in the world is the matter?"

Her brother smiled.

"Nothing—that is to say, I can't say what makes me sigh. I was thinking just then what a strange power of adaptation we human beings have. It seems to me so natural to be living here in this queer sort of way. You ill, Alys, and Miss Western nursing you. I could fancy it had always been so—in a dreamy, vague sort of way."

"I know how you mean," said Mary.

"Shall you be sorry when it is over, Laurence," said Alys, "and we are back again at Romary, without our guardian angel?"

"One is always sorry, in a sense, when anything is over, at least, I am. I suppose I have the power of settling myself in a groove to an unusual degree," said Mr Cheviott, evasively.

"You certainly have not the power of making pretty speeches," said Alys. "*I* called Mary 'our guardian angel,' and *you* call her a 'groove'."

Just then Mrs Wills put her head in at the door with an inquiry for Miss Western, and Mary went out of the room.

“I wanted you to say something about Mary’s perhaps coming to Romary,” said Alys.

“Why? Do you think she would come?” asked Mr Cheviott, doubtfully.

“No, I do not think she would,” Alys replied, “but I wanted her to see that *you* would like her to come.”

“Did she *say* that she would never come to see you at Romary?” Mr Cheviott said.

“Yes, decidedly. Her words were, ‘I cannot fancy myself, under *any* circumstances whatever, going to Romary,’ and I thought I heard her half say ‘again’—‘going to Romary again.’ But she has never been there?” Mr Cheviott did not reply; he turned to the fire and began poking it vigorously.

“Laurence,” said Alys, feebly.

“What, dear?”

“Please don’t poke the fire so. It seems to hurt me.”

“I am so sorry,” said her brother, penitently. “It’s the same with everything,” he added to himself. “I seem fated to make a mess of everything I have to do with.—I wish I were not so clumsy,” he went on aloud to his sister. “What shall I do with you at Romary? How shall we ever get on without Miss Western?”

“I shall have to make the best of Mrs Golding, I suppose,” said Alys, in a melancholy voice. “But she fusses so! Oh, Laurence, isn’t it a pity? Just as I have found a girl who could be to me the friend I have wished for and needed all my life, a friend whom even you, now that you know her, approve of for me, that she should have this prejudice against knowing us. Indeed, it must be more than prejudice. She is too sensible and right-minded to be influenced by that.”

“Does she know that I, at one time, objected to your knowing her?” said Mr Cheviott.

“She knows something of it—not, of course, that I ever said so to her—but she is very quick, and gathered the impression somehow. But it is not that. She said you were quite right to be careful whom I knew, and that, of course, she and her people were strangers to you. I don’t think Mary would resent anything that she felt any one had a *right* to do. No, it is not that,” said Alys.

“What can it be, then? Is it her horror of putting herself under any obligation?”

“Obligation, Laurence! As if all the obligation were not on our side!”

“Well, yes. I don’t think I meant that exactly. I mean that, perhaps, she may feel that, owing her so much, we could not do less than invite her to Romary. She may have an exaggerated horror of any approach to being patronised.”

“No, she is not so silly. She knows we should be *grateful* to her for coming. She is neither so silly, nor, I must say, so vulgar-minded, as you imagine. Laurence, even though you own to liking and admiring her now, it seems as if you could not throw off that inveterate prejudice of yours,” said Alys, rather hotly.

Mr Cheviott, under his breath, gave vent to a slight exclamation.

“Good Heavens, Alys,” he said, aloud, “I think the prejudice is on your side. You cannot believe that I *can* act or feel unprejudicedly.”

“I do not know what to believe,” said Alys, dejectedly. “I am bewildered and disappointed. There is something that has been concealed from me, that much I am sure of. And I do think you might trust me, Laurence.”

It sounded to Laurence as if there were tears in her voice. He went over to her bed-side, and kissed her tenderly.

“My poor little Alys,” he said, “indeed I do trust you, and, indeed, I would gladly tell you anything you want to know, if I could. But there are times in one’s life when one cannot do what one would like. Can’t *you* trust *me*, Alys?”

Alys stroked his hand.

“Could I ever leave off trusting you, Laurence?” she said, fondly. “I do not mind so much when you tell me there is something you can’t tell—that is treating me like a sensible person, and not like a baby.”

That was all she said, but, like the owl, “she thought the more.”

And Mr Cheviott too—his thoughts had no lack of material on which to exert themselves just then. He was sorry for Alys—very sorry—and not a little uneasy and ready to do anything in his power to please and gratify her. But how to do it?

“She cannot, under any circumstances whatever, imagine herself ever coming to Romary again,” he said to himself, over and over, as if there were a fascination in the words. “Ah, well, it is a part of the whole,” he added, bitterly, “and Alys must try to content herself with something else.”

A slight cloud seemed, for a day or two, to come over the comfort and cheerfulness of the little party at the farm. Mary was conscious of it without being able, exactly, to explain it. “But for Alys,” she felt satisfied that she would not care in the least.

“Mr Cheviott may ‘glower’ at me if he likes,” she said to herself. “I really don’t mind. I am not likely ever to see him again, so what does it matter? He is offended, I suppose, because I did not at once accept with delight the invitation

which he condescended, grudgingly enough, no doubt, to allow poor Alys to give me."

So in her own thoughts, as was her way, she made fun of the whole situation and imagined that Mr Cheviott's decrease of cordiality and friendliness had not the slightest power to disturb her equanimity. Yet somehow in her honest conscience there lurked a faint misgiving. It was difficult to call his evident dejection haughtiness or temper, difficult to accuse of offensive condescension the man whose every word and tone was full of the gentlest, almost deprecating, deference and respect—most difficult of all to hold loyally to her old position of contempt for and repugnance to a man so unmistakably unselfish, so almost woman-like in his tender devotion to the sister dependent on his care.

"Yet he *must* be heartless," persisted Mary, valiantly, "he *must* be narrow-minded and cruel, and he *must* be what any straightforward, honourable person would call unprincipled and intriguing, wherever the carrying out of his own designs is in question."

"I shall be so glad to be home again, mamma," she said to her mother one afternoon when she had left Alys for an hour or two, to go home to see how the Rectory was getting on without her.

"Yes, dear, I can well fancy it," replied Mrs Western, sympathisingly. "You must just remember, you know, Mary, that your present task, however distasteful, is just as much a *duty* as if that poor girl were one of the cottagers about here. Indeed, almost more so. I dare say, in spite of their wealth and position, she is far more really friendless than any other of our poor neighbours. But she is a sweet girl, you say?"

"*Very*," said Mary, warmly. "It is a pleasure to do anything for her."

"Poor child! And with such a brother! A *most* disagreeable, cold, haughty man, I hear. But he surely cannot be anything but courteous to you, Mary? Under the circumstances, anything else would be too outrageous."

"Oh dear, no," said Mary, hastily, startled a little somehow by her mother's tone. "He is perfectly civil to me—most considerate, and I suppose I should say 'kind.' Only I shall be glad to be at home—they are talking now of moving Miss Cheviott to Romary on Thursday—and back into my regular ways. Mother, I'm an awful old maid already, I get into a groove and like to stay there."

The words recurred to her on her way back to the Edge. Would she really be so glad to be home again? She had used Mr Cheviott's expression, and it led her into the train of thought which had suggested it to him. Yes, there was truth in what he said. In almost every kind of life, in almost any circumstances, even if painful in themselves, there grows up secretly, as the days pass on, a curious, undefinable charm—a something it hurts us to break, though, till the necessity for so doing is upon us, we had been unconscious of its existence.

"It must be that," said Mary. "I have got into the groove of my present life, and now that it is coming to an end, disagreeable though it has been, I feel it strangely painful to leave it. Of course it is natural I should feel pain in parting from Alys, whom I can *never* be with again; but, besides that, I am sorry to have done with the whole affair—the queer incongruous life, the old kitchen in the evenings, and Mr Cheviott and his books in the corner, the feeling I am of use to her, to them both, that they would have been wretchedly uncomfortable without me, and that even now that I am away for an hour they will be missing me. What queer, inconsistent complications we human beings are! It is just the coming to an end of it all, the beginning to see it in the haze of the past, that gives it a charm."

She stood still and gazed across over the bare, long stretch of meadow land before her to the far distant horizon, radiant already in the colours of the fast setting sun. Suddenly a voice behind her made her start.

"Are you bidding the sun good-night?" it said.

Mary turned round and saw Mr Cheviott.

"Yes," she replied. "I suppose I was. There, is something rather melancholy about a sunset, is there not?" she added after a little pause.

"There is something not rather, but very melancholy about all farewells. And sunset is good-bye forever to a day, though not to the sun," said Mr Cheviott.

> "'Out of Eternity
> This new day is born;
> Into Eternity
> At night will return.'"

"Yes," said Mary again. "It is like what my little sister Francie once said, 'What a sad thing *pastness* is.'"

"How pretty!" said Mr Cheviott. "Pastness! Yes, it is a sad thing, but fortunately not an ugly thing. Distance in time as well as in space, 'lends enchantment to the view.' How strangely little things affect us sometimes," he went on. "There are occasions, little events of my life, that I cannot recall without an indescribable thrill, neither of pleasure nor pain, but a strange, acute mixture of both. And yet they are so trifling in themselves that I cannot explain why they should so affect me."

"I think I have felt what you mean," said Mary.

"And in the same way I have felt extraordinarily affected by a far-off view sometimes," pursued Mr Cheviott. "When I was a boy, from my nursery window we had, on clear days, a view of the shire hills, and on the top, or nearly on the top of one of them, we could, on *very* clear days, distinguish a little white cottage. Do you know, I could never look at it without the tears coming into my eyes, and yet, if it had been near enough to see it plainly, most likely it was the

most prosaic of white cottages."

"I have had the same feeling about things *not* 'enchanted' by distance," said Mary. "Once, on a journey, driving rapidly, we suddenly passed a cottage with two girls sitting on the door-step. A ray of rather faint evening sunlight fell across them as they sat, otherwise everything about the scene was commonplace in the extreme. But yet *something* made me feel as if I were going to cry. I had to turn my head away and shut my eyes."

"That's just what I mean," said Mr Cheviott, and then for a minute or two they both stood silent, gazing at the sunset.

"Miss Western," said Mr Cheviott, at last, "when you are back at the Rectory again, and the present little phase of your life is past and done with, I trust its 'pastness' may soften all the annoyance you have had to put up with. Even I, I would fain hope, may come in for a little of the benefit of the mellowing haze of distance and bygoneness?"

"I do not feel that I have had *any* annoyances to bear," said Mary, cordially. "Alys has been only too unselfish, and—and—you, yourself, Mr Cheviott, have been most considerate of my comfort. My associations with the Edge can never be unpleasant."

"Thank you—thank you, so very much," said Mr Cheviott, so earnestly that Mary forthwith began to call hereof a humbug.

Would it not have been honest to have said a little more—to have told him that, while she really did thank him for his courtesy and thoughtfulness, nothing that had happened had, in the least, shaken her real opinion of his character? Of the other side of his character, so she mentally worded it in instinctive self-defence of her constancy. For, indeed, to her there had come to be two Mr Cheviotts—Alys's brother, and, alas! Arthur Beverley's cousin!

Chapter Twenty Three.

Arthur's Cousin.

> "I loved him not, and yet, now he is gone,
> I checked him when he spoke; yet could he speak—"
>
> *W.S. Landor*.

The evening that followed this little conversation was one of the—if not the—pleasantest of those Mary had spent at the farm. Alys seemed wonderfully stronger and better, or else she had caught the infection of her brother's unusually good spirits, and, till considerably past her ordinary hour of settling for the night, Mr Cheviott and Mary stayed in her room, laughing, chattering, and joking till Mrs Wills began to think more experienced nurses would be better fitted to take care of the young lady.

"Not that Miss Mary has not an old head on young shoulders, if ever such could be," she remarked to her husband, "but Miss Cheviott, for all that she's a-lying there so weakly-like, and many a month, it's my opinion, when they get her home again, will have to lie; she do have a sperrit of her own. And the master, as I'm always a-going to call him, thinking of our Captain Beverley it must be, he has a deal of fun in him, has Mr Cheviott, for all his quiet ways, as no one would fancy was there."

But, by and by, Mary exerted her authority. Alys must go to sleep. What would Mr Brandreth say if he found her knocked up and wearied the next day—Wednesday, too, the day before the move to Romary, for which all her strength would be required? So whether sleepy or not, Alys had to obey orders, and, as Mary had a long letter to Lilias to write, Mr Cheviott volunteered to read his sister to sleep, for which Mary sincerely thanked him.

He came into the kitchen an hour or so later, while she was still busy with her letter. He had a book in his hand, and sat down quietly to read it beside the fire. After a while the kitchen clock struck ten.

"Miss Western," said Mr Cheviott, "I think if I had any authority over you, as you have over Alys, I would exert it to make you go to bed. You were up very early, you have been on your feet, about one thing and another, nearly all day, besides a good long walk; and now you are writing I should be afraid to say *how* many sheets full. Don't you intend to take any rest? I feel responsible, remember, for the condition in which you go back to the Rectory, and I don't want your father and mother to think Alys and I have no conscience about overworking you."

Mary left off writing, and looked up with a smile. Her wavy brown hair was somewhat disarranged, and she pushed it back off her temples with a slight gesture of weariness. Her face was a little flushed, but her eyes were bright and happy-looking. Those dear, good, honest eyes of hers, ready to tell of pleasure and content, as of, it must be confessed, disapproval or indignation! She made a pleasant picture, tumbled hair notwithstanding—she reminded Mr Cheviott, somehow, of the day he had first seen her under the porch of the old church, when she had looked up in his face with that peculiarly attractive expression of hers of hearty, fearless good-will.

"I do believe, now that I leave off writing and can think about it," she said, "I do believe I *am* a little tired. Not that I have done anything unusual to-day by any means. I suppose I must go to bed," looking regretfully at her not yet completed letter; "but writing to Lilias is such a temptation."

"She is enjoying herself very much, you say," observed Mr Cheviott, in so natural and unconstrained a manner that, for the moment, Mary actually forgot that he was the speaker, forgot her ordinarily quick rising indignation whenever he ventured to name Lilias at all.

"Exceedingly," she replied, warmly. "I have never had such cheerful, almost merry, letters from her before when she

has been away. I am delighted; but a little astonished all the same," she added, in a lower voice, almost as if speaking to herself.

"I am so *very* glad of it," said Mr Cheviott, fervently, yet with a sort of hesitation which recalled Mary to herself. Quick as thought the blood mounted to her temple—she turned sharply, the whole expression of her being, even to the pretty curves of her slight firm figure, seeming to her observer to change and harden. She gathered up the loose sheets of her letter and made a step or two towards the door. Then her habitual instincts of consideration and courtesy asserting themselves, she stopped short.

"I think I had better go to bed," she said. "Goodnight, Mr Cheviott."

Hitherto, latterly that is to say, in the prevalence of a tacit truce between these two, the usual amenities of intimate and friendly social relations had half unconsciously crept in.

"For Alys's sake," Mary had decided, when for the first time she found herself shaking hands with the man she had prayed she might "never see again," "for Alys's sake it is necessary to make no fuss, and perhaps for my own, too, it is on the whole more dignified to behave in an ordinary way."

But to-night, dignity or no dignity, her indignation was again too fully aroused to allow anything to interfere with its expression, and she was proceeding in queenly fashion to the door, when, to her amazement, Mr Cheviott stepped forward and stood in her way.

"Miss Western," he said, quietly, "won't you say goodnight? Won't you shake hands with me as usual?"

Mary hesitated. She did not want to make herself ridiculous—for Lilias's sake even, she shrank from the slightest appearance of petulance or small resentment. She hesitated; then looking up bravely, said, honestly:

"I would rather not, but—" A pair of dark eyes were gazing down upon her—gazing as if they would read her very soul, so earnest, so *true* in their expression that Mary could not but own to herself that it was difficult to realise that they belonged to an unprincipled and dishonourable man.

"But?" he said, gravely.

"I was only going to say, if you think so much of shaking hands, I don't mind," said Mary, with a curious mixture of deprecation and defiance in her tone. "I don't want to be uncourteous or exaggerated—besides, what is there in shaking hands? We do so half a dozen times a day with people we do not care the least for."

"Yes," said Mr Cheviott, gravely still, "we do. But people one doesn't care the least for are different from people one positively dislikes, or worse still, *distrusts*."

"Can't you leave all that?" said Mary, sadly. "*I* cannot help what—what happened, and, indeed"—her voice trembling a little—"towards the Mr Cheviott I have known *here* I should be most wrong to have any but friendly feelings."

She held out her hand. Mr Cheviott took it in his, holding it for one little moment longer than was really necessary.

"Is it always to be war between us, Miss Western?" as if the words could not be kept back. "Heaven knows how glad *I* should be to leave forever all the painful part of the past."

Mary slowly shook her head. Then looking up suddenly again, she said, gently:

"We have got on very well here without fighting. Why should not the truce last till the end of the time here? There is only another day."

"Yes," repeated Mr Cheviott. "Only one other day."

Then Mary went off to bed, but not, for much longer than her wont, to sleep. Her mind seemed strangely bewildered and perplexed.

"I have lost all my mile-stones," she said to herself. "I feel as if I were being forced to think black white in the strangest way. But I won't—no, I won't, *won't*, won't!"

And with this laudable determination she went to sleep.

It was late before Mr Cheviott left the kitchen fire-side that night.

"Will the truce last," he was saying to himself, "even through another day? Twenty times in an hour I have been on the point of saying what, indeed, *would* end it one way or another. And Arthur thought I could not sympathise with him! I wonder on which of the two of us that idiotic will has entailed the greater suffering?"

His good spirits seemed all to have deserted him by the next morning. He was grave and almost stern, and, so said Alys, "objectionably *affairé* about some stupid letters sent on from Romary." Alys was unusually talkative and obtrusively cheerful, but Mary understood her through it all. A cloud of real sorrow was over both girls, more heavily on Mary, for she knew what Alys was still silently determined to hope against, that this was far more than the "last day" of their queer life at the farm, that it was the end of the strange but strong friendship that, despite all obstacles, had sprung up between them.

For though Alys had almost pointedly refrained from any recurrence to the question of their meeting again at Romary, and Mary had been only too ready to second her in all avoidance of the subject, this absence of discussion

had in no wise softened the girl's resolution.

"Never," she repeated to herself, "never under *any* circumstances can I imagine myself entering that house again."

And the day wore on without any allusion being made to the when or the where of their ever meeting again.

Late in the afternoon Mary had gone at Alys's request to pick some of the pretty spring flowers to be found in profusion in the Balner woods hard by, when, as she was returning homewards, laden with primroses and violets, looking up she saw Mr Cheviott coming quickly along the path to meet her.

"Alys?" she exclaimed, quickly, with just the slightest shade of anxiety in her voice. "Does she want me?"

"Oh, no," replied Mr Cheviott, with a smile. "Alys is all right. What an anxious nurse you are, Miss Western!"

"Yes," said Mary, "it is silly. I must get accustomed to the idea of her doing without me. But I could not help having a feeling to-day of a different kind of anxiety—a feeling of almost superstitious fear lest anything should go wrong with her to-day—the last day. It would be so hard to leave her less well than she is, and—of course," she went on, looking up with a slight flush on her face, "I own to being a little proud of her! It is a great satisfaction to hear Mr Brandreth say that, considering all, she could not have got on better than she has done."

"Of course it is," said Mr Cheviott, warmly. "And I am more glad than I can say that you feel it so. It is a little bit of a reward for you."

Mary did not reply, and they walked on slowly for a few moments in silence.

"How pretty your flowers are," said Mr Cheviott, at last.

"Lovely, are they not?" replied Mary, half burying her face, as she spoke, in a great rich cluster of primroses that she had tied up together into a sort of ball. "They are the best flowers of all—these spring ones—there can be no doubt about it."

"Or is it that they *are* the spring ones," suggested Mr Cheviott.

"A little perhaps," allowed Mary. "Have I not got a quantity? Alys took a fancy for some to take home to Romary."

"Poor child, she will not be able to gather any for herself this year," said Mr Cheviott.

"No," said Mary.

"And she will not have you to gather them for her after to-day."

"No," said Mary again, this time more dryly.

Mr Cheviott stopped short, and as they were placed in the path, Mary, without positive rudeness, could not help stopping too.

"Miss Western," said Mr Cheviott, abruptly, "is your decision quite unshaken?"

"What decision?" said Mary, quietly.

"About coming to see us at Romary, about, in fact, continuing to honour us with your acquaintanceship—I would *like* to say friendship, but I am afraid of vexing you—or the reverse."

Mary pulled a poor primrose to pieces, petal by petal, before she replied.

"I wish," she said, at last, with an appeal almost approaching to pathos in her tones, "I wish you had done as I begged you last night—let this last day end peacefully without rousing anything discordant. Mr Cheviott," she went on, with an attempt at a smile, "you don't know me. There are certain directions in which I feel so intensely that it would not take much to make me actually fierce—there is something of the Tartar underlying what you think cool self-possession—and one of those directions is my sister Lilias." Her voice faltered a little. "Now won't you be warned," she added, speaking more lightly, "won't you be warned, and let our pleasant truce last to the end?"

"To the end," he repeated, with some bitterness. "A matter of a few hours, and, for the sake of keeping those peaceful, I am to relinquish my only chance of—of ever coming to a better understanding with you? No, Miss Western, I cannot let the subject drop thus."

"Then what do you want to know?" she said, facing round upon him.

"I want to know if you keep to your determination never to come to see my sister at Romary, never to enter my house again, never, in fact, to have anything more to say to Alys, who is attached to you, and whom I know you care for? You may say she might come to see you, but at present, at any rate, that is impossible—besides, in such forced intercourse there could be no real enjoyment."

"No," said Mary, "there could not be. It is best to call things by their right names. I do care for Alys, deeply and truly, but I do not wish or intend to go on knowing her. I would not ask her to come to my home to see me, because I cannot go to her home to see her."

"And why not?"

“Because she is your sister,” replied Mary, calmly. “And because I could not receive the hospitality of a man who has behaved as I believe you to have behaved.”

Mr Cheviott drew a step nearer her, and Mary, impelled, in spite of herself, to look up in his face, saw that it had grown to a deadly whiteness. She saw, too, something which she was half puzzled, half frightened at—something which in her short, peaceful experience of life, she had never come into close contact with—a strong man’s overwhelming indignation at unjust accusation. She stood silent. What could she say?

“This is *fearfully* hard to bear,” he said, at last. “I thought I was prepared for it, but—in spite of myself, I suppose—I had cherished hopes that recently your opinion of me had begun to soften. Miss Western, has it never occurred to you as possible that you have misjudged me?”

Mary hesitated.

“Yes,” she said, at last. “I may own to you that—lately—I have tried to think if it *was* possible.”

“You have *wished* to find it possible?” said Mr Cheviott, eagerly.

“Sometimes,” said Mary.

“God bless you for that,” he exclaimed, “and—”

“No, do not say that,” she interrupted. “I have more often wished *not* to find it so, for I—I gave you every chance—I put it all so plainly to you that horrible day at Romary—no, it is impossible that I have done you injustice. Were I to begin to think so, I should feel that I was losing my judgment, my right estimate of things altogether. But I do not wish to continue thinking worse of you than you deserve—you may have learned to see things differently—is it that you were going to tell me? Heaven knows if your interference has done what can never be undone, or not; but, however this is, I do not want to refuse to hear that you have changed.”

Mr Cheviott’s face grew sterner and darker.

“I have not changed,” he said. “What I did was for the best, and I could not but do the same again in similar circumstances.”

“Then,” said Mary, hardening at once, “I really have nothing more to say or to hear. Please let me pass.”

“No,” he replied. “Not yet. Miss Western, I value your good opinion more than that of any one living. I cannot let you go like this. It is my last chance. Do you not know what I feel for you—can you not see what you are making me suffer? I have never loved any woman before—am I to give up all hope on account of this terrible prejudice of yours? But for that I could have made you care for me—I know I could—could I not? Mary, tell me.”

His voice softened into a tenderness, compared with which the gentlest tones he had ever addressed to his sister were hard. But little heard Mary of tenderness or softness in his words. She stood aghast, literally aghast with astonishment—amazement rather—so intense that at first she could scarcely believe that her ears were not deceiving her. Then, as the full meaning of his words came home to her, indignation, overwhelming indignation, took the place of every other feeling, and burning words rose to her lips. For the moment “the Tartar” was, indeed, uppermost.

“You say this to me!” she exclaimed. “You *dare* to say this to me. You, the man who, in deference to contemptible class-prejudice and to gratify some selfish schemes, did not hesitate to trample a woman’s heart under foot, and to spoil the best chance for good that ever came to a man you profess to care for—*you*, selfish, heartless, unprincipled man, dare to tell me, Mary Western, that you love me! Are you going out of your senses, Mr Cheviott? Do you forget that I am Lilias’s sister?”

“No,” he said, in atone which somehow compelled her attention. “I do not forget it, and I am not ashamed to say so. I do not offer you—for it would but be thrown at my feet with scorn—but I would have offered you a man’s honest, disinterested devotion, were you able to believe in such a thing as coming from me. But *you* are blinded by prejudice —you will take into account nothing but your own preconceived interpretation. You will not allow the *possibility* of my being innocent of what you accuse me of. So be it. But there *have* been women who have known an honest man when they found such a one, and have not found their trust misplaced.”

Some answering chord was touched for the instant in Mary’s heart. Her tone was less hard, less cruelly contemptuous when she spoke again.

“I am not doubting your sincerity as regards myself,” she said, her voice trembling a little. “I suppose you do mean what you say, however extraordinarily incomprehensible it appears to me. But *that* makes things no better—oh! if you had but left me under the delusion that there was something to respect in you! I thought you narrow-minded and prejudiced to a degree, but I had grown to think you had some principle—that in what you did you were actuated by what you believed to be right. But what am I to think now? Where are all the well-considered reasons for interfering between your cousin and my sister that you would have had me believe in, now that—that—you find the case your own, or fancy it is so? What can I, too, think of your principle and disinterestedness?”

“What you choose,” said Mr Cheviott, bitterly. “It can matter little. But you make one mistake. I never gave you *any* reasons for my interference. I told you I had acted for the best, and I madly imagined it possible that having come to know me, *you* might have begun to believe it possible that my conduct was honest and disinterested. I had not intended to confess to you what I have done. My object in speaking to you again was purely—believe me or not, as you like—to try to gain for my sister the hope of sometimes seeing you. I was going on to volunteer to absent myself

from Romary, if personal repugnance to me was the obstacle, if only you would sometimes come. But I am only human; your words and your tone drove me into what I little intended—into what I must have been mad to say to *you*."

He stopped; he had spoken in a strangely low tone, but he had spoken very fast, and Mary's first sensation when his voice ceased was of bewilderment approaching almost to a kind of mental chaos, and of vague but galling self-reproach. But for a moment she said nothing, and Mr Cheviott was already turning away, when she called him back, faintly and irresolutely, but he heard her still.

"I don't know what to say," she said, brokenly. "I suppose I have said what I should not. I suppose I let my anger get the better of me. But I have never learned to dissimulate. Your words seemed to me, remembering what I did, an insult. I suppose I *should* have thanked you for—for the honour. But it has all been a mistake. You must see I could never have cared for you—*never*; were I ten times satisfied you had done Lilias no wrong, your conduct to her remains the same. But I wish to be reasonable. Let us forget all this, and, so far as can be, let us part friends."

She held out her hand, this time in vain.

"No," said Mr Cheviott. "I cannot shake hands on such terms. I run no risk of hurting your feelings by saying so; you, I know, do not attach much consequence to so empty a ceremony, but unfortunately I do. Goodbye, Miss Western."

He raised his hat and turned away.

When he was fairly out of sight, Mary sat down on the short grass that bordered the wood-path, leaned her head against the stump of an old tree standing close by and burst into tears. Then she took her flowers, the pretty, winsome things she had plucked so carefully, gathered them all into one heap, and, rising from her seat, moved by some sudden instinct of remorse, threw them—threw them, with all the strength of her vigorous young arms, away, back among the underwood and grassy tangle where they had grown.

"Primroses and violets," she said as she did so, "I shall never be able to endure the sight of you again."

Chapter Twenty Four.

Et Tu, Brute!

> "... How strange the tangle is!
> What old perplexity is this?"
>
> *Songs of Two Worlds*.

And Alys did not get her flowers, poor girl. Nor was she told the reason why. But late that last evening, when the packing was done, and the various little personalities that, even in an enforced sojourn of the kind, are sure to collect about people, above all about people of individuality and refinement, were all collected together and put away, and the farm-house rooms had resumed their ordinary consistent bareness, Mary sat down by Alys's bed and put her arms round the girl's neck and kissed her with a clinging tenderness that brought the tears to Alys's eyes.

"Dear Alys," she said, softly, "I want to thank you."

"To thank *me*," replied Alys, in astonishment. "Oh, no, Mary, all the thanks are, *must* be, on one side."

"No," said Mary, "I have many things to thank you for. You have been so patient and sweet, and so grateful for the little I have been able to do for you. And one thing I may thank you for certainly."

"What?" whispered Alys.

"For loving me," said Mary. "You have done me good, Alys. I was growing, not perhaps exactly selfish, but self-centred. I put my own home and my own people before everything else, in a narrow-minded way, and I fancied that people who were different from us externally—people who had had fewer struggles and more luxuries than my parents—must of necessity be narrow-minded and self-absorbed and unsympathising. Alys, it is absurd, but do you know I do believe I have myself been growing into the very thing I so detested—I do believe, in a sense, I was encouraging a kind of class prejudice?"

Alys listened attentively.

"I see what you mean," she said. "Mary, you are awfully honest."

"I don't know," replied Mary, vaguely. "Self-deception must be a kind of dishonesty."

Alys hardly heard her. She was watching eagerly for the upshot of this confession, yet afraid of startling away the concession she was hoping for by any premature congratulation on her friend's altered views. So she lay, without speaking, till at last Mary's silence roused her to new misgiving.

"Won't you go on with what you were saying?" she ventured at last.

"What was it?" said Mary.

"Oh! about your being glad you had got to know us, and—"

"Nay," exclaimed Mary, "I am sure I did not say *that*, Alys. What I said was that I thanked *you* for showing me how loving and sympathising you are, and that being prosperous and rich and courted and all that, as you are, need not necessarily make one narrow-minded and selfish."

"Well," said Alys, "it comes to much the same thing. I don't see why you need have flown up so at my way of putting it."

"Because," said Mary, with vehemence, disproportionate to the occasion, "I was speaking of and to you, Alys—you alone."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Alys, "I would like *my* praise far, far more, Mary, if you would give poor Laurence a little bit of it too. He deserves it, while I—"

"Never mind," said Mary, uneasily. "Don't let us get into a discussion, dear Alys."

"I am sure I don't want to discuss anything except the end of your sentence. Do finish, Mary. Now that you have got to know *me*, or like *me* a little, you are not going to keep to your horrible resolution?"

Mary's face clouded.

"I see, what you mean," she said. "Oh! Alys, I am sorry to pain you, and very, very sorry not to be able to look forward to seeing you again, but I cannot change. I cannot—"

Alys leaned forward and put her hand over Mary's mouth.

"No," she said, "I won't let you repeat that. I know what is coming, 'I cannot under any circumstances whatever imagine myself, etc.' No, Mary, you are not to say that. It is a sort of tempting Providence to be obstinate. Fancy now what might happen. Suppose I get much worse, Mary,—suppose that great London doctor that Laurence is going to have down to see me, says I can't get better—that I am going to die—wouldn't you come to Romary then, to say good-bye, Mary?"

Mary turned away her head and sighed deeply.

"I was not going to say what you thought, Alys," she said, at length. "I was only going to say that I cannot see any probability of my ever going to you at Romary. If you ever marry, Alys—I should not say that; you are sure to marry —*when* you do, I shall go to see you in your own home, if you still care to have me, and if your husband has no objection."

"But yours, Mary? What about his objections or non-objections?" said Alys.

"They will never exist, for there will never be such a person," said Mary, calmly. "It was settled—oh, I can't tell you how long ago, always, I think—in all our family conclaves there was never a dissentient voice on the subject—that I was to be an old maid. I am thoroughly cut out for it. Any one can see that. 'Dans mon coeur il n'y a point d'amour' of *that* kind, certainly," she hummed, lightly.

"But, but, Mary," said Alys, "finish the verse."

"How do *you* know it?" said Mary. "It's an old Norman or Breton song. Mother sang it when she was a girl."

"I *do* know the second line, and that is all that matters," said Alys, sagely. "Well, good-night, Mary. You are not quite as naughty as you have been, but that is the best I can say for you. However, I shall live in hope. But I am awfully dull, Mary. And how merry we were last night! It is too bad of Laurence to have gone over to Romary so late to-night, just when he might have known our—at least my spirits would need cheering. You, of course, have the getting back to your beloved people to look forward to."

And, two mornings after this, Mary woke to find herself in her own familiar room at the Rectory. What a dream the last fortnight seemed! And what a long time ago appeared now the day of Alys Cheviott's accident! Spring had come on fast since then. The leaves of the creeper round Mary's window were beginning to peep in and to be visible as she lay in bed, the birds' busy twitter and the early sunlight told that the world was waking up once more to approaching summer. How home-like and peaceful it seemed! yet Mary could not feel as delighted to be at home again as she had expected.

"I am anxious about Alys, I suppose," she said to herself, "and sorry to have been obliged to disappoint her. If she knew, what *would* she think or feel? would she ever wish to see me again? I hardly think so, and I could never be at ease in her presence. Another reason in favour of my decision. Yet I wish I could have avoided saying some of the things I did—even to *him*. Oh, if only I could forget all about it!"

For, notwithstanding all the strength of mind she brought to bear on the subject, that scene in the wood Mary could not succeed in banishing from her thoughts. Over and over again it rose up before her, leaving behind it each time, it seemed to her, a sharper sting of pain, a more humiliating sense of self-reproach. Yet how and where had she been wrong? Was it not better to be honest at all costs? Over and over again she determined to banish it finally from her memory, but no sooner had she done so than some trifle—the sight of a primrose in Francie's hat, or some apparently entirely disconnected allusion, would bring it back again as vividly as ever, and, with a certain fascination that Mary could not explain to herself, every word that Mr Cheviott had said, every change of expression that had come over his face, would repeat themselves to her imagination. Was it true? she asked herself, was it true what he had said to her?—but for her previous knowledge of his real character, but for the deep-dyed "prejudice," as he had called it, against him in her mind, could she ever have grown to care for this man? *Surely* not—yet why did this assertion of his recur to her so often, and not altogether in the sense of re-arousing her indignation?

"He is like two people in one," she said to herself, "but as to which is the real one, facts, fortunately, leave me in no doubt. And *yet* I am sorry to have wounded him so deeply, little as he cared for the feelings of others."

"You look tired, Mary dear," said her mother, when, after the early Rectory breakfast, Mary was preparing as usual to collect her sisters and little Brooke for lessons in the school-room. "Don't you think you might leave the children to manage for themselves one other day? You need rest, I am sure, after all you have gone through."

"No, mother dear, I am really not tired," said Mary. "I only feel rather—I don't know how—dissipated, I suppose, unsettled, or whatever you like to call it."

"That only means tired, dear," repeated her mother, fondly, so fondly—for Mrs Western was not, as a rule, demonstrative with her children—that Mary felt angry with herself for not being able to respond more gratefully to her solicitude, for, in fact, feeling rather irritated than soothed by it.

"But I have *really* had nothing to tire me, mother," she persisted. "Alys Cheviott was as considerate as possible, and, except the first two nights, I had no watching or anxiety. It was hardly to be called 'nursing'."

"Perhaps not," allowed Mrs Western, "but there was the constraint and discomfort of the life—above all, the enforced intercourse with that disagreeable man—that Mr Cheviott, whom you dislike so. I really cannot tell you, Mary dear, how much I have admired your unselfishness and moral courage during this trying time. But you will never regret it. Who knows how much good you may have done that poor girl for all her life—poor I cannot but call her, notwithstanding her riches and position, and everything—fatherless and motherless, and with such a cold, selfish brother as her only protector."

"He is a very good brother to her, mother. I cannot but confess that I was astonished at his devotion and tenderness to her, and they are deeply attached to each other," said Mary, her colour rising a little as she spoke. "I am afraid, mother, I sometimes am too wholesale in my opinion of people. Once I take a dislike to them it is difficult for me to see any good in them. I want to correct this in myself."

"You are so honest, dear," said her mother.

"And as for my doing good to Alys Cheviott," continued Mary, "it seems to me rather that she might do *me* good. She is so simple, so unselfish and unspoiled."

"Anyway, I am glad they were considerate, and, I suppose, grateful," said Mrs Western. "How, indeed, could they be otherwise?"

And Mary went off to her pupils.

But lessons seemed rather heavy work this morning. The fortnight's interregnum had been far from salutary in its effects. Alexa was languid and uninterested, Josey pert and self-willed, Brooke and Francie quarrelsome and careless. And, lessons over, there was no Lilias to whom to resort for ever ready sympathy. Mary felt strangely dull and dispirited. She missed Alys's bright yet gentle companionship, Mr Cheviott's constant watchful attention, of which at the time she had hardly been conscious. She missed the quiet and refinement which had of late surrounded her even in the homely farm-house. Not that "home" was unrefined in the coarser sense of the word, but it seemed strangely full of small worries and irksomenesses and "fuss," and Mary hated herself for feeling less heartily ready than usual to take her share in them. She looked round her with vague dissatisfaction and misgiving. How hard a thing it was, after all, to be poor! How difficult, increasingly difficult, it appeared to bring up these younger girls as could be desired! The boys must make their own way in the world; but with regard to Alexa and Josey, there was no doubt that they stood at a disadvantage both as to the present and the future.

"Lilias and I had our own places in the family even at their ages," thought Mary; "but the third and fourth daughters of a poor clergyman—what are they to do? If it were possible to give them a couple of years' training at some first-rate school they might be fitted to be governesses. But such a thing is not to be thought of," and, with a sigh, she turned to the letter to Lilias which was costing her unusual pains from her excessive anxiety not to let it seem less cheerful in tone than usual. "What *would* Lilias say if she knew?" she said to herself as she wrote. "I do not think I need ever tell her, or any one, that is one comfort, and—oh, if only I could forget all about it myself!"

The next morning brought a letter from Lilias. It came, as the letters generally did, at breakfast-time, an hour at which there was but little possibility of privacy for any of the Rectory party. Mary opened, but merely glanced at it, and put it in her pocket to read when alone.

"From Lilias," she said, calmly. "It is a long letter. I will read it afterwards. She begins by saying she is quite well, and sends her love to everybody, so no one need feel anxious about her."

"You *might* read it now, Mary," said Josey. "It would be something to talk about. You forget how dull it is for Alexa and me—never any change from year's end to year's end—while Lilias and you go about paying visits. The least you can do is to amuse us when you return, and you haven't told us a *thing* about the Cheviotts."

"Josephine, be quiet at once," said Mr Western, severely, and to every one's surprise. "That shrill voice of yours seems to stab my head through and through."

"Have you a headache, father dear?" said Mary, with concern. Such an occurrence was a rare one.

"Not exactly, but my head seems oppressed and uneasy. I long for quiet," said the Rector, nervously passing his hand across his forehead. "Lilias—did you say there was a letter from her? How is she? When does she return?"

"Return?" repeated Mary, in surprise. "Why, dear papa, she has not been away a fortnight yet! The London doctors

cannot yet say how soon Mr Greville is to go to Hastings, and they mean to stay there a month at least.”

“Ah, yes, to be sure. I am glad she is enjoying herself, poor child, but I shall be glad to have her back again,” said Mr Western, vaguely, but with a slight confusion of manner which struck Mary as unlike his usual clear way of expressing himself. She put it all down to the “headache,” however, as her mother said he had been suffering a little from something of the kind lately. And by the afternoon he seemed quite like himself again.

It was not till after morning school hours that conscientious Mary felt herself free to read the precious letter. She had looked forward to it as a treat all the morning, and had, from the thoughts of it, gathered extra patience with which to deal with her somewhat unruly pupils. They got on rather better this morning, however.

“I shall get them into shape again in a little,” said Mary, to herself, as at last she sat down on the low window-seat in her own room at leisure to read all that Lilias had to say; “but it certainly does not do for me to leave home even for a few days. Even if *I* could have agreed to go to Romary sometimes, that is another reason against it. And, besides, the life there would spoil me for my home duties.”

A vision, a tempting vision, came over her for a moment of how pleasant a thing “the life there” must be. The quiet and regularity of a well-trained and well-managed household were in themselves a delightful thing to one of Mary’s naturally methodical and orderly nature; then the *prettiness* of the surroundings, the gardens, and the flowers, and the tastefully furnished rooms, the pictures, and the books, and the pleasant voices whose tones seemed still to ring in her ears. What pleasant talks they could have had, they three together; how kind and attentive to every wish or fancy of hers they would have been; how they would have fêted and made much of her in return for her easy task of nursing Alys, had she but “given in” and agreed to forsake her colours! Mary was by no means indifferent, in her own way, to the agreeableness of much that would have surrounded her position as a guest at Romary; she was a perfectly healthy-natured girl, well able to enjoy when enjoyment came in her way, and a girl too of barely one-and-twenty. She gave a little sigh as she re-opened her letter, hoping, in some vague, half-unconscious way, therein to find consolation and support and tacit approval—ignorant though Lilias was of all details of the sturdy stand she had made.

But she was disappointed.

The letter was a nice letter, a very nice letter, as affectionate, sympathising, and sister-like as a letter could be. Written too in very good spirits, it was evident to see; the very result that Mary had so hoped for from Lilias’s visit seemed already to be accomplished *à merveille*. Why was not Mary pleased?

“What an inconsistent, selfish creature I must be,” she said to herself, when she had finished it. “Why am I not glad, delighted, to see that Lilias is happy again? If she did *not* care much for Captain Beverley, if I was mistaken in imagining her whole heart to be given to him, should I not rejoice? It does not alter *my* position, it does not in the least condone the cruel interference that might have ruined her life.”

She turned again to a passage in which Lilias spoke of the Cheviotts.

“Now that you are at home again,” wrote Miss Western, “you will have more time—at least, you will feel freer to tell me all about the Cheviotts. For it always seems to me a mean sort of thing to sit down and write elaborate pulling to pieces of people whose hospitality one is in the act of receiving, even though in your case the receiving it was certainly enforced and not voluntary. I cannot help thinking Miss Cheviott an unusually lovable girl, and I shall not be at all sorry to hear that you have got rid of your terrible prejudice against the brother; I feel so sure that it is to a great extent undeserved.”

Mary turned over the page impatiently.

“I wish people would not write about what they don’t understand,” she said to herself. “How can Lilias’s ‘feeling sure’ affect the question one way or the other?”

Then glancing again at the letter, she saw that there was a long postscript on a separate sheet yet unread.

“I am forgetting to tell you,” it said, “that I do believe I have come across those cousins of mother of whom you heard something from those Miss Morpeths when you were staying at the Grevilles. It was at the doctor’s. I had gone there with Mr Greville, as he hated going alone, and Mrs Greville had a cold. While we were in the waiting-room, an elderly, very nice-looking lady came in with a tall, thin, *dreadfully* delicate-looking boy of about seventeen. As Mr Greville was first summoned to the doctor, he happened to say as he left the room, ‘I shall only be a very few minutes this morning, Miss Western.’ Immediately the lady turned to me and asked me very nicely if I happened to be any relation of the Westerns of Hathercourt, and did I know Miss Cheviott of Romary? I was so astonished, but, of course, answered civilly. She seemed so pleased, and so did the boy, poor fellow, when I told them who I was. Mr Greville was back before there was time for any more explanation. But she gave me her card—‘Mrs Brabazon’—and asked where I was staying, and said she would hope to see me before we left town. The boy’s name she said was *Anselm Brooke*, and her own maiden name was Brooke, so they must be mamma’s people. Use your own discretion as to telling mother or not. It may only revive painful associations with her if nothing more comes of it.”

“It is curious,” thought Mary. “I think I may as well tell mother about it. It will give them all something else to talk of besides my adventures at the farm.”

Mrs Western was interested, in her quiet way, in Lilias’s news. Mr Western, somewhat to Mary’s surprise, took it up much more eagerly.

“I should be very thankful, relieved I may say, if some renewal of intercourse could take place with your mother’s relations,” he said when alone with Mary, the subject happening to be alluded to.

“Would you, papa?” said Mary. “I don’t feel as if I cared to know them in the least. We have been very happy and content without them all our lives.”

“Ah, yes! Ah, yes!” said her father. “But who knows, my dear, how long the present state of things may last? Were anything happening to me, I should leave you all strangely friendless and unprotected. The thought of it comes over me very grievously sometimes, and yet I hardly see what I could have done. Basil is so young—a few years hence I trust he may be beginning to get on—but it will be up-hill work.”

“But Lilias and I are strong and ‘capable,’ father,” said Mary, encouragingly. “*We* could work if needs were, for mother and the younger ones. Besides, you are not an old, or even an elderly man yet, papa.”

“I am not as young and by no means as strong as I have been,” said Mr Western with a sigh. “I don’t like this feeling in my head. I have never had anything like it before, and it makes me fidgety, though I have not said anything to make your mother uneasy. Perhaps it will be better now that I have spoken of it; it may be more nervousness than anything else.”

“I trust so, dear father,” said Mary, anxiously. “Are you not glad to have me back again? Didn’t you miss me dreadfully?” she added, trying to speak more lightly.

“Very much indeed, my dear. I dare say it affected my spirits more than I realised at the time. Yet I could wish, as I was saying, that all of you, you and Lilias especially, had more friends, more outside interests. I hope we have not been selfish and short-sighted in the way we have brought you up—keeping you too much to ourselves, as it were;” again Mr Western sighed. “It is possible, I suppose, to be *too* devoid of social ambition. By the way,” he went on, “I think that Mr Cheviott must be a very fine fellow. People took up an unreasonable prejudice against him in the country at first from his manner, which, I believe, is cold and stiff. But they are finding themselves mistaken. He must be exceeding clever, and, what is better, thoroughly right-minded. I have been very much pleased by some things I have heard of him lately; he has shown himself so liberal and yet sensible in his dealings with his tenantry.”

“Indeed,” said Mary. She was pleased to see her father roused to his usual healthy interest in such matters, yet wished devoutly the model proprietor in question had not been the master of Romary.

“That place has been grossly mismanaged in the old days,” continued Mr Western. “But it will be a very different story now. How I wish we had a squire of that kind here, there would be some hope then of doing practical and lasting good.”

“Still no squire is better than a bad one,” said Mary. “True, very true. How did you like Mr Cheviott, Mary? I was just thinking I should be rather pleased to make friends with him. He might be a good friend to the boys some day, and no one could say we had *courted* the acquaintance in the way your mother and I have always so deprecated.”

“No,” said Mary, feebly.

“Coming in such an altogether unexpected way, you see,” pursued Mr Western, who seemed “by the rule of contrary,” thought Mary, to be working himself up to increasing interest on the subject she was so anxious to avoid, “I should not have, by any means, the objection I have always had to such an acquaintance. They are sure to call—in fact, they cannot possibly avoid doing so.”

“I don’t know,” Mary moved herself to say, “I *hardly* think they will.”

“It will be exceedingly, strangely uncourteous if they do not,” said her father, with unusual warmth. “Surely, my dear, you were not so ill-advised as to say anything to discourage their doing so,” he added, in a tone of most unwonted irritability.

“I am afraid what I said may have *indirectly* tended to do so,” said poor Mary, feeling as if she were ready on the spot to run all the way to Romary and back to beg Mr Cheviott to call on her father at once.

“You were very foolish, very foolish indeed,” said Mr Western, severely. “It is pride, and very false pride, that is at the root of such things, and I warn you that much future suffering is in store for you if you encourage such a spirit.”

“I can’t imagine any future suffering much worse than the present one of having displeased you,” said Mary, struggling hard to keep back the tears that would come. “But indeed, father, I thought I was doing what you and mamma would like.”

“Your mother has been mistaken before now in such matters,” said Mr Western. “However, there is no more to be said about it. I confess I should have enjoyed seeing more of a man of Mr Cheviott’s character and talents, and it is mortifying at my age to be placed in the position of being unable to receive a friendly call from a neighbour.”

“But I did not put it in that way, papa, indeed I did not,” said Mary. “Oh, papa, cannot you trust me? If there is anything I have thoroughly at heart it is that you should receive all the respect and consideration you so entirely deserve.”

“Ah, well, ah, well, my dear, say no more about it. You have made a mistake, that is all. Do not distress yourself any more about it,” said Mr Western, with some return to his ordinary equanimity. But he pressed his hand wearily against his head as he spoke with the action that was becoming habitual to him, and Mary’s heart felt very heavy. On all sides nothing but reproach. Where or how had she done wrong? *Was* it all personal pride and offended feeling that had actuated her conduct, under the guise of unselfish devotion? No, take herself to task sharply as she would, her conscience would not say so.

“Though there must have been a mingling of personal feeling and wounded pride, far more than I was conscious of,”

she said, regretfully. "And now it is too late. I have myself placed a far more hopeless barrier between us by the scornful way I rejected what—what he said to me, what, indeed, I do not believe he ever would have said had I not in a way goaded him to it. Oh, yes, I must have been wrong—if only I could clearly see how!"

She was too young to have had much experience of that terrible longing, that anguish of yearning "to see how" we have been wrong; too young to understand that, were that cry answered at our entreaty, half our hard battle would be over; too young to have any but the vaguest conception of the bewildering complication of motive in ourselves, as in others, which at times makes "right and wrong" seem but meaningless jargon in our ears, idle words to be presumptuously discarded with other worn-out childishness. As if our childhood were ever over in this world!—as if the existence of eternal truth depended on our understanding of it!

Mr Western's headache increased to severity that afternoon, and Mary took all the blame of it on to herself, notwithstanding her mother's consolations and assurances that it would pass off again as it had done before.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Turn of the Wheel.

"This changing, and great variance
Of earthly states, up and down,
Is *not but* casualty and chance
(As some men say is without *ressown*)."

Robert Henrysoun.

It did "pass off" again. The next day Mr Western seemed nearly as well as usual, though to Mary's eyes there was a tired and unrestful expression on his face with which she could not feel familiar.

"He is *not* looking well. He does not seem like his old self, I am certain," she said in her own mind over and over again. But what could be done? He declared there was nothing really wrong; the very mention of sending for Mr Brandreth irritated him unaccountably, and he was most urgent with Mary to say nothing to arouse her mother's anxiety. So the utmost Mary could do was to please him in all the small ways ready affection can always suggest, to exert herself to be even more cheerful and entertaining than her wont.

She wrote to Lilias, begging her to let most of her letters be to her father, and urging upon her the desirability of meeting with all possible cordiality Mrs Brabazon's friendly overtures. But for some days Lilias had nothing more to tell of the new-found cousins.

A week passed, a week of pretty hard work for Mary. What with "the children's" extra calls upon her patience and attention, her anxiety about her father, and unusual efforts to seem cheerful and light-hearted, its close found her really tired and dispirited.

"Far more tired than with nursing Alys," she said to herself, when on Saturday afternoon she was taking Brooke and Francie a walk, thankful to know that the more troublesome members of her charge were safely disposed of for the rest of the day in a holiday expedition to old Mr Halkin's farm. "That was play compared with the worry and fret of the last few days. And why should I feel it so? There is something not right about me just now. *I* am changed, though I blame the children. I have grown captious and discontented. I do believe that fortnight at the farm spoiled me—the being thanked and praised for everything I did. What a silly goose I am, after all! How I do wish I could hear how Alys is—I do think she might write again, but I suppose it is my own doing," with a little sigh.

For two or three pencilled words from Miss Cheviott, saying merely that they had got safe to Romary, that she had borne the drive pretty well, but was woefully dull without Mary, were all the news Mary had had of her late patient.

Her thoughts were interrupted by little Francie. She had been running on in front of her brother, but turning suddenly, fled back to Mary in alarm.

"What's the matter, dear?" her sister exclaimed, for the child was white and trembling.

"A horse," whispered Francie, "another naughty horse coming so fast, Mary, and it makes me think of that dedful day."

Francie's fears had exaggerated facts. The horse, coming up behind them on the soft turf at the side of the path, which deadened the sound of its approach, was proceeding at an ordinary pace, which slackened somewhat when its rider caught sight of the little party in front of him. Slackened, but that was all. Mr Cheviott, for it was he, passed them at a gentle trot, just lifting his hat to Mary as he did so. Mary's face flushed as she bowed in return.

"I do think," she said to herself, "as we are *not* to be friends, it would be much better taste for him not to come our way at all. It will annoy poor father exceedingly, in his nervous state, to hear of Mr Cheviott almost, as it were, passing our door. But, of course, he may have business at the farm."

And she called to Brooke and Francie, volunteering to tell them a story, and tried her best bravely to force her mind away from the sore subject. But a surprise was in store for her.

More than an hour later, when she and the children were close to the Rectory gate on their return home, little Brooke, who was of an observant turn of mind, called her attention to some fresh hoof marks on the gravel drive.

“See, Mary,” he said, “some one’s been here since we came out. I wonder if it was that horse we met, that the gentleman belonged to that bowed to you?”

“That belonged to the gentleman, you mean,” said Mary, laughing in spite of herself. “Oh! no, I am sure it has not been he, Brooke dear.”

But Mary was wrong. Her mother met her at the door, her face bright and interested, her hands filled with some lovely flowers.

“Mr Cheviott has been here,” she said, eagerly, “and it has done your father so much good. He stayed fully half an hour with him, and talked so pleasantly, your father says, and he brought these flowers for you from his sister with a note. What a pity you were out!”

“I dare say it was quite as well,” said Mary, calmly. “Papa has had him all to himself, and he enjoys a quiet talk with one person alone just now. I am really very glad Mr Cheviott called, as it has pleased papa.”

And in her heart she could not deny that this was behaving with “something like” generosity!

Alys’s note was but a few words—she was not yet allowed to write more, she said—but few as they were, the words were full of affection and gratitude. The London doctor had not yet been, but was expected next week. In the mean time she had to lie perfectly still, and it *was* rather dull, though “poor Laurence” did his best. And she ended by hoping that Mary would think of her while arranging the flowers. Mary certainly did so—and with feelings of increased affection, not unmingled however with the pain of the old vague self-reproach.

For some days Mr Western seemed quite to have recovered his usual strength and spirits, and Mary was glad to be able to write cheerfully to Lilias, who had been threatening a premature return home, had the news thence not improved.

“Papa is better,” she announced to Mrs Greville, two days after their arrival at Hastings, when the afternoon post brought Mary’s letter.

“It seems to me,” she went on, after receiving Mrs Greville’s congratulations on the good accounts,—“it seems to me that it is far more his spirits than anything else that are affected.”

“But at his age that is not a good sign,” said Mrs Greville.

“I suppose not,” said Lilias, thoughtfully. “Mary says he has begun to think and speak so anxiously about our future in case of anything happening to him.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mr Greville, complacently, “that’s the worst of a large family.”

“The worst and the best too,” said Lilias. “If papa’s health did break down he would have us all to work for him.”

Mr Greville smiled—a not unkindly but somewhat dubious smile.

“Easier said than done, my dear girl,” he said. He rather liked to provoke Lilias into a battle of words, she grew so eager and looked so pretty when she got excited; he would not have objected to a daughter, or even a couple of daughters like her, though the bare thought of all the younger Westerns in the overflowing Rectory made him shiver.

But before Lilias had time to take up her weapons there occurred a sudden diversion. A ring at the front door bell, which, while talking they had not noticed, was followed by the announcement, by Mrs Greville’s maid, that a lady was asking for Miss Western.

“A lady for Miss Western,” repeated Mrs Greville. “Show her in then, Miller, at once.”

But the lady, it appeared, declined to be “shown in.” She had begged that Miss Western would speak to her for a moment in the hall, not feeling sure that there might not be some mistake.

“What a queer message,” said Mrs Greville. “Take care, Lilias; it is probably some begging person.”

“No,” said Lilias, with a sudden inspiration, as she turned to leave the room, “I don’t think it is. I do believe it is Mrs Brabazon.”

Her intuition was correct. Mrs Brabazon it proved to be. Mrs Brabazon on foot, with none of the *apanage* of the Brooke wealth about her except her richly comfortable attire and general air of prosperity and well-being. Only her kindly eyes had a somewhat careworn expression, and there were lines in her face which told of past and present anxiety. She received Lilias with cordiality almost approaching affection.

“I am so glad it is you,” she said as she shook hands with Lilias. “I was so afraid it might be some other Miss Western, though the name is uncommon, not like *Weston*. Do you know what I did? Fancy anything so stupid! I lost your address, which you remember I noted down on a bit of paper in Dr —’s waiting-room. I could not remember the name of the friends you were staying with, and of course hunting for you in all the hotels in London would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack. And I have so little time, I am always so hurried to get back to Anselm when I am out. It was not till the day before we left town that it occurred to me to try to trace you through Dr —, and when I went to his house for the purpose, he was off to the country! Oh! you don’t know how vexed I was.”

“And how did you find me out here?” asked Lilias, a little bewildered by Mrs Brabazon’s unconcealed eagerness to prosecute the acquaintance so unexpectedly begun.

"By the local paper—the visitor's guide, or whatever they call it. Of course I was not looking for *you*, I had no reason to suppose you were here; but the moment I saw the name Western I felt sure it must be you, and Anselm felt sure that Greville was the name of your friends. It really seems quite—what people call providential, though, somehow, I never like using the expression in that way."

"And how is your nephew—young Mr Brooke?" said Lilias.

Mrs Brabazon shook her head.

"It is Basil over again—ah, it is heart-breaking work," she said, sadly. "But I forget, I am speaking to you as if you knew all about us."

"Somehow I feel as if I did," said Lilias, "the familiar names—one of my brothers is Basil, and another Anselm Brooke, but we call him Brooke always."

"And which is Basil?"

"The eldest," said Lilias. "He has got a berth, as he calls it, in an office in the city. It is a good opening, I believe, and he will probably be sent out to India in a year or two. But in the mean time, of course, he gets very little, and—and it keeps us very strait at home," she added, with a smile.

Mrs Brabazon listened with unfeigned interest.

"I must hear all about them," she said. "But not today. And I am keeping you out here in the passage all this time."

"That is my fault," said Lilias. "Won't you come in? I *know* Mrs Greville would be pleased to see you." (A thoroughly true assertion, as Mrs Greville was already on the verge of that peculiar phase of *ennui* so apt to seize on active practical people when away from "home" and its duties, stranded in a strange place where they know no one, and never go out without the consciousness of the terrible word "visitors" branded on their foreheads.)

"Not to-day, thank you, my dear. I *must* run home," said Mrs Brabazon. "But tell me what day will you spend with us? Can you come to-morrow? We are at the —."

Lilias might have hesitated to accept *too* readily the invitation, however cordial, of the rich relations who for so many long years had ignored Margaret Western and her children; but the influence of Mary's earnest advice was too strong upon her to make her dream of holding back. Besides, it was impossible to look in Mrs Brabazon's face and doubt her good intentions.

"Thank you," the girl replied. "I should like to come very much. But I think I must return here early, the evenings are so dull for Mr and Mrs Greville."

"Of course," said Mrs Brabazon. "And Anselm is always so tired in the evening. The day-time is the best for us. I will send the carriage for you at half-past twelve—will that do?—and it shall bring you back again at four or five, or any time you like. Possibly Anselm may be going a drive, and would come round this way for you. And pray apologise to Mrs Greville for my unceremonious behaviour."

"Thank you," said Lilias. "Yes, that will suit me perfectly. I shall be ready at half-past twelve."

"Good-bye, then, for the present. I shall have a great deal to talk to you about to-morrow. I want to hear *everything* about your brothers and sisters and everybody," said Mrs Brabazon, as she shook hands in farewell.

Lilias went back to the drawing-room to tell her surprising news to her friends. Mrs Greville was full of interest and excitement, Mr Greville somewhat inclined to question the advisability of this sudden friendship.

"Have you ever heard your mother speak of this Mrs Brabazon? Are you quite sure she is what she represents herself to be?" he said, doubtfully.

Lilias smiled.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I am quite sure of that. Mamma remembered Mrs Brabazon by name. She was a Miss Brooke, and her father and my grandfather were first cousins. These Brookes are the elder branch."

"But who are they?—I mean, how many are there of them?" asked Mrs Greville. "Why is Mrs Brabazon always with them?"

"The mother is dead, I am sure of that," said Lilias, "and I *think* Mrs Brabazon has kept house for Mr Brooke since her death. It was Mary that told us all we knew, and she heard it from some ladies she met at your house."

"Of course," exclaimed Mrs Greville, in a tone of relief, "the Morpeths—you remember, Charles? Oh, yes, of course, it is all right. Frances Morpeth was always saying how nice Mrs Brabazon was. I am sure you are quite right to cultivate the acquaintance, Lilias. Don't you agree with me, Mr Greville?"

"I suppose so," said Mr Greville, lazily. "But I hope the cultivation of it will not absorb you altogether, Lilias. It would be wretchedly dull in these stupid lodgings without you, my dear, to argue with and contradict, and look at."

"You need not be afraid. I am not going to desert you," said Lilias, laughing, as she left the room.

"That girl really grows prettier and prettier," said Mr Greville. "She is much more amusing, too, than her sister Mary. I fancy Mary is something of a prig; there was no getting a smile out of her the last time she was over with us. Lilias is

brighter than ever I knew her, full of fun and pleased with everything.”

“She is very nice,” agreed Mrs Greville. “But they are both very nice. I am not at all sure but that it is Mary who has the lion’s share of the work at home. How pleased I shall be if anything comes of these new relations.”

“Umph,” said Mr Greville.

“Mr Brooke’s carriage” came for Miss Western at half past twelve. Whether “Mr Brooke” referred to the young man she had already seen, or to a father whom she had as yet heard nothing of, Lilias felt in some doubt. But before the day was over Mrs Brabazon’s extreme communicativeness had put her in full possession of the family history past and present, and had, besides, suggested hints which made the poor girl giddy with surprise and bewilderment, and an utterly novel sense of perplexity.

“I must consult some one,” she said to herself, when she got back to Mrs Greville’s lodgings. “I feel too confused and amazed to decide what to do. I had better tell the Grevilles, they are sensible and kind and really interested in us, and they will advise me as to whether I should write home about what I have heard.”

So to Mrs Greville’s inquiries as to how she had got on, what she had heard, etc, etc, Lilias was very ready to give most comprehensive answers.

“I got on very well indeed, thank you,” she said. “They were as cordial and kind as possible. Mr Brooke, Anselm’s father, is to be down here on Friday, and Mrs Brabazon wants me to spend Saturday with them to see him, and what’s more, she made me write from the hotel to Basil, to ask him to come to them from Saturday to Monday if he can get off, which I am sure he can. She told me to tell him she would ‘frank’ him both ways. Wasn’t that considerate, Mrs Greville?”

“*Very*,” replied Mrs Greville, heartily. “I am exceedingly glad to hear it.”

“I am sure Basil will come,” continued Lilias, “for I told him papa and mamma would wish it. But, oh! Mrs Greville, you will really think I am dreaming when I tell you what else Mrs Brabazon told me.”

She looked up in Mrs Greville’s face, her blue eyes bright with excitement, her cheeks glowing with eagerness. Even lazy Mr Greville’s curiosity was aroused.

“Why, let us guess,” he said, jokingly. “Is old Mr Brooke going to adopt you and make you his heiress? Why, you *would* be irresistible then, Lilias! But, by-the-bye, he has a son and heir, so it can’t be that.”

“No,” said Lilias, “not exactly. But it’s something quite as wonderful. What *do* you think Mrs Greville—Mrs Brabazon gave me to understand—in fact, she said so plainly—that after Anselm, Mr Brooke’s only remaining child, *mamma* is heir to all, or, at least, to a great part of their property.”

“Your mother!” exclaimed Mrs Greville, apparently too astonished to say more. Mrs Western, she knew, had been a governess when her husband fell in love with and married her, and though she had always known her to be what is vaguely termed “well-connected,” she had somehow never associated her with possible riches or “position;” she had, on the contrary, often annoyed the Western girls by a slight shade of patronage in her tone of speaking of their mother, whom she looked upon as an amiable, decidedly unsophisticated and unworldly woman—“sair hauden doun” by the small means and large family at the Rectory.

“Your mother!” she repeated.

But Mr Greville’s worldly wisdom prevented his losing his head at the news.

“*After* Mr Brooke’s son, you say,” he observed. “But that makes all the difference. Lots of people are next heir *but one* to a fortune without ever coming any nearer it. What’s to prevent this Mr Anselm marrying and having half a dozen sons and daughters of his own?”

“That is the thing,” said Lilias, “that—Anselm, I mean, is, of course, what the whole depends upon. Had he been strong and well we should probably never have heard or known of our—of mamma’s position. But—it seems so horrid to talk about it so coolly—Anselm will never grow up and marry, Mr Greville—he is only sixteen now—for he is dying.”

“Dear me, dear me,” said Mr Greville, “how very, very sad!”

But underneath his not altogether conventional expression of sympathy, Lilias could plainly detect the reflection—“That very decidedly alters the state of the case.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “it is terribly sad.”

“And under these circumstances—for you speak of this son as an only child, and he has probably long been delicate,” pursued Mr Greville—“how is it, may I ask, that these Brookes have never before looked up your mother? Their meeting with you now is purely accidental, and more Mrs Brabazon’s doing than Mr Brooke’s, it seems to me.”

“She explained all that,” said Lilias. “It is only very lately that Anselm has been an only child. There was quite a large family of them, and five, I think, lived to grow up. But one by one they have dropped off—all died of consumption like their mother. Basil, the second son, and apparently the strongest, lived to be six-and-twenty, and only died last year, having caught cold at some races—regimental races, I mean; he was in the Dragoons,” her colour rising unaccountably as she mentioned the regiment. “Before his death, Mrs Brabazon says, he was very anxious to look us up, for he never expected that Anselm would live long. But his father has been in such a broken-down state that Mrs Brabazon could never get him to take any interest in the matter. *She* does; it is wonderful how she can do so, I think,

when one remembers how she has seen her own nephews and nieces die one by one."

"There is no chance, I suppose, of old Mr Brooke's marrying again," said Mr Greville, consideringly.

"None whatever. He is nearly seventy, fifteen years older than his sister, and thoroughly aged by trouble, she says."

"Then the estates are entailed?"

"Principally, not altogether. But they have never been separated, and that was why Basil Brooke wanted his father to look us up. He was anxious that the alienable—is that the word?—part of the property should go with the entailed if the next heir were a desirable sort of person. For I must explain *Basil* is the real heir; mamma would only have a certain life-rent, a very ample one though, she could provide for all her other children out of it. The entail is somehow rather peculiar. Mrs Brabazon comes in for nothing, though so much nearer than mamma, because she has no son."

"And has your mother no idea of all this?" inquired Mr Greville.

"None whatever," said Lilias, decidedly. "She knew there had been an unprecedented number of deaths among the Brookes, but she has always had a vague idea there were scores of them left still. Then she never associated herself, being a woman, with the possibility of succession. There *were* several female Brookes only a few years ago, but of the three now left not one has a son, and they are all old, Mrs Brabazon the youngest. Now, dear Mr Greville, the question is this—what, or how much should I write home of all that I have heard?"

"Why not all?" said Mrs Greville.

"I don't know," said Lilias. "I suppose it is from a vague fear of rousing hopes that may possibly be—no, not disappointed, there hardly seems any chance of that—but deferred, *long* deferred, possibly. Anselm may live some months, but there can be no question of his recovery. He spoke to me about it himself; he is nearly as anxious for his father to recognise us and settle things as his brother Basil was, Mrs Brabazon says. But Mr Brooke may live a good many years, may quite possibly outlive papa," the girl added, with a sad little drop in her voice.

"It is of that I am thinking," said Mr Greville, turning to Lilias with a kind earnestness of manner contrasting strongly with his usual easy indifference. "By 'that' I mean your father's state of health and spirits. It seems to me it would be cruel to keep all this from him for fear of possible delay in its coming to pass. The relief to him of knowing you all would have something to look to in case of his death would be great enough to be almost like a new lease of life. And surely, if things were turning out as Mrs Brabazon says,—surely if any such need were to arise, Mr Brooke would do something for your mother at once."

"I *think* so," said Lilias. "Mrs Brabazon did not say so exactly, but she certainly inferred it. When speaking of Basil, and hearing of his being in an office in the City, she and Anselm looked at each other. 'That is just what we heard,' Mrs Brabazon said, and Anselm asked if he did not dislike the life very much. I said, 'No, not so very much—he was glad to be doing anything, though his great wish *had* been to go into the army,' and poor Anselm said he did not see why that might not still be arranged."

"Curious unselfishness, surely, to take such an interest in the one who, he believes, will eventually take his place," observed Mr Greville.

"Yes," said Lilias, "it struck me as strangely unselfish. But Mrs Brabazon says Anselm has never cared to live since his brother's death. Basil was the strong one, and Anselm leaned on him for everything, he has always been so delicate, 'living with a doom over him ever since he was born,' Mrs Brabazon called it."

"Consumption, I suppose?" said Mr Greville. "But your mother does not look as if she came from a consumptive family."

"No, it is not from the Brookes, but from their mothers side that they are consumptive," said Lilias. "The deaths among the other Brookes have been in many cases from accidental causes."

There fell a little pause; Lilias, eager for decision, was just about to break it with a repeated request for advice, when Mr Greville intercepted her intention.

"I'll tell you what I'd do in your place, my dear," he said, suddenly. "Write the whole to your sister Mary. She's as sensible a girl as one often meets with, and, being on the spot, can judge as to the effect the news is likely to have on your father."

"Yes," said Lilias, "I think I shall. She is on the spot, as you say, and could tell it less startlingly than I could write it. Besides," she added, with a slight touch of filial jealousy, "she can consult *mamma*."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Mrs Greville, in a conventionally proper tone.

"And, after all," said Mr Greville, a little maliciously, "'Mamma' is really the chief person concerned."

He was shrewd enough to suspect that notwithstanding his wife's honest pleasure in good fortune coming to her old friends, she would have preferred its not coming to them through their mother, the quiet, reserved woman whom she had somehow never been able quite to understand, who met her good-natured patronage with an unruffled dignity which always prevented hearty Mrs Greville from feeling quite at ease in her presence, though mentally considering her as rather a poor creature than otherwise.

It was late that night, or early, rather, the next morning, before Lilias went to bed. For, till her letter to Mary was written, she felt she could not rest. If only she could have written one other letter too!

"Oh, Arthur," she said to herself, "what good fortune your love seems to have brought us already! And should you become poor for my sake, what happiness if it should ever be in my power to restore to you any of what you may have sacrificed! My sisters and I would have daughters' portions, Mrs Brabazon said; and mine could not, at the worst, but be enough for us to live on. How strange that the Brookes should know him!"

For in the course of conversation that day, it had been mentioned, *à propos* of the Cheviotts' meeting with Mrs Brabazon in Paris, that Arthur Beverley and Basil Brooke had been brother officers and great friends.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Sir Ingram de Romary.

> "Raged the loud storm...
> The lightning o'er his path
> Flashed horribly—the thunder pealed—the winds
> Mournfully blew; yet still his desperate course
> He held; and fierce he urged his gallant steed
> For many a mile. The torrent lifted high its voice."
>
> *Lydford Bridge*.

Hathercourt letters *sometimes* came of an evening. When any thoughtful or good-natured neighbour happened to pass the Withenden post-office at or after three o'clock in the afternoon, it was a favourite attention to call for the Rectory letters. And sometimes it happened that the owners of the letters were not sorry to receive them in private, for even among the least reserved or secretive natures it is not always pleasant to have one's affairs discussed or guessed at by half a dozen inquisitive young people round a breakfast table.

Lilias had not written quite as much to Mary as usual of late, finding it difficult to make time for more than the almost daily lengthy and amusing letters she sent to her father. So when Mr Wills from the Edge, who, since her residence under his roof, had taken "Miss Mary" into special favour, called with a thick budget addressed in Lilias's hand, Mary felt surprised as well as delighted.

But her pleasure was somewhat tinged with alarm when she read the few words which, at the top of the sheet, first met her glance:

"Read this when you are alone, and likely to be uninterrupted. It is nothing wrong. Don't be frightened."

But frightened of course she was, and thankful to be able at once to satisfy herself.

"Nothing wrong!" It would have been difficult to judge from Mary's face, when she looked up after finishing the letter, what had been the nature of its contents. Like Lilias, her first impression was one of such utter bewilderment that it seemed as if her brain were refusing to take in the facts before her. She got up from her seat, pushed her hair back from her forehead, and tried to think reasonably and rationally. But it was difficult.

"Can I be dreaming?" she said to herself. "Mamma heir to all the Brookes' property! *Can* it be true? Oh, papa, poor papa—he must be told. Only last night again he was talking to me of his racking anxiety about our future; it is so impressed on him that he is not going to live long. And, as Lilias says, this news may be fresh life to him."

She sat down again, and for some minutes allowed her fancy to run riot in the new world so suddenly opened before her. To be rich! How extraordinary the idea seemed to her—no more furrows on her father's face of anxiety as to the future, no more daily worries for her mother about butchers' and grocers' books and servants' wages and everlasting new boots for the boys; plenty of books and music, and pretty dresses even, which in her heart Mary was by no means given to despise, for herself and Lilias; a first-rate governess for the girls—unlimited power as well as will to help their poorer neighbours—a pretty and luxurious home, something like Romary, perhaps! A flush rose to Mary's cheek at the thought—what would the Cheviotts think of this marvellous news? Would it increase or diminish the separation between them? Was it possible that even yet all might come right between Lilias and Arthur Beverley, or had Lilias quite left off caring for him? Was it—? Her speculations were suddenly brought to a close—a tap at the door reminded her of the present, and recalled her to the consideration of how and when she should first break this astonishing revelation to her parents.

"Consult with mamma," Lilias had said. Yes, of course, that was the first thing to be done. But to get hold of her mother alone for an uninterrupted talk was by no means so easy as it seemed, just now especially, since Mr Western's failing health had rendered him *exigeant* and capricious in a way quite foreign to his ordinary character.

The tap at the door was repeated.

"Come in," cried Mary, starting up as she spoke.

"How can I when the door is locked?" said her mother's voice.

Mary hastened to unlock it.

"I am so sorry for keeping you waiting," she said, penitently, as she did so. "I had no idea it was you, mother."

"I have been looking for you all over the house, and began to think you must have gone out," said her mother, in a slightly aggrieved tone. "It is nearly tea-time, and I want to hasten it, for possibly a cup of tea may do your father

good. It is about him I wanted you, Mary. He seems to me decidedly less well this evening, and I have just been wondering if we should not ask Dr Brandreth to come to see him to-morrow. The postman will be here directly. What do you think?”

“Would papa not mind?” said Mary, consideringly.

“I don’t know—that is the difficulty. He is always pleased to see Dr Brandreth, and often enjoys a talk with him; but whenever I have proposed it lately, he has begun worrying about the expense. Dr Brandreth is very kind—to do any good to your father I know he would gladly come for nothing at all; but your father would not have that. He has always paid our doctor’s charges to the full, and would be miserable not to do so. But it *can’t* be helped; we are certainly unusually short of money just now, but where your father is concerned, Mary dear, I seem to grow reckless.”

Mary had drawn her mother within the threshold of her room. They stood talking near the door-way in low tones.

“If *that* is the only hesitation,” the girl replied, eagerly, with a suppressed excitement in her voice which, had she been a whit less preoccupied, her mother could not but have noticed, “if that is the only difficulty, oh! mother dear, don’t hesitate an instant.”

Mrs Western sighed. Her heart only too thoroughly agreed with Mary, but, alas! to her life experience of poverty it seemed no longer unendurable and inconceivable, no longer anything but sadly inevitable that, even in such a matter as a question of health or sickness, possibly even of life or death, considerations of pounds, shillings, and pence should force themselves to the front. She only sighed and hesitated.

“Mother dear,” persisted Mary, “let me write to Dr Brandreth at once. I *know* it is right. And oh, mother, I have such wonderful news to tell you. I have a letter from Lilias—it was to read it quietly I had locked myself into my room. Mother I don’t know how to tell you what she has written about.”

Mrs Western’s mind was still running on the fors and againsts of sending for Dr Brandreth. She hardly took in the sense of Mary’s words.

“A letter from Lilias!” she repeated. “Poor Lily, I am glad she is enjoying herself. But, Mary, if you really think we should send for Dr Brandreth, there is no time to lose. Josey called out as I came up-stairs that she heard Jacob’s ‘make-ready’ whistle at the end of the lane, and when he whistles so far off it’s always a sign that he is in a hurry.”

“Then he must just not be in a hurry,” said Mary; “but all the same, mother, I’ll write the note at once. And, in the mean time, can’t you try to guess what Lilias’s letter is about?”

“It surely isn’t that she has met Captain Beverley again,” said Mrs Western, anxiously, “or *surely* not that any one else has taken a fancy to her? I never thought Lilias anything of a flirt, but—”

“Oh, no, mother dear, it is *nothing* of that sort,” said Mary, as she ran down-stairs before her mother. “Don’t make yourself uneasy. I will tell you all as soon as I have sent off the note to Dr Brandreth.”

“We must have tea as soon as possible,” replied her mother. “I will be getting it ready, Mary, and when you have sent the note, go into your father’s study and try to get him to come into the dining-room. It will be better for him than sitting alone in the study when he is feeling ill.”

“Very well,” said Mary. She could not bring herself to share her mother’s apprehensions, she was in a state of such excitement that the whole world seemed to have changed to her. Her father could not but get better and stronger now; mental anxiety, she felt certain, had far more to do with his failing health than any one imagined.

Still when the note—less urgently worded, it must be owned, than had it been written to her mother’s dictation—was dispatched, and she went to the study to seek her father, she felt a little startled. He was sitting in his chair by the fire, half dozing, it seemed to Mary, but when he looked up in answer to her greeting, she saw that his face looked changed somehow, its expression told of pain and oppression greater than he had yet endured.

“Is your head so bad, dear father?” she said, anxiously.

“Very, very bad indeed. I feel perfectly stupid with that sense of oppression, and my sight is so strangely hazy. I could not conceal it from your mother,” he went on, half apologetically, “though you know, my dear, how I always shrink from making her uneasy.”

“Yes,” said Mary, half absently, “I know. Will you come into the dining-room to tea, papa? Mamma sent me to fetch you.”

“Very well. If she wishes it, though I feel as if I would rather stay here. I hope the children will be quiet, poor things. I can’t stand any noise or excitement tonight.”

Mary looked at him as he spoke, and dismissed the half-formed idea—that, since she had been alone with her father, had seized her with sudden temptation—of telling him the contents of the letter in her pocket, now, at once. She saw he spoke the truth. He was unfit to bear any great excitement.

Tea passed over with unwonted quiet. The “children” were impressed by their father’s weary looks, and conversation was carried on in unusually amicable whispers. After tea Mr Western went back to his study, and Mary at last succeeded in getting her mother to herself.

“For a quarter of an hour only, dear,” said Mrs Western. “Then I must take my work into the study and sit with your father. And I want to persuade him to go early to bed.”

“It is barely seven yet, mother,” said Mary. “Now listen—first of all, do you remember Lilias writing—of course you do—about having met a cousin of yours, a Mrs Brabazon, in town?”

“At the doctor’s, wasn’t it? Waiting for Mr Greville at the doctor’s, and your father was so pleased at it, and thought something might come of it—of course, I remember,” replied Mrs Western, growing interested. “Well, Mary?”

“Well, mother,” continued Mary, “Lilias’s letter is all about these relations of yours. She has met them again, they are at Hastings just now, and she has been to spend a day with them. And, mother,” she proceeded cautiously, “it does indeed seem as if something were going to come of it. Do you happen to know, did you ever hear how the Brooke property is left—entailed, I suppose I should say?”

“In the usual way, entailed on to the eldest son. I have always known that,” said Mrs Western, in some surprise.

“But *failing* an eldest son, mother, failing any direct male heir at all, do you—?”

Her question was never completed. At that moment a bell rang sharply and violently through the house. Mary and her mother stared at each other for a moment in silence. Bells were at no time in great request at the Rectory, and the sound of the special bell now heard seemed strange and unfamiliar.

“What can that be?” said Mary. “Some trick of the children’s I am afraid. Wait here, mother; I’ll go and see.”

She ran to the door, but before she had more than opened it her mother had overtaken her.

“Let me pass,” she whispered, in a hoarse, breathless voice—“let me go first, Mary. I know what it is. It is the study bell. Mary, your father—”

They rushed across the hall and down the study passage together. Which first reached the door Mary never knew. But between them it was thrown open and—ah, yes!—Mrs Western’s instinct was correct; the blow that for so long had threatened them had fallen at last—the Rector lay unconscious on the floor, and at the first glance Mary thought her mother was right when in agony she wailed out—“He is dead! Oh, Mary, he is dead!”

But he was not dead. They did what in their ignorance they could, poor things! and then, a quarter of an hour or so after the first alarm, Mary came rushing into the school-room, where the frightened children were all collected together.

“George, where is George?” she said. “He must go, or find some one to go, for the doctor. Simmons is out—it is always the way. But where *is* George? Can none of you tell me?”

“Oh, Mary, I am so sorry,” said poor Alexa. “I am afraid George has gone to bed. Have you forgotten about his sore knee? I don’t think he *could* go for the doctor. Couldn’t Josey and I go? Oh, dear! what shall we do?”

Mary for an instant wrung her hands in perplexity. It all came back to her memory about George’s having hurt his knee by a fall from a tree the day before, hurt it badly too. What was to be done? The nearest possibility of a man and horse was a mile off, and even then *only* a possibility, hardly worth wasting precious time on the chance of. Simmons, their own factotum, was out for the evening—what was to be done? Mary’s quick mind glanced it all over and decided.

“Get my cloak and hat, quick, Josey—any of you,” she said. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll run myself to the Edge and get Wills to go. He has a good horse, and has often had to bring Dr Brandreth when Al—Miss Cheviott was there. Yes, that will be best, better than running a mile the other way on the mere chance of Giles Swanwick being able to go.”

She was off before any one could stop her. But indeed it was the best thing to do. It was terrible to have to leave her mother alone with the silent, already in a strange sense, *unfamiliar* figure that Mary found it hard to believe could be “papa,” but what might not delay or a bungled message result in? She only glanced in again to impress upon Martha, a fairly intelligent woman of her class, on no account to leave her mistress alone; if anything were wanted to call to Miss Alexa, or Miss Josephine, who would remain within ear-shot.

At the front door Mary was stopped by Alexa, trembling and pale with repressed anxiety, yet, Mary was glad to see, crying but little.

“Tell me, Mary, dear Mary—forgive me for stopping you,” she said, breathlessly, “but do tell me, do you *think* he is going to die?”

“I don’t know—oh! Alexa, how can I tell?” said Mary. “Let me go, dear, and try all of you to be good. That’s the only thing you can do just now.”

“I will, indeed I will,” said Alexa, bravely, “and, Mary, you shall see a difference in me from this time, see if you don’t.”

Mary kissed her and hurried out.

“Perhaps there is really more strength and sense in Alexa than we have given her credit for,” she said to herself. It was a very tiny drop of comfort, still there was *some* in her young sister’s sympathy and evident desire to be of use. “For,” thought Mary, “it is impossible not to recall all dear papa’s forebodings—he has spoken so much of them lately, as to what would become of them all, and Alexa and Josey seemed as much on his mind as any—in case—”

She stopped suddenly as there flashed across her mind the recollection of Lilias’s letter, which by some strange brain freak the new excitement of the last half hour had completely banished from her memory. Could it still be true—this

wonderful news which so short a time ago had seemed to illumine the dark future so brilliantly and scatter every cloud? *Could* it be true?

"And what if it be?" thought Mary, recklessly, a sob rising in her throat. "What shall we care for money or comfort without *him*! What a mockery it seems coming *now* when the greatest sorrow of our lives is upon us! What madness it seems ever to have murmured at our small means or privations or difficulties or anything while we were all together and well! Oh, to think that only the last time I walked down this lane I was grumbling to myself at the home worries and the children's troublesomeness and the monotonous commonplaceness of my life! If only we were back to all that—if only—would I *ever* grumble again?"

The tears *would* come. Mary ran faster in hopes of driving them away and preserving the self-possession which she felt she dare not lose, and another ten minutes brought her to the Edge. She knew the ins and outs of the place so well that without knocking she quickly found her way into the kitchen, where Mrs Wills was busy ironing. The familiar kitchen—how little she had thought the last time she saw it, on what an errand she would next be there!

This errand was soon told, and Mrs Wills was full of sympathy. But sympathy, alas! was all she had to give, and Mary was in sore need of something more. It was terribly disappointing to find that Wills himself was not at home, nor likely to be for some hours to come. On his return from Withenden he had ridden on to Bewley, a village some miles the other way, about a horse buying or selling, or some business of the kind, which, rendered diffusive by her excitement, Mrs Wills would have given Mary the whole details of, had not the girl cut her short with an anguished exclamation:

"What am I to do? What *can* I do?" she cried. "They are all depending on me to find some way—mamma and all—and even now he may be dying. Oh, Mrs Wills!"

Mrs Wills wiped away her tears with one corner of her apron, while she stopped to consider.

"There's neither man nor boy about this blessed place to-night, as ill luck would have it," she said. "I would offer to run myself, and gladly, but I'm not as quick as when I was younger, Miss Mary. But stay—there's farmer Bartlemoor's not more than a mile and a quarter away, where there's sure to be one of the sons at home and plenty of horses. To be sure it's not exactly on the way to Withenden, but not so far about neither. Do you know it, miss?—Bartle's farm, I mean? Bartles we calls them mostly for shorter."

"No," said Mary, "I don't. But tell me and I am sure I can find it."

Mrs Wills's description recalled the place to Mary's recollection. The Bartlemoors were not her father's parishioners, but she remembered noticing the house, a rather picturesque old-fashioned one, in some of the long summer rambles the Rectory children were so fond of.

It was not yet quite dark when again she set out. But had it been the blackest of midnights, little, save for the increased difficulty and delay, would Mary have cared. She hurried on, trying hard not to think, nor to distract herself by picturing what might at that moment be happening at the Rectory. It seemed to her that she had implicitly followed Mrs Wills's directions, yet the landmarks she was on the look-out for were strangely long of coming. It was all but dark now—the road, hardly indeed worthy of the name, along which she was hastening was perfectly bare of any sign of human habitation; she had met no one since she left the Edge, not a single belated market-cart even had passed her, and now, as Mary stood still in despair, she noticed that the clouds, which all the evening had been gathering ominously together, had joined their phalanxes—there was no longer a break in the sky—the rain began slowly but steadily, in five minutes it was a perfect pour.

Mechanically almost, poor Mary crept under a tree and stood still to think what she should do. Where indeed was the use of hurrying on, when every step, for all she knew, might but be taking her further and further in the wrong direction? It was too evident she had lost her way. What she would have done she often afterwards asked herself, if, at that moment, the sound of wheels approaching rapidly in her direction had not caught her ears. *Too* rapidly indeed was her next fear—how, amidst the pouring rain and the darkness, could she attract the driver's attention? She ran forward—yes, to her delight the vehicle, whatever it was, had lamps! Could it possibly, by any blessed chance, be Dr Brandreth himself returning from a country round? Anyway, whoever and whatever it was, she must do her utmost to attract attention. And as Mary said this to herself there flashed across her memory a gruesome legend of the neighbourhood, which many a night, when a child, had made her put her fingers in her ears for terror of what she might hear—a legend of a certain Sir Ingram de Romary who, maddened by wine and some wild quarrel, had driven himself and his horse to destruction over the Chaldron water-fall, a mile or more the other side of Hathercourt. All the way from Romary Dene, an old ruin now long given up to the owls and bats, the mad race had been run, and still on wild, dark, stormy nights "folks said 'twas to be heard again."

Mary, standing in the road, shivered as the story rushed through her brain—shivered with strange nervous terror, for which, at the same moment, she vigorously despised herself.

"Papa dying," she said to herself, "and I to be frightened of a ridiculous ghost story! What can I be made of? Have I no heart?"

Afterwards she did herself more justice. A strong excitement may, indeed, override every other sensation, but it may also, by some slightest variation, kindle every perception, every nerve, every feeler, so to speak, of our Briareus-like imagination into abnormal acuteness. Who cannot but recall with astonishing minuteness the trifling outside details of any scene morbidly impressed on our memory—the pattern on the walls above the bed where our best beloved lay dying, the details of the dress of the indifferent messenger who brought us that news we can never forget? Who cannot but remember the wild, even ludicrous, vagaries that flashed through our fancy at some "supreme moment" of our lives?

But, shiver as she might, Mary had already committed herself to action. She stood some little way forward on the road, and, as the gig, dog-cart, whatever it was, came within hail, she called out as loudly as she could the first thing that came into her head to say:

“Is that you, Dr Brandreth?”

She could not at first have been heard. There was no visible abatement of the driver’s speed. Again, and yet again, Mary repeated her cry, but apparently with no effect. On flew the wheels, down poured the rain. Mary was obliged, to save herself the risk of being knocked down as it passed her, to draw back a little.

“It surely must be Sir Ingram, after all,” she said to herself, but with no terror this time, with rather a wild, incomprehensible desire to laugh. But as the vehicle actually drew near her, as the lamps flashed into her face, common sense and self-possession returned.

“Oh, stop—stop!” she cried, “for mercy’s sake, whoever you are, stop!”

This last appeal, though she knew it not, was unneeded. Already the pace had been slackening, but it was not so easy, as might appear, suddenly to pull up a powerful, fast-trotting horse instinctively sharing its master’s desire to get home and out of the storm of rain as fast as possible. But two or three yards beyond the spot where Mary stood it was achieved. There were two men on the dog-cart, one driving, the other sitting behind. Almost before the horse stopped, the latter jumped down and was at its head.

“What can it be?” said the driver, as the man ran past him. “Yes, stay you by Madge, Andrew, or we shall have her getting excited. I’ll get down.”

Andrew, to tell the truth, was by no means averse to do as he was told. Madge’s kicks and plunges impressed him infinitely less than a hand-to-hand or face-to-face encounter with a ghost, or, failing a ghost, a lunatic escaped from the county asylum, which was the next idea presented to his bucolic brain. And, to do him justice, Mary might reasonably enough have been mistaken for the latter, if not for the former, as she stood in the pouring rain, umbrellaless, hatless even, at first sight; for, habitually careful, she had, when the rain first came on, half unconsciously drawn over her head the hood of the large waterproof cloak with which, most fortunately, she had enveloped herself for her run to the Edge. And from under this curious head-dress gleamed out her white face and brown eyes, unnaturally bright with anxiety and excitement, looking almost black in the flashing light of the lamps—different, how different, from the sunny hazel eyes that had looked up in Mr Cheviott’s face, half shyly, but all frankly, that Sunday morning in the old church porch!

They looked up now with a wild yet most piteous beseeching in their gaze. There was no need for Madge’s master to get down from his seat to question this strange suppliant. Before he could move she had run up to the side of the wheel, and before he could speak she had, so far, told her story:

“I have lost my way,” she said, “and, oh! I shall be so grateful if you can help me. Can you tell me if I am anywhere near Farmer Bartlemoor’s? You must forgive my stopping you. I did not know *what* to do.”

And for all answer, the man she was addressing sprang down at one bound to her side, exclaiming:

“Mary! You here? You poor child, what is—what can be the matter?”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

An Act of Common Humanity.

> ”... And now thy pardon, friend,
> For thou hast ever answered courteously,
> And wholly bold thou art, and meek withal
> As any of Arthur’s best
> ... I marvel what thou art.”
>
> “Damsel,” he said, “ye be not all to blame,
> ... Ye said your say;
> Mine answer was my deed. Good sooth! I hold
> He scarce is knight, yea but half man ...
> ... He, who lets
> His heart be stirred with any foolish heat
> At any gentle damsel’s waywardness.”
>
> *Gareth and Lynette*.

Her eyes gleamed up into his face. But for a moment or two she did not speak. The inclination was so desperately strong upon her to burst into tears that she felt if she attempted to answer him, if she even moved her gaze or allowed a muscle of her face to quiver, it would have been all over with her self-control. He, on his side, stood watching her closely; he did not like the strained, unnatural expression, and thought for a moment that when it relaxed it would be into something worse—he thought she was going to faint, and half stretched out his arms as if to catch her. Mary saw the action, and it restored her self-possession.

“I *won’t* be a fool,” she murmured to herself, “wasting all this precious time with my nonsense,” though in reality

barely three minutes had passed since the sound of the wheels had first reached her.

Then she gave herself a sort of little admonitory shake, and, turning again to Mr Cheviott, spoke in a more natural, but yet evidently excited tone.

“I will explain it all,” she said, and so she did. Her father’s symptoms of increasing weakness and the note to Dr Brandreth, then the sudden seizure and the difficulty of obtaining a messenger, ending with her own failure at the Edge and Mrs Wills’s suggestion.

“And now,” she said, “if only you can tell me where I am, or if your man knows Farmer Bartlemoor’s, it will be all right, and I shall be so very grateful to you.”

But to her surprise Mr Cheviott did not at once reply, nor did he turn to “Andrew” for information. Instead of this, he took out his watch, and, examining it by the light of the lamp, murmured something to himself.

“Five miles—twenty minutes,” he said, “yes, that would be far the quickest.”

Then he turned to Mary.

“Miss Western,” he said, gravely, “you are getting as wet as you possibly can. I must drive you to some shelter. Shall I take you back to the Edge, or home?”

“Oh, no, no!” cried Mary. “*Don’t* mind me. I entreat you not to mind me. If you have time to drive anywhere, if I dare ask you such an unheard-of thing, drive me to the nearest point to Dr Brandreth’s. I feel as if I could not go to the Bartlemoors, they don’t know me, and my head is growing so confused I am not sure that I should know what to say when I got there.”

He had half expected this—it hardly seemed possible to oppose her—and the risk to herself, if greater in one way seemed less in another.

“Well, then,” he said, “will you do exactly as I tell you?”

“Yes,” she replied, meekly, “exactly.”

“Your cloak is waterproof, I see,” he continued, “is your dress dry underneath it?”

“Quite,” she answered, “and my boots are thick, and it has not been raining long.”

Mr Cheviott turned to the carriage, from which he extracted a large, soft, woolly rug.

“Loosen your cloak for a moment,” he said, “and put this thing on under it, then your cloak again. Now can you climb up to the front beside me? I am driving.” Mary managed it, almost without assistance, and Mr Cheviott followed her. But, just as the groom was about to leave the horse’s head, a sudden giddiness came over her, and she swayed forward for a second. Mr Cheviott caught her with his left arm, and called to the man to stay where he was for a moment.

“Miss Western,” he said, in a low voice, “you are perfectly exhausted. It is not right of me to let you go farther.”

She placed both hands on his arm.

“Oh, yes, yes,” she pleaded. “Anything rather than losing more time by taking me home first. It was only for a moment—I am better now.”

“Andrew,” called out Mr Cheviott, “where is my flask?”

“In the left-hand inside pocket, sir,” was the reply, “the pocket of your light top-coat, sir—not of the ulster.” In a moment the flask was forthcoming, a small quantity poured into the silver cup and held to Mary’s lips.

“No, thank you,” she said, calmly. “I never take wine.”

Mr Cheviott felt almost inclined to laugh.

“It is not wine, as it happens,” he replied. “It is brandy and water. But, if it were wine, it wouldn’t matter. You promised to do as you were told.”

“Brandy,” repeated Mary, “I *cannot* take that. It will go to my head.”

“It will not,” said Mr Cheviott. “Now, Miss Western, don’t be silly. Drink it.”

She did so.

“Was there ever such a girl before?” said Mr Cheviott, speaking audibly enough though as if to himself. “Such a mixture of strength and childishness, common sense and uncommon fancifulness! Oh, Miss Western?” Mary, in turn, could hardly help laughing.

“Now,” he went on, “if you feel giddy you very likely will when we start—don’t say it’s the brandy. I cannot keep my arm round you,” Mary started up indignantly, she had forgotten that all this time, through the episode of the flask and all, the arm had been there,—“I cannot keep my arm round you,” he continued, coolly, though perfectly aware of the start, “because I am going to drive. I cannot trust my man to drive this mare, and I cannot let you sit behind with

him. So promise me, if you feel giddy, to take hold of my arm for yourself. It will not interfere with my driving, and a very light hold will keep you firm."

"Very well," said Mary, meekly enough to outward hearing, though, in her heart, a vow was registered that, short of feeling herself falling bodily out of the carriage, nothing should induce her to resort to such assistance.

"I shall drive slowly, at first," said Mr Cheviott, "as the mare is already a little excited. But it will not really lose any time to speak of. I was driving foolishly fast when I met you, but then I had only my own neck to think of."

"And Andrew's," suggested Mary.

"And Andrew's," he repeated. "But Andrew is experienced in the art of taking care of his neck. I never saw any one with a greater knack of keeping out of damage than he has."

Was he talking for talking's sake, or with the intention of setting her at her ease by showing her how completely so he was himself? Mary felt a little puzzled. Thoroughly at ease he certainly was, and, more than this, he seemed to her to be in remarkably good spirits, yet his next observation showed her how far from indifferent he was feeling to the anxiety that she was suffering.

"I fancy we shall just catch Brandreth," he said, "and you will find no time has been lost. This is his whist club night, and it was to be at old Admiral Maxton's. They break up at nine, I know—the Admiral is so very old—so the doctor will be just about getting home."

"Are you going to take me all the way to Withenden?" said Mary, half timidly.

"*Certainly*," replied Mr Cheviott, decidedly. "Now, Andrew, let her go. All right."

But just at first it seemed to Mary more like "all wrong." With a plunge and a dash that nearly took her breath away, the impatient animal darted forward. How Andrew managed to scramble into his seat was a mystery to Mary. It was all she could do to keep hers; the same giddy feeling came over her, her head reeled, and, with a vague remembrance of Mr Cheviott's injunction, she caught hold of his arm to steady herself. He was prepared for the movement, and by no means discomposed by it. In a minute or two the mare settled down into a steady pace, and Mary's head grew steady.

She quietly withdrew her hand.

"I beg your pardon," she said, somewhat stiffly.

"Not at all," replied Mr Cheviott, "it's what I told you to do. But don't be frightened of Madge—it's only a little show-off; we quite understand each other."

"Thank you," said Mary, imagining a patronising shade in his tone. "I was not the least frightened; I am not nervous."

"No, you are not, but you are *human*, Miss Western, and what you have gone through to-night has been enough to try any one's nerves," said Mr Cheviott, gravely.

Mary did not reply, though she felt herself ungracious for not doing so. In a minute he went on again.

"I have been thinking," he said, "of what you told me about your father. Of course I am no doctor, but I believe I can give you a little comfort. This sort of seizure is not so alarming when it comes on, as in his case, gradually; it is not like a man in too good health—a great full-blooded fellow like Squire Cleave, for instance—do you know him?—being struck down suddenly. Your father, as a rule, is so equable, is he not? and lives so quietly and regularly. I *fancy* he will get over it, and be much the same as usual again. Of course it is serious, but I have a friend at this moment who had an attack of this kind ten years ago, and is now fairly well and able to enjoy life; of course he is obliged to be careful."

What a load was lifted from Mary's heart! To be allowed to *hope*—what a relief! The tears rushed to her eyes, they were in her voice as she replied:

"Oh, how good you are! Thank you, thank you for telling me that," and in *his* turn Mr Cheviott made no reply.

"Freedom from anxiety, from daily worry—he has had too much of that—would be greatly in his favour, would it not?" Mary added, after a little pause.

"Undoubtedly, I should say," said Mr Cheviott, recalling as he spoke the careworn expression of the Rector's face as he had last seen him. "Peculiarly so in his case, I should say. He is a very sensitive man, is he not?"

"Very," said Mary, "but not in the sense of being irritable. He is very sweet-tempered. Poor father," she went on, with a sudden burst of confidence which amazed herself, "he has had far too much anxiety; but if only he gets well, I think and believe that that can be, is going to be, cured."

"What can she mean?" thought Mr Cheviott, one or two possible solutions of her words darting through his mind. But what she did not tell he of course could not ask, only just then a sudden and unnecessary touch of the whip made Madge start again.

They were close to Withenden by now. Dr Brandreth's house stood a little out of the town on the side by which they were entering it. Mr Cheviott drew up.

“Suppose we wait here,” he said. “Andrew can be thoroughly trusted to deliver exactly any message you give him, and it might be—perhaps you would not care about clambering up and down again from that high seat?”

Mary’s cheeks grew hot, dark as it was. She did not know whether to be angry or grateful, whether indignantly to declare her indifference to Withenden gossip or to choose, as her conductor evidently wished to suggest, “discretion as the better part of valour.” A moment’s reflection decided her that, considering all he had done and was doing, she had no right to reject the suggestion.

“Thank you,” she said, and, turning to the groom, gave a distinct message, short and to the point. “My letter will be at Dr Brandreth’s before now,” she added to Mr Cheviott, “and that will explain a little. It was asking him to come early to-morrow.”

“That message is all you have to give,” said Andrew’s master as the man was hastening off. “You need not say who brought it, or anything.”

“But, Mr Cheviott,” said Mary, half timidly, half indignantly, “I would not mind all Withenden knowing I had brought it. And—and your driving me here was really an act of pure humanity; no one could say I had done anything in the least not—not nice.”

Her voice quivered a little.

“Certainly not. But don’t you think sometimes—we must take the world as we find it, you know—sometimes it is just as well to give ‘no one’ the power to say good, bad, or indifferent about what we do?” said Mr Cheviott, very gently.

“Perhaps,” said Mary, more humbly than was usual with her. Then she added, “It was not nice of me to say that—about your kindness being an act of pure humanity. I didn’t mean—I only meant—I don’t know what I meant, but I am very, very much obliged to you.”

“But you have no reason to be. It was, as you said, just an act of common humanity,” said Mr Cheviott, with slight bitterness.

”‘Pure,’ I said, not ‘common’,” corrected Mary.

“Well, it’s all the same. How can I think you will consider it even an act of friendliness? You won’t have us for your friends. And even if I were ten times the unmitigated ruffian you believe me to be,” he added, with a slight laugh, “would it not be an immense pleasure to me to return in the slightest degree your goodness to Alys? You do believe I care for her, I think? I am grateful, most grateful, to you and to the dark night, and to the chance that made me choose that way home, for making it possible for me to be of the least service to you.”

“Mr Cheviott,” said Mary, impulsively, “whatever you are, you have behaved most generously to *me*. It was very good of you to come to papa—after—after all I said.”

“Thank you,” he said in a low voice.

“I wish,” she added, as if speaking to herself, “I *wish* I could understand you. I hate to do any one injustice.”

“And what if you found that you had done such to me?” he asked, eagerly.

“*Of course* I would own myself in the wrong, if I saw that I had been,” she replied, proudly, and Mr Cheviott could *feel* that her head was thrown back with the gesture peculiar to her at times.

“And then?”

“You would—you would forgive me, I suppose,” she said, lightly, but with a slight nervousness in her voice. Mr Cheviott was silent. Mary seemed impelled to go on speaking. “On the whole,” she said, “I think I shall register your kindness to-night as an act of great generosity. Will that do better?”

“As you please,” Mr Cheviott replied, dryly, but, it seemed to Mary, sadly too. And she was right.

“How *can* she ever see that she did me injustice?” he was saying to himself. “I can never explain things—it is madness to imagine I can ever be cleared.”

Andrew’s report was most satisfactory. Dr Brandreth had just come in and would start at once. The order for his dog-cart had been sent out while the man stood at the door.

“Then,” said Mr Cheviott, “the faster we get back to Hathercourt the better. You would like to be there before Brandreth arrives?”

“Very much,” said Mary.

“Will not your mother have been very uneasy about you?” he added.

“I hope not. I *think* not,” said Mary, anxiously. “She may have been too absorbed about papa to think of me. And she knows the difficulty. Very likely she thought I was waiting at the Edge till Wills came back again. But, Mr Cheviott, you are not meaning to take me home all the way?”

“What else, what less could I possibly do?” he replied, bluntly.

“Will not your sister be dreadfully uneasy at your being so late?” she asked.

“No, she does not expect me to-night at all—at least, I left it uncertain,” Mr Cheviott replied. “I have been hunting over near Farkingham to-day. It is nearly the last meet of the season, and Alys begged me not to miss it. Then I dined at Cleavelands, half intending to sleep there. But I found there was going to be a dance after dinner, and—somehow I don’t care for that sort of thing, especially without Alys. So I came away.”

No one certainly could have to-night accused Mr Cheviott of stiffness or uncommunicativeness.

“How is Alys?” asked Mary.

“Better, on the whole, better, but it is slow work,” said Mr Cheviott, with a little sigh. A sigh partly of brotherly anxiety, partly of regret for the additional complications this accident of his sister’s had brought into his own and others’ lives. “It may be years before she is thoroughly well again,” he added, and Mary, feeling that there was little she could say in the way of comfort, was silent.

“Can your horse take you all the way home again tonight?” she said, presently.

“I think so. If not, I dare say I can put up for the night at Beverley’s farm,” he said, carelessly, adding, with a slight change of tone, “our old quarters.”

The allusion, somehow, made Mary feel nervous again. In her eagerness to change the subject she flung herself off Scylla into Charybdis—in homelier terms, “out of the frying-pan into the fire.”

“Do you know what came into my head when I first saw you driving so fast up that lane?” she said with a slight laugh.

“No,” he replied. “You did not know who it was. I think you first fancied I was Dr Brandreth, did you not?”

“I thought it just possible. But that is not what I meant. I could not help having a foolish wild sort of fancy that perhaps you were Sir Ingram de Romary—you know the story?”

“The fellow that pitched himself over the Chaldron Falls,” said Mr Cheviott. “Yes, I remember. Your fancies about me are the reverse of complimentary, do you know, Miss Western? The last time you had any such, if I remember right, you took me for the ghost of that other still more disreputable Romary, the fellow that forced an unfortunate ‘heathen Chinee’ girl to marry him, and then abused her so that she threw herself out of the window of the haunted room.”

“Mr Cheviott!” said Mary, reproachfully, her cheeks glowing at the remembrance of that day.

And Mr Cheviott was merciful enough to say no more.

They drove back to Hathercourt very fast. So fast that when they drew up at the Rectory gates there was as yet no sound of Dr Brandreth’s wheels in the distance.

“Will you let me get down here, please?” said Mary. “I don’t want to make them think it is the doctor, as they would only feel disappointed.”

Mr Cheviott got down and helped Mary out of the carriage.

“Would you mind *my* waiting here an instant?” he said with some hesitation. “Dr Brandreth cannot be here for five or ten minutes yet, and I should be so glad to hear how your father is, and if I can be of any more use.”

“I will run back and tell you—in a moment,” said Mary.

There was no need for her to ring or knock at the hall door. It was on the latch as she had left it, and in a moment, at the sound of her opening it, Alexa, George, and Josey appeared.

“Oh! Mary, we have been so frightened about you,” they began.

“But first tell me how papa is,” she interrupted.

“Better, a little better. He opened his eyes and smiled at mamma, and now he seems to be sleeping, really sleeping, not in that dreadful sort of way,” said Alexa.

Mary gave a sigh of thankfulness.

“Run in and tell mamma Dr Brandreth will be here in five minutes. Has she been very frightened about me?”

“No, dear, we wouldn’t let her,” said Alexa, re-assuringly. “We told her you might have to wait at the Edge till Wills came back, it was raining so.”

“That was *very* good and sensible of you,” said Mary, at which commendation poor Alexa’s white face grew rosy with pleasure.

“But aren’t you coming in to mamma, Mary?” she said, seeing that her sister, after disentangling herself from a mysterious fluffy shawl in which she was wrapped, was turning away to the door.

“Immediately,” said Mary. “I am only running back to the gate with this rug, to return it to the—the person that lent it me, and who drove me to Withenden.”

“All the way? How very good-natured! What a way you have been! And what a lovely rug. Is that Mrs Wills’s? Surely

not," they all said at once. But Mary wisely paid no heed, she ran to the gate and back again almost before she was missed.

"This is your rug, Mr Cheviott," she said, breathlessly, "and thank you for it so much, and thank you for everything. And papa is already a very little better, they think."

"I am so glad," he said, cordially. "But, Miss Western, how exceedingly foolish of you to have taken off the rug and run out again into the cold without it!"

Mary laughed.

"I am very hardy," she said, as she ran off again. "Good-night, and thank you again."

But Mr Cheviott stopped her for an instant.

"Is there nothing I can do to help you?" he asked.

"Nothing—nothing *more*, I should say," she replied.

"And—Miss Western, you are not going to sit up all night," he went on—"promise me you will not; you are not fit for it, and that is not the way to prepare yourself for, perhaps, weeks of nursing."

"I am truly *quite* rested and fresh," she said. "It is very kind of you to think of it. I shall not do anything foolish. Good-night again."

He did not and had not attempted to shake hands, nor had Mary offered to do so.

"He refused my hand the last time I offered it," she said to herself. "But on the whole, perhaps, what wonder?"

Dr Brandreth, approaching Hathercourt some ten minutes later, was surprised to meet a dog-cart driving off in an opposite direction. But it passed too quickly for even his quick eyes to identify it.

"Whose trap can that be?" he said to his boy.

"Dunno, sir. Not so very onlike the Romary dogcart neither," was the reply.

"Impossible!" said the doctor. And in his own mind he wondered why Mary Western had not prosecuted the acquaintanceship with the Cheviotts, so strangely begun.

"It would be a good thing for those girls to make some friends for themselves," he thought to himself. "Nice as they are, I don't altogether understand them; they don't give themselves airs—the very reverse, yet for all that I suspect they are too proud for their own advantage. And if poor Western is really breaking up, goodness only knows what is to become of them!"

Early, very early the next morning, Mr Cheviott's groom made his appearance at the Rectory to make inquiry, with his master's compliments, for Mr Western. At the door he was met by "the young lady herself," coming out for the refreshment of a breath of the sweet spring air, all the sweeter for the last night's heavy rains.

"And she told me to tell you, sir, with Mrs Western's compliments, as how the Rector was better than might have been expected, and as how the doctor gives good hopes."

So "Sir Ingram de Romary" drove home again, and sympathising Alys heard with eager interest of her friend's new troubles, and longed more than ever to see Mary Western again.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Alys Puts Two and Two Together.

> "I shall as now do more for you
> Than longeth to womanhede."
>
> *The Nut-brown Mayd*.

"Mr Western is not so well, I hear," said Mr Cheviott to his sister one afternoon, a fortnight or so after the Rector of Hathercourt's first seizure.

Alys started up from the invalid couch on which she was lying. The brother and sister were in a small morning-room which Alys sometimes called her "boudoir," though its rather heterogeneous furniture and contents hardly realised the ideas suggested by the word.

"I am so dreadfully sorry," she exclaimed. "I had a note from Mary yesterday saying he was so much better."

"These cases are sadly deceptive," said Miss Winstanley, who was knitting by the window, consolingly. "At Mr Western's age I should think it extremely doubtful if he recovers. I know two or three almost similar cases that ended fatally, though just at first the doctors thought hopefully of them."

"How did you hear it, Laurence?" said Alys. "You didn't send over to-day to inquire, did you?"

“No. Arthur told me. He said that he had met Brandreth on the road somewhere on his way back from the Edge,” said Mr Cheviott, strolling to the window, where he remained standing, looking out.

“I wish you would ask him to come and tell me *exactly* what Dr Brandreth says,” Alys asked.

“He is not in—he went over to the stables a few minutes ago. I’ll tell him to come and speak to you when he comes back. But I feel sure that was all he heard,” replied Mr Cheviott, without manifesting any surprise at Alys’s extreme interest in the matter.

“I wonder if they have sent for Miss Western—Lilias, the eldest one, I mean,” soliloquised Alys. “Mary said they hoped not to need to do so, as there was some difficulty about her coming home sooner than had been fixed. Poor Mary, how much she must have had to do, and she *never* thinks of herself or takes any rest. I *wish* I could do anything to help her!”

Mr Cheviott turned from the window to the fire, and began poking it vigorously.

“Excuse me, Laurence,” said Miss Winstanley, plaintively. “I think the fire’s quite hot enough; it is such a very close evening for April.”

Mr Cheviott laughed and desisted.

“I am out of place in this room,” he said. “I am always doing something clumsy. I’ll send Arthur instead—he’s a much better tame cat than I.”

He turned to leave the room.

“By-the-bye, Alys,” he said, putting his head in at the door again, “you had better make much of Arthur while you have him. He says he must leave the day after tomorrow.”

“And he only came yesterday,” said Alys, regretfully. “It’s too bad—only two days.”

“Three, my dear,” corrected her aunt. “We arrived the day before yesterday. Arthur left Cirencester on Tuesday, and slept Tuesday night in my house, and this is Friday.”

“Well, it’s much the same,” said Alys. “He might stay a little longer. He’s always so busy now. Why should he have such a craze for hard work? It doesn’t suit him at all.”

“My dear!” said Miss Winstanley, reprovingly. “How can you say such a thing? In his circumstances his friends cannot be too thankful that he has taken to some useful employment, which will do him no harm either way, however things turn out.”

Alys pricked up her ears.

“How do you mean ‘in his circumstances,’ aunt? How are his circumstances different from Laurence’s, or any other man’s who has a place and a good income?”

“Oh! I don’t know, my dear,” said Miss Winstanley, evasively. “I told you once before, I don’t know all about Arthur’s affairs. One, two, three—I am so afraid I have got a row too much—by-the-bye, my dear, I wish you wouldn’t talk so much about those Westerns. I warned you of it last year. Laurence does not like them, and the mention of them always irritates him.”

“It was Laurence himself who first mentioned them, as it happens,” said Alys, not too respectfully, it must be confessed.

“Ah, yes, but you said a great deal more, and, as I said last year—”

“Last year and this are very different, aunt,” said Alys. “Have you forgotten all that Mary Western did for me? No one has recognised it more fully than Laurence.”

“Ah, well, perhaps so. But still he does not *like* them. Did you not see how he made some excuse for going away, when you would go on talking about them?”

“It was no such thing. It was you fidgeting him about the fire when he was really concerned about Mr Western,” muttered Alys, but too low for her aunt to catch the words. And Miss Winstanley relapsed into her “one, two, three, four,” and for a few minutes there was silence. Then Alys returned to the charge.

“By what you said just now about Arthur’s uncertain circumstances, did you mean the peculiar terms of his father’s will?” she said, demurely.

“Oh, yes, of course, I suppose so, but I wish you would not ask me. I am very stupid about wills and all sorts of law things,” said Miss Winstanley, floundering about helplessly beneath her niece’s diplomatic cross-questioning. “I only meant that for a man who can’t marry and settle down it is an excellent thing to have some employment.”

“And why shouldn’t he marry and settle down?” said Alys. “He will come into his property in two years, when I am twenty-one—I always remember it by that—and till that he could have a good allowance to live on. Why shouldn’t he marry, poor fellow? I think it very hard lines that he shouldn’t.”

“But—” began Miss Winstanley.

"But, aunt," said Alys, who was "working herself up" on a subject she was at all times inclined to grow rather hot about, "I really mean what I say. It is the only one thing I have ever really felt inclined to quarrel with Laurence for *I* can tell you that Arthur has been much nearer marrying than you have any idea of, and—"

It was Miss Winstanley's turn to interrupt. "My dear!" she exclaimed, letting her knitting-needles fall on her lap in her excitement, "you don't mean to say that he—that you—you won't be twenty-one for two years."

"What *do* you mean, aunt?" said Alys. "What has my being or not being twenty-one to do with Arthur's marrying?"

Miss Winstanley looked as if she were going to cry.

"Why will you always begin about this subject, Alys?" she said, pathetically. "I thought you meant—"

"Well, tell me that, any way," said Alys. "You must tell me what you thought I meant."

"Oh, nothing. I must have mistaken you. It was only when you said that about his having thought of marrying—before your accident, of course—and I knew he took it so much to heart, but of course that was natural on all accounts," said Miss Winstanley, confusedly.

Alys sat bolt up on her couch, thereby setting all her doctor's orders at defiance. A red spot glowed on each cheek, her eyes were sparkling. Miss Winstanley could see that she was growing very excited—the thing of all others to be avoided for her!—and the poor lady's alarm and distress added to her nervousness and confusion.

"Now, aunt," said Alys, calmly, "you *must* tell me what I want to know. I am not so blind and childish as you have all imagined. I have known for a good while that there was some strange complication which was putting everything wrong, in which, somehow, *I* was concerned. Don't make yourself unhappy by thinking it has been all your doing that I have come to know anything about it. It has been no one person's doing; it has just been that I have 'put two and two together' for myself."

"Alys," ejaculated her aunt, "what an expression for you to use!"

"It expresses what I mean," said Alys, pushing back the hair off her throbbing temples. "And since I have been ill I have had so much time for thinking and wondering and puzzling out things—and I think I have become quicker, cleverer, in a way than I used to be. I seem as if I could almost guess at things by magic, sometimes. Now, aunt, what I want to know is *this*—is Arthur's future in any way dependent on *me*, or anything I may or may not do?"

"Had you not better ask Laurence?" said Miss Winstanley, tremulously, driven at last hopelessly into a corner.

"No, it would be no use. There is something that he is, in some way, debarred from telling me, I am sure, otherwise he would have told me, for he has no love of mystery or secrecy. And *yet* I feel equally sure that it is something that can only be put straight by my knowing it."

Miss Winstanley sat silent, a picture of bewildered distress.

"Aunt," said Alys again, after a short pause, her cheeks and brow flushing to the roots of her hair, "what I am going to ask you I don't like to put in words—it seems to me such an altogether repulsive, unnatural idea, but, as you won't speak without, I *must* ask you. Has all this trouble anything to do with my marrying some one, any one in particular? You told me once that Uncle Beverley, Arthur's father, was extraordinarily fond of me when I was a baby, and that he would have done anything to show his gratitude to my mother for what she had done for him. Now, aunt, has this anything to do with the peculiar terms of his will, which I have very often heard alluded to?"

"I have never seen the will; believe me, Alys, I do not know its exact terms," Miss Winstanley pleaded.

"Well, I dare say you don't, aunt. But you know enough to throw a little daylight on *my* part of it. Aunt, is it, *can* it be that Arthur's inheriting his father's property—his *own* property—depends on his marrying *me*?"

Her voice quivered and fell—a whole army of contending feelings were at war within her as she waited breathlessly for Miss Winstanley's reply.

"No, not exactly," she said, trying, as usual, to shelter herself behind vague and indefinite answers, "if *you* did not want to many *him*, he would not be punished for that. Now, Alys, this is all I can say. I am going away upstairs to my own room, to avoid any more talk of this kind."

Miss Winstanley rose from her seat, nervously tugging at her shawl which, as usual, had dropped far below her waist as she got up.

Alys took no notice of her last sentence.

"If *I* don't want to marry *him*, he will be none the worse," she repeated, slowly, "but if he doesn't want to marry me—what then? That would be a different story! Thank you, aunt; on the whole, I think you have told me enough, so you may stay down-stairs without fear. I am not going to ask any more questions."

Her tone was cool and composed enough, yet, on the whole, Miss Winstanley would rather have had her more visibly angry. There was a gleam in her eyes and a scorching spot on each cheek which her aunt had not for long seen there. "Alys was very hot-tempered as a child," she was wont to say of her, "but of late years she had calmed down wonderfully."

"No, Alys, I don't want to stay down-stairs, thank you," she replied, reprovingly, tugging harder than ever at the front

of the recalcitrant shawl, her efforts in some mysterious way only resulting in a more tantalising descent behind.

Alys made no reply.

"To think," she was muttering to herself, "to think how all this time I have been kept in the dark! How like a fool I have behaved! Laurence might have warned me *somehow*—however he was bound down not to tell me. He had better have tried to upset the will on the ground of Uncle Beverley's being mad, which he certainly must have been!"

Two minutes after Miss Winstanley left the room Captain Beverley entered it.

"Alys," he said, as he came in, "Laurence said you wanted me, so here I am. Why, what's the matter, child?" he added, with a quick change of tone as he caught sight of her face. She was not crying, but her cheeks were burning and her eyes gleaming, and as she looked up to answer her cousin, he saw that she was biting her lips in a quick nervous way to keep back the tears—a gesture peculiar to her from childhood.

"*Everything* is the matter," she said, bitterly. "I feel as if I should never trust any one again. I have something to say to you, Arthur, something very particular, and I want to say it very distinctly, so please to listen."

"I'm all attention," said Arthur, lightly still, though in reality not a little apprehensive as to what was coming. What could it be? Could Alys have found out about the understanding that now existed between himself and Lilias—she had been so intimate with Mary Western at the Edge? But a moment's reflection dismissed the idea. Lilias was too true to have told any one, even her sister, without his sanction. Besides, even had the fact come to Alys's knowledge, she would have been pleased and sympathising, not discomposed and indignant, as she evidently was.

"Listen," she repeated. "I want to tell you, Arthur Beverley, that supposing anything so altogether impossible and unnatural, and—and absurd and ridiculous as that you, my cousin, almost brother, should have thought of wanting to marry me—*me*, Alys!—well, supposing such a thing, I want to tell you that nothing you or any one could ever have said or ever could say would make me ever, even for half an instant, take such a thing into consideration. I *could* not do so. I tell you distinctly that I would not marry you for *anything*, Arthur, not if my life depended upon it."

Captain Beverley stared at her—stared as if he hardly believed his own ears.

"Does he think I am going out of my mind?" thought Alys, while across her brain there darted a horrible misgiving—could she in any way have misunderstood Miss Winstanley's confused replies?—could this impulsive act of hers, instead of being, as it had seemed to her, a positive inspiration, be after all a mistake, a terribly unwomanly mistake, which, to the last day of her life, she would blush to think of? Afterwards it seemed to Alys as if in waiting for her cousin to speak she had lived through years of agonised suspense.

"Alys," he said at last, hoarsely, it sounded to her. "Alys," and oh! the relief of the next few words, strangely chosen and almost ludicrously matter-of-fact as they sounded! "Would you mind putting that in writing?"

"Certainly not. I will do so this moment," she replied, recovering her self-possession and presence of mind on the spot. "Here, give me my writing things—just push my davenport over here."

Arthur did so, his hands trembling, his face pale with anxiety. All Alys's nervousness and agitation seemed to have passed to him.

"It is best to do it at once," he murmured, more as if speaking to himself than to her, "before I am tempted to say anything, so that my conscience may be clear that it is entirely voluntary, entirely her own doing."

"Yes," said Alys, looking up from the paper on which she had already traced some lines, "that it *certainly* is." Then she went on writing. "There, now, will that do?" she exclaimed, holding the sheet towards him.

"Read it, please," said Arthur, and Alys read:

> "Of my own free will, uninfluenced by any one whatsoever, I wish to declare that no conceivable consideration would, at this or any other time, make me agree to marry my cousin, Arthur Beverley.
> "Alys Madelene Cheviott."

"Yes," said Arthur, slowly, "that will do. Shall I thank you, Alys, or would you rather not?"

She looked up with a sparkle of her old mischievousness in her eyes.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she said; "I don't quite see it, I confess. I have simply stated a fact." Then suddenly she held up her hands before her face, which was growing hot again. "No, no, Arthur, don't thank me," she exclaimed; "I could not bear it. It is altogether too—too bad that anything like this should come between you and me. Go away, please, and send Laurence."

Arthur looked at her with earnest, regretful tenderness. But he saw that she was right. She would be better without him, and he went. Five minutes afterwards her brother entered the room.

"Alys," he said, sternly, but any one that knew him could have seen that it was a sternness born of anxiety, "what is all this? What have you been doing? I cannot understand what Arthur says, or rather he won't explain, but refers me to you. What have you been doing?"

"Only enacting the part of Miss Jane Baxter," said Alys, with an attempt at indifference.

"Alys, what do you mean?"

"Who refused all the men before they axed her," continued Alys, in the same tone.

"Alys!" said her brother again, and something in his tone arrested her.

She looked up.

"Laurence," she said, "don't misunderstand me; I am not really flippant and horrid like that, but it is true all the same. I have told Arthur, deliberately and seriously, that, if he were ever to ask me to marry him, *nothing* would ever make me take such a thing even into momentary consideration. I would not marry him for *anything*."

"Had he asked you to do so?" said Mr Cheviott, in a tone half of amaze, half of bewilderment.

"*No*," said Alys, "I told you he had not, and most certainly after what I have said, he never will."

"Do you think he had any intention of the kind?" again questioned her brother.

Alys hesitated. Her quick wits told her that she must be careful what admissions she made. Were she to reply what she believed to be the truth—that her cousin never had had, never would have any such feelings with regard to her as could lead to his asking her to many him—the effect on him might, she felt vaguely, be disastrous. So she hesitated, and meanwhile her brother watched her narrowly.

"I don't see," she said at last, "I don't see that I need answer that, Laurence. All I want you to know is that, after what I have said, Arthur could never think of me in that way. I have made it impossible for him to do so."

"And what made you do this? What has put all this into your head? Was it Aunt Winstanley?" asked Mr Cheviott.

"No," replied Alys. "That is to say, Aunt Winstanley did not put anything in my head, though I forced her to answer one or two questions I asked her. She did so very confusedly, I assure you, and but for my own ideas I should have been little the better for her information. No one is to blame. I have not been as blind and unconscious as you thought—that is all."

That *was* all in one sense. It was plain to Mr Cheviott that Alys would say no more, and on reflection he could not see that any more explanation on her part would do any good. He stood silent, hardly able as yet to see clearly the effect of this extraordinary turn of affairs.

"I am going up to my own room, Laurence," said Alys, rising slowly as she spoke. "I am very tired. I think I won't come down to dinner. I don't want you just now to say whether you think I have done rightly or wrongly, wisely or unwisely—some time or other I dare say you will explain all that has puzzled me. But in the mean time some instinct tells me, told me while I was doing it, that you, Laurence, would be glad for me to do it. Kiss me, dear, and say good-night."

He bent down and kissed her tenderly, still without speaking. But when Alys was up in her own room, safe for the night from all curious or anxious eyes, she lay down on her sofa, burying her face in its cushions, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Cutting the Knot.

> "Let's take the instant by the forward top;
> ... On our quick'st decrees
> The inaudible and noiseless foot of time
> Steals ere we can effect them."
>
> *All's Well that Ends Well*.

Dinner passed very silently at Romary that evening. Mr Cheviott was preoccupied, Captain Beverley labouring evidently under some suppressed excitement, Miss Winstanley nervous and depressed.

"Have you seen Alys, Laurence?" she said, as the butler came with a discreet inquiry as to what Miss Cheviott would be likely to "fancy." She had told her maid that she did not want any dinner, but had been so far influenced by Mathilde's remonstrance as to say she would take anything her aunt liked to send her. "I really don't know what to send up to her," Miss Winstanley went on, helplessly. "What do you think, Laurence? I went to her room on my way down-stairs, but Mathilde said she had begged not to be disturbed."

"I saw her half an hour ago," said Mr Cheviott. "I think she is only tired. I will send her up something." He got up from his chair and himself superintended the arrangement of a tempting little tray.

"Is Alys ill?" said Captain Beverley, in a low voice, and with a slight guiltiness of manner which did not escape his cousin.

"I think not," Mr Cheviott replied, dryly, as he sat down. "She has been over-excited, and nowadays she can't stand that sort of thing."

Arthur said no more, but he was evidently glad when dinner was over, and Miss Winstanley had left the cousins by themselves.

“Laurence,” he began, eagerly, when the last servant had closed the door and they were really alone, “I am anxious to tell you everything that passed between Alys and me this afternoon. I only thought it fair to her that she should tell you what she chose to tell, first.”

“That was not very much,” said Mr Cheviott, “she evidently is afraid of damaging you by saying much.”

“God bless her,” said Arthur, fervently, “of course she does not know the whole state of the case. But *I* am perfectly willing to tell you everything, Laurence; in fact, as things are, I should be a fool not to do so. But, in the first place, read this.”

He held out the paper that Alys had written and signed. In spite of his intense anxiety—an anxiety but very partially understood by Captain Beverley, who little knew the personal complications the charge of his affairs had brought upon his cousin—Mr Cheviott could not restrain a smile as he read the words before him.

“An extraordinary document, I must confess,” he said, as he returned it to Arthur. “Upon my word, Beverley, Alys and you are just a couple of children. If only such serious results were not involved, the whole thing would be most laughable. What can have put all this into her head?”

“Her own intentions and her own observations principally, I believe,” said Arthur. “She knew something of—of my admiration for Miss Western, and she suspected that you had exerted your influence to prevent its coming to anything. She knows you to be too honourable and right-minded to interfere in such a matter without good reason—through mere prejudice, for instance.” Mr Cheviott winced a little.

“I cannot say of myself, Arthur, that I *was* always quite free from prejudice in this matter,” he interrupted, speaking in a low and somewhat constrained voice, “but I am, I believe I am, ready to own myself in the wrong if I have been so.”

Arthur’s face beamed with pleasure.

“Thank you for that, Laurence,” he said, “a hundred thanks. But I keep to what I said. Whatever your personal prejudices may have been, you did not act upon *them*. Your conduct was based entirely upon regard, unselfish regard for my welfare, and this Alys felt instinctively and set her wits to work to puzzle it out. But what has first to be considered is this—the statement on that paper is Alys’s own voluntary declaration—”

“Did she write it of her own accord?”

“She first *said* it to me, in stronger and plainer words even than those she wrote; and when I asked her if she would put it on paper, she did so in an instant—with the greatest eagerness and readiness. Now, Laurence, what is now my position? Supposing I wished to do such a thing, *could* I ask Alys to marry me after what she has said—it would be a perfect farce and mockery.”

“It certainly would,” said Mr Cheviott. “I’ll tell you what we must do, Arthur. We must go up to town and lay the present state of the case before old Maudsley, and see what he says. He is as anxious as any of us to get the thing settled, and he must see that it would be perfect nonsense now to look forward to any possibility of the terms of the will being fulfilled. And I do not see that their non-fulfillment can possibly rest upon *you*. It is a strong point in your favour that you have done nothing premature in any other direction. No doubt we shall have to go to law about it—carry it before the Court of Chancery, I mean to say—but as all the beneficiaries, you and Alys, or myself as her guardian, are of one mind as to what we *wish*, I cannot now anticipate much difficulty.”

“But, Laurence,” began Arthur, and then he hesitated. “At all costs,” he went on again, “I must be open with you. I *have* done what you call something ‘premature’ in another direction. I am as good as—in fact, I *am* engaged to Lilias Western.”

Mr Cheviott’s brow contracted.

“Since when?” he said, shortly, while a sudden painful misgiving darted through his brain. Had *Mary* known this?—had she, in a sense, deceived him? True, she was under no sort of bond not to oppose him—rather the other way; from the first she had openly defied him on this point, but still she must be different from what he had believed her, capable of something more like dissimulation and calculation than he liked to associate with that candid brow, those honest eyes, were it the case that she had known this actual state of things all through that time at the Edge farm—so lately even as during their strange drive to Withenden and back. With keen anxiety he awaited his cousin’s reply.

“Since about the time of Alys’s accident I came down here then one day—you did not know—I was so uneasy about Alys—and I met Lilias close to the Edge, and heard from her how Alys was. And then somehow—I felt I could not go on like that, at the worst I could work for her, and I have been learning how to do so, you must allow—somehow we came to an understanding.”

“And her people know, of course—her sister does, any way, I suppose?” said Mr Cheviott, with an unmistakable accent of pain in his voice which made Captain Beverley look up in surprise.

“Her sister—Mary, do you mean? No, indeed she does not. None of them do. There was, indeed, very little to know—simply an understanding, I might almost call it a tacit understanding, between our two selves that we would wait for each other till brighter days came. We have not written to each other or met again. I would do nothing to compromise Lilias till I could openly claim her. I did not, of course, explain my position; had I done so, she would not, as you once said, have agreed to my ruining myself for her sake. All she knows is that I may very probably be a very poor man. And *because* I could not explain my position, I saw no harm in keeping it all to our two selves for the present. But, you see, I have looked upon it as settled—till to-day I have considered myself virtually disinherited, and I have been working hard at C— to fit myself for an agency or so on at the end of the two years.”

Mr Cheviott listened attentively, without again interrupting his cousin. But Captain Beverley could see that it was with a lightened countenance he turned towards him again.

"*Alys* knows nothing of this?" he said. "You are perfectly certain that her eccentric behaviour to-day was not caused by her believing she in any way stood between you and Miss Western? Don't you see, if it were so, this would injure you altogether; it might then seem as if she had done what she has out of pique, or self-sacrifice, or some feeling of that kind that, in a sense, you were to blame for?"

Mr Cheviott watched his cousin closely as he said this, but Arthur stood the scrutiny well. For a moment or two he stared as if he hardly understood; then a light suddenly breaking upon him, he flushed slightly, but there was no hesitation in his honest blue eyes as he looked up in his cousin's face.

"I see what you mean," he said, "but I didn't at first. No, Laurence, Alys thinks of me as a brother; she did know and warmly approved of my admiration for Miss Western, but she never knew of its going further. I rather think she fancies it shared the fate of my other admirations, and that she thinks no better of me in consequence. What she did to-day had nothing to do with that. She has got into her dear little head that she comes between me and my fortune, and knowing that she never could possibly have cared for me, except as a brother, whether I had cared for her in another way or not, she has, for my sake, nobly taken the bull by the horns. And so far I feel all right. Had I proposed to her twenty times, she would never have accepted me."

Mr Cheviott was silent. Whether or not he agreed with his cousin was not the question. That Arthur honestly believed what he said was enough.

"And what is to be done then?" said Arthur.

"What I said," replied Mr Cheviott. "We must lay it all before Maudsley as soon as possible. And in the mean time, Arthur, do nothing more—let things remain as they are with Miss Western. In any case you cannot come into your property for two years."

"But whatever happens, I am not going to let 'things remain as they are,' as you say, for two years," said Arthur, aghast. "You can continue my present income for that time, anyway, now that my future is likely to be all right. At the worst, even if my engagement was publicly announced, it is six of one and half a dozen of the other as regards Alys and me. I should have shown I did not want to marry her, but she most certainly has shown she does not want to marry me." He touched Alys's paper as he spoke.

"Yes," said Mr Cheviott, "that is true."

"Perhaps," said Arthur, laughingly, "if we appeal to the Court of Chancery, it will divide the estate between us. I shouldn't mind. Lilias and I could live on what there would be well enough."

"I don't think that's likely," said Mr Cheviott. "However, the first thing to be done is to see Maudsley."

And it was settled that they should go up to town the following day.

But when the cousins had separated for the night, and Arthur was alone with his own thoughts, a certain feeling of dissatisfaction with his own conduct came over him.

"I can't make it out exactly," he said to himself, as he sat over the smoking-room fire with his pipe, "but somehow I've a feeling that I'm not acting quite straightforwardly. How is it? Is it that I am claiming my property on false pretences—knowing in my heart that I never did intend to propose to Alys; or is it that I am not behaving rightly to Lilias—keeping her, or our engagement rather, dark till I feel my way? Laurence is as honest a fellow as ever lived, but then his intense anxiety that I should get my own blinds him a little, perhaps, to the other sides of the question. What a muddle it all is, to be sure!"

He sat still for a few moments longer, then suddenly rose from his seat.

"I'll do it," he said; "right or wrong, it seems the honestest thing. I'll do it."

He hunted about for writing materials, and, having found them, set to work at once on a letter. He did not hesitate in writing it; he seemed at no loss what to say, and in less than half an hour it was completed, signed, sealed and addressed to *Mrs Western, Hathercourt Rectory*.

Then the young man gave a deep sigh of relief, went to bed, and slept soundly till morning. But very early he was astir again; before many members of the Romary household even—for it was, compared with many, an early one—were about, Captain Beverley had crossed the park, and traversed on foot the two miles to the nearest post-office, that of Uxley, where he deposited his letter, and was at home again before Mr Cheviott made his appearance for the eight o'clock breakfast, necessitated by their intended journey.

A couple of hours later found the two young men in the train.

"Laurence," began Captain Beverley, but his cousin interrupted him.

"Excuse me, Arthur. I want to say something to you before I forget. You must let *me* be the spokesman with Maudsley; if he proposes, as I expect, to carry your affairs to the Court of Chancery, I think it will be best for his mind to be perfectly unprejudiced, and to let his instructions, in the first place anyway, come from me. You, I am certain, would not tell the story impartially—you would tell it against your own interests."

"I must tell it as it is, Laurence," said Arthur, "and, no doubt facts will show that I am, at least, as much to blame as

Alys for the non-fulfillment of my father's wishes. For, Laurence, I was just going to tell you when you interrupted me—I've *done* it, out and out. I couldn't stand leaving things as they were; it wasn't fair to her, nor honest to any one, somehow. I have written and sent a formal proposal for Lilias to her parents. I sent it to her mother, because her father is ill."

"And what did you say?"

"I told them that my prospects were most uncertain—I might be poor, I might be rich, and probably should not know which for two years, but that, at the worst, I could work for my livelihood, and was preparing myself for such a possibility."

Mr Cheviott was silent.

"Are you awfully annoyed with me, Laurence?"

A half smile broke over Mr Cheviott's face at the question.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I don't know. If a fellow *will* cut his own throat—"

"Complimentary to Miss Western," said Arthur.

"Well, well, you know what I mean. I allow that, in your case, there was strong temptation, and, of course, Arthur, I respect you for your straightforwardness and downrightness. *Personally*, I have certainly no reason to be annoyed. What the relief to me will be of having this horrible concealment at an end, you can hardly imagine—the misconception it has exposed me to—good God!" He stopped abruptly. Arthur stared at him in amazement.

"I had no idea you felt so strongly about it, Laurence," he said. "It makes me all the more thankful I have done what I have. You refer to Alys, of course? I know she must have been puzzled, but *nothing* would shake her confidence in you, old fellow, and now she will understand everything."

"Yes, it would, of course, be an absurdity to carry out the directions about not telling her, once you are openly engaged to Miss Western," replied Mr Cheviott. "And, I suppose, you have not much misgiving as to what the answer will be to your letter?"

"I don't know," said Arthur. "It will all come right in the end, but I expect her people to hesitate, at first, on account of the uncertainty. But you don't think there will be any question of stopping my allowance, in the mean time, if I marry before the stated period is out?"

"I think not. I can take that upon me—for Alys. But if we appeal to the court at once it will probably confirm your income till things are settled."

That same evening the cousins returned home. Some light, but not much satisfaction, was the result of their journey. Mr Maudsley approved of the course proposed by Mr Cheviott, but was decidedly of opinion that no decision could be arrived at till the date fixed by Arthur's father for his son's coming of age. "And then?" eagerly inquired both men. He could not say—it was an unusual, in fact, an extraordinary case, but, on the whole, seeing that the non-fulfillment of the testator's wishes was at least as much the lady's doing as the gentleman's—a contingency which never seemed to have dawned upon Mr Beverley—on the whole it seemed improbable that Captain Beverley should be declared the sufferer. "But it was a most extraordinary complication, no doubt," repeated Mr Maudsley, and he was glad to feel that neither he nor any one connected with him had had anything to do with the drawing up of so short-sighted a document as the late Mr Beverley's last will and testament.

"Who did draw it up?" said Arthur, turning to his cousin.

"A stranger," was the reply. "You know he consulted no one about it. He knew my father would altogether have opposed it. But it is perfectly legal. Mr Maudsley and I have tried often enough to find some flaw in it," he added, with a slight smile.

"And what about telling Alys?" said Arthur, with some little hesitation, as the dog-cart was entering the Romary gates.

"I think," said Laurence, "I think, as she knows, or has guessed so much, it is best to tell her all. It is to some extent left to my discretion to explain the whole to her should it be evident that the conditions cannot be fulfilled, which I have always interpreted to mean in case of her or your marriage, or engagement to some one else. Of course there are people who would say that you are not yet married, hardly engaged, and that I should wait, to be sure. But honestly I confess, after what has happened, it would be repulsive to me, in fact, *impossible* to go on dreaming that your father's wishes ever could be fulfilled. The worst of such a deed as your father's will is that all I can do is to act up to the *letter* of his instructions—as for the *spirit* of it—!"

"You've done your best," said Arthur, re-assuringly; "far better than any other fellow in the same position could have done. Just you see if Alys doesn't say so. It's been a horrid sell for you altogether, and—"

"Not the *not* getting your patrimony. You don't mean that?" interrupted Laurence. "Heaven only knows what the relief will be to me if, as I am beginning to hope, it is decidedly the right way."

"No, I didn't mean that exactly," said Arthur. "I know you and Alys are less selfish and grasping than any two people *I* have ever come across—*cela va sans dire*—I meant the bother and worry and all the rest of it. I wish somehow *something* might go to Alys. I can't help wishing that, you see, knowing it all and feeling just as if she were my own sister."

“*Don’t* wish it,” said Laurence, shortly. “Alys will have enough. Married or single she need never be dependent on any one.”

“Ah, yes!” returned Arthur; “but still—She wouldn’t be the worse of a home of her own. Downham now—it’s a nice little place, and what on earth should I do with two—*three*, there’s the Edge,” he added, with a merry, boyish laugh —“if Downham, now, could be settled on Alys, for, you see, Laurence,” he added, seriously, and as hesitating to allude to anything so completely out of the range of probabilities, “after all, it’s just possible you may marry.”

“I suppose so,” said Laurence, with a touch of bitterness in his tone which Arthur, had he perceived, would have been at a loss to explain, “I suppose so, but so *highly* unlikely, it is no use taking it into consideration one way or another. Confess now, Arthur, you hardly could, could you, *imagine* such a thing as any girl’s caring for me?”

Arthur looked up at his cousin with some surprise. Was Laurence joking? He could not tell.

“I don’t know why one shouldn’t,” he said, meditatively. “A girl, I mean—I don’t see why you need fancy yourself so unattractive. You’re good-looking enough, and—come now, Laurence, that’s not fair; you’re leading me out to laugh at me,” for so only could he interpret the slight smile that flickered over his cousin’s face.

“I was in earnest, I assure you,” said Mr Cheviott. “However, never mind. We’ll postpone the discussion of my charms to a more convenient season. Here we are at home.”

“Shall you have your talk with Alys to-night?” said Arthur.

“Probably—unless, that is to say, you would rather I should wait till—till—how shall I put it?—till you get a reply to your letter to Hathercourt.”

“No,” said Arthur, decidedly, “don’t put it off on that account. Whatever disappointment in the shape of delay or hesitation may be in store for me, I’ve no misgiving as far as Lilias herself is concerned. She’s as true as steel. And in any case Alys deserves my confidence. No sister could have been stauncher to me through all than she has been.”

And so it was decided, though, glad as Laurence felt to put an end once and for always to the only misconception that had ever existed between his sister and himself, a strange indefinable reluctance to tell her all clung to him.

“She will hate so to hear the idea of a marriage with Arthur discussed or alluded to,” he said to himself. “Girls are such queer creatures. However, the more reason to get it over. Will she ever tell it to Mary Western, I wonder? I shall lay no embargo upon her, for sooner or later Arthur is sure to tell the elder sister the whole story. But even if it were all explained, what then? I said in my fury that day what I wish I could forget—I said to her that I *could* have made her care for me. *Could* I? Ah, no—such deep prejudice and aversion could never be overcome. As Arthur could not conceal in his honesty, I am very far from an attractive man—not one likely to ‘find favour in my lady’s eyes.’ I am certainly not ‘a pretty fellow.’ Ah, well, so be it!”

Chapter Thirty.

“Amendes Honourables.”

”... But what avails it now
To speak more words? We’re parting,
Let it be in kindness, give me good-bye,
Tell me you understand, or else forgive.”

“I’ve nothing to forgive; you love me not,
And that you cannot help, I fancy.”

Hon. Mrs Willoughby.—*Euphemia*.

But, as not unfrequently happens, Mr Cheviott found the anticipation worse than the reality. Alys was upstairs in her own room when they got to the house, and she begged her brother not to ask her to come down that evening.

“I am not ill,” she said, “only tired and nervous, somehow. Come up to me after dinner, Laurence, and let us have a good talk—that will do me more good than anything.”

She looked up at him with a curious questioning in her eyes that struck him as strangely pathetic.

“Yes,” he said to himself, “she *must* be told all.”

So the way was paved for his revelations. And Alys was sufficiently prepared for them to manifest no very overwhelming surprise. She listened in silence till Laurence had told her all. Then she just said quietly:

“Laurence, it was a *cruel* will.”

“Yes,” said her brother, “however intended, so it has indeed proved.”

“Going near,” pursued Alys, softly, almost as if speaking to herself, “going near to spoil two, four, nay, I may say *five* lives,” she whispered. “Oh, thank God, Laurence, it is at an end!”

She clasped her thin little hands nervously. How changed she was—Alys, poor Alys, who used to ignore the very

existence of nerves!

Her next remark struck Mr Cheviott unexpectedly.

“Laurence,” she said, “I wonder if Mary Western will ever know all this!”

He had it on his lips to answer, “The sooner so, the better,” but he *could* not. Instead thereof his reply sounded cool and unconcerned in the extreme.

“Possibly she may, some time or other. Arthur is sure to tell Lilias Western whom it *does* concern. But why should you care about her sister’s knowing it?”

“Because I *do*,” Alys replied, oracularly.

There was a large allowance of letters in the Romary post-bag the next morning. Several for Captain Beverley—all of which, but one, he put hastily aside. And his heightened colour and evident anxiety could not but have betrayed to his companions whence came that one, had not both Mr Cheviott and Miss Winstanley been absorbed by news of unusual interest in their respective letters.

“Laurence,” said Arthur, at last, when for the time letters were put down, and breakfast began to receive some attention, “is that yesterday’s *Times*? Have you looked at it? I wonder if there is a death in it of some one I know—you know who I mean—the last of those poor Brookes, Basil’s brother, I mean Anselm, a boy of eighteen. I hear he died at Hastings, two days ago.”

“I don’t know about its being in the *Times*,” replied Mr Cheviott, “but, curiously enough, I have just heard of it in a letter from an old friend of mine, Mrs Brabazon, an aunt of the poor fellow’s, and—”

“And?” said Arthur, eagerly.

Mr Cheviott glanced at Miss Winstanley. “Afterwards,” he formed with his lips, rather than by pronouncing the word, in reply to his cousin. But Miss Winstanley had caught something of what they were saying.

“The Brookes,” she exclaimed, “are you talking of the Brookes of Marshover?” and when both her companions answered affirmatively, “How very odd!” she went on, growing quite excited. “My letter is all about them too. It is from my old friend, Miss Mashiter, who has been staying at the same hotel at Hastings as the Brookes are at, and she is quite upset about the poor young fellow’s death—it was so sudden at the last, and there is such a romantic story about. It appears that a cousin of the young man’s came to Hastings lately, a most exquisitely beautiful creature, with whom he had been in love since early boyhood, though somewhat older than himself, and she has been devoting herself to him, and now the report is that, just before he died, he got his poor father to promise to leave everything to her—he has no child left, and the Brookes are enormously rich. What a catch the young lady will be!”

“Aunt Winstanley, I am ashamed of you!” said Mr Cheviott. “I had no idea you were so worldly-minded. You don’t mean to say you ever heard of such a thing as a girl’s losing a lover and consoling herself with another—especially when the first had, as you say in this case, left her a fortune?”

“It *is* very sad,” agreed Miss Winstanley, quite deceived by Mr Cheviott’s tone—“very sad, but such is the way of the world, Laurence. Of course, I would not say such a thing before Alys.”

“*Of course* not,” said her nephew, approvingly.

Arthur looked up with relief; for the instant, Miss Winstanley’s story had startled him a little—for to whom could the episode of the beautiful cousin refer but to Lilias, still, as her mother’s letter informed him, at Hastings, “doing what she can for our poor friends there.” But there must be great nonsense mixed up with Miss Mashiter’s gossip, Arthur decided, seeing that Laurence, who had the correct version of the whole in his hands, could afford to tease Miss Winstanley about it. The poor boy—Anselm Brooke—was dead, but still—the idea of Lilias’s name being coupled with that of any man, or boy even, was not altogether palatable, and still less that of her being an heiress!

“What a mercy I yielded to my inspiration and wrote to Mrs Western yesterday!” he replied. “To-day, after hearing that report, nonsensical though it probably is, I should hardly have liked to write.”

He was thankful when Miss Winstanley at length got up from her seat—her breakfast seemed to have been an interminable affair that morning—and saying that she must go and ask what sort of a night Alys had had, left the cousins to themselves.

“What is your news? What does Mrs Brabazon write about?” exclaimed Arthur, eagerly, almost before the door had closed on Miss Winstanley.

“Rather,” said Laurence, “What is *yours*? Mine will keep, but you, I see, have a letter from Hathercourt which, I am sure, you are dying to tell me all about.”

“To show you, if you like,” said Arthur, holding it out to his cousin. “You have guessed, I see, that it is all I could wish.”

It was a thoroughly kind and sensible reply from Mrs Western. She made no pretence of astonishment at the nature of Captain Beverley’s letter to her; she said that she and her husband would be glad to see him again, and to talk over what he had wished to say to them.

Lilias was at Hastings, but expected home in a few days. Mr Western was continuing better. Any afternoon of the

present week would find them both at home and disengaged, and she ended by thanking Arthur for his consideration in writing to her instead of Lilias's father, as he was still far from able to meet any sudden agitation without risk of injury.

"Should I go over this afternoon, do you think?" said Arthur.

"Yes, I should say so," replied Mr Cheviott. "And what will you tell them?"

"Everything. I have no choice," said Arthur. "That is to say, I shall tell them all about my father's will and the present state of the case, and what Maudsley thinks and what *you* think. Of course I need not go into particulars as to what passed between Alys and me the other day, but I will just tell them that anything of the kind, as regards both her and myself, never has been, never *could* have been possible—that we are, and always have been, and always shall be, I trust, brother and sister to each other."

Mr Cheviott had been listening attentively.

"Yes," he said, when his cousin left off speaking, and looked up for his approval, "I don't think you can do better."

"And now for your news—Mrs Brabazon's, I mean," said Arthur, eagerly. But Mr Cheviott showed no corresponding eagerness to reply.

"She says," he answered, quietly, "that Miss Western is with them and quite well. Of course they are all sadly depressed by young Brooke's death, though they knew it must come before long—she writes as if poor old Brooke had got his death-blow, but she says that 'Lilias' has been the greatest comfort to them."

"And what more?" asked Arthur, "there is something more, I know. There is nothing in all that to have been a reason for Mrs Brabazon's writing to you."

"I didn't say there was. Women constantly write letters without any reason," observed Mr Cheviott.

Arthur got up from his seat and walked impatiently up and down the room.

"Laurence," he said at length, "I think that sort of chaffing of yours is ill-timed."

"I don't mean to chaff you—upon my word, I don't," said Mr Cheviott, looking up innocently. "All I mean is that, whatever my news is, I am not going to tell you any more of it at present. It is much better not, and you will see so yourself afterwards."

"You meant to tell me all when you first got the letter?" said Arthur.

"Well, yes, I don't know but that I did. But I have changed my mind."

"Is it—no, it cannot be—that there is any truth in that absurd nonsense that Miss Winstanley was telling us?"

"Why should you ask? It bore on the face of it that it *was* absurd nonsense," replied Mr Cheviott. "Do, Arthur, trust me. You have done so in important things. Can't you leave me to tell you about Mrs Brabazon's letter after you have been at Hathercourt?"

"Very well. Needs must, I suppose," said Arthur, lightly.

But he was not without misgivings during his long ride to the Rectory.

"I wish that idiotic old maid had kept her gossip to herself instead of writing it off to Miss Winstanley," he said to himself more than once, and when he got close to Hathercourt he felt so nervously apprehensive of what he might be going to hear, that the relief of meeting, or rather overtaking Mary within a few yards of the house was very great.

Mary had no hat or bonnet on—she had just run out to gather some fresh green for the simple nosegays her father liked to see from his sofa. She was already in mourning for her young cousin, and as she looked up with a bright flush of pleasure to return Captain Beverley's greeting, he could not help thinking that, though "not Lilias," she was certainly very pretty.

"That black dress surely shows her off to advantage," he said to himself, "or else she has grown prettier than she used to be. What a queer fellow Laurence is—fancy being shut up at the Edge for three weeks with a girl like that, and emerging as great a misogynist as before!"

Her mother was at home and disengaged, or would, no doubt, speedily be so, when she heard of his visit, Mary told him. Then he got off his horse, and she led him into the drawing-room.

"Mamma is in the study, I think," she said, lingering a little. Then with some hesitation and rising colour, "I had a letter from Lilias this morning. She is coming home the day after to-morrow."

"So soon?" exclaimed Captain Beverley, delightedly. "That is better than I hoped for. Mary," he went on, impulsively, holding out both his hands and taking hers into their clasp, "Mary—you will forgive my calling you so?—you know what I have come about, don't you? You will wish me joy—you have always been our friend, I fancy, somehow."

"*Our* friend," repeated Mary, inquiringly. "You are sure, then," she went on, "that—that it will be all right with Lilias? Yes, mamma told me of your letter—you don't mind?—it is quite safe with me."

"Mind, of course not. But how do you mean about Lilias?" he asked, with a quick return of his misgiving. "Nothing has

happened that I have not been told of?”

His bright face grew pale. Mary, with quick sympathy, hastened to re-assure him.

“Oh, no, no,” she said, “I don’t know what you have heard—but it isn’t that. Nothing of *that* kind could make Lilias change *of course*. I only mean—it is a long time since you have seen her, and—and—you went away so suddenly, you know. Lilias has never said anything to me, but I have been at a loss what to think about her.”

“As to what she has been thinking about me, do you mean?”

“Yes,” said Mary, bluntly.

Arthur’s face cleared.

“If that is all, I am not afraid,” he said, gently. “You are sure that is all, Mary?”

“Quite sure,” she replied. Then after a moment’s pause, “How is Miss Cheviott?”

“Pretty well—at least, so I am told,” he replied; “but to me she seems terribly changed. Laurence, her brother, I mean, won’t say much about her. He can’t bear to own it, I fancy. And it is so dull for her. I think that keeps her back—she should have some companionship.” Mary’s face grew very grave. She gave a little sigh. “I wish—” she was beginning to say, when the door opened and her mother came in.

Alys was alone in her room that afternoon, when a tap and the request, “May I come in?” announced her cousin’s return. She knew where he had been, for Laurence had told her everything; but she had not been alone with Arthur since their strange interview two days ago, and the remembrance of it set her heart beating as she called out, “Come in by all means.”

To her surprise, Arthur came quickly up to her sofa, bent down and kissed her on the forehead before he spoke.

“Dear Alys,” he said, “I have come straight to you. It is all thanks to you, and I wanted to tell you, before any one, that everything’s going to be all right.”

For half a second there seemed a catch in Alys’s breath. Then she looked up with a smile, though there were tears in her eyes too.

“I am so glad, so very glad,” she said, softly. “Then has Lilias come back?” she asked.

“No, she is coming the day after to-morrow,” he replied, “and that reminds me—I have a great deal to tell you, Alys, and I am sure it will interest you—on Mary’s account as well as on Lilias’s.”

“I think I know—part of it anyway,” said Alys. “Laurence has been telling me of his letter from Mrs Brabazon—he would not tell you because he thought it would be so much pleasanter for you to know nothing about it till the Westerns told you themselves.”

“Yes,” said Arthur, “I see.”

“How strange it all seems!” said Alys. “How well I remember meeting Mrs Brabazon in Paris last year, and how she cross-questioned me about the Westerns, at the time, you know, that Laurence was so prejudiced against them.”

“And you spoke up for them?”

“A little,” said Alys, blushing slightly, “I mean, as much as I could.”

“Good girl!” said Arthur, approvingly.

“And since then, you know, Laurence has quite changed. How could he help it? You have no idea of Mary’s goodness to me that time at your farm, Arthur, and knowing *her* showed what they all were, so single-minded and refined, and so well brought up though they have been so poor. You mustn’t mind, Arthur,—it is no disparagement to Lilias when I say I cannot help counting Mary my special friend.”

“And now I hope you will see her often,” said Arthur. “She would do you good.”

Alys shook her head.

“I know she would,” she said, “but she won’t come here.”

“*Now* she will,” said Arthur. “She can have no more of that exaggerated terror of being patronised, if that has been her motive. The county will all find out the Westerns’ delightful qualities now, you’ll see, Alys. By-the-bye, I wonder what made Mrs Brabazon write to Laurence.”

“Just that some one in the neighbourhood might know the real facts of the case,” Alys replied. “There is sure to be so much gossip and exaggeration. I fancy, too, she wrote with a sort of wish to disabuse Laurence of his prejudice against her cousins—I am sure she noticed it that day in Paris—Did the Westerns tell you all about their affairs, Arthur?”

“A great deal, they are so frank and, as you say, single-minded, Alys. They have known something about it for some time, ever since Lilias met the Brookes at Hastings.”

"And has it been all owing to that?"

"Oh, no—a great part of the property *must* have come to Mrs Western; no, to the eldest son, Basil, I should say, at Mr Brooke's death. But the Westerns might not have *known* this, and as the father said to me, in his invalid state, the release from anxiety is a priceless boon."

"But it isn't only Basil that is to benefit," said Alys, eagerly. "Mrs Brabazon said—"

"Of course not," her cousin interrupted. "Everything is to go to him eventually—old Brooke not having any one to provide for, and not wishing to cut up the property—but Mrs Western will, for life, be very well off indeed, and so will the whole family. Each daughter and younger son will have what is really a comfortable little fortune. The Marshover Brookes are *very* rich, you know."

"And to think *how* poor the Westerns have been!" said Alys, regretfully.

"Yes; but a few years ago nothing could have seemed more remote than their chance of succession. And, after all, even very rich people can't look after all their poor relations."

"No, I suppose not," said Alys, with a sigh. "Will they leave Hathercourt?"

"Sure to, I should think. Mr Brooke wants them to go to Marshover, Mrs Western says, and keep it up for him, as he will be most of the year abroad. He is not obliged to do anything for them during his life, you see, but he has already settled an ample income on Mrs Western, and Basil is to go into the army, and George to college."

"I shall never see Mary again, all the same."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, but I am certain she will never come here. Arthur, I think she dislikes Laurence too much ever to come here."

Arthur opened his eyes.

"Dislikes Laurence!" he repeated. "Why should she?"

"She does," persisted Alys, "and Laurence knows it."

"Well, we'll see. Perhaps Lilias may help us to overcome Mary's prejudice," said Arthur, with a smile. "And failing Mary, Alys, you won't be sorry to have Lilias for—for a *sister*—will you, Alys?"

Alys smiled, and her smile was enough.

All this happened in spring. Early in the autumn of that same year Lilias and Arthur were married. They were married at Hathercourt—in the old church which had seen the bride grow up from a child into a woman, and had been associated with all the joys and sorrows of her life—the old church beneath whose walls had lain for many long years the mortal remains of Arthur Beverley's far-back ancestress, the "Mawde" who had once been a fair young bride herself.

"As fair perhaps, as happy and hopeful as Lilias," thought Mary, as her eyes once more wandered to the well-known tablet on the wall, with a vague wonder as to what "Mawde" would think of it all could she see the group now standing before the altar. Then there came before her memory, like a dream, the thought of the Sunday morning, not, after all, so very long ago, when the little party of strangers had invaded the quiet church, and so disturbed her own and her sister's devotions. And again she seemed to see herself looking up into Mr Cheviott's face in the porch, while she asked him to come into the Rectory to rest.

"He smiled so kindly, I remember," thought Mary, "and there was something in his face that made me feel as if I could trust him. And so I might have done—ah! how hasty and prejudiced I have been—thank Heaven, I have injured no one else by my folly, however!"

And then she repeated to herself a determination she had come to—there was one thing, be the cost to her pride what it might, that she would do, and to-day, she said to herself should, if possible, see it done.

It was a very quiet marriage—for every reason it had seemed best to have it so. There were the considerations of Mr Western's still uncertain health, of the mourning in the Brooke family with which that of Lilias was now identified, of Alys Cheviott's invalid condition, and even of Captain Beverley's own anomalous position, as still, by his father's will, a minor, and at present, therefore, far from a wealthy man, though every hope was now entertained that before long he would be in legal possession of his own. There were no strangers present—only the Grevilles and Mrs Brabazon, besides the large group of brothers and sisters, and Mr Cheviott as "best man," and Lilias and her husband drove off in no coach and four, but in the quiet little brougham now added to the Rectory establishment, for Mr Western's benefit principally, when he was at Hathercourt. For Hathercourt was not to be deserted, though only a part of the year was now spent there by the Rector's family, and to the curate, whose services he now could well afford, was deputed the more active part of the work. They had all been at Marshover for some months past, and had only returned to Hathercourt a few weeks before the marriage.

"I could hardly believe in any family event of great importance happening to us anywhere else—we seem so identified with our old home. I like to think I shall end my days here, after all," Mr Western was saying, with inoffensive egotism, to Mr Cheviott, as they stood together in the window after the hero and heroine of the day had gone, when Mary came up and joined them.

“Yes, father,” she said, gently. “I remember your saying so, ever so long ago. I think,” she added, turning to Mr Cheviott, “it was the afternoon of that Sunday you all drove over to church here—do you remember?”

Mr Cheviott smiled slightly.

“I remember,” he said, quietly. “I have never been inside the church since, till to-day. If it is still open I would like to look round it, if I may?” turning to Mr Western for permission.

“It is not open,” said Mary, answering for her father, “but I can get the key in an instant, and, if you like,” she went on, considerably to Mr Cheviott’s surprise, “I will go with you.”

He thanked her, and they went. But, before fitting the great key into the old lock, as they stood once again by themselves in the church porch, Mary turned to her companion.

“Mr Cheviott,” she said, “I offered to come with you because I wanted an opportunity for saying something to you that I did not wish any one else to hear. I have never seen you alone since—since a day several months ago, when Lilias, by Arthur’s wish, explained *everything* to me, and I want just to tell you simply, once for all, that I am honestly ashamed of having misjudged you as I did, and—and—I hope you will forgive me.”

Mr Cheviott looked at her for a moment without speaking—her face was slightly flushed, her eyes bright and with a touch of appeal in them—half shy, half confident, which carried his thoughts, too, back to the last time they had stood there together. She looked not unlike what she had done then, but he—There was no smile in his face as he replied.

“Thank you,” he said. “It is kind and brave of you to say this, but I cannot say I forgive you. I have nothing to forgive. If I were not afraid of reviving what to you must be a most unpleasant memory, I would rather ask if *you* can forgive *me* for my much graver offences against you?”

“How? What do you mean?” said Mary, startled and chilled a little by his tone.

“My inconsideration and presumption are what I refer to,” he said. “I cannot now imagine what came over me to make me say what I did—but you will forgive and forget, will you not, Miss Western? We are connections now, you see—it would never do for us to quarrel. I once said—you remember—that speech is the one which I think I must have been mad to utter—that in other circumstances, had I had fair play, I *could* have succeeded in what I was then insane enough to dream of. *Now* my aspirations are surely reasonable enough to deserve success—all I ask is that you will forget all that passed at that time, and believe that, in a general way, I am not an infatuated fool.”

Mary had grown deadly pale. She drew herself back against the wall, as if for support.

“No,” she said, in a hard, constrained tone, “no, that I cannot do. You ask too much. I can never *forget*.”

Mr Cheviott gazed at her in astonishment. For one instant, for the shadow of an instant, a gleam darted across his face—*could* it be?—*could* she mean?—he asked himself, but, before his thought had taken form, Mary dashed it to the ground.

“I am ashamed of myself for being so easily upset,” she said, almost in her ordinary tone, “but I have had a good deal to tire me lately. We needn’t say any more, Mr Cheviott, about forgiving and forgetting, and all such sentimental matters. I have made my *amende*, and you have made yours, and it’s all right.”

Mr Cheviott’s voice was at its coldest and hardest when he spoke again.

“As you please,” was all he said, and Mary, foolish Mary, turned from him to hide the scorching tears that were beginning to come, and fumbled with the key till she succeeded in opening the door.

“There now,” she said, lightly. “I must run home. I don’t think you will require a cicerone for this church, Mr Cheviott,” and before he could reply, she was gone. Gone—to try to smile when she thought her heart was breaking, to seem cheerful and merry when over and over again there rang through her brain the cruel words—“He never cared for me, he says himself it was an infatuation. He is ashamed to remember it; oh no, he never really cared for me, or else my own words turned his love into contempt and dislike—and what wonder!”

Two or three days after Lilias’s marriage Mary heard from Alys Cheviott. She and her brother were leaving England almost immediately, she said, for several months. The letter was kind and affectionate, but it did not even allude to the possibility of her seeing Mary before they left.

“Good-bye, Alys,” said Mary, as she folded it up and one or two hot tears fell in the envelope. “Good-bye, dear Alys; and good-bye to the prize I threw from me, when it might have been mine—surely the best chance of happiness that ever woman was offered!”

Chapter Thirty One.

A Farewell Visit to Romary.

> “He desired in a wife an intellect that, if not equal to his own, could become so by sympathy—a union of high culture and noble aspiration, and yet of loving womanly sweetness which a man seldom finds out of books; and when he does find it perhaps it does not wear the sort of face that he fancies.”
> *The Parisians*.

The Westerns were not to spend this winter at Marshover. It was too cold for Mr Western, and so was Hathercourt. A house, therefore, for the worst of the season had been taken at Bournemouth, and there old Mr Brooke had promised to spend with them his otherwise solitary Christmas.

"I'm so glad you are going to Bournemouth," said Mrs Greville one day, a few weeks after Lilias's marriage, when she had driven over to say good-bye to her old friends before they left; "it is such a nice cheerful place, and plenty going on there. Quite a pleasant little society. It will be an advantage for the girls if, as Mrs Brabazon tells me, they are to be in town next year."

"But Alexa and Josephine will not be at Bournemouth except for a week at Christmas," said Mary. "They will be at school."

"And Alexa is too young to go out at least for another year," said Mrs Western.

"But there is Mary. *You* are not going to school again, are you, Mary?" said Mrs Greville, laughingly, turning to her.

"I almost wish I were!" she replied, "excepting that I should not like to leave mother. But I shall not go out at all, dear Mrs Greville, either at Bournemouth or in town. I don't care for society."

"How can you tell till you have tried?" said her friend.

"That's just it. I don't know anything at all about it, and I feel too old to get into the way of it."

"Mary!" exclaimed Mrs Greville; "what an idea! At one-and-twenty," and even Mrs Western looked slightly surprised.

"I can understand your thinking you will never care for things of the kind *much*, and I dare say you never will," Mary's mother observed. "But if not for your own, it *may* for others' sakes—for your younger sisters'—be necessary for you to go a little into society."

"Ah, well—not at present, any way, and possibly never," said Mary. "Alexa would make a much better Miss Western than I."

Mrs Greville smiled.

"Are you tired of your honours already, Mary?" she said. "Well, who knows!"

"I didn't mea—" began Mary, flushing slightly, "besides, it has *always* been settled that I was the old maid of the family."

"Nonsense," said Mrs Greville. "That reminds me, you will find some old friends at Bournemouth—the Morpeths; you don't know, Mary, what an impression you made on Vance Morpeth."

Mary looked annoyed. "That boy!" she exclaimed, hastily, "my dear Mrs Greville—"

"He isn't a boy—he is five-and-twenty," interrupted Mrs Greville, slightly ruffled. "Of course I don't mean to say that *now*, with your present prospects you might not be justified in—well, to use a common phrase, though not a very refined one, in 'looking higher'."

"Dear Mrs Greville!" exclaimed both Mary and her mother together. "*Don't* say things like that, *please*," Mary went on. "You don't really think that I would be influenced by that kind of consideration?—you don't think so poorly of me?"

"No, my dear, I do not. I think you and all of you a great deal too unworldly; I wish, for your own sakes, you *were* a little more influenced by considerations of that kind," said Mrs Greville, nodding her head sagaciously, and just then, some one calling Mrs Western from the room, she went on in a lower voice, "Why are you so desperately cold to Mr Cheviott, my dear? Do you really dislike him so hopelessly?"

"Who said I disliked him?" exclaimed Mary, sharply, and the slight extra colour on her cheeks deepened now into hot, angry crimson.

"My dear! Don't be so fierce. Surely you can't have forgotten all the things you *yourself* said against him. Why, you would not even go to see through Romary till I coaxed you into it—just because it was *his* house. I assure you your aversion to him became quite a joke among us—Vance Morpeth always speaks of him as your *bête noire*."

Mary was silent. What else could she be?

"I only wish you had *not* expressed your dislike to or before me," continued Mrs Greville. "I should have been only too glad to have been able to say that *I* had never heard of it when Alys Cheviott told me how it had distressed and disappointed her."

"Did *Alys* speak of it?" said Mary, surprised and a little annoyed.

"Yes, to me—not to any one else. You need not be indignant at it, Mary. It came about quite naturally. You know I have seen a good deal of her this summer while you were all at Marshover. She seemed to like my going over there, and she has been very lonely, poor girl. That aunt of hers is such a goose! And one day she was asking me all about you, and she added quite naturally how much she wished you would sometimes go to see her."

"But I was away," pleaded Mary, not quite honestly.

“Yes, just then; but you had been at home quite long enough to go if you had wished, and that was Alys’s disappointment. She told me that almost her first thought, when everything was cleared up between Lilias and Captain Beverley, was, ‘And now I shall be able to see Mary,’ thinking, of course, that when you understood that Mr Cheviott’s dread had been altogether unselfish—fear of Arthur’s ruining himself by disobeying the will—you would at once lose your dislike to him.”

“And what does she now think?” asked Mary.

“She doesn’t know what to think. She fears that in some way Mr Cheviott has so deeply offended you that your dislike—prejudice—whatever it is—to him, is incurable.”

Again, for a moment, Mary was silent. Then she said, hesitatingly.

“Has she—do you think, Mrs Greville—said anything of this to Mr Cheviott?”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs Greville. “But of course, my dear Mary, you cannot pretend to be so modest as to fancy that your staying away from them—from Alys, at least—in this marked way, cannot have attracted attention. After the service you did them—the great obligation you put them under to you, and Alys’s constantly expressed affection and gratitude—your refusing to go to her, when she *couldn’t* come to you, was a very strong measure. And, to speak plainly, unless you had the very strongest reasons for it, I think it was very unkind to that poor girl.”

Mary, for some little time past, had been believing her punishment complete. Now, as Mrs Greville spoke, she realised that it had not been so. She *had* been cruel to Alys; she had allowed her own feelings—her mortification at the past, her proud terror of possible misapprehension in the future—to override what was the clearest and plainest of duties. “I am not worthy to be called a friend,” she said to herself, and tears filled her eyes as she turned to Mrs Greville.

“Thank you,” she said, gently, “for what you have said. It will not have been in vain.”

And Mrs Greville kissed and told her if she were proud and prejudiced, she was also honest and magnanimous. And then the good lady drove herself home in her pony-carriage with a comfortable feeling of self-satisfaction, and a vague, not unpleasing suspicion that she *might* turn out to have been a sort of “*Deus ex machinâ*,” or “benevolent fairy god-mother, we’ll say,” she added to herself, not feeling quite sure of the Latin of the first phrase, or that it did not savour a little of profanity, “just to give a little shove to affairs at the right moment.”

All day Mary thought and thought over what she should do. Could she get to see Alys, now at the eleventh hour, for the Cheviotts, if they had not already done so, must be on the eve of quitting Romary for the winter? Should she write to Mrs Greville and ask her to convey some message? Should she—so many months had passed since she had seen Alys that a little further delay could be of small consequence—should she wait for an opportunity of seeing Lilias, and asking *her* to explain? To explain what, and how? Ah! no. Explanation of any kind was impossible, and the necessity for it she had nothing but her own foolish conduct to thank for. At last—“I will attempt no explanation, no excuse, or palliation,” she decided, “Alys is generosity itself. I will trust her by asking her to trust me.” And that same evening she wrote to her a few simple words, which she felt to be all she *could* say.

> “My dear Alys,” she said, “will you forgive me? I see now that I have made a grievous mistake, done a wrong and cruel thing in never going to see you all this time. This knowledge has come to me suddenly and startlingly, and I cannot rest till I write to you. I cannot explain to you what has distorted my way of seeing things, but I ask you to forgive me, and to believe that, selfishly and unkindly as I have acted, there has not been a day, scarcely an hour, since we were together in which I have not thought of you.
> “Yours affectionately,—
> “Mary Western.”

And when this letter was written and sent, Mary felt happier than she had done for a long time. Was it all “the reward of a good conscience?” Was there not deep down, unrecognised, in a corner of her “inner consciousness,” wherever that debatable land may be, a hope, a possibility of a hope rather, that Mrs Greville’s statement, to some extent, explained the change in Mr Cheviott’s manner? What if Alys, after all, had been the innocent marplot—suggesting to her brother in her disappointment that the “all coming right” of Lilias’s affairs had not resulted in a complete change of attitude on Mary’s part; that her dislike to him must be even deeper founded than could be explained by her misjudgment of his conduct towards her sister? What if they had both been at cross-purposes—each attributing to the other a prejudice that no longer existed—which, indeed, Mary had done nothing to remove his belief in on her part—which, as existing on his side towards her, she had imagined to have yielded temporarily to what he himself had described as an “infatuation,” but to return with tenfold strength?

All this she did not say to herself in distinct words, but the suggestion had taken root in her heart, and was not to be dislodged. And though days grew into weeks before there came from Alys an answer to her letter, Mary went about through those weeks with lightened steps and hopeful eyes. She could not distrust Alys, she told herself; and her mother, seeing her so cheerful, congratulated herself that Mary was “getting over” the loss of Lilias, which she had been beginning to fear had greatly depressed her.

Alys’s letter, when it did come, was all that Mary had expected and more, much more than she felt herself to have deserved.

“I will not ask you to explain anything,” wrote Alys, “I am more than satisfied. I cannot tell you what a change it makes in my life to be able to look forward to seeing you as much and as often as you can be spared to me. It will help me to be patient, and to try to get strong again. I am likely to be much alone when we return to England, for Laurence is thinking of letting Romary and taking a house for me somewhere not very far from town. He seems to have taken a dislike to a country life, and says he thinks he would be better if he had ‘more to do.’ I cannot agree

with him that such a thing is possible, for I have never known him idle for half an hour."

Mary gave a little sigh as she folded up the letter—that was all. And soon after came on the time for the family move to Bournemouth, and with a strange feeling of regret she again said good-bye to Hathercourt.

The winter passed, uneventfully enough on the whole. There was a flying visit from Lilias and her husband on their way back from Italy to the small country-house that was to be their home for the next two years; there were old Mr Brooke and Mrs Brabazon and the two schoolgirls, Alexa and Josey, for Christmas; there were, for Mary, very occasional glimpses of Bournemouth society; but with these exceptions her daily life was what many girls of her age would have considered very monotonous. She did not seem to find it so, however; she appeared, indeed, what Lilias called so "aggravatingly contented" that she owned to Arthur, with a sigh, that, after all, she greatly feared that the family prophecy about Mary was going to turn out true.

"At one-and-twenty," she said, lugubriously, "she really seems to be steadily developing into an old maid."

"Wait a little," said Arthur. "Mrs Brabazon is determined to have her in town for some weeks. There is still hope of Mary's proving to be not altogether superior to youthful vanities and frivolities."

"Very little, I fear," said Lilias, half smiling, half provoked.

Mrs Brabazon had her way—Mary did go to town, and, after her own fashion, enjoyed herself. She was generally liked, in some cases specially admired, but that was all. She gently repulsed all approach to anything more, and, though grateful to Mrs Brabazon, perplexed her by her calm equability in the midst of a life novel and exciting enough to have turned a less philosophical young head. If, indeed, it were "all philosophy," thought Mary's shrewd cousin, and not, to some extent, preoccupation?

One day towards the end of April—Mary had been six weeks in town—there came a letter from Bournemouth, asking her, if possible, to go to Hathercourt for a day or two, to make some arrangements preparatory to Mr and Mrs Western's return there, "which," wrote her mother, "no one but you, dear Mary, can see to satisfactorily, sorry as I am to interrupt your pleasant visit."

Mrs Brabazon was somewhat put out. She had two or three specially desirable engagements for the next few days; but, though Mary heartily expressed her regret at the summons being, from her hostess's point of view, thus ill-timed, she owned to herself rather enjoying the prospect than otherwise.

"I am an incurable *country* cousin, dear Mrs Brabazon," she said; "you will have more satisfaction in every way with Alexa, if you are kind enough to take charge of her next year."

"And where do *you* intend to be then?" said Mrs Brabazon, amused, in spite of herself, at Mary's tone.

"I shall have retired to my own corner. I have always been told I should be an old maid," said Mary, laughingly.

And two days later found her at Uxley. She was not to stay at Hathercourt, the Rectory being just released from the hands of painters and decorators, and unfit for habitation, and Mrs Greville delighted to seize the chance of a visit from one of her old favourites.

The day before that fixed for Mary's return to town Mrs Greville came into the drawing-room with a note in her hand.

"You have quite finished at Hathercourt, you are sure?" she said, "you don't need to go over again?"

"Oh, no, thank you," said Mary, "there is nothing more for me to do. I am *quite* at your disposal for the rest of my time. Is there anything you want to do this afternoon?"

"Nothing much—only to drive over to Romary," said Mrs Greville. "I have a note from poor old Mrs Golding, saying that she would be so thankful to see me. She is really ill, and quite upset with the idea of leaving Romary. She has only just heard definitely from Mr Cheviott about it, as she kept hoping he would change his mind."

"Shall I not be in the way if I come with you? I don't in the least mind staying alone," said Mary, diplomatically.

"Oh dear, no!" replied Mrs Greville, who had not perceived the slight shadow that had stolen across Mary's face at the mention of Romary, "the fact is I *want* you, for the boy cannot come this afternoon, and I don't like driving quite so far alone."

Mary resigned herself with outside cheerfulness, but some inward misgiving.

"I would rather never have gone near Romary again," she said to herself; "however, I need not go into the house, and it will be a sort of good-bye to the place, and with it a great deal besides."

For of late she had grown less hopeful. Alys had written once again, and to this second letter Mary had replied. But that was months ago, and she had heard no more; and, though nothing could make her distrust Alys's affection, she was beginning to fear that their gradually drifting apart was unavoidable.

"Thinking of me as her brother does," said Mary to herself, "it is not possible that she and I can have much intercourse. It was insane of me to hope for it."

When Mrs Greville's pony-carriage drove up to the house, Mary asked leave to stay outside.

"I shall be quite happy wandering about by myself," she said, "and Mrs Golding will prefer seeing you without a

stranger. How long shall you be—an hour?”

“Possibly two,” replied Mrs Greville, laughing, “there is no getting away from the old body sometimes. And as I shall not see her many more times I should like to pay her a good long visit.”

“Don’t hurry, then,” said Mary. “I shall be all right.”

It was a very lovely day. Romary looked to much greater advantage than the last time Mary had been there. It had then been mid-winter to all intents and purposes, at least as far as the trees and the grass were concerned. Now it was the most suggestively beautiful season of the year—spring-time far enough advanced to have much perfection of loveliness of its own, besides the rich promise of greater things yet to come. Mary had not before realised how pretty Romary was.

“I wonder they can think of leaving it,” she said to herself, half sadly. She had sauntered round the west front of the house, along a terrace overlooking a sort of Italian garden, when, turning suddenly another corner, she came upon a well-remembered scene—the thick-growing shrubbery through which ran the foot-path leading to the private entrance near the haunted room. With a curious mixture of feelings Mary stood still for a moment, recalling with a strange fascination the sensations with which she had last hurried along the little path. Then she slowly walked on.

Bright as the day was, it seemed dusk in the shrubbery.

“It is really a rather creepy place,” thought Mary, “one might expect to meet any kind of ghost hereabouts.”

And as if the thought had conjured up some corroboration of her words, at that moment in the narrow vista of the path before her there appeared a figure approaching in her direction. For one instant Mary started with a half-thrill of nervous apprehension—was she really the victim of some delusion of her own fancy?—then she looked again to feel but increased bewilderment as she more clearly recognised the figure. How *could* it be Mr Cheviott? Was he not most certainly still at Hyères? Had not Mrs Greville told her so that very morning?

There was just this one flaw in her argument—the person now rapidly nearing her *was* Mr Cheviott! And when Mary became convinced of this her first sensation of amazement gave way to scarcely less perplexing annoyance and vexation at being again met by him as an uninvited intruder on his own domain.

“*Was* there *ever* anything so awkward?” thought Mary, “was ever any one so unlucky as I?” she repeated, proudly stifling the quick flash of gladness at meeting him again anywhere, under any circumstances. And so overwhelmed was she by her own exaggerated self-consciousness that when in another moment with outstretched hand he stood before her, she did not even notice the bright look of pleasure that lighted up his face, or hear the one word, “*Mary*!” with which he met her.

Whether she shook hands or not she did not know. She felt only that her heart was beating to suffocation, and her face crimson as she exclaimed confusedly:

“Mr Cheviott! I had not the least idea you were here—in England even. I only came over with Mrs Greville—I am so vexed—so ashamed—If I had had any idea—” Then she stopped, feeling as if she had only made bad worse. Mr Cheviott looked at her.

“If you had had any idea I was anywhere near here you would have flown to the Land’s End or John o’ Groat’s House to avoid me—is that it?” he said, and whether he spoke bitterly or in half jest to cover some underlying feeling, Mary really could not tell. She turned away her head and did not speak.

“If he takes that tone,” she said to herself, “I shall—I don’t know what I shall do.”

“Won’t you answer me? Mary you *must*,” he said, passionately, facing round upon her—half unconsciously she had walked on, and he had kept abreast of her—and taking both her hands in his—“do you hate me, Mary, or do you not?” he said. “I am not a proud man, you see, or else my love for you has cast out my pride; perhaps you will despise me for it, for a *second* time daring to—but I made up my mind to it. I came back to England on purpose to be *sure*. At least, you must see that my love is no light matter, and—oh! child, tell me—*do* you hate me? Look up and tell me.”

He had changed his tone to one of such earnest appeal that Mary trembled as he spoke. But when she tried to look up her eyes filled with tears, and the words she wanted would not come.

“*Hate* you?” was all she could say.

But it was enough. He looked at her as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

“Do you mean to say—*Mary*—do you mean that you *love* me? And all this time—”

A smile broke through her tears.

“Can’t you believe it?” she said. “At least, you may absolve me from having ever told you anything but the plain truth as to my feelings towards you,” she added. Then he, too, smiled.

“But,” she added, “the last time we met, you yourself called it an ‘infatuation.’ I thought you had grown ashamed of it.”

“Ashamed of it,” he repeated, “ashamed of loving you? My darling! Ashamed of my reckless inconsideration for your feelings?—yes, I had reason to be *that*. And an infatuation it certainly did seem, to believe that there was any

possibility of your ever learning to care for me, for there were all those months of disappointment after my conduct in that wretched complication had been cleared up, and day by day Alys hoped, and I hoped, for some sign from you. And then what you said to me the day of the marriage I looked upon as merely wrung from you by your brave conscientiousness—that made you feel your acknowledgment of mistake was due even to me. Do you see?”

“Yes,” said Mary; “but,” she added, shyly, “what made you change?”

“Your letter to Alys partly; by-the-bye, you have to tell me how *you* came to change so as to write it? And then—I don’t know how it was—I felt my case so desperate; I had nothing to lose, and oh, Mary, what an inestimable possibility to gain! I made up my mind to try once more, and as soon as I could leave Alys I came home, never hoping, however, to see you here—in the very lion’s den!”

“Does Alys know why you came?”

“No, I would never have told her, or any one, had I failed. But to think that I have won!—Mary, I never before in all my life dreamed of such happiness. I have everything that makes life worth having given to me in you. And, do you know,” he added, with a sort of boyish *naïveté*, “I don’t think I ever realised how wonderfully pretty you are? What have you been doing to yourself?”

Mary laughed—a happy, heartful laugh that fully vindicated the youthfulness she had begun to believe a thing of the past. She was not above feeling delight at *his* thinking her pretty.

“It is your eyes, I think,” he said. “They were always nice, sweet, honest eyes, but now something else has come into them. What is it?”

“Guess,” whispered Mary. “I don’t think it was there this morning.”

“It wasn’t your beauty I ever thought the most of,” he said. “It reminds me of something I read the other day, that when a man *does* And his ideal it is sure ‘not to wear the face he fancies.’ But I have got it *all*, face too!”

“And now,” said Mary, “please go away. I am sure Mrs Greville is ready, and I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

Mr Cheviott’s countenance fell.

“Mayn’t I come with you to meet her? Won’t you tell her?” he said.

“Not before *you*!” said Mary, laughing. “But I will tell her—I should like to tell some one,” she added, girlishly.

“And when can I see you?”

“To-morrow morning. Come to Uxley early if you can. I am not leaving till the afternoon. And then we can fix about—about your going to see them at Bournemouth, and all that.”

“But *I* would like to tell some one, too, this very minute, at once, and I have no one. What shall I do?” he said, ruefully.

“Tell Mrs Golding,” said Mary, mischievously, and before he could stop her, she had turned and was running at full speed along the shrubbery path, back to the front of the house, where, sure enough, Mrs Greville and the pony-carriage were waiting.

Ten minutes after, Mr Cheviott entered the old housekeeper’s room.

“Mrs Golding,” he said, “I am not so sure that I *shall* let Romary after all!”

The End.

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