Title: A Country Sweetheart

Author: Dora Russell

Release date: November 4, 2014 [EBook #47282]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net

A Country Sweetheart

BY
DORA RUSSELL,
AUTHOR OF
"His Will and Hers," "The Broken Seal," "The Last Signal," ETC.

CHICAGO AND NEW YORK:
RAND, McNALLY & COMPANY,
PUBLISHERS.

THE SONG OF THE "No. 9."

My dress is of fine polished oak,
As rich as the finest fur cloak,
And for handsome design
You just should see mine—
No. 9, No. 9.

I'm beloved by the poor and the rich,
For both I impartially stitch;
In the cabin I shine,
In the mansion I'm fine—
No. 9, No. 9.

I never get surly nor tired,
With zeal I always am fired;
To hard work I incline,
For rest I ne'er pine—
No. 9, No. 9.

I am easily purchased by all,
With installments that monthly do fall,
And when I am thine,
Then life is benign—
No. 9, No. 9.

To the Paris Exposition I went,
Upon getting the Grand Prize intent;
I left all behind,
The Grand Prize was mine—
No. 9, No. 9.

At the Universal Exposition of 1889, at Paris, France, the best sewing machines of the world, including those of America, were in competition. They were passed upon by a jury composed of the best foreign mechanical experts, two of whom were the leading sewing machine manufacturers of France. This jury, after exhaustive examination and tests, adjudged that the Wheeler & Wilson machines were the best of all, and awarded the company the highest prize offered—the GRAND PRIZE—giving other companies only gold, silver, and bronze medals.

The French government, as a further recognition of superiority, decorated Mr. Nathaniel Wheeler, president of the company, with the Cross of the Legion of Honor—the most prized honor of France.

The No. 9, for family use, and the No. 12, for manufacturing uses, are the best in the world to-day.

And now, when you want a sewing machine, if you do not get the best it will be your own fault.

Ask your sewing machine dealer for the No. 9 Wheeler & Wilson machine. If he doesn't keep them, write to us for descriptive catalogue and terms. Agents wanted in all unoccupied territory.

WHEELER & WILSON MFG. CO., CHICAGO, ILL.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW HEIR.

In the summer time, from the door of a darkened room, a gray-haired, bent old man had just followed a great surgeon down the wide staircase of Woodlea Hall.

The surgeon looked around when he reached the last steps, and there was kindly pity on his grave face as he met the appealing eyes that were fixed on his.

“I am sorry to say there is no hope, Mr. Temple,” he said, in answer to the mute inquiry on his listener’s face.

Mr. Temple’s bowed gray head bent a little lower when he heard this verdict, and that was all.

“Is he your only son?” asked the surgeon, commiseratingly.

“He is our only child,” answered Mr. Temple.

“Ah—that is sad, but there is no doubt football is a dangerous game.”

“How—how long will he be spared to us?” now inquired Mr. Temple with quivering lips.

“He will drift away probably during the night, or in the small hours of the morning. He will not regain consciousness; the injury to the base of the brain is too severe.”

The great surgeon only stayed a few minutes longer in the grief-stricken household after this, and then was driven away. And when he was gone, with a heavy sigh—almost a moan—Mr. Temple began to ascend the staircase, and on the first landing a lady was standing waiting for him with terrible anxiety written on her pale face.

Mr. Temple looked up when he saw her, and shook his head, and as he did this the lady sprang forward and gripped his hand.

“What did he say?” she asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Come in here, my poor Rachel,” he answered gently, and as he spoke he led her forward into a room on the landing, the door of which chanced to be open, and then closed it behind them. “My dear—I grieve very much to say—Sir Henry’s opinion is not very favorable.”

His voice broke and faltered as he said these words, and a sort of gasping sigh escaped the lady’s lips as she listened to them.

“What did he say?” she repeated, with her eyes fixed in a wild stare on Mr. Temple’s face.

“He—he said we must prepare—”

“No, no! not to lose him!” cried the lady with a sudden passionate wail. “Phillip, I can not, I will not! He was so bright a few hours ago—so bright and well—my Phil, my boy—and now, now—it will kill me if he dies!”

She flung herself on the floor in a frantic passion of grief before her husband could prevent her, and lay there writhing in a terrible paroxysm of despair, while the gray-haired man beside her bent over her, and tried in vain to comfort or soothe her. She was his wife, but fully twenty years younger than he was; a handsome dark-eyed woman, of some thirty-five years, and the injured boy lying in the darkened room was her only child.

“Who did it?” she suddenly cried, raising herself up. “Who murdered him? Which of the boys?”

“My dear, it is so difficult to tell in a scramble—so difficult to find out.”

“I will find out!” went on Mrs. Temple, passionately. “I do not believe it was an accident; someone must have struck him on the head. Oh! my boy, my darling!” she continued, rocking herself to and fro; “the one thing I had to love; the only one that loved me—must, must I lose you, too!”

“It is a terrible blow, Rachel—but—”

“Why not try someone else? Do you hear, Phillip?” said Mrs. Temple, now starting to her feet, and grasping her husband’s arm. “Send or telegraph for another doctor at once.”

“My dear, it would do no good,” answered Mr. Temple, sadly. “You heard what Doctor Brown said; Sir Henry Fairfax is one of the first surgeons in town—and—he said there was no hope.”

A wild shriek broke from Mrs. Temple’s lips as she heard this fatal verdict. Her agonized grief was indeed pitiful to behold. Again and again she repeated that her boy was the one being that she had to love; was the only one she loved, and the gray-haired old man sighed deeply as he listened to her frantic words.

She never seemed to think of his grief, nor even to remember it. It was her own loss she harped on; her own misery. But Mr. Temple did not reproach her with this. He did not say my heart, too, is broken; the spring of my life is gone. Yet this was so. The poor lad Phillip Temple, drifting away so fast from life, had been the center of all his hopes, the pivot of all his joy. And he, too, was telling himself sadly, as he listened to his wife’s moans, that the boy had been the only one who had loved him, or who had cared for his love.

“She never loved me,” he thought, looking at the handsome grief-stricken woman before him; and as he did so his memory went back to fifteen years ago; back to the days when he, the squire, had gone wooing to the whitewashed parsonage house, and had won the dark-eyed girl on whom he had set his heart. He had not asked himself then if her heart was his. She seemed to like him; she smiled on him and accepted his presents, and her mother hinted at the advantages of an early wedding-day.

So they were married, and by and by Mr. Temple found out his mistake. She had never loved him, and one morning fell fainting from her chair when she read the news that a soldier cousin had been killed at some distant Indian outpost.

And in the days that followed he learnt the truth. Her cousin had been her lover, but the old hindrance, want of money, had stood between them, and thus Mr. Temple had won his wife. She made very little secret of this to her husband, and did not affect love she could not feel. Her child became her idol, and from the time when the baby boy began first to lisp her name she worshiped him with the whole strength of her passionate, ill-regulated heart.

The boy, however, had been a bond between the husband and wife, and they had got on fairly well together for his sake. They used to talk to each other of his future, and it was a subject

equally dear to them both. He was a fine, healthy, clever lad of fourteen when he went out to play football on the fatal day when he was carried back to his father's house insensible. He had somehow fallen, and a rush of boys had swept over him, and when they raised him up he never spoke again. They took him back to Woodlea Hall; the village doctor was sent for in all haste, and at once advised further advice to be telegraphed for. This was done, and Sir Henry Fairfax arrived from town only to pronounce the case to be hopeless.

It was a terrible affair, people said, terrible for the poor mother and for the poor squire, who somehow was the most popular of the two. Country neighbors called at the lodge gates, with commiserating inquiries, while the parents hung over the speechless boy, waiting in terrible anxiety for Sir Henry Fairfax's arrival. He came late in the afternoon, and did not stay long. He carefully examined the unconscious lad, heard what the country doctor had to say, and then told the father the truth.

The boy was dying; the little heir to the broad acres and the old name was about done with earthly things. It had been a beautiful day; the sun had blazed down from a cloudless sky on the wide park, the glowing flower-beds, and the green lawns of Woodlea Hall. It seemed a mockery; outside so bright, inside so full of gloom. Still, until Sir Henry Fairfax's arrival, there had been hope. Doctor Brown, the country doctor, had spoken of "returning consciousness" to the anxious mother. They had watched and waited, however, for that "returning consciousness" in vain. The lad lay white and still, breathing slowly, with closed eyes. He took no notice of his mother's tender words, of her fond appeals. He did not hear them, and his bright eyes were closed to smile no more.

"Rachel, my dear, will you leave him any longer alone?" at last Mr. Temple ventured to say, as his wife wept and moaned, and he laid his hand on her shoulder as he spoke.

She started and looked up.

"Did you say no hope?" she asked, wildly.

"Sir Henry said—" faltered Mr. Temple.

"Then there is none for me—none, none!" went on the wretched woman, in her despair. "Why should I lose everything? Why should God take everything from me? I have been a good woman for Phil's sake, and He is going to take him—all the good that is in me will be buried in his grave!"

"Hush, hush, my poor girl; do not talk thus."

"What do you understand," continued Mrs. Temple, yet more wildly, "of love like mine? You are old—you do not suffer—"

"I do, God knows I do!" cried the unhappy man, and tears rushed into his eyes, and ran down his furrowed cheeks as he spoke.

"When George Hill died, I bore it for Phil's sake," went on Mrs. Temple, regardless, or forgetful, of the useless pain she was inflicting; "and now—and now, my darling, my darling, must I lose you, too?"

"Come to him now, at least," urged Mr. Temple; "you would wish to be with him, would you not, Rachel? There may be some—parting word."

Mrs. Temple moaned aloud.

"You mean before he—"

"Before he leaves us. Come, my poor Rachel, for his sake try to compose yourself."

These words seemed to have some effect on the unhappy mother. She made an effort to be calm, and a few minutes later, leaning on her husband's arm, and tottering as she went, she returned to the bedside of the dying boy.

Those standing round it moved back as she approached it. There were present the village doctor and Mrs. Layton, Mrs. Temple's mother, and the poor lad's nurse. No one spoke. Doctor Brown had already told Sir Henry Fairfax's opinion to the two weeping women, and Mrs. Layton silently put her hand into her daughter's as she neared the bed. But Mrs. Temple shrank from this mark of sympathy. Without a word she fell on her knees and fixed her eyes on the face of the unconscious boy.

No wonder she had loved him. He had inherited her own handsome features, and dark marked brows, and lithe slim form. But his disposition had not been like hers. He lacked her waywardness, her excitability. He had been a sunny-faced, sunny-hearted lad, and to see him lying thus—mute, white, and still—was inexpressibly painful.

They watched him hour after hour. The sun dipped behind the green hills that lay to the west, and slowly the summer daylight began to fade, and still there was no change. Mrs. Layton crept noiselessly out of the room to go down to the vicarage to see after her husband and household, but all the rest remained. The gray-haired father sat at one side of the bed, and at the other the mother knelt. From time to time the doctor felt the small brown wrist that lay outside the coverlet, and the old nurse by the window was praying silently.

But Mrs. Temple breathed no prayer. In her heart was hot revolt and despair. She never took her eyes from her boy's face, and her expression told her anguish. Once the doctor poured her out some wine, but she put it from her with a gesture of loathing.

And so the numbered hours stole on. Presently a new light shone into the room—a soft pale

radiancy—and the moonbeams lit the dying face. They fell on it more than an hour, and then a faint change took place in the breathing. The doctor bent down and listened; the father drew a gasping sigh. It was the passing away of the young soul; and a moment or two later they were forced to tell Mrs. Temple that she was childless.

Then the pent-up anguish broke loose. The bereaved mother caught the dead boy in her arms, and called to him by every endearing name to come back to her.

“Come back, my darling, my darling; do not leave me alone!” she shrieked in her despair.

They sent for her mother, but the very presence of Mrs. Layton seemed still further to excite her.

“But for you,” she cried, turning on her mother in her frantic grief, “he would never have been born! But for you I would have been with George—George Hill, from whom you parted me!”

It was a most painful scene. Mrs. Layton drew the gray-haired old squire out of the room, and tried to whisper some words of comfort in his ear.

“Grief has made poor Rachel beside herself,” she said. “Fancy her talking of George Hill now, when the poor fellow has been dead over ten years. They were children together, you know.”

But Mr. Temple made no answer. He knew very well that his wife was speaking the truth, and that his mother-in-law was not. He turned from Mrs. Layton and went into his library, and sat there alone, thinking. The boy’s death had changed everything. Mr. Temple was a rich man, for besides his own large property, he had in his youth married for his first wife the daughter and heiress of Sir Richard Devon, whose estates marched with his own. At her death this lady had left everything she possessed to her husband, and thus Mr. Temple was one of the largest land-owners in the country.

The old man sighed when he thought of all this, and covered his face with his hands. He was thinking who would now come after him; thinking of his heir. He knew who it must be. The Woodlea estates had been entailed by his father in the event of his having no children, beyond him. The late Mr. Temple had left two sons, Phillip, the heir, and John, who had gone into the army and died young. But he had married, and left a son, also named John. This John Temple the squire knew was now the heir to Woodlea. He was a man of some thirty years old, and occasionally had visited his uncle, but no great intimacy had existed between them.

John Temple had a fair fortune, and had not sought to increase it. He had been educated as a barrister, but he had never practiced. He had lived a good deal abroad, and led a roving life, it was said, but his uncle knew very little about him. He had had in truth small interest in him. But now all this was changed. His bright young son, his hope and pride, had passed away, and the old squire, sitting with his bowed head, knew that John Temple was his heir.

CHAPTER II.
THE MAYFLOWER.

Three days later they carried young Phillip Temple to his grave, and the new heir came to Woodlea as a mourner. His uncle had written to John Temple to tell him of the sad and untimely death of his son, and John Temple had received the news with a little shrug.

“Poor lad, what a pity, and he was such a fine boy,” he said to the friend who was dining with him, when the squire’s black-edged letter was placed in his hand.

“But this will make a great difference to you?” answered his friend.

It was then John Temple gave the little shrug.

“It will give me a good many more thousands a year than I have now hundreds,” he said, “but that will be about the only difference. The poor lad with his youth would have enjoyed the old man’s money more than I shall. I am too old to believe in the pleasures of riches.”

“I am not, then,” replied the friend enviously; “you can buy anything.”

“No,” answered John Temple, and his brow darkened.

He was a good-looking man, this new heir of Woodlea, tall and slender, and with a pair of keen gray eyes beneath his dark brows. He looked also fairly-well content with life, and took most things calmly, if not with absolute indifference.

“I have been able to pay my way, and what more does a man want?” he said, presently, as his friend still harped on his new inheritance. “To be in debt is disgusting; I should work hard to keep out of it.”

“It is very difficult to keep out of it,” was the reply he received.

“You must cut your coat according to your cloth,” answered John Temple, smiling. “Had I lived extravagantly I should now have been in debt, but I have not, and therefore I have no duns.”

What he said of himself was quite true. He had lived within his income, and was not therefore greatly elated by learning that he would probably soon be a rich man. Perhaps he affected to care less about his change of fortune than he really did. He was cynic enough for this. At all events he

accepted his uncle's invitation to be present at his poor young cousin's funeral, and he wrote in becoming and even feeling terms of the sad loss the squire had sustained.

Mr. Temple read this letter with a sigh, but he was not displeased with it. He did not show it to his wife, who was prostrate with grief. Mrs. Temple's condition was indeed truly pitiable. Her one moan was she had no one to love her now, and she refused to be comforted.

"She will be better," said Mrs. Layton to the squire, "when it is all over. Rachel is, and always was, very emotional."

Mrs. Layton meant that her daughter would be better when her young son was in his grave. But Mr. Temple did not consult his mother-in-law on the subject. He fixed the day for the poor lad's burial himself, and he invited the funeral guests. And it was only after John Temple had accepted his invitation that he told Mrs. Layton that he expected his nephew.

Mrs. Layton went home to the vicarage brimful of the news.

"Of course this young man is the heir now," she said to her husband; "but surely Rachel will have the Hall for her life? We must see about this, James."

The Rev. James Layton, an easy-going man, looked up from the composition of his weekly sermon as his wife spoke.

"I dare say it will be all right," he said.

"But it may not be; this young man is sure to marry after the squire's death, and he looks extremely ill and shaken, and I can not have Rachel's home interfered with."

"You are always looking forward," replied the Rev. James, pettishly. "I'm busy, I've my sermon to finish."

"The sermon can wait, and is of no consequence; but Rachel's future is. You must speak to the squire about it at once."

"I consider it would be absolutely indecent, Sarah, to do so at present."

"That's all very fine, but the poor old man may take a fit any day, and then where should we be —with a new madam at the Hall, after all Rachel has gone through?"

"She always seemed right enough till the poor lad died."

"Still, she married an old man, and should therefore have the benefit of it."

"Well, wait until the poor boy is in his grave, at any rate."

"Dilatory as usual! I always said, James, you would never get on, because you are not pushing enough. You do not court the bishop like the other greedy parsons, and just look where you are. At sixty-nine, in a small vicarage like Woodlea, with under four hundred a year! You can not expect me to have patience; and how about poor Rachel? You'll allow this young man, John Temple, to come down to the funeral, and perhaps obtain power over a silly old man, and your own daughter may be left out in the cold! And all because you won't speak a few words, and insist on the Hall being settled on her."

"Speak yourself," said Mr. Layton, impatiently.

"I would at once, only I know he won't listen to me. He's got some stupid grudge into his silly old head, and never consults me about anything. You are the person to do it, and you must do it."

"Well, go away for the present, at any rate."

"Oh, yes, just like you! Wait till young Temple arrives; wait until it is too late, and then you will be satisfied!"

Having thus reproved her husband at the vicarage, Mrs. Layton crossed over to the hall for the purpose of reproving her daughter. And as she entered the wide domains, and looked around at the luxuries and beauties of the place, she naturally felt anxious to keep them in the family.

"Rachel must rouse herself," she mentally reflected, as she ascended the broad staircase. "Now the poor boy is gone, she has lost a bond between herself and the old man, and therefore she must exert herself to keep up her influence."

She thought this again as she walked along the wide, softly-carpeted corridor that led to her daughter's room.

"What a nice house!" she reflected. "No one must come here. No interloper; no new squire and his wife!"

She knew that Mrs. Temple's marriage settlement was everything that was satisfactory. She had seen to that herself when the gray-haired man had gone courting her dark-haired girl. She had taken full advantage of an old wooer's folly, and seen that he paid a heavy price for his bargain. But nothing had been said about the Hall. Then, when the boy was born nothing naturally was said of it. His mother would live, of course, with the young heir. But now the young heir was dead, and some new arrangement must be made.

Mrs. Layton knew she had no easy task before her, when she rapped at the door of her daughter's bedroom. Rachel Layton had been difficult to manage, but Rachel Temple had developed into a very wayward woman. As a rule, she was on fairly good terms with her mother, but she brooked no interference. Mrs. Layton derived many benefits from her connection with the Hall. Her mutton, her butter, her eggs, her vegetables, all came from the same source. The

remembrance of this inspirited her. The Hall must remain Rachel's, she told herself, cost her what it would.

It was the day before the poor boy's funeral, and John Temple was expected at Woodlea early on the following morning. There was, therefore, no time to lose. So Mrs. Layton plucked up her courage and entered her daughter's apartment, determined to speak her mind.

Mrs. Temple was standing at one of the windows gazing listlessly out. She could not rest, and her handsome face was lined and drawn with her mental sufferings. She looked years older since her boy's death, and she glanced round as her mother entered the room without speaking.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Layton, "how are you feeling now?"

"How can you ask?" answered the unhappy woman, "when everything is ended for me—that is how I feel."

"But, my dear Rachel, this is folly; everything is not ended for you, and you have, I am sure, many years of happy life before you yet."

"Happy life! Very happy life—alone in the world."

"You may not always be alone, Rachel, and I have come here just now, my dear, especially to speak of your future."

"I have no future."

"My dear child, yes; you have had a great loss—"

"No one knows what he was to me!" interrupted Mrs. Temple, passionately, and she began to wander up and down the room wringing her hands as she went. "My darling, my boy, and to think that after to-morrow I shall see him no more—that they will take away from me even what is left!"

"Rachel, has Mr. Temple told you that—his nephew is coming to-morrow?"

"No," replied Mrs. Temple, listlessly.

"He is, then—Mr. John Temple—who, of course, is now Mr. Temple's successor."

"Is he coming so quickly to take my darling's place!" cried Mrs. Temple, with a sudden flash of indignation. "But what matter, what matter!"

"It is a matter, my dear, and it is about this that I wish to speak to you. When you married, the Hall was not included in your settlement, as I now see that it ought to have been, but—we could not foresee your sad loss. Now this young man will succeed Mr. Temple, but he ought not to have the Hall in your lifetime. That must be secured to you, and before this young man arrives I think Mr. Temple ought to be spoken to on the subject, and I should advise you to exert yourself, my dear, and prevent young Mr. Temple gaining an undue influence over your husband."

Mrs. Temple fixed her large dark eyes on her mother's face.

"What are you talking of?" she said.

"I am telling you, my dear Rachel, only you do not seem to attend to what I am saying, that this young man is coming, who is now your husband's heir, and naturally he will try to obtain power over his uncle, which you should not allow. And, as I told you before, this house is not settled on you, therefore—"

"Be silent, mother, be silent!" cried Mrs. Temple with strong indignation, lifting up her hands. "What, when my darling's not gone from it yet—when he is still under the roof—you talk of such things! You always were a wicked, worldly woman, but this is too much—too much!"

Her tone and manner frightened Mrs. Layton. "I only meant, my dear—" she began.

"Go away, leave me alone!" went on Mrs. Temple, and Mrs. Layton thought it best to go.

"She has no common sense," she reflected as she went back to the vicarage. "However, I have done my duty, and whatever happens I am not to blame."

But in spite of this "little disagreement" with her daughter, as she called it, Mrs. Layton did not fail to appear the next day at the Hall. She went early, "as of course I must see after the sad arrangements," she told her husband, "as Rachel is quite incapable of doing so, and I consider Mrs. Borridge, the housekeeper, anything but what she ought to be."

So she interfered in the sad arrangements, and she saw John Temple, the new heir, arrive with jealous eyes. She admitted, however, that he was good-looking, "which makes it worse," she mentally added. She saw also the squire receive him, and introduce him to the funeral guests as "my nephew," with a certain sad emphasis on the words that Mrs. Layton fully understood.

All the gentlemen in the neighborhood had been invited, and nearly all arrived at the Hall to follow poor young Phillip Temple to his grave. The squire of Woodlea was universally respected, and the guests looked at his bowed gray head, and grasped his thin trembling hand with deep sympathy. It was a truly affecting sight as the slim coffin was borne into the churchyard followed by the childless old man. As on the day of the poor lad's death the sun was shining brightly, and in the pretty spot where they laid him, green trees were dappling the green grass.

Groups of the villagers stood around to watch the sad procession, and talk of the dead boy. They had all known him; he had grown up in their midst, and the tragic accident that had ended in his death had occurred in a field close to the churchyard.

John Temple stood by his uncle's side during the service, and he noticed just at its close a girl dressed in white, and wearing white ribbons, step forward and approach the open grave.

She was carrying a large white wreath, and her eyes were full of tears, and she hesitated as if she did not like to go through the group of mourners around the grave. She was close to John Temple, and he turned round and addressed her.

"Do you wish to place that wreath in the grave?" he said, kindly.

"Yes, but I—" faltered the girl.

"Shall I place it for you?" asked John Temple.

"Oh, thank you, if you would," she answered, gratefully.

He took it from her hands, and laid it gently and reverently on his young cousin's coffin. There were many other flowers, and as John Temple placed hers, the girl took courage and went up close to the grave and looked in.

"He was so fond of flowers," she said in a low tone, and her tears fell fast.

"Poor boy," answered John Temple, and then he looked at the girl and wondered who she was.

But the service was over and the mourners turned away, and John went with them. He glanced back and saw that the girl in the white frock was still standing by the grave. Others, too, had now approached it; gone to take a last look at the young heir.

The funeral guests did not return to the Hall, except John Temple, who drove there with his uncle. The squire was deeply affected, and John not unmoved.

"He—he was everything to me," faltered the squire.

"I feel the deepest sympathy for you," answered John Temple, and his words were actually true.

It was a short but dreary drive, and when they reached the Hall the squire asked John Temple to excuse him until dinner time.

"I feel I am unfit company for anyone," he said, "but make yourself quite at home in the house that will be yours some day," he added, with melancholy truth.

Thus John was at liberty to pass the time as best he could. He went to the Hall door, and looked out on the green park. It was a tempting vista. His uncle's words not unnaturally recurred to his mind. So this was his inheritance; this wide wooded domain, this stately mansion house. The son of a younger son, he had been brought up in a very modest home, and he remembered it at this moment. It was certainly a great change, and John Temple thought of it more than once as he walked straight across the park, and finally reached a long country lane scented with meadow-sweet, and its hedges starred with the wild rose.

Temple lit a cigarette, and sat down on a rustic stile. The whole scene was so rural it half-amused John. The hayfield near; the cows standing in another field beneath some trees for shelter from the sun; the distant gurgle of a brook.

"It only wants the pretty milkmaid," thought John, with a smile.

This idea had scarcely crossed his mind when he saw advancing down the lane the same girl in the white frock that he had seen by his young cousin's grave. She was gathering the roses from the hedge rows, and placing them in a small basket whenever she saw one that struck her fancy. She was intent on her task, and never saw Temple seated on his stile until she was quite close to him. Thus, he had an opportunity of watching her, as she stretched out her hands to pluck the flowers.

It was a charming face, fresh, young, and beautiful, and Temple was half sorry when, with a little start and a blush, she perceived how near she was to him. He rose and raised his hat, and the girl looked at him half-shyly, and then addressed him.

"You are the gentleman, are you not," she said, "who so kindly placed my wreath in dear Phil Temple's grave?"

"Yes," answered John Temple, "it was very kind of you to bring one."

"Oh, no," said the girl, quickly, "we knew him so well, you know. He was the dearest boy, and—and his death was so dreadfully sad."

"Most sad, indeed; I am truly sorry for his poor father."

"Oh! it is terrible; terrible for every boy that was playing in the field."

"How did it happen?" asked Temple.

"They were running after the ball, all the boys at Mr. Carson's school, and Phil, they think, fell, and there was a rush of boys, and someone must have struck his head with his foot. No one will say they did, but some one must. My young brother was playing, but no one seems to be able to say how it happened. But he never spoke again; he was unconscious from the first."

"It must have cast quite a gloom over the neighborhood."

"It has been dreadful for everyone; everyone loved him, and to think now—"

"Well, his sufferings are over."

The girl raised her beautiful eyes with a look of surprise to John Temple's face.

“But life is not suffering,” she said. “His life was all brightness—but you did not know him?”

“Yes, I did, slightly; he was a fine boy, and I was very sorry indeed to hear of his death. I am his cousin, John Temple.”

“I did not know; I heard the squire’s nephew was coming—but of course I did not know—”

“And you? Do you live near here?”

“Yes, at Woodside Farm; that white house there, yonder in the fields.”

She pointed as she spoke to a long, low house standing some half a mile distant. As she did so John Temple looked again at her lovely face. Never in all his wanderings, he was telling himself, had he seen one half so fair. The coloring and features were alike perfect. Perhaps his gaze was too steadfast, for she dropped her eyes and suddenly turned away.

“I must be going now,” she said; “I came to get those roses to make another wreath—good-morning.” And she bowed and turned away.

Her manner was so simple and dignified that John Temple felt it would be a liberty to follow her, or try to detain her. Therefore he turned his footsteps once more in the direction of the Hall, and on his way thither he encountered Mr. Layton, the vicar of Woodlea, who had read the service over poor young Phillip’s grave.

The vicar had noticed John Temple among the mourners; he was a connection of the family, and he stopped.

“I think I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. John Temple?” he said.

“Yes,” answered John, touching his hat.

“I am the vicar here; my daughter married your uncle. Ah—this has been a sad affair.”

“Most sad—can you tell me the name of the young lady you must have just met?”

The vicar smiled.

“Ah, that is our village beauty,” he said; “they call her the Mayflower.”

CHAPTER III.

A SAD FLIRT.

John Temple was too much interested on the subject to be content with such crude information.

“The Mayflower,” he repeated, smiling. “What a pretty name for a pretty girl! But I suppose that is not her real name?”

“No, her real name, for I christened her, and so should know, is Margaret Alice Churchill, but she was born in May, and that is how she got her pet name, I suppose.”

“She has a lovely face.”

“Yes, yes, she is well-favored, and is a good girl, too, I believe—a very good girl. They say young Henderson, of the Grange, wants to marry her, but this may be just gossip.”

“And who is he?”

“Oh, he’s a well-to-do young man, very well-to-do. His father died about a year ago, and he came into the family property. It’s not a large estate, but a snug bit of land, and the old man had saved money.”

“Quite an eligible young man then,” said John Temple, a little mockingly.

“Yes, Miss Margaret might do worse. And he’s a nice lad, too; fond of sport and that kind of thing. But you’ll be meeting him, for I suppose now we will often see you at the Hall?”

Mr. Layton looked at John Temple with slight curiosity in his mild face as he said this, for he was remembering the lecture his wife had given him on the subject of the Hall.

“I do not know, I am sure,” answered John; “of course nothing has been said yet on any such subject.”

“Still, Mr. Temple, you are the direct heir, you know, to the squire after poor young Phil is gone. I always understood the Woodlea property was strictly entailed by the squire’s father, on the surviving children of his sons, and you are now the only surviving child, I believe?”

“I believe there was some such arrangement,” said John, rather repressively. He considered it too soon to speak of heirs or heirships, and he was getting rather tired also of the vicar’s company.

“I think I must be going on my way,” he added; “good-day, Mr. Layton,” and he touched his hat.

But the vicar was somewhat loth to be shaken off.

“We will meet again at dinner-time; the squire has asked me to dinner; it’s a sad occasion, but these things must be.”

It was not only a sad occasion, but a very tiresome occasion, John thought, some hours later,

when he did meet the vicar again at the squire's table. And not only the vicar, but Mrs. Layton also, who dined unasked at the Hall. She had indeed spent the day there, and was not a woman to know there was a meal going on in her son-in-law's house without joining it. She, therefore, took her daughter's place at the head of the table, also unasked, and talked a good deal to John Temple.

She was a brisk little woman, with a small thin face, and a sharp tongue. She might have been pretty once perhaps, when her eyes were not so hard, if that ever had been. Now she was certainly not pretty, nor sweet with any womanly grace. She had an eager, watchful look, as though always on the alert. She was watching John Temple, as she sat at the squire's table, and talked to him; watching and speculating as to what he would do after the squire was gone.

"How is Mrs. Temple?" asked John, in a low tone, while the vicar was prosing on to the poor squire.

"Poor dear, what can I say?" answered Mrs. Layton; "she was wrapped up in him; yes, wrapped up. I consider it wrong myself, Mr. Temple, to make an idol of anything; all may go, all may go! My dear squire, may I trouble you for a little more of that salmon? It's delicious."

Mrs. Layton got her salmon, and ate her green peas with relish, and all the time went on enlarging about her daughter's grief. She also tried to extract some information from John as to his past life, but here she signally failed. John was reticent and repressive, and probably, as she remarked afterward to her husband, "he had good reason to be."

"And the vicar tells me you met Margaret Churchill to-day," she said, presently. "Well, she's a pretty girl, but I fear a sad flirt, a very sad flirt."

"Pretty girls often get that character," answered John, "because men naturally admire them."

Mrs. Layton shook her head.

"But Margaret really goes too far," she said. "Now there's young Henderson of Stourton Grange, an excellent match for her, and far beyond what she might expect. Yet after letting him run after her for months, and encouraging him in every way, I'm told she's actually refused him."

"She may not like him."

"But then why did she seem to like him, Mr. Temple? Her encouragement was marked, positively marked. And then there's our curate, Mr. Goodall—certainly he is not much in anyway, and has nothing to offer her, but still she flirts with him. I consider it unwomanly, degrading in fact, to make so little of herself as to take up with everyone, yet this is what Margaret Churchill does."

"You are very hard on the pretty Mayflower."

"Yes, now look at that—Mayflower indeed! Such an absurd name. And I'm told she always likes to be called May, but I make a point of addressing her always as Margaret, the name she was christened by."

"If ever I have the privilege I shall call her Miss May."

"It's a privilege you will share with a good many young men, I'm afraid, Mr. Temple. Yes, Margaret Churchill, to my opinion, is a very indiscreet young woman."

"She's very handsome, at all events."

"Yes, in a way; everything depends on taste, you know. James," this was to the footman, "hand me the stewed chicken again. Try this entree, Mr. Temple; it's excellent."

John Temple was exceedingly glad when the dinner was over. Mrs. Layton wearied him to death. She went into small parish details and squabbles, and gave the minutest description of her wrongs.

"A clergyman's wife has many trials, Mr. Temple, but I try to bear them, and it is such a poor parish, too. My husband and I have toiled here for over thirty-nine years, and we barely can live, and certainly the laborer is worthy of his hire."

"Certainly," said John, with a laugh.

"And talking of labor, I do not know what the working classes are coming to," continued Mrs. Layton, with extraordinary rapidity; "I assure you, Mr. Temple, I can not get a man—just a common working man—to plant and dig my little bit of potato ground, under half a crown a day! I've tried a shilling, which I consider fair, eighteen pence, two shillings, all in vain. It's absurd."

Thus Mrs. Layton talked on, and then, after having taken two glasses of port wine, she finally withdrew, "to see after my poor dear," she said, alluding to her daughter. After she was gone John asked leave to go out on the terrace to smoke, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he found himself alone.

The terrace ran round one side of the house, and below it were the gardens. The haze of evening was lying over the glowing flower-beds, and the dew upon the grass. It was all so still; the drone of a late reveler returning from the flowers, the rustle of a bird's wing among the trees, were the only sounds.

Up and down walked John, thinking of many things. "If this had only happened ten years ago," he was reflecting; "happened when I was young."

He did not look very old in the soft light, with the evening breeze stirring the thick brown hair

above his brow, for his head was uncovered. A man in his prime; a handsome man, and one well-fitted to please a woman's eyes. Perhaps he knew this, and somehow his mind wandered to the fair-faced girl he had seen and admired in the country lane.

"So she is a little flirt, is she?" he thought, with a smile. "The pretty Mayflower."

The name pleased him almost as much as the girl's beauty had done. She reminded him of the roses he had seen her gather from the hedge. She was so fresh and sweet, he thought, and it amused him to hear of her lovers.

"Of course she has lovers—what girl worth looking at has not?—but I wonder if she has ever loved," he reflected.

By and by he began thinking of another woman, and as he did so he frowned. He began to whistle to distract his thoughts, and then suddenly remembered how lately this had been the house of death. He felt sorry for the poor mother, with her fresh grief, upstairs; sorry for the gray-haired old man.

"I suppose I should go in and talk to him," he said, and he did. He found the squire alone.

The vicar had gone home with his wife, and there was no one in the dining-room but the desolate old man.

John tried to talk to him, but he found it very difficult. When two lives have run in completely different grooves, the conversation is apt to be strained. The squire had always lived in the country, John Temple always in towns. They spoke a little on politics, and John easily perceived his uncle's opinions were opposed to his own. But he did not intrude this on his attention, and it was a subject at least to converse on.

They parted on friendly terms for the night, and the next morning the squire called his nephew into the library, and spoke to him seriously of his change of position.

"It is only right that you should have an allowance out of the estates now, John," he said, "when you will probably so soon inherit them."

"Please do not speak of such a thing," answered John, with an earnest ring in his voice which pleased the squire.

"I must both speak of it and think of it," he said. "My poor boy's death has been a great shock to me, and shocks at my age are not easily thrown off. I wish to feel to you, and treat you now as my heir, and I wish you to be quite open to me as regards your affairs. Like most young men I suppose you have debts?"

"No," smiled John, "I have none."

"I am glad to hear it," answered the squire, "though I was quite prepared to pay them if you had. I also propose to allow you one thousand a year out of the property, and I hope you will look on this house in the future as your home."

"You are most kind and generous, uncle."

"I am simply just; this house, you know, and the Woodlea property are entailed on you. I have other property which came to me through my first poor wife." And here the squire sighed.

"But why speak of things which must be distressing to you so soon?"

"Things of this kind are always best settled—life is so uncertain—look at my dear boy."

"That was a very exceptional case."

"No doubt, but still I wish everything to be arranged between you and me. I am sorry we have not seen more of each other, but it is not too late. For the present you will stay on here, at least for a time?"

"If you wish it, yes."

"I do wish it;" then the squire went into further business details, and John Temple knew that he would be a richer man some day than he had ever dreamed of. The squire had saved out of his large rental, and he had not been communicative to his wife's family as to the real extent of his income. He disliked Mrs. Layton exceedingly, and was barely civil to her for his wife's sake. If she had known the extent of his wealth her encroachments would have been even greater than they were, and Mr. Temple considered he had quite enough of Mrs. Layton as it was.

During this conversation the uncle and nephew were mutually pleased with each other. And after it was over John Temple went out for a stroll, and with a smile at his own folly, turned his footsteps in the direction of the country lane where he had met "the Mayflower."

But no pretty girl was to be seen. The lane somehow looked very empty to John, though the roses were still blooming on the hedge-rows, and the meadow-sweet scenting the air. He therefore walked on and on. He saw a belt of trees in the distance, and he determined to walk until he reached them.

He found when he did so a wooded hillside with a gurgling streamlet at its foot. A rustic narrow bridge spanned the rivulet, and ferns grew on either side of it in great luxuriance. It was a pretty shady spot, with a winding dell on one side of the little bridge. Along this John Temple had proceeded a few yards when he caught a glimpse of something white beneath one of the trees. He looked again and saw it was a girl sitting on a camp-stool reading. He drew nearer; the girl heard his approaching footsteps, even on the mossy turf. She looked up. It was the Mayflower,

and John Temple felt he had not had his walk in vain!

He stopped when he reached her, and took off his cloth traveling-cap.

“Forgive me addressing you, Miss Churchill,” he said, smilingly; “but I have lost my way.”

The Mayflower smiled, too.

“You are a long way from the Hall,” she said.

“I wanted a good walk, and now will you tell me where I am?”

“This place is called Fern Dene, and the wood beyond, up the hill there, is called Fern Wood. It is famous for its ferns, and there are some very rare kinds growing about here, and there are also some rare kinds of moths, but I never can bear to catch them.”

“No, it’s better to let them have their lives in peace.”

“Yes, and they look so beautiful fluttering about. But I admit I steal the ferns. This is part of the squire’s property, so you must not tell him.”

“You would doubtless be arrested as a poacher.”

“Not quite so bad as that,” laughed the Mayflower; “indeed, I think he knows. Dear Phil Temple,” and her expression changed, “often came here with me to help me to collect them, for I have a fernery at Woodside of which I am very proud.”

“I wonder if we could find some now?” asked John. “I know something about ferns, and can tell the rare ones.”

The Mayflower did not speak; in truth she was considering whether it would be quite proper for her to go fern hunting with a young man of whom she knew so little.

Perhaps John Temple saw, or thought he saw, the reason of her hesitation. He smiled; he looked in her bright fair face, and then he condescended to a subterfuge.

“I feel quite tired with my walk,” he said. “I wonder if you would think me rude or lazy if I were to sit down on the turf?”

Still the girl did not answer, but she smiled.

“May I?” asked John, emboldened by the smile.

“The turf is not mine, but the squire’s,” answered the Mayflower, still smiling; upon which John flung himself on the mossy grass not far from her feet.

“I call this luxury,” he said, stretching out his long limbs. “Fern Dene—so this is Fern Dene? Do you often come here, Miss Churchill?”

“Yes, very often; it’s a nice walk from home.”

“And you read here. May I ask what you were reading when I interrupted you?”

“A novel, of course,” answered the Mayflower, with a blush.

“Yes, of course; that is only natural.”

The Mayflower looked quickly down at the good-looking brown face raised to hers, as John Temple said this, for something in his tone made her think he was amusing himself at her expense.

“Yes, it is only natural,” she answered, with a spirit; “I like to read of lives that I suppose are very often drawn from life.”

“With all its tragedies, its comedies, its subterfuges, and its lies—it’s always the same old story.”

“But there are some lives in which there are no tragedies—nor even comedies?”

“About these, if there be such, there are no stories to tell.”

Just at this moment there appeared coming down the hill through the trees behind them the stalwart form of a young man, carrying a gun, and followed by two dogs. He paused a moment when he saw the white dress of the Mayflower, and smiled; but in another moment, perceiving John Temple lying on the grass at her feet, he frowned.

The dogs ran forward and were approaching the Mayflower’s camp-stool in the manner of welcome and familiar friends, when their master harshly called them back, and, hearing his voice, the Mayflower looked round just in time to see the young man savagely strike one of the dogs with a whip which he had drawn from his pocket.

The poor beast yelled and shrank back, and the Mayflower rose indignantly, her fair face flushing as she did so.

“Oh, Mr. Henderson, what a shame!” she cried. “What are you striking the poor dog for?”

The young man, on being thus addressed, came forward, and there was a flush on his handsome face also, as he approached the girl. John Temple did not move; he lay looking up at two figures before him.

“Why did you strike Juno?” repeated the Mayflower, as the young man drew near.

He raised his cloth cap as he answered, and his brown eyes fell.

“One must keep them in order,” he said, half-sullenly.

“But Juno was doing nothing. Come here, poor Juno; I hate cruelty.”

“Yet you sometimes practice it,” retorted the young man in a low tone.

He was singularly striking looking. Tall and splendidly formed, with features—though he was as brown as a gypsy—of remarkable regularity. It was indeed impossible not to remark on his personal appearance. The one defect on his face, perhaps, was his mouth, which was sensual looking, though shaded by a thick, crisp, brown mustache. Still, he was a splendid specimen of young manhood, and John Temple, from his vantage ground, mentally, distinctly admitted this. Yet, in spite of all his physical advantages; in spite, also, of being undoubtedly well-dressed, there was a certain countrified look about him which was almost indescribable.

The Mayflower turned her pretty head away when he spoke of her cruelty, and his brown eyes followed this slight movement with unmistakable eagerness. But she made no answering sign of interest. She looked down at John Temple lying on the grass, and he rose as she did so.

“So you are fond of God’s dumb creatures?” he said.

“I am very fond of horses and dogs,” she answered; “indeed, I think, of all animals.”

“And, no doubt, they are fond of you?”

The girl laughed softly and blushed a little, and then stooped down and stroked poor Juno’s fawn head, who had once more crept to her side, in spite of her master’s lowering looks.

“What a handsome creature!” said John Temple; “and she evidently knows you.”

“Oh, yes; we are old friends,” answered the Mayflower, and she half glanced at the young man she had called Mr. Henderson as she spoke, but he did not look pleased.

“Perhaps you like new friends better?” he said. “Well, good-morning, Miss Churchill,” and once more touching his cap he strode away, whistling for his dogs to follow him.

“Who is the country Adonis?” asked John Temple, smiling.

“Oh, he is called Mr. Tom Henderson of Stourton Grange,” replied the Mayflower, demurely.

“Ah!” said John, still smiling. He understood now, he thought, the cause of Mr. Henderson’s clouded brow and sullen words.

“He is a handsome fellow, don’t you think, Miss Churchill?” he asked.

“People call him good-looking,” answered Miss Churchill, and she cast down her eyes a little consciously. “But I don’t think he has a nice temper; fancy him striking the poor dog!”

“Perhaps he was jealous because she seemed fond of you.”

“That was very foolish then.”

“Ah, but jealousy is a devouring demon,” said John Temple. “But, of course, you never felt it?”

“Oh, yes, I have!”

“I can not believe it, Miss Churchill, though I am sure you have caused much.”

Again that puzzled look stole over the girl’s face. She could not help feeling as though she knew Mr. Temple very well, and would like to talk nonsense to him, and yet she was conscious that perhaps she should not.

“Do you know Mrs. Layton, the vicar’s wife?” now inquired John Temple, remembering the character she had given Miss Churchill.

“Oh, yes, and she’s such a spiteful old woman!”

“She’s an awful old woman, I think. She bored me to death last night when she dined at the Hall.”

“Did she mention me?” now asked the Mayflower, with a glance of fun in her dark blue eyes.

“Well, to tell the truth, she did,” answered John Temple.

“And she abused me, of course?”

“That was impossible.”

“Oh, but I know she did if she mentioned me. I am one of her pet aversions. She says all sorts of hard things about me, and because they call me May at home she always addresses me as ‘Miss Margaret,’ as she thinks it is an ugly name, and I hate it.”

“The vicar told me they called you the Mayflower,” said John, looking earnestly at the girl’s lovely face.

“Oh! that is a foolish name,” she answered, with a blush and a smile rippling over her rosy lips.

“I think it is a charming name, and forgive me if I say—”

“Please don’t say any nonsense—at least I mean—”

She paused here, and blushed more deeply than before.

“You mean I have not to pay you any compliments? What I was going to say is no compliment, but the simple truth. But I will not tell you even the truth unless you like it.”

“I—I do not care for compliments.”

“You do not need them.”

“That is all right then,” smiled the Mayflower. “And—now I must say good-by, Mr. Temple; it is time I was going home.”

She put out her little hand quite timidly, and John Temple took it in his own.

“May I see you again sometimes?” he said. “Will you come here again?”

“I—do sometimes come here.”

“I shall hope to see you then. Good-by, Miss Churchill.”

He took off his cap and stood bare-headed before her, and as with her light feet the Mayflower turned homeward, she was not thinking of her lover, young Henderson, but of the stranger who had just crossed her path.

CHAPTER IV.
THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.

After Mr. Tom Henderson had left the Mayflower with John Temple in Fern Dene, he walked onward with a frowning brow and an angry heart. He was in love with the pretty girl he had just seen sitting with another man lying at her feet; in love with her, and jealous of her very words, and moreover he knew who this other man was.

He had seen John Temple at poor young Phil Temple’s funeral the day before, and knew therefore that this good-looking, pleasant-tongued man was the new heir of Woodlea.

“And how on earth did Margaret Churchill pick up his acquaintance?” he asked himself, scowlingly. He felt savage at the very thought. He was a hot-tempered man, and had been brought up at home, and always had had very much his own way at Stourton Grange. And now he was master there, and had no small opinion of his own importance.

He knew that in point of family and position he was a good match for Margaret Churchill. Margaret’s father was a tenant farmer, and Tom Henderson a land-owner, and he quite appreciated the difference. But the beauty of the neighborhood apparently did not. She did not treat the young squire of Stourton as he expected to be treated, and perhaps this really only added to her attractions in his eyes.

At all events he felt very angry at seeing her with John Temple. He walked on with hasty steps, and never noticed that presently he was followed by a woman. By and by he came to a field of tall uncut corn, which was swaying in the summer breeze. Then she made haste to overtake him. She quickened her steps, she almost ran, and a few moments later she called out his name.

“Tom!” she cried, and young Henderson hearing her voice turned quickly round, and a dusky flush rose to his face as he did so.

“Well, Elsie,” he said, stopping and looking by no means well-pleased, “where have you cast up from?”

“Ah! I’ve followed you ever so far, Tom,” panted the girl; “I’ve been waiting about all the morning trying to see you.”

“That was wasting your time then, Elsie.”

“No, don’t say that, but I could not rest till I saw you. Why did you not come last night, Tom, as you promised?”

“I could not get away; some one came to the Grange.”

“Well I’ve got something to tell you; something that’s nearly driven me mad, though I know it’s nothing but lies—oh, yes, I know that, Tom.”

She looked up in his handsome face as she spoke—the half-averted face—and there was beseeching love and tenderness in her eyes.

“And what is this wonderful thing then, Elsie?” he asked.

“It was Elizabeth Jenkins, and she said—”

“Well, what did she say?”

“I know it’s all nonsense, and you mustn’t be angry, Tom—but she said you often went to Woodside Farm; that you—were running after Miss Churchill, in fact.”

The flush deepened on young Henderson’s face.

“Oh! that I was running after her, was I? Well, I haven’t caught her yet, Elsie,” he said, with an uneasy laugh.

“Oh, don’t jest about it, Tom, don’t laugh; it was a cruel thing to say—cruel to me.”

The young man did not speak; he cast his brown eyes down on the path; he moved the arm restlessly with which he was carrying his gun.

“Of course she just said it from spite—just because she knew—” continued the girl, hesitatingly.

Then Henderson looked up.

“What does she know, Elsie?” he said, glancing at the girl’s face.

Her lips quivered and her bosom heaved as he asked the question.

“What everyone must soon know, Tom,” she answered; “what you are and must be to me.”

An expression of great annoyance contracted Henderson’s features.

“And you mean to say you have talked to this woman?” he said, angrily.

“I have not said much,” she replied, half-sullenly, “but she knows.”

“Then you are a fool for your pains.”

He said this roughly enough, and a sudden rush of tears filled the poor girl’s eyes as he spoke.

“It can’t go on, Tom!” she cried, piteously, “your father’s dead now; you know you always promised to marry me when your father died.”

“This is folly,” muttered Henderson, under his thick mustache.

“What is folly?” asked the girl, sharply, looking up.

“This talk about our marriage—it’s an old story, Elsie, and we may as well drop it.”

The change in her expression was something terrible, as she listened to these heartless words. She grew deadly pale, and her whole frame trembled.

“Drop it—never!” she repeated, with passionate earnestness. “Tom, if you hate me now you must marry me; I will kill myself or you if you don’t.”

“It’s no good talking folly.”

“It’s not folly; it’s truth, as there is a God above us it is truth! What, after all, after all,” and she wrung her hands, “you would go back! But you shall not, Tom! You may think to throw me over because you are tired of me, and take up with another girl, but there are two words to that—I will go to Miss Churchill myself—”

“If you do,” interrupted Henderson, with a fierce oath, “I will strike you dead!”

“You can’t strike me worse than you’ve struck me now, but strike me or not, I’ll do what I say unless you keep your word.”

She stood there defying him, with her eyes gleaming and her hands clenched. She was a handsome woman, of a certain type, with a clear brown skin and thick, coarse black hair. She looked also determined and passionate, and perhaps Henderson was afraid to excite her further. At all events he moderated his tone.

“Well, don’t make any more row,” he said; “we can talk it over some other time.”

“But it must be settled, Tom; I can’t wait,” she answered.

An evil look came over Tom Henderson’s face.

“You are always worrying a man,” he said; “there’s no such wonderful hurry about it, and there’s my mother to consider.”

“There’s always something to consider; first it was your father, now your mother. But I am to be considered too, I—I and something besides.”

Henderson did not speak for a moment; he stood as though irresolute. Again he looked at the excited face before him; at the gleaming dark eyes and full quivering lips, and then he said more soothingly:

“Well, go home now, Elsie, and keep quiet, and we’ll see what can be done.”

“I am not going to be put off.”

“I must consider things, and see what I think best. If you go home now I’ll come and have a talk with you to-night at the old place about nine o’clock.”

“Will you be sure to come?”

“Yes, I’ll be sure. And now, good-by, Elsie; you go your way and I’ll go home.”

He nodded to her carelessly, and then turned away, and the girl stood looking after him as he went. And there was infinite pain in her expression, infinite distress.

“And he loved me once,” she muttered; “he loved me once.”

These words seemed like an epitaph on her life’s happiness. She knew it was all over, and that the young man to whom she had given so much was weary of her; weary of the frail bondage by which she held him.

And, in truth, never was man more weary. Young Henderson’s face was black as night as he strode on after he had left the girl he called Elsie. She was a chain around his neck, an intolerable burden, from which he could see no way to free himself.

And yet he must be free! Margaret Churchill’s lovely face rose before him as he passed down the fields of waving corn. He would not give her up, he told himself; he would not let this folly of his almost boyhood come between himself and his fair love.

He remembered the days when he had first known Elsie Wray; the days when he used to ride past the pretty, rather picturesque wayside public house where her father lived, and where the handsome, motherless girl occasionally acted as barmaid.

He was just about nineteen when he had first spoken to her—a handsome, dark-browned lad—and, having been caught in a passing storm, he had taken shelter at the wayside house. Elsie was about his own age—perhaps a year younger—and these two had drifted first into a flirtation, and then, on the girl's part at least, into a deep and passionate love.

It went on for years, always, young Henderson believed, in secret, on account of his father. The squire of Stourton was an irascible old gentleman, and would have allowed "no folly," as he would have called it, between his son and a barmaid. Alas, for the poor girl! The young, ardent, handsome lover came night after night in the gloaming, and the two wandered together in the dewy fields, and sat on the lone hillsides, and talked of the days when they would be free to wed, and when there would be no partings between them any more.

So it went on until, in an evil hour for poor Elsie, young Henderson saw Margaret Churchill's (the Mayflower's) fairer face, and his first love-dream was over. Over for him but not for Elsie Wray, with all its bitter fruits. She could not believe at first that he had changed; it seemed impossible, and she so fond. Then his father died, and her hopes of speedy marriage revived. But there was always some excuse from the once ardent lover. It was too soon after his father's death, his affairs were not settled, and so on.

And now for the first time she had heard from some friend that he went to Woodside Farm, and, naturally, as Miss Churchill was considered the prettiest girl in all the country round, her jealousy was aroused. She, however, little guessed how far her false lover had committed himself with his new love. He had, in fact, asked Margaret Churchill to be his wife, and though she had said him nay, he still held determinately to his purpose.

"No one and nothing shall come between us," he muttered, with gloomy emphasis, with his teeth set hard, as he walked on homeward after his stormy interview with Elsie. And there was a look on his face, a dark, savage look, that boded ill for the poor girl who had loved him too well.

CHAPTER V.
MRS. TEMPLE.

"I can not get that girl's face out of my head," John Temple thought more than once, as he walked back to the Hall. Her beauty had indeed a wonderful charm for him. He had seen and known many pretty women, but to his mind none so fair and sweet as the Mayflower. And he liked to think of her by this name.

"She is just like a flower," he told himself. "Ah! that such a face should ever fade!"

This idea made him more thoughtful. He began to muse on the brief tenure of earthly things. And as he approached the stately house that in all probability would one day be his, he was thinking thus still.

"I may never come here," he thought, looking at the old Hall, with the summer sunshine falling on its gray walls; "never, nor child of mine."

A shadow passed over his face; he struck impatiently with his walking stick at a tall thistle growing by the wayside, and there was a cloud still on his brow as he entered the hall, and went up the broad staircase that led to the bedroom appropriated to his use.

As he passed down one of the corridors, a tall lady in black suddenly opened one of the doors and appeared before him. She was very pale, and her dark eyes were gleaming as though she were laboring under strong mental excitement.

She looked at John Temple, and then came out on the corridor and confronted him.

"So," she said, "you have come to take my boy's place?"

Then John knew at once who she was. This was his uncle's wife, the bereaved mother, who had lost her only child. He bowed low, and a look of pity came into his gray eyes.

"I have felt very much," he said, "for your great grief."

"It has benefited you, at any rate," she answered, bitterly.

"I can not feel it a benefit at such a cost."

She looked at him keenly as he said this, and then her faced softened.

"You can not tell what he was to me," she murmured in a broken voice; "my only one, my only one!"

A sudden passion of tears here came to her relief. Her bosom heaved and her whole form was convulsed, and John Temple naturally felt exceedingly disconcerted. He tried to say some consoling words; he endeavored to take one of her trembling hands. But the sound of her sobs soon attracted the attention of someone within the bedroom from which she had come out. A respectable maid appeared and endeavored to persuade her to return.

"Oh, madam! do not give way so," she said; "I was sure it was a pity you should see—this gentleman so soon. But she would see you, sir," she added, looking at John Temple.

"If my presence distresses you," said John, courteously, looking pityingly at the weeping

woman, “I shall leave the Hall at once.”

“What matter is it, what matter is it!” moaned Mrs. Temple; “nothing matters to me now!”

With this she turned away and went back into the bedroom, and the maid hastily closed the door after her, and John saw her no more. But the incident affected him; her grief was evidently so deep and heartrending; her bitter words to him only the natural outpouring of her troubled heart.

“Poor woman,” thought John, and he said nothing to his uncle of this meeting when they dined together in the evening.

The squire again spoke to John of the property and his tenants.

“I have improved some of the farm holdings very much during the last few years,” he said; “at Woodside Farm especially the whole of the outbuildings have been renewed.”

“Ah,” said John, interested, “at Woodside Farm?”

“Yes, that is one of the best farms on the property, and is let to a very respectable man named Churchill. Suppose we walk over to-morrow morning, and I will show you the place?”

John, nothing loath, at once assented.

“The house is old and somewhat picturesque,” continued the squire, “and now that the outbuildings are in such good order, I consider Woodside a sort of model place.”

John expressed himself desirous of seeing it, and he doubtless was. He had not forgotten that Woodside was the Mayflower’s home, and he wished again to look on her fair face.

“There can be no harm in it,” he thought; “it is a very innocent pleasure indeed to admire a pretty girl.”

Accordingly at breakfast the next morning he reminded the squire of his proposition of the night before.

“Didn’t you say, sir,” he said, “that we had to go over and see some model farm or other this morning?”

“Yes, to be sure, Woodside Farm,” answered the squire, “but it had gone out of my head, as things sometimes do now. I am glad you reminded me of it.”

The uncle and nephew accordingly started together almost immediately breakfast was over.

“We will get there, I think, before Churchill gets away among his fields,” said the squire. “I should like you to see him, for I believe him to be a highly respectable man.”

It was a bright, fresh morning, and John Temple enjoyed the walk. The waving mazes of uncut corn; the hedge-rows scented with the meadow-sweet; the cattle standing under the trees, made to his mind a pleasant picture.

“After all, the country is charming,” he said, raising his head as though more freely to inhale the air, and looking round at the green and fertile landscape.

“Do you think you would not tire of it?” asked the old man by his side, lifting his sad eyes and looking steadfastly at his nephew’s good-looking face. He was wondering what his life had been; how the last decade of his thirty years had passed. Not in riotous living he told himself, for John Temple’s features bore no marks of dissipation nor sin. His eyes were clear and resolute, his whole bearing that of a man who had led at least a fairly good life.

“He looks honest,” thought the squire, and then he sighed, thinking of his dead boy, and all the fond hopes which lay buried in his untimely grave.

“I might tire of it,” answered John, smiling in reply to his uncle’s question, “if I never had any change, for I think we all want change. It is human nature, part of our heritage, to desire it.”

Again the old man sighed.

“You must marry now, John,” he said, and as he spoke a flush rose to his nephew’s face.

“I think not,” he answered.

“You will think differently I hope, some day,” continued the squire. “But here we are at Woodside; it is a pretty spot.”

It was indeed a pretty spot; a long, low, white house, standing amid a large old-fashioned garden, with trim box-borders, and fruit trees laden with their ripening crops. They approached the house from the front, but at the rear the squire pointed out with some pardonable pride the new and expensive outbuildings.

“I wish every farm on the property was in such good order,” he said. “But we will go into the garden, and I dare say will find the farmer somewhere about, or perhaps his daughter can tell us where he is.”

As he spoke the squire opened the garden gate and passed down the walks, accompanied by John Temple and followed by two dogs. A little summer house stood on the path, and a moment later a pretty scrimmage ensued. A very handsome gray kitten was disporting itself at the entrance of the summer house, and at the sight of the avowed enemies of its race, the kitten prepared for battle. With tail erected and every hair on end, it stood to receive the charge it evidently expected. The dogs saw it, and with vicious yells ran forward, and the brave kitten’s moments had been numbered had not its mistress with a cry sprang forward from the interior of

the summer house and caught it to her breast. The squire and John called back the dogs; the Mayflower protected her kitten, and then stood smiling and blushing to receive her visitors at the entrance of the summer house.

“Oh, Mr. Temple, your dogs frightened me so!” she said, as the squire offered her his hand.

“I am very sorry,” he answered, “but they have not touched your kitten, have they?”

“In another instant they would,” smiled the Mayflower, holding her pet tightly in her arms.

“What a pretty creature it is,” said John Temple, now stroking the kitten’s striped head, whose large eyes were wide open with terror.

“Yes, isn’t he a beauty?” answered the Mayflower. “Poor Jacky! and would the naughty dogs have eaten you?”

Jacky looked as if he decidedly thought that they would, and clung to his mistress’ white frock, who soothed and comforted him. The Mayflower certainly was a lovely creature as she stood thus, with her fair head uncovered. She had been sewing in the summer house; trimming a white straw hat, and ribbons and flowers lay strewn about, and as a man of taste John Temple found it impossible not to admire so pretty a picture.

“Is your father in the house?” now asked the squire.

“He was in the garden five minutes ago, looking at the apple trees,” replied the Mayflower. “Shall I call him, Mr. Temple?”

But at this moment Mr. Churchill, the farmer, was seen advancing toward them, as he had heard in another part of the garden the squire and John Temple calling back their dogs, and now came to see what was the matter. He took off his low-crowned hat when he recognized the squire, but Mr. Temple held out his thin hand to his favorite tenant.

“Well, Mr. Churchill, how are you?” he said. “I have brought my nephew to see you; my nephew —and now my heir.”

His voice faltered a little as he said the last few words, and a look of respectful sympathy passed over the farmer’s brown face.

“Glad to make your acquaintance, sir,” he said, looking at John Temple with a pair of very intelligent gray eyes.

Altogether he was a good-looking man, and was, moreover, an excellent farmer. He had gone with the times, and instead of grumbling at the price of corn and foreign competition, grew on his land the crops he found to sell best. He was a great breeder of horses also, and his stud was quite a famous one. He was also a keen man at a bargain, and prosperous. He had married a lady in a superior social position to himself, whom he had won by his good-looking face, and he had given his only daughter Margaret Alice Churchill (the Mayflower) an excellent education. Mrs. Churchill had died two years ago, but as yet he had taken no second wife, so May, as she was always called at the farm, was the mistress of the house.

He had two other children, both schoolboys, and Willie Churchill (the second boy) had been one of the players in the fatal game of football when poor Phil Temple, the little heir of Woodlea, had met his death. The squire knew this fact, but no particular blame had been laid on the boy. A rush had taken place, and the little heir had fallen, and it was said to be impossible to tell who had given the actual kick or blow that had destroyed Phil Temple’s life.

“I think it will interest my nephew to have a look at your stud,” continued the squire; “he’s lived mostly in towns, and knows nothing of farming, I dare say, but horses interest nearly all men.”

“To be sure,” answered Mr. Churchill. “But won’t you come in, gentlemen, and rest awhile first, and have a glass of claret, or a taste of our home-brew or cider?”

The squire accepted the farmer’s offer, and said he would have a glass of the home-brewed ale, as he knew it of old. He therefore walked on toward the house, accompanied by Mr. Churchill; and May Churchill, still carrying her kitten, followed the two, with John Temple by her side.

“I was quite glad when my uncle proposed to come here to-day, Miss Churchill,” he said; “I wanted to see your pretty home.”

“You are very welcome,” answered the Mayflower, with such a charming grace of manner that John Temple could not help wondering where she could possibly have acquired it.

“You must show me your fernery,” he continued; “and,” he added hastily, for they were now nearing the house, “will you come one day to Fern Dene, and let me try to find some rare ones for you? Will you come to-day—this afternoon?”

May blushed to her pretty white brow.

“This afternoon?” she repeated with hesitation.

“Yes, why not? It is fine; promise to come?”

“Very well,” said May, and as she spoke her father turned round and addressed her.

“May, my dear,” he said, “give me the cellar keys.”

“At three o’clock,” remarked John Temple in a low tone, but May had heard the words.

She hurriedly entered the flower-festooned porch of the house, which opened into a long low hall with windows on either side of the door, which also were filled with flowers.

The whole place, indeed, had an air of comfort and refinement, and the dining-room into which Mr. Churchill ushered the squire and John Temple was not only substantially but handsomely furnished. A rich turkey carpet lay on the polished oak floor, and the sideboard and mantel-piece were of carved oak. John Temple looked around with astonishment. He had pictured a tenant-farmer's house to be so very different. For, from the silver flagon in which a neat hand-maiden bore the home-brewed ale, to the fair young daughter, everything at Woodside was of the very best.

May Churchill lingered in the room a few minutes, and then when the squire began to talk of the stud and their accommodation, she went out, and John Temple saw her once more enter the garden. But he did not see her again during his visit to the farm. The farmer was intent on his different breeds of horses, and had made a good bargain with the government during the last months for mounts for the troops. John got a little weary, it must be confessed, to all this, but the squire was interested. John was thinking of the sunny garden not far away, and wishing he was wandering with fair May among the flowers. However, he made no sign of this. He left Mr. Churchill with the impression that he was a sensible, well-bred young man, and likely to make a good landlord, and this last idea was an important point to Mr. Churchill's mind.

The uncle and nephew left Woodside in time to be back to the Hall for lunch, and when they entered the dining-room, to their great surprise they found Mrs. Temple awaiting their arrival.

It was the first time that she had been down-stairs since her boy's death, and the squire went forward with some emotion, and took her hand when he saw her.

"My dear," he said, "I am very glad you are able to come down to-day—this is John Temple, my nephew."

John bowed low, and Mrs. Temple fixed her dark eyes on his face, but did not speak, or make any allusion to their meeting on the corridor the day before.

"We have had a long walk," continued the squire, a little nervously, "and you must be hungry, John?"

"Please sit down, then," said Mrs. Temple, still looking at John with her restless eyes, and waving him to take a seat at the table. "It's a fine day outside, isn't it?"

"A charming day," answered John. "Do you think you will feel well enough to venture out a little?"

"I don't know," she replied; "I am weary of being indoors. I feel as if I can not breathe, and yet to go out so soon, so soon"—and she covered her face with her hand.

"My love, I entreat you not to agitate yourself," said the squire, yet more nervously.

She took her hand from her face; her eyes were dry and hard, and she smiled a bitter smile.

"I did not mean to make a scene," she said. "I meant to be as if nothing had happened—as if I had still something to live for. I apologize to you, Mr. Temple."

Again John bowed low his comely head.

"I wish you could understand," he said, "how deeply and truly I sympathize with your grief—I do, indeed, Mrs. Temple."

There was the ring of truth in his voice; the gleam of truth in his gray eyes, and Mrs. Temple seemed to understand this.

"Do not let us speak of it," she said, and as she spoke she seated herself at the table. "Now, tell me where you have both been?"

"We have been over some of the farms," answered the squire, hastily, and John understood that for some reason or other he did not wish to speak of their visit to Woodside to his wife.

But John was an easy conversationalist, and the lunch hour passed not unpleasantly. After it was over Mrs. Temple rose, restlessly.

"Come with me into the garden for a short time," she said, addressing John; "it will occupy my mind a little to talk to you."

"I shall be most happy," he answered, and for the next half-hour he walked up and down the garden walks with his uncle's wife. She was evidently trying to keep herself under control, but occasionally she grew excited.

"You must have thought me mad yesterday," she said once, "to waylay you as I did. But I felt so restless to see you; I hated you, you know, because—because you had come to take my darling's place."

"I hope you will not hate me any longer," replied John, gently.

She looked at him searchingly.

"No," she said, "I do not think I shall. But bear with me for a little while, for I have suffered so much. Mine has been a life of suffering," she added, impetuously. "No one knows, none but my own heart, what I have gone through."

"We all suffer at times, I believe," answered John, gravely.

"But men do not suffer as women do," continued Mrs. Temple, excitedly. "Men can go out into the world, can fight, can struggle, while we sit breaking our hearts at home. But why speak of it?

Anyone can tell what my life has been—look at my marriage?”

“But my uncle is most devoted to you?”

“A young woman married to an old man! Take my advice, Mr. Temple, don’t marry an old woman.”

She gave a harsh little laugh as she said this, and it jarred on John’s ears. He grew restless to go away. It must be nearing three o’clock, he knew, and he wanted to be in the woods at Fern Dene, with someone who was fresh and fair, not like this dark, handsome, spirit-torn woman. And with quick intuition Mrs. Temple perceived this.

“You are tired of me,” she said, “and I am getting tired of you. Good-by for the present; we will meet again at dinner;” and with this she nodded and turned away, and John was free to follow his own inclinations.

CHAPTER VI.
CRUEL WORDS.

What these inclinations were we may easily guess. To walk as quickly to Fern Dene as possible, yet when he arrived there he found that May Churchill was just preparing to go home.

“I could not come before,” he explained, hastily; “my uncle’s wife took into her head to go into the garden, and asked me to go with her, and what could I do?”

“Poor Mrs. Temple!” said May, pityingly.

“Yes, indeed, she is greatly to be pitied.”

“Her loss was terrible, most terrible. Phil was such a dear, bright boy, and to die unconscious, as he did, must have nearly broken his mother’s heart.”

“Do you know her?” inquired John Temple.

“A little; merely through things connected with the schools and the church, you know. I used to teach at the schools once,” added the Mayflower, with a smile rippling over her rosy lips; “but Mrs. Layton made herself so disagreeable that I left off, and since then I have been one of her black sheep.”

“I hope I shall be one of her black sheep, too.”

“It has its disadvantages though, I assure you. If you have any little peccadillos or failings, Mrs. Layton will find them out and preach them on the housetops, unless you are in her good graces.”

“I am sure you have neither peccadillos nor failings.”

“Ask Mrs. Layton,” laughed May.

“Mrs. Layton’s opinion would never change mine.”

“Then you are stanch to your friends,” said May, looking at him with her beautiful eyes.

“I know I shall always be stanch to you.”

May laughed and turned away her head, and John saw the white throat color and the lovely bloom on her smooth cheeks deepen.

“We are forgetting the ferns,” she said.

“So we are; tell me the best place to find them.”

She led him up a green arcade, through which a shallow stream went bubbling on. By the marge of the water strong, hardy ferns were plentiful, but these were principally of the larger kinds. But here and there in little mossy dells, the rarer fronds in their delicate greenery grew, and John Temple, pen-knife in hand, was speedily engaged in cutting them from the earth. The Mayflower stood by his side, while John knelt on the ground, and John felt conscious that the situation was a dangerous one. Alone in the woods with a beautiful girl, kneeling practically at her feet! Yet he felt wonderfully happy. His years seemed to roll back; he was a youth again, with all the hopes and aspirations of youth.

He looked up at the fresh, bright face bending over him, and he forgot many things that he ought to have remembered. As for May Churchill she also felt perfectly happy. She had never known anyone she liked half so much as Mr. Temple, she was thinking. “And he is so good-looking, too,” pretty May also reflected, glancing down on John’s brown head.

These two, in truth, were fast drifting into that dangerous stream where too often lives are wrecked and hearts are broken. Standing on the marge the golden tide flows by, and we only see the shining surface, not the rocks below. But sweet are these hours; sweet the dawn, the dream, of joys to come! The dawn may cloud, the dream be broken, but the coming shadows seem far away.

It was only the early dawn for John and May. Neither of them, indeed, had for a moment reflected that this meeting would make any difference in their lives. Feelings are strange and subtle, and creep in unawares to the human heart. They only both felt very happy, and the world seemed very bright. Bright to them, and dark and black to jealous eyes watching them from the

higher ground above.

These jealous, fiery brown eyes were those of young Henderson of Stourton Grange. He had hoped to meet May Churchill during the afternoon in Fern Dene, as she often went there, and to his rage, when he arrived at the crest of the hill above the Dene, he saw May again with John Temple.

He could see John look up in her face, as he knelt on the ground, and May look down and smile on his. Henderson had gone to the Dene in a most unhappy and unsettled state of mind, and this sight seemed to half-madden him. His brow grew black as night, and a bitter curse broke from his lips.

“But if I swing for it, this shall not be,” he muttered.

Then he thought darkly of his interview with Elsie Wray the night before, and now this girl stood as an obstacle in his way. He had not dared openly to refuse to marry her, yet he never meant to do so. He feared her; she might fulfill her threat, and write or go to May Churchill, and then he knew that in that case all hope of winning May was over.

“I must try to get her to go away,” he thought, frowning and knitting his black brows. “But then there’s that confounded old fool, her father.”

It was certainly a miserable enough position in which he found himself. Bound by his honor, by a hundred promises, to marry one woman, and passionately in love with another! He stood mentally cursing his folly, his fate, and the unhappy girl who had trusted him too much. But give up May he would not. There was a dogged obstinacy about this young man; the sullen, unreasonable obstinacy of a low order of mind, and when once he had determined on a thing nothing would turn him from his purpose.

So gnawing his thick, red underlip beneath his brown mustache, and grinding his strong white teeth in his wrath, he watched the two below dallying on the green sward. He did not seek to interrupt them. He had already learnt to hate the smiling indifference of John Temple’s manner to him, and he knew he could not rely on his own temper. No; he saw them arrange the ferns they had got in May’s little basket; he saw them stand side by side, looking at the bubbling stream, and then he watched them leave the Dene and cross the rustic bridge which led to it.

They were still together when he lost sight of them, and then he turned homeward, with a gloomy brow and an angry heart. As he strode on, various plans crossed his brain. But of one thing he was determined. Cost what it might, he would get rid of Elsie Wray.

As he neared Stourton Grange, a substantial square stone house, standing in an extensive well-kept garden, he encountered a tall, good-looking lady in deep mourning. This was his widowed mother, and Tom Henderson was her only son. Her face brightened when she saw him, and she put out her hand when she met him, and laid it on his arm.

“My dear, how lucky that I should come upon you,” she said, smiling affectionately.

Young Henderson’s smile in return was a somewhat forced one, and her fond eyes instantly perceived this.

“Something is worrying you, Tom,” she said, quickly. “What is it?”

Tom did not speak; something was worrying him, more than worrying him, but it was not a thing he could exactly tell his mother.

She looked up fondly into his eyes.

“My dear,” she asked, “can I help you in anything? I am sure there is something wrong.”

“You are quite right,” he answered abruptly.

“What is it, Tom? Surely you can trust your mother.”

“Oh, I can’t tell you about it.”

He said this very impatiently, and Mrs. Henderson looked at him anxiously.

“Is it about some woman, Tom?” she said.

Tom replied by a sort of a groan.

“I wish you would marry, Tom,” continued Mrs. Henderson, earnestly. “Many mothers don’t wish their sons to marry because they say it takes them away from themselves, but I don’t feel this. Your happiness would be mine. Tom, a little bird has whispered to me that you run after a certain very pretty girl; is this true?”

“You mean May Churchill?” answered Tom Henderson; “well, I certainly do admire her very much.”

“And—are you engaged to her?”

“No; there are always worries in the way.”

“Not surely—”

“Mother, I may as well tell you that I have made a fool of myself, but I must get out of it.”

“But Tom—”

“There! don’t talk of it like a good old woman; I’ll get out of it, that I’m determined.”

Mrs. Henderson did not say anything more. She walked on with her hand through her son’s

arm, feeling very anxious. Tom Henderson had been a wayward boy, and he was a wayward man, and his mother was conscious perhaps that she had spoilt her only child. She had heard a rumor—got one of those painful hints which friends do not scruple to give—about her son's connection with Elsie Wray of the Wayside Inn. But she had never spoken of it to Tom. She was a delicate-minded woman, and extremely attached to him, and there were subjects on which Mrs. Henderson felt she could not speak to her boy.

The mother and son walked home together and then parted, Mrs. Henderson to see after some household arrangements, Tom to retire to his own room to write a letter to Elsie Wray.

Let us look over his shoulder as he sat, pen in hand, with his black brows knitted and his handsome face distorted with the angry passions in his heart. He began:

"Dear Elsie," and then paused. He did not in truth know what to say. He knew he was acting shamefully, but he told himself it was folly to sacrifice the happiness of his whole life because a foolish girl had loved him too well.

Again he began "Dear Elsie," on a fresh note-sheet, and this time continued his letter:

"Dear Elsie: Our interview of last night was very unsatisfactory, and I want to see you again, and I hope we will come to some lasting agreement. I am quite willing to come down handsomely for any supposed wrong I may have done you, and I hope you will act like a sensible girl and accept my proposition. Will you meet me to-night at nine o'clock, on the ridge above Fern Dene? It's a quiet place, and we can have our talk out there without being interrupted as we were last night. There is always someone about near your house, seemingly. But do act sensibly, and don't make a row about what can not be helped now.

"Yours sincerely,

"T. H."

He finished this letter, and then put it in his pocket and walked to the stables, and gave it to his groom. This man was engaged rubbing down a horse when his master appeared, and he seemed quite accustomed to receive such missions.

"Take that over to Miss Wray, Jack," said young Henderson; "make some excuse—have a pot of beer or something—but give it into her own hands, and no one else's, and here's a shilling for the beer."

"Very well, master," answered Jack, pocketing the note and the shilling with something between a grin and a nod, and then touching his forelock. "Must I go directly?"

"Yes," said Henderson, and then he turned away, and went whistling out of the stables with his hands in his pockets.

Upon which Jack took a rough towel and rubbed his own face and hands, and otherwise improved his appearance, and then started off on his way to the wayside public house.

"The game's nearly up," he thought, with another grin, as he went shambling on. "Miss Elsie will ha' to look a bit lower than the young master before she's done."

He speedily arrived at his destination. It was a pretty spot—this wayside house, with its trellised walls, covered with creepers and roses, and its open porch. In the porch the master of the house, James Wray, was sitting smoking a long white pipe, and he took it from his mouth and nodded in a friendly manner when the groom from Stourton Grange appeared.

"Well, Jack, my lad," he said, "and how are ye all at the Grange?"

James Wray was not unaware of the intimacy of his daughter with the young owner of the Grange, or without his private hopes that some day he might see Elsie the mistress there. He therefore made room for Jack, the groom, to take a seat beside him in the porch, but this did not suit Jack's views.

"No, master," he said, "I'm that dry I must ha' a drop o' beer first, and I'll go in and get it, and then come out and ha' a bit crack."

The landlord nodded his head and resumed his pipe, and Jack entered the house. Two or three men were sitting drinking, and a good-looking smart girl was acting as barmaid, but Elsie Wray was not visible. Jack looked around, called for his beer, but had a word to whisper in the barmaid's ears as she was serving it.

"Where's the young missis?" he asked.

"She's in the parlor, I think, Mr. Impudence," answered the smart barmaid, tossing her head.

"Tell her one of the lads fra' the Grange wants a word wi' her," said Jack, winking one eye, upon which, with another toss of the head, the barmaid vanished; and a few moments later Elsie Wray, who looked pale, agitated, and handsome, appeared.

Jack touched his forelock and went up to her, and produced Tom Henderson's letter.

"The young master sent this for you, miss," he said.

Elsie put out a shapely brown hand and eagerly caught at the letter, and then without another word retired with it and ran hastily upstairs to her own little bedroom to read it.

When she got there she tore it open with trembling fingers, and, as her eyes fell on the insulting words it contained, the poor girl turned deadly pale, and staggered back as if something had struck her.

“How dare he! How dare he!” she cried aloud, in sharp bitter tones of anguish.

Again she read the cruel words. She stared at them as though they burned into her brain, and then with sudden passion she flung the letter on the floor and trampled it beneath her feet.

“The coward! The base coward!” she muttered. “So he would buy me off, would he? Me! But he shall see; he shall see!”

She began to pace up and down the room after this, evidently revolving some question in her mind. Then she suddenly remembered that the groom from Stourton would probably be waiting for an answer. And with her eyes flashing, and her head thrown back, she returned to the bar in the room below.

Jack was still sitting there drinking his beer, and he rose when Elsie appeared.

Without a moment’s hesitation she went up to him.

“Tell him,” she said, in concentrated tones of suppressed anger and passion, “that I will be there.”

That was all; without another word she turned and left the bar, and the men sitting there looked at each other as she did so. The expression of her face was so tragic that it seemed to forebode evil. Jack Reid—the groom’s surname was Reid—said nothing. He looked rather frightened, and shortly afterward left the Wayside Inn, declining the offer of the landlord, who was still sitting on the porch, to remain any longer.

Meanwhile in her room upstairs Elsie Wray was in a state of mind bordering on distraction. All the hopes of her future life seemed dashed to dust. But with hard-set teeth she told herself that she would not give in. Tom Henderson must keep his word and marry her, even if he never spoke to her afterward.

“Or he or I shall die for it,” she muttered with bated breath.

Then she stole to her father’s room, and from a locked cupboard there drew out a loaded revolver. Elsie, a favorite daughter, and one whom he completely trusted, always kept the landlord’s keys.

Having thus secured the weapon, about two hours later she started with a determined heart to keep the tryst that Tom Henderson had given her.

By this time a fitful moon had risen, the light being constantly obscured by drifting clouds. It was a wild-looking night, and seemed to suit the mood of the unhappy woman who went out to meet her false lover under such cruel circumstances.

CHAPTER VII.
THE LAST TRYST.

Before Elsie Wray quitted the Wayside Inn, however, she had a word to say to the young barmaid who had brought her the message that the groom from Stourton Grange wished to speak to her.

She beckoned this girl to her, who was officiating at the bar, and whispered a few words to her in the passage outside the room.

“Alice,” she said, “I am going out, but don’t tell father. Say, if he asks after me, that I have gone to bed with a bad headache. Do you understand?”

The barmaid nodded; she quite understood that her mistress was going out to meet the young squire from Stourton Grange. This affair was known and had been much commented on by the small circle round the inn-keeper’s family. Some had shaken their heads over it, and wished it might end well. Others took a more charitable view. But Alice, the barmaid, had seen the look in Elsie’s face when she had given her message to Jack Reid the groom, and her expression did not bode well.

“You won’t be late, mistress?” whispered the girl.

“No,” answered Elsie, in a low, slow tone, and she clutched the revolver she held beneath her cloak yet harder as she spoke. “I will go out by the back door,” she added.

“I’ll watch till you come back,” said Alice, and Elsie nodded and then glided away into the darkness, and the barmaid looked after her for a moment, but was quickly recalled to her duties by her master’s voice.

Elsie having quitted the house and closed the door softly behind her, passed down through the kitchen garden, and speedily found herself on the high road.

She had a long walk—at least two miles and a half—before she could reach the high land that lies above Fern Dene. Stourton Grange stands about a mile to the west of Fern Dene, and once or twice in the early days of their love, Elsie had met young Henderson in the Dene. But this was before Henderson had discovered that this shady and romantic spot was the favorite walk and resort of pretty May Churchill. After this there were no more meetings in the Dene with his lowly-born sweetheart. Henderson chose another direction, and ran no risks of encountering May

Churchill while walking with Elsie Wray.

Now swiftly and silently beneath the drifting clouds the forsaken woman went on to what Henderson meant to be her last tryst with him. She never looked up nor around. She knew the way well, and every feeling of her heart was concentrated on one object.

“He shall die unless he does me justice,” was the thought that entirely possessed her. She was desperate, and in her desperation she was capable of anything.

In the meanwhile Tom Henderson was feeling anything but comfortable. The groom, Jack Reid, had returned and had given Elsie’s message to his young master, and added what he called a hint of his own.

“She looked mortal bad,” he said, significantly.

Tom Henderson whistled, but he by no means liked the prospect before him. He drank more wine at dinner than was his wont, and his mother again and again looked at him anxiously. She did not like his restless movements, his somewhat disjointed words. At last he rose and said he would go out for a smoke and a stroll.

“Don’t be late, my dear,” answered his mother.

“No,” said Tom, and then she watched him walk down the avenue till the red tip of his cigar disappeared in the darkness.

He went on slowly enough. He knew he was going to meet an angry, disappointed woman, and he knew he had done Elsie the worst wrong a man can do, yet he never swerved from his purpose. But he wished it was over; he was essentially selfish, and he was thinking of his own feelings of discomfort and not of the poor girl’s, as he went on through the gusty night.

Presently he came to the ridge of high land above Fern Dene. This is rather a remarkable piece of ground; the dip of the hill from it down to the Dene being exceedingly steep, even precipitous. This descent is thickly studded with trees, brambles, and undergrowth. On the ridge there is a narrow walk, with the fall of the hill on one side and stretching fields on the other.

Along this walk Henderson went, still slowly, and as he did so the moon suddenly broke forth from the drifting clouds, and showed him dark and distinct the figure of a woman on the pathway before him.

It was Elsie Wray wrapped in a long cloak, and standing on the very verge of the descent below, gazing down into its gloomy depths. Henderson could see her face in the moonlight; could see the sharply cut profile and the black brows, for the hood of her cloak had fallen back, and her head was uncovered. She looked a weird and tragic figure in this lonely spot, and for a moment Henderson hesitated to approach her. Then he pulled himself together.

“It must be done,” he told his sinking heart, and he therefore began to walk more quickly forward, and at the sound of his footsteps Elsie turned her face away from the ravine and looked around.

But she made no forward movement to meet him. She stood there awaiting his approach, silent, motionless, and something in her attitude made Henderson yet more uneasy.

At last he neared her.

“Well, Elsie,” he said, holding out his hand, “I’m afraid you’ve had a long walk.”

She did not answer, nor did she attempt to take his proffered hand.

“I asked you to come here, Elsie,” continued Henderson, somewhat hurriedly and nervously, “because I want to have a good talk with you. I want in fact to make some arrangements, some permanent arrangement. You see all that talk about our marriage is nonsense. I’ve others to consider, my mother to consider, and a marriage between us would never do, that’s a fact.”

“When did you first learn this fact?” asked Elsie, bitterly.

“Well, you see, I was only a lad when I first knew you, Elsie, and lads do and say a lot of foolish things. But I want to make it all square and act handsomely, as I told you in my letter, if you will only be a sensible girl.”

“And how much do you propose to buy my silence for?” said Elsie, yet more bitterly.

“Oh, well, it’s no use speaking in that tone. I mean to do what I say, and settle enough on you to make you comfortable for life. Why not emigrate, and you could marry some fellow out there with the money I give you? I thought of even as much as two thousand pounds.”

“Not for ten hundred thousand pounds!” cried Elsie, raising her voice in passionate accents. “Not for all the money that was ever coined, Tom Henderson!” she went on. “What do you take me for? Do you think I would sell my rights, the rights of my unborn child? Never! You must marry me, or you will rue the day.”

“I can not marry you,” answered Henderson, doggedly. “Don’t you see it’s impossible for a fellow in my position to do so? How can I take a wife from a public house? You should look at things more sensibly, Elsie!”

“You should have thought of all this before—before it was too late. Now it is. If not for my sake, for the sake of the child—”

“Oh, bother the child!” muttered Henderson, brutally.

The face of the woman he addressed turned absolutely livid. Her eyes dazed, her breath came short, and her hand convulsively grasped the revolver hidden beneath her cloak.

“It shall not be the child of shame,” she cried in a low fierce tone. “If you do not promise to do me justice, Tom Henderson, as sure as there is a God above us I will shoot you dead first, and then myself.”

She lifted the revolver as she spoke, and Henderson saw the gleam of steel in the moonlight, and his face grew pale.

“Will you promise?” repeated Elsie, sternly, and her blazing eyes never left the changing face of the man standing before her. Henderson faltered. He saw she was in earnest, and he changed his manner.

“Do not be foolish, Elsie,” he said.

“It is not folly,” she answered in a determined voice. “Long have I borne with you; borne with your neglect, your insults; but now I have made up my mind. Either you marry me, or we both shall die.”

“Think for a moment—”

“I will think no more; I have nearly gone mad with thinking; now I shall act. Tom Henderson, will you marry me?”

“Oh, well, if you put it in that way I suppose I must.”

Elsie’s raised hand, with which she had been pointing the revolver at Henderson’s throat, fell at these words, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

“Let it be so then,” she said, in a strange, weary tone. The strain had been so great; the struggle was over. Her arm dropped; her head fell on her breast. But in a moment—in this moment of weakness—the coward before her sprang upon her, grasping her arm, and wrenched the revolver from her grasp.

He did it so quickly that Elsie had not time to resist, nor to realize his action. He held the revolver in the air; he gave a brutal laugh of triumph.

“Now,” he cried, “will you shoot me now? So you were going to force me to marry you, were you, by your silly threats? But I won’t, there; do you hear, I won’t!”

He almost shouted the last words, and they fell on the ears of a woman stunned with misery.

“What!” she gasped forth. “What!”

“I’m not going to be bullied into doing anything I don’t mean to do by your tragedy airs,” continued Henderson, his passions rising as he spoke. “I’ve made you a fair offer; most of women would consider it a handsome offer, but you’re a fool.”

She looked in his face with a stony look of despair.

“Do you mean to go back from what you promised?” she said.

“I never promised! Once for all, Elsie, make the best of the situation; take my money, and go away.”

“Coward!”

She hissed out this word with bitter emphasis. She stood there facing him pale to the very lips. Henderson held the revolver high in his strong hand, and she knew she could not reach it. He had robbed her of her weapon, but he had not conquered her soul.

“You have lied then,” she said, with concentrated scorn, “as you have done a thousand times. I might have known! But for all that you shall not marry Miss Churchill. I will go to her to-morrow, and tell her the whole story; tell her what you are, and how you have treated me, and I will tell my father.”

“You will do this?” cried Henderson, in sudden fury. “You never shall!”

“I will do it,” repeated Elsie, doggedly.

“I swear you shall not live to do it!”

“I will!” again said Elsie.

“Then I’ll shoot you dead before you do it!” cried Henderson, fiercely, pointing the revolver at Elsie as he spoke.

The woman did not flinch as the man had done. Perhaps she felt that all her life was ended that was worth living for. At all events she did not swerve.

“Swear that you will not go near Miss Churchill; that you will never tell your father anything of what has been between us,” continued Henderson, still pointing the revolver at Elsie’s head, “or by the heavens above us I’ll shoot you!”

“I will tell my father to-night; I will see Miss Churchill to-morrow.”

These were almost the unhappy woman’s last words. Henderson, maddened by anger, by the wine he had drunk, and by her obstinacy, with a savage oath pulled the trigger of the weapon he held, and the next moment Elsie, with a cry, made a little spring forward, and a moment later fell fatally wounded at his feet.

Then Henderson began to realize what he had done. He laid the revolver on the grass; he knelt down at Elsie's side.

"Elsie, you are not any worse, are you?" he said; "I only meant to frighten you, I only—"

As he was speaking the moon, which had hitherto been partly obscured and hidden by the drifting clouds, suddenly shone out in its full radiancy. It shone on the face of a woman struggling in her death throes; on a ghastly wound which had torn open one side of her shapely throat, and from which a stream of blood was pouring fast.

Henderson, horror-stricken, drew out his handkerchief and tried to stanch this, but with a dying effort Elsie pushed his hand aside. She opened her eyes; she struggled for breath.

"Tom Henderson," she gasped out, for each breath was a gasp, "God will bring you to account for this—I curse you with my dying breath."

After this she spoke no more. Henderson, appalled by his own deed, felt powerless. He knelt there and watched the last struggles of the woman he had shot. He knelt there when it was all over, and when the loving, passionate heart that he had broken had ceased to beat. Did some dim memories rise before him as he did so? Did he think of Elsie as the bright young girl he once had loved? If so, he uttered no word. He waited till the last quiver was still, the last moan hushed, and then pale, trembling in every limb, he rose.

Elsie Wray was dead, and he had killed her! The night breeze seemed to whisper this, as they rustled in the ravine below; strange voices muttered it in his ears. Good God! And she had cursed him as she died!

Henderson shuddered as he remembered this. Again he glanced tremblingly at the dead woman's face. The flickering shadows of the moonlight still played on it; the half-open eyes were full of scorn.

But something must be done, yes, something must be done, Henderson told himself after a brief interval of horror. He must try to hide this deed that he had committed, this murder that his hand had wrought. Murder! The horrid word seemed to ring in his ears; it seemed written in flames before his eyes. Suddenly it all grew dark; the moon had hidden her light, and in the gloom Henderson stood alone with his dead.

Then it flashed across his brain that he had shot Elsie with the weapon that she had brought. This seemed to offer a hope of deliverance to his mind. She would be supposed to have shot herself. Who was there to tell? Henderson listened a few moments with bated breath. There was not a rustle, but the trees below stirred with the night wind; not a sound, and it was now dark, very dark.

Summoning all his courage, he once more approached the dead woman's body. He meant to throw it down the ravine, where chance might hide it. With a sickening feeling of loathing he stooped and raised it in his arms. Bah? As he did so something still warm ran over his hand. He dropped the body with a suppressed cry; it was Elsie's blood, and when he remembered this, it added new horror to his soul.

But it must be done. With a great effort he once more bent down. He pulled it along this time—this lifeless thing he feared to touch. He dragged it to the edge of the ravine; he rolled it over the sharp descent. He heard it fall, then stop. He thought it had found a resting place. But suddenly the crash of a branch giving way fell on his ears. Again came a ghastly fall, then another, then a third, and then all was still.

Henderson stood listening, spellbound with fear and horror. Great drops of moisture fell from his forehead, his very hair seemed to bristle with affright. Then after a time of unbroken silence, he slightly recovered himself. He sought for, and found, the revolver he had laid on the grass. This he flung down the ravine after the dead woman, and having done this he turned and fled from the spot with the black curse of murder on his soul.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE DEW ON THE GRASS.

When people have been very happy one day, they naturally wish to be happy another. John Temple and May Churchill had been very happy collecting the ferns in the Dene, and before they parted John expressed a wish that this pleasure might be repeated.

"We have had a charming afternoon, have we not, Miss Churchill?" he said, when May stopped at a short distance from her home and suggested that here they had better part.

"Yes, I think we have," answered May, half-demurely, half-coquettishly.

"I don't think, I'm sure," smiled John. "And an idea has just struck me, how lovely that place, Fern Dene, would be in the early morning, when the dew is on the grass?"

"How romantic you are, Mr. Temple!"

“I was, but the weight of my years has crushed it all out of me.”

“You do not look very old. How old are you, really?”

“I am thirty, but I feel forty.”

“Thirty,” repeated May, with a little laugh. “Just ten years older than I am!”

“Oh, that decade, what I would give to forget it,” said John Temple, half-seriously. “To go back to my lost youth; to be like you—”

May shrugged her pretty shoulders.

“But I shall get old, too,” she smiled.

“And cease to be the Mayflower,” said John, with a genuine sigh. “Ah, that is very sad.”

Again May Churchill laughed. She stood there a picture of youth and beauty; a girl in the prime of her girlhood, and conscious perhaps that John Temple’s gray eyes were fixed admiringly on her lovely face.

“Yes,” he repeated, “that will really be very sad. Age makes no matter to ordinary-looking people, you know, but to a flower—”

“When shall I begin to wither?” asked May, archly.

“Oh! do not speak of it! And yet,” he continued more seriously, still looking at May, “there are some faces that must always be beautiful; some eyes that can never grow dim.”

“I plainly perceive that age has still left you romantic, Mr. Temple.”

“You inspire me, I was going to remark, to say foolish things. But on reflection I perceive the speech lacks politeness. But how about the dew on the grass! Will it lie till ten o’clock? Do let us meet in Fern Dene to-morrow morning, Miss Churchill, at ten o’clock to see?”

“How can you be there so early?” smiled May.

“I would rise with the lark, I would soar, I would do anything, if you will go.”

“It would be fun, certainly. Very well, if you will be there by ten, I will, but I do not expect to find you.”

“We shall see,” said John Temple, fervently.

“Yes, we shall see,” answered May, with a gay little laugh. “And now good-by, Mr. Temple.”

They shook hands and each went their separate way, thinking of the other. May Churchill was amused, excited, and flattered. How much more agreeable was this well-bred man, she was thinking, than country-bred young Henderson. In truth the Mayflower had never taken very kindly to this admirer of hers. But her father often invited Henderson to Woodside Farm, and his shrewd eyes were not blind to the young man’s love for his pretty daughter. The squire of Stourton Grange was a good match for May, Mr. Churchill had decided in his practical way, and certain ulterior views of his own made him wish to see May married.

May, however, was very happy at her home, and her father had never mentioned anything of Henderson’s attentions to her. Her young brothers sometimes rallied her about the young squire, but May took it all very good-naturedly. But if Henderson ever had had any chance of winning her affections, the time was past after she had met John Temple.

She went home smiling and happy after parting with him, but as she was entering the pleasant garden at Woodside, to her consternation she met Mrs. Layton coming out of the gate. The vicar’s wife did not approve of the Mayflower, nor of her pet name, but this did not prevent her asking small favors from her, when it suited Mrs. Layton’s convenience to do so.

“Oh, here you are, Miss Margaret,” she said, holding out a thin, meager hand; “I’m very glad I’ve met you, as I’ve had a long walk, and the servant said you were out. I wanted to see your father, but I dare say you will do as well. It is our school feast on Thursday, though, as you do not attend now, of course you do not know. But still I hope Mr. Churchill will supply the milk and cream gratis, as he kindly did last year?”

“I’ve no doubt that he will,” answered May, smiling.

“Thank you, then I may look on that as settled. Any little thing helps, you know; fruit or eggs, or anything. Indeed, speaking of eggs, could I have half a dozen fresh-laid ones to take away with me now, as the vicar is very fond of a fresh-laid egg?”

May Churchill blushed. Mrs. Layton knew perfectly well that May had nothing to do with the selling of eggs, nor the management of the poultry-yard. But she simply chose to ignore this; she liked “to keep people in their proper stations,” she used to say, and as she considered a farmer’s daughter ought to know about the selling of eggs, she was determined to let May Churchill know this.

“Of course I mean to purchase them,” Mrs. Layton added, as May hesitated.

“I will inquire if we have any to spare,” replied May, just a little haughtily; and as she spoke she turned and went in the direction of the dairy, and a few minutes later reappeared, carrying a small basketful of fresh eggs.

“I have brought you a few eggs, Mrs. Layton,” she said, “and I trust you will accept them.”

“Oh, dear, no; please tell me how much they are?” replied Mrs. Layton, fumbling for her purse.

“We do not sell eggs,” answered May, coldly.

“Not sell eggs! Dear me, I thought all farmer’s daughters sold eggs. But as you are so kind, I will accept them; and you’ll not forget to tell your father about the milk and cream? Well, good-afternoon, Miss Margaret; I think I must steal one of your roses, though, before I go.”

It must be admitted that May Churchill entered the house after this interview feeling a little ruffled. She had felt so happy before, and had enjoyed her afternoon so much, and then to be snubbed in this fashion!

“She’s a vulgar old woman,” she consoled herself by thinking, and tried to forget her annoyance in arranging the table prettily for her father’s tea.

This meal was of a very substantial order. The farmer dined early, but between seven and eight partook of a heavy meat tea. Cold lamb, a fowl, and a home-cured ham, and various other good things awaited him, to which he presently did ample justice. He was a very sober man, and healthful, and he laughed heartily about Mrs. Layton asking for the milk and cream.

“She’s not troubled with modesty, the parson’s wife, is she?” he said. But somehow May did not tell her father what Mrs. Layton had said about the selling of eggs.

May’s two young brothers were spending some days with a neighboring farmer’s son, and the father and daughter were thus alone. And after tea was over Mr. Churchill, having lit his pipe, looked more than once reflectively at his pretty girl.

“I’ve got something to say to you, May,” he said, at last.

“Yes, father,” answered May, looking up. She was not afraid of anything her father might have to say to her. He was always kind and generous in the matter of household expenses, and there had never been any squabbles between them regarding weekly bills.

“I’m thinking of marrying again, May,” continued Mr. Churchill, somewhat abruptly. “You see you’re sure to marry, and the boys are young, and will want someone to look after them—and so shall I,” added the farmer, with an uneasy laugh.

May did not speak for a moment, for she was completely astonished. Her lovely wild-rose color deepened, her eyes fell, and her hands played nervously with some embroidery she held in her dainty fingers.

“It’s Mrs. Bradshaw of Castle Hill,” proceeded Mr. Churchill; “you see she’s a handy woman, and has a nice bit of money, and there’s some very good grass land at Castle Hill.”

“Mrs. Bradshaw!” repeated May in dismay. She knew the buxom widow her father spoke of, both personally and by repute, and had never considered her a person fit to associate with. Her own mother had been a lady, the daughter of a clergyman, and May had certainly hoped that if her father married again he would not marry a woman like Mrs. Bradshaw, who had first been the wife of a country shopkeeper, and then of Mr. Bradshaw, a farmer at Castle Hill. Altogether it was a great blow to May Churchill, and she did not attempt to offer any congratulations to her father.

“I would not have thought of it,” continued Mr. Churchill, glancing at his young daughter’s changing face, “but that you are certain to marry soon, May. There’s young Henderson of Stourton; anyone can see what he wants.”

“I do not care for Mr. Henderson,” replied May, hastily, and without another word she rose quickly and left the room, leaving Mr. Churchill much disappointed by the conversation that had passed between them.

Then May went to her own room, and sat down to think, with a galling sense of annoyance in her heart. First Mrs. Layton and now her father had made her feel her social inferiority to the man of whom she had thought so pleasantly during the earlier part of the day.

“It’s absurd, my going to meet Mr. Temple,” she reflected, not a little bitterly. “No doubt he regards me as a milkmaid, a pretty milkmaid.”

She rose a few moments later, and stood looking at her own likeness in the mirror. No milkmaid type this, but a lovely young Englishwoman, with refined, delicate features, and the most charming expression in the world. May unconsciously smiled as she looked at herself in the glass. It was very trying certainly to have a stepmother like Mrs. Bradshaw thrust upon her, and to be reproached for not selling eggs by Mrs. Layton, but these things did not make her less fair.

She therefore decided that she would go and meet Mr. Temple the next morning. And she did. She said nothing to her father at breakfast about this early expedition, but started as early as half-past nine o’clock for Fern Dene, without telling anyone in the house where she was going.

She walked quickly and her spirits rose as she passed through the fields in the fresh morning air. Yes, the dew was still on the grass, she thought, smilingly, as she glanced at the herbage growing beneath the hedge-rows. Then presently she came to the little bridge across the brook that led to the Dene. How the water sparkled in the sunshine! Everything looked so bright; the blue sky, the wavering boughs of the green trees dappling the grass.

May walked on with a sense of exhilaration and pleasure pervading her whole being. She walked on until where the Dene narrows, stopped for a moment and glanced up at the steep-wooded declivity at its side. What made her suddenly start and turn pale? A little cry broke from her lips; a ghastly sight met her horror-stricken eyes.

A woman’s body, with head hanging downward and dark hair unbound, was suspended from a

branch of one of the largest trees. May made a step nearer with shrinking dread. She thought first the poor creature had hanged herself, but a second glance told her this was not so.

There was a red stain of curdled blood around the drooped throat, from which the handkerchief had fallen, and the face, with its sightless, half-open eyes, nearly touched the ground. May went closer—then she saw the wound in the throat—the broken branches above; she recognized the face! It was the handsome girl from the Wayside Inn, the landlord's daughter, and with a cry of horror May turned and fled from the spot.

She ran until she came in sight of the little bridge at the entrance of the Dene. On this, as he was in the very act of crossing it, John Temple saw her come hurrying on, evidently in a state of the greatest excitement and agitation. Instead of the pretty smiling girl he expected to meet, here was a woman who came toward him with outstretched hand and a white, shocked face.

"Oh! Mr. Temple," she gasped out, as they met, "something so dreadful has happened!"

"My dear Miss Churchill," he answered, taking both her hands, "what has happened?"

"A poor girl, a poor woman, is lying I think murdered farther up the Dene—"

"Murdered?" repeated John Temple.

"I think so, I fear so," continued May, who was trembling in every limb. "She is hanging from a tree—she may have fallen—"

"Are you sure she is dead?" asked John Temple, gravely. "This has given you a great shock, I fear; but I had better go at once and see if I can do anything."

"Yes," answered May, with a shudder. "Oh! her face is so awful, awful, Mr. Temple! I think I know who it is; a poor girl I knew by sight. What shall we do?"

"We must see at once if help can be given. Are you afraid to show me where she is?"

"No," said May, in a low tone, and again she shuddered.

"You need not go all the way, you know," said John Temple, kindly and gently. "Come, lean on me; you are trembling so that you can scarcely stand."

He drew her hand through his arm and spoke soothingly to her, and May felt thankful that he was there. His presence seemed to give her courage, and presently she was able to show him where the poor girl's body was hanging from the tree. John Temple left her for a few minutes and went on. Then he, too, saw the terrible sight that had filled May's heart with horror. He went up and touched one of the poor girl's hands; he felt for the stilled pulse. But he knew too well it was useless. The ghastly face told its own tale. The woman was dead; had probably been murdered, and the miserable affair must, of course, at once be investigated.

He returned, therefore, to May and asked her if she were afraid to go home as quickly as possible and give the alarm.

"I do not like leaving the poor woman's body quite alone," he said, "but if you are afraid—"

"Oh, no," answered May; "I will run home. Father will most likely be about the place, and he will come at once. I will go now."

She hurried away, while John Temple kept his dreary watch. Presently she reached the homestead, and met her father almost at the gate. Almost breathless and panting she told the dreadful news, and Mr. Churchill listened, surprised and shocked.

"But are you sure it is Wray's daughter, my dear?" he said.

"I am almost sure," answered May. "Oh, father, it is such a dreadful, dreadful sight!"

"In that case I had better ride over and break it to poor Wray. Why, she was a fine, handsome, merry girl; how ever can such a thing have happened?"

While the father and daughter were speaking, and Mr. Churchill was considering what it would be best to do, to their surprise and pain James Wray, the landlord of the Wayside Inn, was seen approaching in a small dog-cart in great haste toward the house. He pulled up when he recognized the Churchills, and they saw that his face was pale and agitated.

"You've not seen or heard anything of my girl, have ye?" he asked, excitedly, addressing Mr. Churchill, whose eyes fell uneasily as he spoke. "She left home last night, and has never come back. I'm on my way to the station, and if I hear nothing of her there I must get the police."

"Come into the house a few minutes, Mr. Wray," answered Mr. Churchill, feelingly; "perhaps I may have some news for you."

James Wray sprang from the dog-cart and grasped the farmer's hand.

"Not bad!" he cried, "don't say bad news about my girl! What is it, man? What do you know?"

CHAPTER IX.
DRAWN CLOSER.

"You had better come into the house," again urged Mr. Churchill; "my daughter here may have

something to tell you."

Then James Wray looked eagerly at May, whose face grew very pale.

"I fear there has been an accident," she faltered.

"Not to Elsie? Not to my girl!" cried James Wray.

"I—saw someone lying in Fern Dene—as if she had fallen," said May in a trembling voice; "I am not sure—who it was—not sure it was Miss Wray—I ran to tell father—"

"Fallen!" repeated Wray, aghast. "Where could she have fallen from? How could my girl be in Fern Dene?"

"Suppose I send one of the men to bring Doctor Graham, he's the nearest," suggested Mr. Churchill. "I will go with you to Fern Dene if you like, Mr. Wray."

"It can't be my girl there!" said Wray, in violent excitement. "She went out about half-past eight o'clock, the barmaid says—how could she be there?"

"It's better to ascertain at any rate, and I'll send for Doctor Graham at once. This poor young woman in Fern Dene, whoever it be, may require some assistance," answered Mr. Churchill, quietly.

He therefore at once dispatched one of the farm servants for the doctor, who only lived a quarter of a mile distant, and he whispered a word in May's ear.

"Are you well enough to go with us, May?" he said. "And tell some of the women to bring brandy and blankets; the poor soul may not be dead, you know."

May made no reply. She had looked at the landlord's agitated face, and great pity for him was in her heart. But she was not quite sure of the dead woman's identity. She thought it was Elsie Wray, but the face was so awfully changed she could not be certain.

"It may not be your daughter, Mr. Wray," she said, tremulously, "who is lying injured—but we had better see."

"It can not be my daughter," affirmed Wray, "but we can see, we can see."

"I will drive May to Fern Dene," said Mr. Churchill. "It will take less time, and then we can take with us what is necessary, and will you drive the doctor, Mr. Wray?"

"Why wait for the doctor? Let us go at once," answered the landlord, with nervous, eager impatience. "It can't be my girl there, and I must find her."

"Very well; he can follow. My horse will be harnessed in a minute, and then we can start," said Mr. Churchill; and very shortly afterward they did start. Mr. Churchill's horse was a young and powerful one, and they quickly drew in sight of the wooded dell that hid so drear a sight. Here Mr. Churchill assisted May out of the high dog-cart, and then fastened his horse to a tree, and took out the brandy and blankets they had brought. By this time Wray, who had been urging his pony to its utmost speed, overtook them, and the three together—May, her father, and the landlord—crossed the little bridge and found themselves in the shady Dene.

May went on, naturally with shrinking dread, and the landlord with trembling footsteps. They had not gone far when they met John Temple; he had heard their voices in the silence around, and now advanced to meet them, and as he did so his face was very grave.

"This is a sad affair, Mr. Churchill," he said.

"I hope nothing very bad, Mr. Temple?" answered the farmer.

"It looks very black, at least," continued Temple; "there is a revolver lying near the body among the undergrowth, but I thought it best not to touch it until the police arrive."

"The body!" gasped the landlord, with staring eyes fixed on John Temple's face, who did not know he was the father of the unhappy Elsie.

"Yes, the poor woman is quite dead, has been dead apparently for hours," answered Temple, and as he spoke a sort of cry escaped the landlord's lips.

"Where is she?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "It's not my girl, but still—"

"She is suspended from a tree a little farther up the Dene," said John. "I can show you the spot."

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Wray!" now cried May, laying her hand on the landlord's arm. "Let father and me go first—it's no sight for you—"

But the landlord pushed aside her detaining hand.

"Let me go," he said, hoarsely, and he ran forward, followed by the rest. Then when he beheld the ghastly sight, the streaming black hair, the half-open eyes, a great cry escaped his lips.

"My girl, my girl!"

His words rang through the woods. He flung himself on his knees; he raised the head; he looked wildly in the face. Yes, it was his girl—his Elsie—lying foully murdered in this lone spot!

"Elsie, who has done this?" he asked in passionate grief.

"Father, help me to disentangle her; to lift her down," now said May, with streaming eyes. "Oh! help us, Mr. Temple!"

“Yes,” answered John Temple, “I will climb the tree and disentangle her dress. You help to hold her head and body, Mr. Churchill, while I go up.”

He was slight and active, and soon the poor still form was loose from the branch which had caught and held it in its fall. They laid her gently on the grass. May Churchill knelt down and covered the ghastly face and the blue-edged wound on the shapely throat, and she tried also to draw away the landlord from his dead daughter’s side.

“Oh, come away, come away, Mr. Wray,” she said, pitifully; “this is no place for you—I will stay with her—you go with father.”

But the unhappy man took no heed of her words. He knelt there holding one of Elsie’s cold hands; his eyes were staring from his head with sorrow.

“Who killed thee, my lass?” he asked again and again; “thee who had wronged none.”

“It may have been an accident,” suggested May, tearfully and soothingly.

But at this moment the doctor and some others arrived on the spot, and the doctor at once knelt down and removed the handkerchief from the face and throat.

“This looks like murder,” he said, in a low tone, carefully examining the wound.

“There is a revolver lying there among the undergrowth,” pointed out John Temple.

Mr. Churchill went forward at these words to the spot John indicated, and picked up the revolver and looked at it attentively.

“Why, Mr. Wray,” he said, “this is your revolver—here is your name engraved on it.”

Then James Wray raised his stony, grief-stricken face, and looked at the revolver in the farmer’s hand.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s mine—how did it come here?”

“It looks as if she—”

“She never brought it—she has been lured here and shot. Oh! my girl, my girl, that I should have lived to see this day!”

Nothing could exceed his heartrending grief. Elsie had been his only child, and for her he had worked and saved. He was well off, and for long had nourished a secret hope that his daughter would marry the young squire of Stourton Grange. And now it was all over; she lay dead before him—had died a tragic death—and a dark suspicion crossed his mind as he looked at her motionless form.

“Whoever’s done it, I’ll hunt him down!” he swore, inwardly. “I’ll ha’ his life for thine!”

It is useless to write of the painful details that followed. The police arrived and Elsie Wray’s body was carried away, followed by her heart-broken father; May Churchill also walked close to the bearers of the dead, as they bore her down the Dene. But before this was done, with gentle, womanly hands May had again covered the face, and rolled up the long hair, and arranged the dress in seemly fashion. And John Temple stood by and watched her do this, with strange emotion.

“She is not a mere pretty girl, then,” he was thinking, and he turned away with a restless sigh.

Then, when the sad procession had crossed the little bridge at the commencement of the Dene, May and her father returned to Woodside, and Elsie’s body was carried on to the Wayside Inn, for the inquest which was necessary to be held on it. May was very much overcome as she stood and watched them bear away the poor girl whose tragic end she had been the first to discover. She wished even to follow the dead the whole way, but Mr. Churchill would not hear of this, and John Temple also advised her not to do so.

“Let your father drive you home,” he whispered; “you look quite done up as it is.”

So May was handed into her father’s dog-cart, but just as they were starting Mr. Churchill asked John Temple to go with them.

“Can’t I give you a lift, Mr. Temple?” he said.

“Thanks, very much,” answered John, with alacrity, stepping up into the back seat of the dog-cart, and when they reached the nearest road to Woodlea Hall, he made no offer to descend, but accompanied Mr. Churchill and May the whole way to Woodside Farm.

When they arrived there Mr. Churchill insisted that he should remain to lunch.

“It’s our early dinner, you know, Mr. Temple, but we can offer you a fair slice of mutton.”

John Temple accepted this invitation also, and then judiciously began talking to the farmer of his horses.

“My uncle has given me a good allowance,” he said, “and I want a good horse. Have you anything you think would suit me?”

Mr. Churchill, who was a man with a keen eye to a bargain, immediately led John away to inspect his stables and paddocks. And it ended by John buying a valuable riding-horse and the

farmer feeling that he had done an excellent morning's work. Then came the early dinner, at which May presided, looking in John's eyes more lovely still from the light pallor of her smooth cheeks, and the faint violet rim round her beautiful eyes. The tragic affair of the morning was scarcely mentioned, but the meal was hardly over when a summons was served at the farm for May and her father both to attend the inquest on poor Elsie Wray's body, which had to be held on the following morning.

Then some one came to see Mr. Churchill on business, and John Temple and May were left alone.

"Let us go into the garden for a little while," he said.

So the two went out together and walked side by side on the trim gravel walks, between the blooming flower-beds, which were May's especial care. May made some allusion to Elsie Wray's death, but after a word or two on the subject John Temple changed the conversation.

"She probably committed suicide, poor girl," he said; "her appearance indicated that she was a woman of strong and passionate emotions."

"In any case it is so terribly sad."

"Yes, but do not think of it; we all must do so to-morrow; let us put off the evil day."

Then he began talking to her of a little tour he had had in Normandy at this very time last year, telling her of the quaint old French towns that he had sojourned in, with their wide ramparts, spreading orchards, and rosy pippins. He spoke well and graphically, and somehow both forgot the time. Suddenly, however, John glanced at his watch and gave an exclamation.

"Why, the day has flown!" he cried. "Do you know it is actually five o'clock, and I left Woodlea at half-past eight. My good uncle will naturally think I have run away."

"You must tell them—" began May, and then she paused embarrassed.

"I will tell them I went out for an early walk, and by accident met you, who had just made the sad discovery which you did. There is no need to say anything else."

"No, of course not," answered May, relieved.

"And I will add that I went back with you to Fern Dene, and saw the poor girl and remained there while you ran home for assistance to your father. This affair is sure to be greatly talked of."

"Yes, it is most painful to be mixed up in it, and I feel so dreadfully sorry for her poor father."

"The whole thing is painful—but I must go. Good-by, Miss Churchill—I wonder if you would give me a rose?"

"Oh, yes," answered May; and she stooped down and plucked a crimson bud. "Will you have this one?"

"A thousand thanks—once more good-by."

Then their hands met, and for a moment May looked up in John Temple's face, and she blushed softly as she did so.

CHAPTER X.
THE WAGES OF SIN.

It was a dark night when Henderson slunk home after his accursed deed; dark and late, yet his mother was waiting up for him and anxiously listening for his return. She heard him turn the latch-key in the door, and went out into the hall to meet him.

"You are late, Tom," she said.

He started violently when he saw her.

"You up!" he said, hoarsely.

"Yes, I waited to say good-night. Why, Tom," she added the next minute, lifting her lighted candle higher, "whatever is the matter with your coat? Where did you get that stain?"

A shudder ran through his strong stalwart frame as she asked the question, and his guilty eyes fell on the red stain on his coat sleeve.

"I stumbled and fell; it is nothing," he said, yet more hoarsely; "good-night, mother," and without another word he turned and hurried up the unlighted staircase, leaving his mother looking after him in absolute astonishment.

He always smoked before he went to bed, and usually he drank some whisky, and therefore she could not account for his conduct. She grew anxious about him, and after she had retired to her own bedroom she thought she would go quietly to his room-door and see after him. As she approached it she thought she felt a faint smell of burning. She was afraid to go into his room, for he was spoilt and wayward and did not care to be interfered with, so she knelt quietly down and peered through the key-hole.

A strange sight met her startled gaze. Her son was standing by the fireplace, without his shirt

on, and he was burning it by degrees in the grate! She saw him cut out one sleeve and then the other and burn them, adding matches to the flaming linen to make it consume more quickly. The coat that he had worn during the evening—a light cloth summer one—was lying on a chair near. Presently he took this up, and shuddered as he did so. Then he cut off the lower part of one sleeve—and consigned this also to the flames. He watched it burn, and then rolled up the coat, and put it into the drawer of his wardrobe and locked the drawer. After this, he put on a dressing-gown and approached the door of the room from which his mother had scarcely time to fly, when he opened it and came out on the landing with a lighted candle in his hand.

Mrs. Henderson had hurried unseen into an empty room next door, and she now watched her son descend the staircase, and could see that he was ghastly pale, his whole appearance denoting great agitation. A great terror crept over the poor woman's heart, and a nameless dread took possession of her mind. She dare not follow him, but stood hidden in the shadow, and in a few minutes she heard him returning up the stairs. This time he was carrying a bottle of whisky and a glass, and Mrs. Henderson saw his hands were trembling as he did so.

He entered his bedroom and at once began drinking the whisky. He drank glass after glass, though he was by no means in the habit of doing so, and at last flung himself, half-undressed, stupefied, on the bed, and speedily fell into a heavy slumber.

But Mrs. Henderson herself could not sleep for thinking of him. Something had happened, at all events, greatly to disturb him, and Mrs. Henderson felt ill at ease.

The next morning he did not come down to breakfast at the usual time, and finally his mother went up to his room-door and rapped.

"It's late, Tom; are you not well?" she called.

"I've a beastly headache. I'll be down directly," he answered, and when he did appear Mrs. Henderson was quite shocked at his appearance. He looked ill, haggard, and nervous, and ate nothing, drinking his tea, in sullen silence.

All the rest of the morning it was the same thing. He did not go out, but seemed in a state of restless excitement that he could not suppress. Then about twelve o'clock a rumor reached Stourton Grange that a murder had been committed in Fern Dene. The gardener heard it outside and hurried into the kitchen to tell his news. It was not known at first who it was. A woman's body had been found in the Dene, that was all, and when Mrs. Henderson went into her larder to inspect its contents and order the dinner, her cook followed her and told her mistress what she had heard.

Mrs. Henderson turned actually faint as she listened. Tom's strange conduct instantly recurred to her mind. But no, what folly, she told herself the next minute. But, nevertheless, she went into the breakfast-room where Tom was sitting pretending to read the newspapers, with trembling footsteps.

"Tom," she said, "they say something dreadful has happened in Fern Dene—"

She was looking at her son's face as she spoke, and the ghastly pallor that at once spread over it filled her own heart with terror.

"What has happened?" he asked, hoarsely.

"They—say a murder," answered Mrs. Henderson in a faltering voice.

"A murder! What folly!" repeated Tom, and he rose hastily and flung the newspaper on the floor as he did so. His whole manner indicated extreme agitation, and his mother grew pale as she watched him.

"What cock-and-bull story have you got hold of now, I wonder?" he went on harshly, a few moments later.

"They say a woman's body has been found in the Dene," answered Mrs. Henderson, slowly, and Tom Henderson visibly started as she spoke.

"I don't believe it," he said, abruptly, and a moment later he hastily left the room, leaving his mother greatly agitated.

Henderson had not left the house the whole morning, but after pacing up and down his own bedroom for some minutes an extreme restlessness came over him, and he went toward the stables, and in the stable yard he found Jack Reid, the groom, rubbing down a horse.

The man did not look around as his master approached him, but went on with his task, while Henderson stood a moment or two looking on without speaking.

"Billy looks very fresh this morning," he said, presently, with affected carelessness, and the groom, still without looking around, only nodded his head in answer to his master's remark.

Henderson moved uneasily, and then, after another pause and in an uneven voice, he said:

"What's this story, Jack, my mother's been telling me about some woman or other being found in Fern Dene?"

Then Jack did look around, and Henderson's eyes shifted and fell as he did so.

"It's Miss Wray," he said, in a sullen tone; "she's been found dead in the Dene."

"Miss Wray! Dead!—impossible!" exclaimed Henderson.

"It's true enough, though," answered Jack, roughly.

“How do you know? Who found her?” queried Henderson.

“Miss Churchill, from Woodside Farm, they say, and she ran and met the young squire from the Hall. Anyhow, she’s dead—she’s been shot, and they say an inquest will be held on her to-morrow.”

Henderson turned absolutely livid as he listened to Jack’s information. He took two or three hasty strides down the stable yard, and then he once more returned to the groom’s side.

“Jack,” he began, and then hesitated.

“Well,” asked Jack, not over-respectfully.

“You remember,” went on Henderson, forcing himself to speak, “taking a note to her from me?”

Jack laconically nodded his head.

“That note,” went on Henderson, desperately, “was to ask her to meet me in Fern Dene, but I changed my mind and did not go. She had got some folly into her head about marrying me, and so I thought afterward it was better not to go. But she may have gone—do you see, Jack? Yes, to be sure she may have gone,” continued Henderson, wiping his dark brow.

“And, Jack, about that note? Did anyone see you give it to her?” he went on.

“Yes, there were some fellows sitting at the bar saw me,” answered Jack, coolly.

“That’s a pity—but it can’t be helped,” said Henderson, in increasing agitation. “But—did anyone hear the answer she sent me?”

“Yes, she walked straight back into the bar with your letter in her hand after she had read it, and her eyes were just blazing in her head. ‘Tell him I will be there,’ she said, and the fellows heard it as well as me.”

Again Henderson wiped his brow.

“She may have gone—I can’t say anything about it, you know. I never went near, but that note may get me into some trouble. Jack, I’ll make it worth your while to hold your tongue—to say nothing about the note, as only you knew it was from me.”

“I knew,” answered Jack, doggedly.

“Yes, of course you knew, but you must not mention this to anyone. I’ll give you as much as five pounds—”

“Ten would suit me better.”

“Well, I’ll make it ten, then. If anyone asks who gave you the note, say a stranger you met on the road gave you a shilling to deliver it to Miss Wray. Do you understand? Put it on a stranger, and you shall have ten pounds, for I do not wish to be mixed up in this matter at all.”

“I can well understand that.”

“You see, Jack, she may have gone to meet me, and when she found I was not there she may have shot herself. She is shot, you say?”

“Yes, dead as a herring.”

“It’s a shocking affair; really a shocking affair,” continued Henderson, hastily; “poor girl!”

“Ay, poor lass!”

“It might have happened so—in her disappointment, you know, she may have shot herself, that is if she had anything to shoot herself with?”

“They say her father’s revolver was lying nigh her.”

“Then I fear it has happened so. Don’t you think so, Jack? How lucky for me that I did not go near.”

“Quite a close shave.”

“Yes, quite a close shave indeed. Well, Jack, now we’ve arranged it, I’ll go into the house and get you the ten pounds—but remember you were to say a stranger—that a stranger gave you the note.”

Jack nodded and Henderson hastily returned to the house, and speedily reappeared with two crisp five-pound bank notes in his pocket, which he soon placed in Jack’s horny hand, who at once deposited them in his corduroys. But when they were safely there, he looked up with his shrewd brown eyes in his master’s face.

“About that note,” he said. “Maybe the poor lass left it behind her, and it was in yer writing.”

Henderson’s face fell.

“The devil it was!” he muttered.

“And maybe she’s other letters, put by that ye wrote? I’ve taken other letters, perhaps, signed by yer name. No, master, the story about the stranger giving it to me won’t wash. It would only make me out a big liar, and not help ye. You’ll ha’ to face the letters, and stick to the story that you did not go to meet the poor lass when she met her death.”

“Of course, I did not go. After I wrote the letter, I got afraid to meet her,” said Henderson, in great agitation.

“Stick to that; ye got afraid to go, and the poor lass must ha’ shot herself because ye broke yer word; ye may make them believe that, not the other, for lots o’ folks knew what was between ye and poor Elsie.”

Henderson’s teeth almost chattered in his head.

“You think so?” he said, tremblingly.

“I’m sure; Alice the barmaid knew and others. Stick to the story that ye did not go.”

Jack’s manner as he said this was very determined, and Henderson begun to see the prudence of his advice.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said, after thinking a moment or two. “The letter I sent yesterday was not signed in full—only my initials—but I have sent letters signed in full, and she may have kept them. It’s a confounded business altogether, and I wish I had never seen her.”

“It’s too late to wish that,” replied Jack, significantly; and then he resumed grooming the horse, while with a moody brow and an uneasy heart Henderson returned to the house, feeling that he would be almost sure to be called to account for the letter he had written the day before to poor Elsie Wray.

And he was. The afternoon had not passed when a police-constable arrived at Stourton Grange and asked to see Mr. Henderson. With a sinking heart he went to this interview, and the policeman informed him that he was the bearer of a summons for him to be present at the inquiry to be held on the death of Elsie Wray during the following morning.

“And I’ve one for your groom, Jack Reid, Mr. Henderson,” continued the policeman, with his eyes fixed searchingly on Henderson’s changing face; “he delivered a letter it seems to Miss Wray on the day of her death.”

“Yes,” faltered Henderson; “but I did not go near.”

“You must reserve your evidence until you are before the coroner, and you had better give it carefully,” and with these warning words the policeman took his departure, leaving Henderson a prey to the most morbid dread.

And scarcely had the constable gone when Mrs. Henderson crept into the room with an almost colorless face.

“Tom,” she said, in trembling accents, “what has that man been here for?”

“I’ve to attend the inquest on that girl found in Fern Dene to-morrow morning,” answered Henderson, huskily, turning away his head.

“They say it’s the girl from the Wayside Inn. Oh, Tom, did you go and meet her?” asked Mrs. Henderson, piteously.

“I never went near her; but, mother, a confounded thing has happened. I was ass enough to write to her to ask her to meet me; I wanted to buy her off, in fact. When I was almost a boy I got entangled with her, and she was always urging some claims or other that she thought she had against me, and I wanted to pay her a big sum and be done with it. Well, I asked her to meet me last night, but I did not go. I went out for a short time, as you remember, and then I turned back and came home. If you are questioned you must say I was home early, or never out. Do you understand? They will want to throw suspicion on me on account of the confounded letter I wrote. The girl must have gone, I suppose, and shot herself because I did not go, for her father’s revolver was lying beside her.”

Mrs. Henderson had turned absolutely white during this garbled narrative. From this hour she never doubted her son’s guilt. She looked at him with terror-stricken eyes, but no word came from her trembling lips.

“You must say I was home early; only out a few minutes,” repeated Henderson, doggedly, and almost with a gasp Mrs. Henderson whispered out a few words.

“You were—at home early,” she said.

“That’s it; you mayn’t be asked, but that’s your answer, and now I’ll go out for a walk, for I’ve a disgusting headache still.”

He turned and went out of the room as he spoke, and Mrs. Henderson leaned against the table for support.

“Oh! my unhappy boy,” she murmured with her white lips; “my miserable boy!”

In a few minutes she saw him go down the avenue smoking, and then with feeble, trembling footsteps, as though suddenly aged, she proceeded to her son’s bedroom. She locked the door, and then drew out her housewifely bunch of keys. With these, one after the other, she tried to unlock the drawer in Henderson’s wardrobe, where she had seen him hide the coat he had worn the night before, and from which he had cut the stained sleeve. At last one of her keys opened the drawer, and with shaking fingers Mrs. Henderson drew out the coat she had seen him roll up and place there. With a sickening dread she now unrolled it. Half of one of the sleeves was gone as she knew, but a faint stain—a smudge, as it were, on the breast—quickly attracted her attention.

She shuddered as she looked at it; shuddered and turned faint, but with an heroic effort she conquered this failing of her bodily powers. She relocked the drawer, and wrapped her son’s mutilated coat in some brown paper she found lying on the table. She carried this parcel to her own room, after carefully brushing out the grate in Henderson’s; and wrapping the burnt

fragments it contained in paper, she carried these away also.

When she reached her bedroom she concealed these two parcels, and then rang for her housemaid. She bade this maid make up and light the fire, for, as it was summer time, there were no coals in the room.

“I feel so chilly, Jane,” she said; “I must have got cold, and will be all the better for a fire.”

The fire was soon lit, and when it had burnt up and the servant was gone, Mrs. Henderson at once commenced to cut her son’s coat to pieces, and burnt it gradually. She was afraid to make a smell of burning by doing it altogether. But every shred of it was at last consumed, and Mrs. Henderson watched it disappear with a miserable heart.

In the meanwhile Henderson had once more strolled toward the stables, and there, as he expected to find, was Jack Reid. The groom looked up and nodded when he saw his master approaching.

“I wanted a word wi’ ye, sir,” he said; “I’ve been hanging about, and all the country-side’s up about the murder.”

“I know nothing about it,” said Henderson, doggedly, “but—you were right, Jack, about the letter; the policeman who served the summons about the inquest said something about you having taken one.”

“I knew I was right; folks saw me gi’ it to her, and there’s a great talk over it. And the police ha’ been examining where she was found all the day, and they say she must ha’ shot herself, or been shot, on the high ridge above the Dene. There’s blood there, and she must either ha’ fallen into the Dene or been thrown, as the branches are broke all the way down from the top to where she was found.”

Henderson’s face grew literally ghastly as he listened to these words, and his groom watched him with a certain grim humor in his expression.

“I never went near,” said Henderson, huskily.

“Ay, stick to that; ye never went near; ye only asked her to go; and one good job is that the old man’s pistol was found beside her.”

“She must have shot herself. My mother will tell them I was in the house all night; I never was out.”

The groom made no answer to this, and after a few moments’ silence Henderson turned sullenly away. There was something in the groom’s manner that frightened him; a suppressed insolence and unbelief in the man’s tone.

And later in the day, as he sat moodily smoking after dinner, he received a message by one of the maids that Jack Reid wished to speak to him. He rose and went to the hall door, where he found the groom.

“May I ha’ a word wi’ ye, sir, about one of the horses?” he said, with a significant look, and Henderson followed him out as he spoke.

“It’s not about the horses, sir,” he continued, as soon as they were a little distance from the house, “but I didn’t want any o’ the women folk to hear what I have got to say. But the missus mustn’t say ye were never out last night. Ben Wood, the carter, saw ye out about half-past eight, and is ready to swear it. But I’ve sent for ye to say that ye’d best say ye were down at the stables then, and I’ll back ye out. Say ye were on yer way to the stables when Ben met ye.”

“Very well, Jack, you must swear this, or there’ll be no end of trouble,” answered Henderson.

“Ay, trouble enough, anyhow; for, master, I’ve another word for ye—ye’re watched. The police ha’ their eye on ye, and ye’ll not go in or out of the house now unless they know.”

CHAPTER XI.
A SILENT WITNESS.

Tom Henderson returned to the house after this last interview with his groom in a truly pitiable state of terror and alarm. And a man, a stranger, passed him in the avenue. This was no doubt one of his watchers; his footsteps were dogged; he was a free agent no more.

He turned cold and shuddered when he thought of it. Dread visions rose before him, and the terrible penalty of his crime grimly haunted his mind.

As he entered the house he suddenly remembered the coat he had worn the day before, when he had gone to meet the hapless Elsie. He had cut out and burnt the stained sleeve, but what if the house was searched and the coat discovered in its—as he supposed—present condition? No, it must be destroyed entirely, he told himself.

But how to do this? If he burnt it the smell of the burning cloth would spread through the house. He would bury it in the garden somewhere, he finally decided; but he must wait to do this; must be sure that no one was loitering about, spying his actions.

He waited until midnight. Mrs. Henderson had not come down-stairs to dinner, nor during the

whole evening. She had sent a message to her son that she had a cold, and was unable to appear. Henderson, therefore, had only his own miserable company. And to sustain his courage he kept drinking glass after glass of whisky, and by twelve o'clock had certainly had more than enough.

When the clock pointed to this hour he rose, and quietly as possible stole upstairs for the purpose of bringing down the coat that he intended to conceal. He unlocked the drawer in the wardrobe where he knew he had placed it, and started back with sudden astonishment and dismay, to find it was gone! He absolutely shook with fear. Where and how had it disappeared? He turned everything over in the drawer twenty times with trembling hands, but did so, as he knew, in vain.

He never thought of his mother about the matter for a moment. Either it had been taken as evidence against him, or—and his guilty soul shivered within him at the idea—some supernatural agency had been at work, and the restless spirit of the dead Elsie had carried away the blood-stained garment.

This thought filled him with absolute horror. He glanced furtively at the dark corners of the room; he fancied that unseen things were near, and at last, unable to endure the strain any longer, he once more hurried down-stairs, and spent the night as best he could on the dining-room couch, after first stupefying himself with whisky.

In the morning he felt in a wretched state alike of mind and body. The inquest on the unfortunate Elsie Wray was to be held at eleven o'clock at the Wayside Inn, and thither Henderson knew he must go. He had to face this ordeal, however ill he was prepared for it, and Jack Reid, the groom, drove him over in the dog-cart at the appointed hour. Henderson was conscious that the people who met him in the country lanes glanced at him with suspicious and lowering looks. His connection with the unhappy Elsie had been whispered about, and many were ready to take the blackest view of the case.

Jack Reid did not fail to impress on his young master during this drive that he must give his evidence with the greatest caution; telling him again and again that it was useless to deny sending the letters that lured Elsie to her untimely end. They agreed between them, in fact, what each had to say, and with this understanding they at length arrived at the Wayside Inn.

May Churchill and her father were there before them, and after the jury had viewed the body, May was the first witness called. She gave her evidence clearly and simply, and her remarkable beauty as she did so excited great admiration. When he first heard her sweet low-toned voice a thrill passed through Henderson's whole frame, and for some moments he could not find courage to look in her face, as she spoke of her ghastly discovery in Fern Dene. Not so John Temple! He could not take his eyes away from this fair girlish witness, and once May looked at him when she described meeting him after she found poor Elsie.

John Temple corroborated her words, and then her father. After this James Wray, the landlord, gave his evidence with deep emotion, and then Alice, the barmaid. She had waited up for her young mistress, who had never returned, and she had waited for Elsie on previous occasions.

"Did you know who she went to meet?" one of the jurymen asked.

The barmaid hesitated, and then glanced at Henderson's changing face.

"I understood it was Mr. Henderson," she answered.

"Did she ever tell you so?"

"No," replied the girl, and then she detailed how the groom from Stourton Grange had brought a letter for Miss Wray in the afternoon, and how her mistress had seemed greatly upset at receiving it, and how she had gone into the bar and said to Reid, the groom, "Tell him I will be there."

Reid then gave his evidence, saying that his master had given him this letter to take to Miss Wray and that he had delivered it into her own hands.

"Have you ever taken other letters to Miss Wray?" he was asked.

"Yes, once or twice," replied the groom.

"From your master, Mr. Henderson?"

"Yes."

"Did Miss Wray seem upset when she gave you the message for your master?"

"She seemed a bit flurried like, I thought," answered Jack.

After this Henderson himself was called, and every eye in the room was fixed on his tall, stalwart form and handsome face as he went forward. He was cautioned in the usual manner, but with a great mental effort he said calmly enough:

"I do not wish to conceal anything."

"You wrote the letter that your groom delivered to Miss Wray, and which was found in her room after her death?"

"I did."

The letter was then handed to the jury, and after they had read it Henderson's examination was continued.

"You asked her to go and meet you on the ridge above Fern Dene?"

“I did, but afterward I made up my mind not to go. I got frightened,” answered Henderson, in a low tone, and with downcast eyes. “There had been some talk of a marriage between us, as you may see by what I wrote to her, and I wished to be done with it, that was why I wrote. But I thought afterward I would write again the next day instead of going—I was afraid to meet her.”

“Were you out during the evening of Miss Wray’s death?”

“Yes, for a short time; I went down to the stables.”

“And you never went near Fern Dene?”

“Never; I was in early; my mother and Jack Reid were the only persons I spoke to during the whole evening.”

Jack Reid was recalled, and confirmed this statement.

His master came down to the stables about half-past eight, he said, “and stayed a good bit;” and then he saw him walk toward the house.

Then came the medical evidence. The wound in the throat might have been self-inflicted, or it might not, the doctor deposed. That the fatal shot had been fired quite close to the dead woman there was abundant evidence to prove, but whether inflicted by her own hand it was impossible positively to say. She had been shot on the ridge above Fern Dene, and had either staggered back and fallen over the declivity to the Dene below, or been thrown down. The evidence altogether was of so unsatisfactory a nature, that the inquest was adjourned to enable the police to endeavor to obtain some more positive information. James Wray swore that the revolver found near his daughter’s body was his property, and this was a fact that naturally pointed to suicide. No one else could have obtained this weapon, as Wray deposed he had seen it in its usual place on the morning of Elsie’s death. In her despair at her false lover not keeping his appointment she had probably shot herself, many were inclined to believe, while others did not give credence to Henderson’s statement that he had not been to Fern Dene on the night of her death. At all events neither the coroner nor the jury were satisfied, and the adjourned inquest was appointed to take place in a week. Henderson heard this in sullen silence, and then, after beckoning to Reid, he left the house, without attempting to exchange a word with any of those present. Once he looked at May Churchill as he passed her, but the girl’s eyes fell as they met his. She did not believe that he had shot poor Elsie, but she believed that he had broken her heart, and a strong feeling of womanly indignation filled May’s breast.

In silence still, Henderson mounted his dog-cart, and in silence also his groom commenced to drive him homeward. They had gone quite a quarter of a mile before either of the men spoke. Then Henderson said uneasily:

“How do you think it went off, Jack?”

“Fairly well,” replied Jack, laconically.

After this there was very little said between them until they reached the Grange. But as Henderson was descending from the dog-cart, Jack Reid suddenly addressed him:

“After ye’ve had a drink, sir,” he said, “will ye come down to the stables?”

“Why?” answered Henderson, testily. “I’ve got a beastly headache, and I don’t want to talk of this hateful affair any more to-day.”

“But I do,” answered Jack Reid, doggedly.

“It’s a nuisance—” began Henderson.

“I must see ye, sir,” interrupted the groom, determinedly, and Henderson, after glancing at him, seeing the expression of his face, nodded and went into the house.

“I’ll come down presently,” he said, and this apparently satisfied Reid, as he drove the horse at once on toward the stables.

Henderson then proceeded to the dining-room, where he found his mother sitting pale and trembling.

“Tom,” she said, tremulously, and then she paused.

“It’s adjourned,” he answered briefly, and then he went to the sideboard and poured out some spirit, which he eagerly drank, and his mother had not courage to ask him any further questions. She kept looking at him fugitively, her heart filled with the direst apprehensions. She saw him drink more spirit, and then he left the room, going toward the stables with a lowering brow and an angry heart.

“Confound the fellow,” he muttered, thinking of his groom. He believed that Reid wished him to pay for the evidence he had given at the inquest, and Henderson considered the ten pounds that Reid had already received ample reward.

When he reached the stables he found the groom smoking in the yard. Reid went on with his pipe as his master approached him, and this increased Henderson’s feeling of anger against him.

“Well,” he said, addressing the groom sharply, “what do you want?”

Then Reid took his pipe out of his mouth and looked straight in Henderson’s face.

“That was good evidence I gave for ye to-day,” he said.

“Yes, yes, I am quite ready to acknowledge that,” answered Henderson somewhat impatiently.

“For a word of mine might have hanged ye, may hang ye yet,” continued the groom.

“What do you mean?” asked Henderson, turning pale to the very lips.

“This,” said Reid, emphatically, “that yer hand, and yer hand alone, spilt that poor lass’ blood. I’ve held my tongue, but I saw ye shoot her, and then fling her down the bank.”

“It’s a lie!” faltered Henderson, with his white lips.

“It’s no lie, but God’s truth. I watched ye that night, and followed ye to the ridge above Fern Dene, and heard every word ye spoke, and what the lass said to ye.”

“I—I was not there.”

“Yes, ye were there sure enough, master,” answered Reid with a scornful laugh. “Poor Elsie carried her father’s pistol wi’ her to make yer promise to keep yer word, and make her yer lawful wife. She threatened ye, and ye did promise, and then snatched the pistol frae the poor lass’s hand. And when she said she wad tell her father and Miss Churchill, yer shot her. It’s no good denying it, for I can prove each word I say, and hang ye as easy as hold up my hand.”

Henderson’s tall form absolutely tottered, and he leaned back against the yard pump for support.

“You—can prove nothing,” he faltered.

“Can’t I? I saw the moon come out and shine on her dead face, and I heard her curse ye before she died. I saw her blood run over yer hand and stain yer shirt and the coat ye wore. Where is that coat now, master; ye have not worn it since?” And again the groom laughed.

Henderson shuddered; this man had stolen the coat then, he thought, and was thus able to produce this damning evidence against him.

“How much—?” he began.

“How much will I take to hold my tongue?” continued Reid, as Henderson hesitated and paused.

“Why, a man should pay a long price for his life anyhow? I heard ye offer poor Elsie two thousand pounds to settle yer debt to her, and I’ll take not a penny less.”

Henderson did not speak. Great drops of dew broke out on his forehead; he felt powerless in his servant’s hands. He looked in the groom’s sharp face, and the man knew he could make his own terms.

“I call it cheap,” he said, “dirt cheap; two thousand pounds for yer life. Well, master, think it over, and if yer wise ye’ll not think long—I’ve told ye my price.”

Henderson made no answer; he turned away and went staggering to the house like a drunken man. He knew now what his position would be, and that this man was his master for his whole life.

CHAPTER XII.
DANGEROUS MOMENTS.

When the first inquiry as to the cause of Elsie Wray’s death was ended, and the adjournment announced, something which he could not resist drew John Temple to the side of the room where May Churchill and her father were standing.

“Well,” he said, addressing May, “one part at least of a very painful affair for you is over.”

May looked gratefully up in his face.

“Yes, it has been most painful, but I am so very, very sorry for Mr. Wray. I should like to go and shake hands with him, but he has never looked at me,” answered May.

“Still, I think I should go,” advised John; “the feeling that true sympathy is given to us is always grateful.”

“Then I will go.”

The landlord was standing with a stern face and kindling eyes as she approached him. He had just watched the departure of Henderson and his groom, and he believed now that Henderson had, to say the least of it, been the cause of Elsie’s death. He had read the insulting letter the young man had sent her, and with his own tongue he had acknowledged there had been “some talk of a marriage” between them. Deceived and betrayed, the poor girl might have put an end to her own life. But not less did James Wray consider him Elsie’s murderer, and he was vowing vengeance in his heart when May Churchill, with her flower-like face, drew near him and placed her small hand timidly in his.

“Mr. Wray,” she said, and that was all. But the landlord needed not words to tell him of the true feelings of her heart. In that gentle touch, in those beautiful eyes, he read her great sympathy and regret. He felt sure she did not despise nor scorn his dead Elsie, and that her womanly tenderness forgave all her shortcomings. His hard eyes grew dim, and he placed a horny brown hand in her white pretty one.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said, and turned away to hide his emotion.

John Temple had watched this meeting, and fully appreciated it. Mr. Churchill was busy talking to one of the jurymen, a neighbor, and John once more speedily found himself at May’s side.

“Let us go outside,” he said, and May went. They stood talking together until Mr. Churchill joined them, and Mr. Churchill spoke very cordially to John.

“I want you to come over to Woodside again, Mr. Temple, and try the mare before I send her to the Hall stables,” he said. “When will it be convenient for you to do so? This afternoon?”

“Yes; that will suit me very well,” answered John; and while a few moments later her father went to see after his trap, John had a word to half-whisper into May’s willing ears.

“I will see you again, then,” he said, and May smiled her answer, and as her father drove her back to Woodside, John Temple’s words and looks recurred again and again to her mind.

As for John, he walked back to the Hall, thinking only of her.

“She is the dearest little girl,” he told himself, and he wished the afternoon were already come. But he found when he arrived at his uncle’s house that he was eagerly awaited for, and that he was expected to give a complete account of all that had taken place during the inquest.

The news of Elsie Wray’s tragic death had indeed created an immense sensation in the neighborhood. Young Henderson of Stourton Grange was so well known, and had frequently visited at Woodlea Hall, and when John Temple entered the dining-room he found both Mrs. Temple and her mother, Mrs. Layton, eagerly talking of him.

“Well, here you are at last,” said Mrs. Temple. “Now come and tell us all about it, and what had Tom Henderson to do with it?”

“A good deal, I fear,” answered John, seating himself at the luncheon table.

“But what?” asked Mrs. Temple, sharply.

“By his own account he wrote to the unfortunate girl to ask her to meet him on the ridge above Fern Dene on the night of her death, and he also said there had been some talk of marriage between them.”

“Of marriage!” repeated Mrs. Temple, incredulously, and at the same moment Mrs. Layton emitted a dismal groan.

“He wanted to be out of it; fling her off, I understand,” continued John.

“I should think so,” said Mrs. Temple, scornfully. “A girl of that class!”

“He should have remembered that when he made love to her,” remarked John, coolly.

“The depravity of the girl, to think of such a thing!” cried Mrs. Layton.

“Do you mean of marriage?” smiled John.

“I mean of marriage with a young man in a perfectly different position of life to her own, Mr. Temple,” replied Mrs. Layton, with injured dignity.

“Yet we have heard of such things,” said John.

“There is but one end to such connections,” groaned Mrs. Layton, “disgrace and shame, and in this case death; in my opinion she deserved to die.”

“I do not believe Tom Henderson shot her,” said Mrs. Temple.

“He said in his evidence he never went near the place, and his groom corroborated this. He said he got afraid to go, and that he intended writing to her again to try and make some arrangement. Altogether it is a very shady affair for him,” replied John.

“Other young men have shady affairs, too, Mr. Temple,” said Mrs. Temple, with a toss of her handsome head, and John’s face turned a dusky red as she spoke.

“We can’t all pose as perfection, you know, my nephew John,” continued Mrs. Temple. “For my part I do not intend to give up young Henderson—he is too good-looking.”

“Unless they hang him,” said John.

“Hang him! Impossible.”

“Not at all impossible, I assure you. He will have to prove he was not near the place, or he will run a pretty good chance of it. I did not like the groom’s face; it was shifty, and he gave me the idea he was not speaking the truth.”

“And your own evidence, Mr. Temple?” said Mrs. Layton. “How did you account for your chance meeting with Margaret Churchill at such an early hour?”

“By my love for the morning air, Mrs. Layton,” answered John, smiling.

“Margaret Churchill, in my opinion, is a most designing young person,” continued Mrs. Layton. “Rachel, my love, may I trouble you for a little more of that delicious curry. Yes, a most designing young person. I am told that she did everything to attract young Henderson, and that her father also tried to entangle him, and then when she had led the poor young man on to a certain point, she turned round.”

“I do not believe he ever proposed for her,” said Mrs. Temple. “I suppose you think her handsome?” she added, looking at John.

“I think she has a beautiful face,” answered John, decidedly.

“Beautiful! That’s a strong term,” remarked Mrs. Temple, scornfully.

“Yet it is one I should apply to her.”

“It may account, then, for your early walk, Mr. Temple,” said Mrs. Layton, with a little sneering laugh.

“My meeting with Miss Churchill was simply accidental, Mrs. Layton,” said John, coolly. “Naturally the poor girl, after such a dreadful discovery, stopped the first person she met to tell him of it.”

“But you knew her before?” asked Mrs. Layton.

“I had spoken to her before; I have bought a horse of her father, and I saw her then.”

“A very convenient transaction for the Churchills,” said Mrs. Layton, with a sneer. “She is a person with no idea of her own position in life, I consider. Would you believe it, I went the other day to the farm for the purpose of buying some eggs, and when I asked Margaret Churchill the price, she looked quite offended, and said she did not sell eggs! Fancy a farmer’s daughter not selling eggs! However, she presented me with a few, and I took them.”

“A very convenient transaction for you, Mrs. Layton,” scoffed John, who was getting out of temper, and an angry gleam shot into Mrs. Layton’s light eyes as he spoke.

“I always do what I consider my duty, Mr. Temple,” she said, drawing up her spare little form. “My husband is fond of fresh-laid eggs, and as this misguided young person would not sell them, I had to consider him.”

John made a sarcastic little bow.

“Wifely duty!” he said; and Mrs. Layton always spoke of him after this passage of arms with great bitterness.

“He is a dangerous person,” she remarked later in the day to her daughter. “Mark my words, Rachel, a dangerous, designing person, and I believe he is carrying on, or will carry on, an intrigue with Margaret Churchill, and how would you like that?”

“I hate the whole lot of the Churchills!” answered Mrs. Temple, passionately. “But his uncle will never allow him to carry on an intrigue with this girl.”

“My dear Rachel, you forget that your husband is elderly, and that this young man is his heir,” said Mrs. Layton. “I do not like to speak on unpleasant subjects, but I think it my duty to tell you this, that when at my earnest suggestion your father spoke to the squire about settling the Hall, furniture, and carriages on you for life, after poor little Phillip’s death, that the squire said he had no power to settle the Hall; that it was entailed on the heir.”

“Oh! don’t, don’t, mother!” cried Mrs. Temple, rising in strong excitement, and beginning to pace the room. “I try to forget my darling’s death; try to put it out of my mind, or I think I should go mad, and now you begin to harp on it again. Let everything go; what matter is it when I have lost him!”

“My dear Rachel—”

“It has made me reckless,” continued Mrs. Temple, “and I often wonder now, mother, where it will end. But on the whole I rather like John Temple, and—he must have nothing to do with this Churchill girl. I will speak to Phillip about it. Both those boys played in that fatal game—who knows? one of them may have been my darling’s murderer.”

She burst into passionate sobs as she ended this speech, and her mother saw it was useless to say anything more. When these fits of excitement came over Rachel Temple, no one had the least control over her. She became, as she had said, reckless, and in this mood she continued the whole of the remainder of the day.

In the meanwhile John Temple was against his will being detained by his uncle, who had been out on business in the morning, and only returned to the hall after his wife and Mrs. Layton had left the luncheon table.

The squire, as the ladies had been, was eager to hear all about the inquest, and John, though inwardly impatient to start for Woodside, was obliged to go through the whole details again to his uncle.

It was late in the afternoon when he found himself free, and then he at once proceeded to the farm. But when he arrived there he found Mr. Churchill was from home.

“When will he be back?” he inquired of the neat maid-servant.

But as he spoke, May Churchill, who had been watching for him, came across the hall from the drawing-room.

“My father was obliged to go out at four o’clock, Mr. Temple,” she said in her sweet-toned voice, “but I do not think he will be very long away. Will you come in and have some tea?”

John gladly accepted this invitation. He followed May into the drawing-room, and sat there drinking tea and looking in her fair face. It was a very pretty room, sweet with flowers, and gracefully furnished. Everything seemed to suit the young mistress, and John was half-unconscious how long he stayed there. The shadows began to lengthen, the sun dipped behind the hills, and still he remained. Then presently the moon rose, and still Mr. Churchill had not

returned.

“Am I tiring you?” asked John.

“Oh, no,” answered May, with a smile and a blush.

John went across the room, and for a moment stood looking out of the open window at the garden beyond, on which now the cold, white moonbeams fell. May had been leaning there before, and an irresistible impulse seemed to draw him closer to her. It was one of those moments when a strange subtle knowledge comes to two human hearts. He bent his head until it nearly touched the lovely face; he took a little fluttering hand in his.

“Come,” he half-whispered, and led her through the casement which opened from the ground, to the silent dewy garden outside. Pale fantastic shadows lay on flower and leaf, the breeze rustled through the lilac bushes, and stirred the fruit-laden boughs. John forgot everything but the sweet and strong emotion which stirred his heart. He put his arm around the slight girlish form; he drew her to his breast.

“Dear one,” he murmured, and May felt too happy to resist his caress. Her breath came short, her bosom heaved, and her hand lingered tenderly in his.

“Mayflower,” whispered John, “may I call you by that sweet name?”

“Yes,” came fluttering from May’s rosy lips, and the little monosyllable was breathed very near to John’s.

Click went the garden gate at this moment, and the two heard it, and started quickly apart. Then a heavy, determined footstep sounded on the gravel walk, and a second or two later Mr. Churchill appeared. He looked surprised but not displeased to see John Temple with his daughter, and apologized for his absence.

“I waited as long as I could, Mr. Temple,” he said, “but I had some business I was forced to attend to.”

“My uncle delayed me,” answered John, “talking of that unfortunate business; but,” he added, smiling, “Miss Churchill has been very good; she has given me some tea, and the night is so lovely we were taking advantage of it.”

“All right,” answered the farmer, “but come in now and have something to eat. I fear it is too late to go down to the stables.”

“I will come over to-morrow and see the mare,” said John; “but thanks, very much, I can not go in now. Good-night Miss Churchill.”

Mr. Churchill hospitably pressed him to go into the house and have supper with them, but John declined. He felt somehow that he could not eat. He was too much excited, and those brief moments with May had moved him deeply. He had realized for the first time how dear she was to him; he knew now that he felt for her what he had never felt for any woman before.

They shook hands and parted, and John walked home alone in the moonlight. There was a delicious sense of life and love in his heart, and he smiled softly as he went on.

“I think she likes me,” he was thinking; “my little country sweetheart—my country sweetheart.”

He repeated these words to himself again and again. And again and again also he mentally saw the girl’s lovely profile on which the moonlight glimmered as she stood in the window. It was a picture in his mind’s eye which never again faded away. There are such pictures that Time’s hand can not touch. And this was one of them to John Temple; the sweet girlish face glorified by the pale white beams.

When he reached the Hall dinner was over, but we may be sure the heir was not allowed to suffer by this. The butler speedily spread a tempting repast before him, but John did not feel hungry still. He lit a cigar and went out on the terrace, and there his excitement sobered down. Other scenes rose up before him; other hours of passion and love.

“I am a fool,” he reflected; “a girl’s beautiful face has made me feel like a boy.”

In the meanwhile the girl with the beautiful face was receiving a very unpleasant surprise. She had gone into the house to order her father’s supper with a new feeling of joy and radiant hope glowing in her heart.

“He loves me,” was the sweet thought that flushed her smooth cheeks, and made her bright eyes sparkle. May never doubted this after those brief moments in the moonlight. And she felt a modest pride in the thought. That this good-looking well-born gentleman should care for her made her very happy. He was the first man also that she had really liked. So pretty a girl, of course, got admirers on every side. But admiration does not necessarily win love. A woman may feel flattered when her heart is totally untouched.

She ordered her father’s supper therefore with a light heart, and went into the dining-room to share it with him gratified and glad. Mr. Churchill also seemed in fairly good spirits, and ate his food with excellent appetite. Then, when the meal was over, he commenced to smoke, and May was just contemplating leaving the room to indulge in her sweet thoughts alone, when her father looked up and addressed her.

“May, I went to see Mrs. Bradshaw this afternoon,” he said.

“Yes,” answered May, somewhat indifferently, for the subject of Mrs. Bradshaw was very unpleasant to her.

“And we have fixed to be married to-morrow morning,” continued Mr. Churchill, in his quiet, determined way.

“To-morrow morning!” echoed May, utterly surprised.

“Yes, what is the good of waiting? But it is to be quite quiet; she did not wish you even to know until it was over. But you have been a good little daughter to me, and therefore I do not care to keep it a secret from you, and I hope also you will be a good daughter to your new mother.”

May’s face flushed painfully.

“She can never be a mother to me,” she said.

“My dear, that is folly. To-morrow she will be your father’s wife, and will take her place here, of course, as mistress. And I hope you two will get on well together. If you are wise you will do so.”

May did not speak.

“We will only be away for a few days, a week at most, as I shall have to be back, I suppose, for the adjourned inquest. We are going to London, and if you are a good girl I will bring you back a smart gown.”

“But father—to-morrow you agreed—for Mr. Temple to come here.”

“Mr. Temple must wait; I did not like to tell him I was going to be married to-morrow when he proposed to come. I will leave a note for him, and give orders that he can have the mare over on trial whenever he likes. Well, May, come and give me a kiss, and wish me happiness.”

The girl rose up at her father’s bidding and kissed his brow.

“I wish you happiness, father,” she said, in a low, faltering voice, and then she turned away and suddenly left the room.

She went to her own, and stood at the window looking out on the moonlit garden.

“Will this make any difference to him?” she was thinking, and a vague uneasiness stole into her heart.

CHAPTER XIII.
GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

John Temple went early to Woodside the next morning, after first making up his mind that he must indulge in no more lovemaking to May Churchill.

“It’s not fair to the dear little girl,” he told himself. “I was led away last night; any man would—a saint would have been, and I am not a saint.”

He kept this determination in his mind all the way to the farm. He was going to see Mr. Churchill about his horse, and not to look at the sweet Mayflower. Nevertheless, his pulses beat a little more quickly when he thought of her, and when he rang at the doorbell of the house his heart was throbbing fast.

In answer to his inquiry if Mr. Churchill were within, the maid replied, with rather a peculiar smile, that her master had left home for some days.

“But,” she added, “he left a letter for you, sir, with Miss Churchill, and she told me to tell you this if you called.”

“Then can I see Miss Churchill?” asked John.

“Yes, sir; will you step this way?”

John accordingly followed the maid to the dining-room, and when she announced Mr. Temple, May rose to receive him with a shy smile and a charming blush.

“I called to see your father about the horse,” began John as he took her pretty white fluttering hand in his.

“Yes, he left a letter for you,” answered May; “a—very strange thing has happened, Mr. Temple.”

“What has happened?” asked John, smiling, and thinking the while how lovely she looked.

“After you left last night,” and the blush deepened as she spoke, “he told me he was going away to be married to-day.”

“To be married!” echoed John, in great surprise.

“Yes, it has upset me very much; I do not like the person; I do not like it at all.”

“And you knew nothing about it?”

“He told me a few days ago he was thinking of going to be married again; but this is so sudden—I am very much distressed about it.”

“You must not let it worry you.”

“But I can’t help it worrying me; I can’t bear the idea of it—it has made me very unhappy.”

May was standing with her hand leaning on the back of the chair from which she had risen at John's entrance, and somehow it seemed only natural that he now should put his brown hand over her white one in a consoling manner.

"I am very sorry," he said; "and I can not bear to think of you being unhappy."

"It's very good of you," began May, "but—"

"I won't allow you to be unhappy," continued John; "come, you must cheer up—you dear little girl."

He really did not mean to do it, but when a man has once nearly kissed a pretty girl, it seems very natural for him to do it again. At all events John did kiss the lovely blooming face before him, and all the rebuke he got was:

"Oh! Mr. Temple, you should not do that!"

"I know I should not," answered John, penitently; "but you are so sweet, so dear, I could not help myself—and then you are unhappy, you know, so you must forgive me."

"I am really unhappy."

"Don't think about the horrid woman," consoled John, taking the two pretty hands in his; "think of something else—think a little bit about me."

The last few words were half-whispered, and they seemed to console May somehow. She began to smile again, and she looked softly at John, though she drew her little hands away from his grasp.

"It seems such a thing," she said, "for him to forget my mother."

"Ah—well; he is only mortal, I suppose."

"Then do you think everyone forgets, Mr. Temple?"

"I think men—" and then he paused. "I know someone that I never could forget," he continued.

May did not inquire who this "someone" was.

"Someone whose face I would dream of if I did not see it for twenty years," went on John, energetically.

"It would be changed in twenty years," replied May, with a little sigh.

"Not in my eyes; in my eyes it could never change."

This was the way in which John kept to his resolution. They went into the garden awhile after this, and sat listening to a black bird singing to his mate. Then they went to May's fernery, and walked beneath the shadow of the trees, and talked fond foolish words. May forgot all about her father's marriage and her hated stepmother. She was with the man she liked best in all the world, and she believed he loved her. What happiness is like this? The golden hours of youth and hope; the vague foreshadowings of still greater joy.

Before they parted John had promised to call again.

"I shall be so lonely," May had said softly, and how could he leave her lonely? Yet he did not mean any wrong; it was the drifting tide bearing him on to he knew not where.

At all events during the next few days he went constantly to Woodside. Mr. Churchill's marriage had taken place, and the wealthy widow from Castle Hill would, no doubt, soon be installed at the farm. May tried not to think of it, and she tried also to tell herself that she must not think seriously of Mr. Temple. But do what she would she did think of him. After all, if he really loved her, would not that sweep away the social difference between them?

And he did love her. May felt sure of this, and this surety alone brought her great happiness. People might try to separate them; his uncle probably would try, but true love can overcome all obstacles. In these sweet dreams the girl lived during the few days following her father's marriage. Then the time for the adjourned inquest approached, and in due course May received a letter from her father to tell her that on the following evening that he and his newly-made wife would arrive at Woodside.

The preparations for this event were intensely disagreeable to May. John Temple also heard the news with great annoyance. No more quiet walks in the lonely garden then; no more tender hand-clasps, nor long, uninterrupted interviews. He gathered from May that her stepmother was not a lady; that she was bustling and interfering.

"Perhaps it is better," John told himself.

May's two young brothers, Hal and Willie Churchill, had been away for their holidays for a week or two also during this time, so that John Temple and the Mayflower practically had been able to see each other whenever they liked. They knew now this state of things would end. The boys were coming home; Mr. and Mrs. Churchill were on the point of arriving, and moreover, John Temple had received a hint from his uncle that his visits to Woodside Farm had been remarked on, and that it would be well that they should cease.

"It can end in nothing, you know, John," the squire had said, not unkindly.

"Certainly it will end in nothing, uncle," answered John, gravely. "I think, if you do not mind, after the adjourned inquest on that poor girl is over, I will leave Woodlea for a month or two."

"My dear boy, you are your own master, and must guide your own actions," said the squire;

“only I do not think it quite fair to this pretty girl that you should pay her so much attention when you can not marry her.”

“No, I can not marry her,” replied John, and after this the subject was not mentioned again, but the conversation was not without effect on John Temple.

So he went to see May for the last time before her stepmother’s arrival in a very sober frame of mind. It was a dull, wet day, and when May saw him crossing the garden she went to open the house door for him, and gave him her hand with a warm clasp of welcome.

“Thank you for coming to cheer me, as I feel so dreadfully dull,” she said, smiling.

“I feel dreadfully dull, too,” answered John, putting down his wet umbrella and hat on the hall stand, and the next moment he put his hand through the girl’s arm.

“Come into the drawing-room,” said May, softly; “I have been making it all smart, and there is a fire there; it is so wet.”

They crossed the hall thus, John lightly leaning on May’s arm, and entered the drawing-room together. There was a bright fire burning in the grate, and the room was fresh and sweet with flowers. Altogether May had done her best to make it look cheerful, but still John felt very dull.

May went up to the fire, and John held out his chilled hands to the blaze.

“When do you expect these people to arrive?” he asked.

“Father said about six o’clock,” replied May.

John took out his watch and looked at it.

“It’s just four now,” he said, “and I must go by five; only one hour, May!”

May sighed softly, and John turned round and looked at her earnestly, and then also sighed.

“The last few days have been very bright, haven’t they, May?” he said.

“Yes,” half-whispered May.

“Too bright, I am afraid,” went on John; “it will make the coming ones seem dull.”

“There may be some bright ones still,” said May, in a low tone, with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks.

Again John looked at her. How pretty she was in her white frock and crimson ribbons! She had a crimson rose in her waistband and another at her throat. “Truly a fair picture,” John was thinking, and it was hard, very hard, to say the word he meant to speak.

“I am going away, May, for a bit,” he said at length, with an effort.

“Going away?” repeated the girl quickly, and her face flushed, and then grew a little pale, and John saw this.

“Yes,” went on John, still with an effort, “I think I shall go abroad for a month or two.”

May did not speak; her pallor increased, and her agitation was visible.

“But I shall never forget Woodside,” said John, after a moment’s pause, “nor you—Mayflower—I wish I could.”

“Why?” asked May, in a trembling voice, and she put out her hand as if for support.

“Because I would be happier if I could,” answered John, also much moved; “I will pay a bitter price, I am afraid, for the bright hours I have spent with you.”

“Oh, do not go away, Mr. Temple!” cried May, suddenly, looking at him with imploring eyes. “I—I shall be so lonely—I shall—”

“We must try to forget all this,” said John, and he put his arm around her and pressed his lips on hers. “Dear little girl—dear Mayflower—it is hard, it is bitter to go from you.”

Tears rushed into May’s eyes, and John kissed them away.

“Do not grieve, darling,” he whispered, “it would make me more sad if I thought I had done any harm to you.”

“But you will come back?” said May, in a broken voice.

John did not speak. He did not mean to come back, but he could not bear to see her distress. He kissed her again; he called her by every endearing name, and May put her hand in his and held it fast.

“Promise me to come back,” she whispered, with her cheek against his.

“I promise,” said John, after a moment’s pause, for he felt he could not resist her appeal.

“And do not quite forget me when you are away.”

“Forget you!” cried John, and he caught her passionately to his breast; “would that I could, May! It would be better for you and me—but the die is cast!”

She was still in his arms, with her head on his breast, when the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel outside was distinctly heard in the room. May lifted her head and gave a cry; John looked sharply around.

“If it is your father, whatever shall we do?”

May, girl-like, ran to the mirror; John, man-like, stood helpless.

“My hair is not very disorderly, is it?” she said, trying to smooth her soft bright curls. “How odious that they should come!”

“What shall I do?” asked John.

“Stay until they come in, and then I suppose—”

“I will go—good-by, dear May.”

He clasped her hand for a moment, and then May went to the door to receive her father and his bride. Mrs. Churchill was already in the hall, and was giving orders to the coachman and servants about her luggage; Mr. Churchill was giving orders about the horses.

As May went forward Mrs. Churchill saw her, and advanced toward her and kissed her face.

“Well, my dear,” she said, “here we are. We have had a wet day to travel in, but it makes it all the pleasanter to get home. And how are you?”

She was a good-looking, middle-aged woman; robust and dark, with marked dark eyebrows, and a firm, hard mouth. She looked a person of strong will also; somehow her very voice told you this.

“William,” she called out in a loud tone to her husband, “here is your daughter.”

Upon this Mr. Churchill came into the hall, and kissed May also.

“Well, my dear,” he said, kindly, “and how have you been getting on?”

“Mr. Temple is in the drawing-room, father,” said May, nervously.

“What—the squire?”

“No, Mr. John Temple.”

But John by this time had appeared. He went up to Mr. Churchill and shook hands with him.

“Well, Mr. Churchill, I hear I have to congratulate you,” he said, with a smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Temple,” answered the farmer. “Sarah, my dear, this is Mr. John Temple, our landlord’s nephew and heir.”

Upon this Mrs. Churchill bowed graciously, and after a few more pleasant words, John Temple went away. Then Mrs. Churchill began bustling about the house as if she had lived in it for twenty years. She remarked on the furniture, and decided where she would place her own “things,” as she called them. She made no pretense about consulting May in any of her arrangements, but took her place at once as mistress of the house and all that it contained.

“But what matter,” thought May, softly, as she stood looking out on the still garden on the night of her stepmother’s arrival at Woodside. “What matter does anything here now make to me?”

CHAPTER XIV.
MAY’S STEPMOTHER.

The next time that May saw John Temple was at the adjourned inquest on the death of Elsie Wray. They both then simply repeated their former evidence, and the only fresh witness on the occasion was Mrs. Henderson.

In faltering and broken words the unhappy mother told what she knew to be untrue. Her son had only been out for a very short time on the night of Miss Wray’s death, she said, and he had returned to the house much earlier than usual. He said he had just been down to the stables, and spoke about the horses.

“Did you know of any engagement existing between your son and Miss Wray?” asked the coroner.

“No, I did not,” truthfully replied Mrs. Henderson.

She was then questioned as to the time of Tom Henderson’s return to the house, but, though very nervous, she had carefully prepared her story. If her evidence and the evidence of the groom, Jack Reid, were true, it was impossible that Henderson could have been in the neighborhood of Fern Dene. At all events the jury gave him the benefit of the doubt. They returned a verdict that Elsie Wray had destroyed her own life when in a state of temporary insanity, and though every one in the room believed that this condition of mind had been brought on by the conduct of young Henderson, there were some ready to blame the poor girl for her folly in fixing her affections on a man so superior in rank to herself.

Among these was Mr. Churchill of Woodside, and after the inquest was over, as Henderson was handing his mother into the dog-cart, Mr. Churchill, in passing to seek his own trap, held out his hand to Henderson, and then to Mrs. Henderson, who was trembling visibly. He only said a word or two about the weather, but his manner showed a certain amount of sympathy and kindness which was very welcome to both mother and son.

May Churchill, on the other hand, who was following her father, passed them with downcast

eyes. She scarcely, indeed, noticed them. A moment or two before she had had a brief interview with John Temple, and he had slipped a note into her hand, and she was thinking of this note and of his words, and not of the Hendersons.

“I have come to say good-by,” John Temple had said, in a low tone, clasping her hand and leaving the note there at the same time; “this will explain.”

“When—” began May, much agitated.

“To-day,” replied John, who understood, and answering her unspoken question, “but—I will not forget.”

Not another word was exchanged between them. Mr. Churchill called to his daughter to come to him, and several people were around them, but May saw no one, and heard no words but John’s. He did not follow her to her father’s dog-cart, but he stood watching her as her father helped her in, and when May turned to look at him he lifted his hat.

Thus they parted, and May went back to Woodside feeling both agitated and depressed. But she had her letter! With this firmly clasped in her hand she sprang from the dog-cart and ran upstairs to her own room without waiting to speak to her stepmother, who was standing in the hall to receive her husband.

When May reached her room she tore open John’s letter with trembling fingers, and read the following words, failing at the time to comprehend their full meaning:

“My Dear May—Sweet Mayflower: I am writing this because I think it right to do so; I am going away because I also think it right. I want you, in my absence, fully to comprehend your feelings toward me. If two people truly love each other I think nothing should separate them, but in the mutual attraction between men and women there is much which is not the love that can not change.

“Dear child, dear sweetheart! you are so much younger than I am that I must warn you against myself. I am world-worn, and until I met you I could not have believed that such a deep, tender, and passionate affection as I feel for you could have arisen in my heart. Yet this is so, but, on the other hand, there are strong and powerful reasons to keep us apart. You must make your own decision when I return. In the meantime believe that I love you, and that I am ready to sacrifice much for your love.

”John Temple.”

May read and re-read this letter, and could not quite follow its drift. She naturally thought that the strong and powerful reasons to keep them apart were social ones. His uncle, of course, would naturally object to his heir marrying the daughter of one of his tenants.

“But he loves me,” May whispered softly to herself; “and I love him, and will sacrifice anything for his sake—mine is the love that can not change.”

But her sweet dream was speedily interrupted. Her stepmother’s loud voice was heard calling to her on the stairs:

“May! dinner is ready; come down at once.”

May had still her hat and cape on, and it took her a few minutes to divest herself of these, but when she went into the dining-room she found her stepmother had not waited for her. Mrs. Churchill was sitting carving a large boiled leg of mutton and turnips, and she looked at May with her bright dark eyes disapprovingly as she entered the room.

“You are late for dinner, May,” she said, sharply. May made no answer. She sat down at the table, but the two thick slices of boiled mutton that her stepmother handed her was impossible food for her. In fact she could not eat it, and played with a little potato.

“Why are you not eating your mutton?” asked Mrs. Churchill.

“I do not like boiled mutton,” replied May, smiling.

“Not like excellent boiled mutton! Then what do you like? I did not know you were such a dainty eater as that.”

“May never eats very much,” said her father, kindly enough; “you like birds best, don’t you, May?”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” answered May.

“It’s impossible to have birds every day,” remarked her stepmother, decidedly, and then nothing more was said on the subject, and May went without her dinner, for which, however, she did not care.

But she did care about her stepmother’s constant interference. She had been accustomed to be her own mistress for years; to go out when it pleased her, and to read or write just as it took her fancy. Now Mrs. Churchill wished to change all this. She insisted on her going out shopping with herself; she found fault with her dress; and when she read, said she was wasting her time.

May tried for her father’s sake to put up with all this, but it was very annoying; then the two boys, Willie and Hal, returned home, and Mrs. Churchill tried to manage them also. Willie, who was a spoilt, rather passionate boy, was furious, but Hal suggested that as she kept the key of the jam closet, they had better be civil.

Then another disturbing element arose in the household for May. This was no less than the

renewal of Tom Henderson's now most unwelcome attentions. Henderson's passion for her had by no means diminished in the changed circumstances of his life. Nay, he told himself that it was for her sake that he had acted as he had done. And taking advantage of Mr. Churchill's known love for making a good bargain, he arrived at Woodside one day under the excuse that he wanted to buy a horse.

Mr. Churchill received the would-be purchaser quite civilly. And Henderson gave a long price for a very ordinary animal. Mr. Churchill was so pleased that he invited the young man into the house to have a glass of wine, and Henderson was only too delighted to avail himself of the chance of once more seeing May.

And he did see her, and also her stepmother. Mrs. Churchill was a shrewd woman, and her sharp, dark eyes speedily perceived that Henderson was deeply in love with May. He sat with his handsome dark eyes fixed on her fair face during the whole time he was in the room, and after he was gone Mrs. Churchill made particular inquiries about him.

"So," she said, "this is the young man, is he, for whose sake that foolish girl at the Wayside Inn shot herself?"

"I have no doubt he behaved very badly to her," replied May.

"How can you possibly tell that, my dear? A girl in her position could not expect him to marry her; he is a very nice, fine-looking young man. Does he often come here?"

"He used to come a great deal," said May, coldly, and then she left the room, but Mrs. Churchill did not forget the subject.

"William," she said, the same night to her husband, "do you know I believe that young Henderson admires May extremely?"

"I used to think so too," answered Mr. Churchill, who was smoking his pipe complacently, and thinking of the good bargain he had made in the morning; "but it's rather an awkward business, about that girl."

"Oh, that will soon be forgotten, and I think it would be a remarkably good match for May, don't you?"

Mr. Churchill gave one or two more puffs at his pipe before he answered.

"Stourton is nice property," he said, at length.

"Yes, and he's a nice-looking young man, suitable in age and everything, and girls are far better married young. I would encourage him to come here if I were you."

But Henderson needed very little encouragement to go to Woodside. He began to do so from the day he had bought the horse, and he made very little secret of what was his attraction, and after awhile Mrs. Churchill made up her mind to bring the affair to a conclusion.

"May," she said, quietly, after one of Henderson's visits, "I think there is no doubt what that young man comes here for."

May did not reply. She had always been very cold and distant to Henderson since Elsie Wray's death, but she also knew very well the reason why he came to Woodside.

"Both your father and I think it would be an excellent match for you," continued her stepmother.

"Nothing would induce me to marry him," answered May, quickly and sharply, and Mrs. Churchill saw a hot flush rise to her lovely skin.

"My dear, it is folly to talk in that way. Girls in these things must be guided by their elders, their parents. I married before I was your age, and I married because my father and mother wished me to do so, not that I was what is called in love with poor Mr. Jones. He, however, made me an excellent husband, and left me in comfortable circumstances. Mr. Henderson is well off, and it is your duty to your father to accept him, as, of course, your keep is a great expense to him."

"Has my father complained of the expense I am to him?" asked May, angrily.

"He has not absolutely complained, but he is naturally anxious that you should settle and marry well. He was speaking to me about it only yesterday. He is not a rich man, and has, of course, many expenses. We both think young Henderson is the very man for you, and as he has a nice, independent property, it is an exceedingly good match."

"I will never marry him," repeated May; "please do not mention this again."

But Mrs. Churchill did mention it again. She dwelt on it. It became her pet subject of conversation, and on one occasion when May was out, she—as she expressed it—"sounded" Mr. Henderson on his intentions toward her stepdaughter.

The young man did not require a second hint.

"I would give anything to marry her, Mrs. Churchill," he said, "but May gives me no opportunity of speaking to her alone; she has changed to me since—"

A strange pallor spread over Henderson's handsome face as he left his sentence incomplete, and Mrs. Churchill instantly observed this.

"Since that poor girl committed suicide, I suppose you mean?" she said, calmly. "It was an

unfortunate occurrence, no doubt, but one that I think no sensible woman could blame you for. You could not be expected to marry her."

Henderson gave a kind of gasp.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mrs. Churchill," he said, "but perhaps May—"

"Oh, May will get over it. Come and have tea with us to-morrow, Mr. Henderson, and I will give you the opportunity of speaking to May alone."

Henderson was only too glad to promise to avail himself of this invitation. And on the following day he arrived at Woodside, excited and eager. And after tea was over Mrs. Churchill proceeded to carry out her little plan. She sent May into the garden alone, under the pretense that she wanted her to gather some flowers, and presently she sent young Henderson after her.

May was in the very act of cutting some roses when she heard his step on the walk behind her, and she was returning to the house to avoid him, when he suddenly caught her hand.

"Don't go, May," he said, in an agitated manner, "I want a few words with you."

"I am busy," answered May, "I can not stay."

"You must stay," went on Henderson, almost roughly. "May, how long is this to go on? How long are you going to play with me as you are playing with me now?"

"I never played with you, Mr. Henderson," said May, with some dignity of manner.

"Oh, yes, you did. But play or not play, will you listen to what I have got to say?"

"I don't wish to listen, Mr. Henderson; nothing that you can have to say to me—"

"Don't drive me mad, May!" cried the young man, passionately. "You know I love you; that I love you too well, and yet you are always cold to me."

"I am sorry if—if you care for me—for I can give you nothing in return."

"Nothing!"

"Mr. Henderson, it is best to speak the truth."

"Your parents wish it," interrupted Henderson, eagerly; "your mother sent me to speak to you."

"I have no mother," said May, raising her head, proudly; "if you mean my father's wife, she has no right to interfere with my affairs."

"And this is all you have to say to me?"

"Yes, except to hope you will never speak of this to me again."

A half-suppressed oath broke from Henderson's lips.

"You carry things with a high hand, I must say; but if this means that that fellow Temple has come between you and me, he had best take care! No one shall come between us—you have cost me too much!"

An evil look came over his face as he spoke—such an evil look that May half-shuddered and hurried away, and as she entered the house she met her stepmother in the hall, who looked at her searchingly.

"Have you seen Mr. Henderson? Has he spoken to you?" she asked.

May felt very angry.

"I wish you would not send Mr. Henderson to speak to me," she said; "I told you it was no use."

"You are a foolish girl, and you should not speak to me in that manner," retorted Mrs. Churchill.

"It has annoyed me very much," continued May, "about these things. I may certainly be allowed to manage my own affairs."

"We shall see, but you are very impertinent, and I shall speak to your father about your conduct."

May said nothing more. She went to her own room, and after locking the door sat down to do what she did every hour of the day—to think of John Temple. Oh! how she longed for his return. She had made her decision; the decision that he had asked for in his letter, and was ready to brave everything for his sake. But he had been gone nearly a month, and she had heard nothing of or from him. Still she did not doubt his word nor his love. He would come back and then how different everything would seem.

But she had not heard the last of young Henderson's visit. When she went down to supper both her father and her stepmother received her very coldly. Then when the meal was over her father spoke to her very seriously.

"May," he said, after he had taken a few puffs at his pipe, "your mother tells me you have been acting very foolishly and not treating her with the respect which is her due, and which I will insist on from everyone in this house."

"If you mean about Mr. Henderson," answered May, turning very red, "I refuse to have anything to say to him."

"You should take the advice of those older than yourself; your mother—"

“Mrs. Churchill is not my mother,” said May, hotly; “poor mother, I am sure, would never have urged me to encourage a man with Mr. Henderson’s character.”

Mr. Churchill got very angry.

“Don’t be so impertinent, girl!” he said. “I’ll tell you what it is, May, if you go on in this way you may find another home for yourself, for I won’t have you in mine!”

“Very well, father, I will,” answered May, and she rose and left the room, and the husband and wife were alone.

“I am afraid you have spoilt her, William,” said Mrs. Churchill.

“I’ll unspoil her, then,” swore the farmer. “I can not think what’s come over her of late.”

This was the first serious quarrel that May had ever had with her father. Mr. Churchill was, indeed, both fond and proud of her. But his new wife had already gained a strong influence over him. She was a clever woman in her way, and good-looking, and very well off, all of which qualifications Mr. Churchill thought much of, and of the last the most. Therefore, the next day he scarcely spoke to May, and her position in the house was exceedingly disagreeable.

But on the day following there came a change. It was Sunday, and May went to church with her two young brothers, her father and stepmother remaining at home, as Mrs. Churchill had a cold. And when May lifted her eyes, and looked at the squire’s square pew, she saw seated there John Temple and Mrs. Temple, his uncle’s wife.

CHAPTER XV.
THE PICTURE HAT.

The squire of Woodlea’s pew was at one side of the old-fashioned country church, and Mr. Churchill’s family occupied seats in the gallery. Therefore John Temple, looking up, saw the entrance of May Churchill and the two boys, and saw also the blush, the look of unmistakable joy, with which she recognized himself.

Other eyes saw this, too; a pair of handsome dark eyes that belonged to Mrs. Temple, who had followed her nephew-in-law’s upward glance, and watched, half with amusement, half with scorn, his brown face color slightly, and a soft look steal over his good-looking face. She also had seen the entrance of the three young Churchills, and drew her own conclusions from John’s expression. He had only arrived at the Hall the evening before, and had in the morning expressed a wish to attend the service at the parish church, somewhat to Mrs. Temple’s surprise.

“I thought going to church would not have been in your way,” she had said at the time.

“I have never heard your father preach,” answered John, smiling.

“You will fall asleep during the sermon—I warn you,” answered Mrs. Temple, also smiling.

“I am a bad sleeper, so that will be delightful,” said John.

The squire was ailing, and had a cold, and therefore did not go to church, so Mrs. Temple and John alone occupied the Hall pew. And when she saw the look on May Churchill’s face, and the look on John Temple’s as their eyes met, she understood why her husband’s nephew had wished to hear her father preach. That look indeed had thrilled through both their hearts. Yet, as John’s eyes fell, he sighed softly, and Mrs. Temple heard the sigh.

But May did not sigh. He had come back; she would see him again, and when she did see him she would tell him she had made the decision he had asked for. She sat there between her two young brothers with her heart beating tumultuously, beating with joy and hope.

Presently Hal Churchill gave a little kick at her small foot.

“I say, May,” he said in a loud whisper, bending his head toward his sister’s ear, “d’ye see who’s in the squire’s pew?”

May made no answer. She frowned, or rather pretended to frown, and Hal went on unabashed:

“I heard he’d come back last night, but forgot to tell you,” continued Hal.

“Horrid boy,” thought May, remembering some sleepless hours she had spent grieving over John Temple’s absence.

The service went on; the weak-eyed curate, who also admired May Churchill, looked up to the gallery occasionally, and so did Mrs. Layton. This good lady repeated the responses in a loud tone, so as to let all those around her know how pious she was, yet she was not above worldly thoughts at the same time. She disapproved of May Churchill’s picture hat and picture face. She was wondering what the world was coming to when tenant farmers’ daughters dressed as May was dressed. She repeated, “Have mercy upon us miserable sinners,” but she did not really include herself in that category. She prayed for her neighbors, but not for herself, and she was greatly troubled in spirit concerning May Churchill’s picture hat.

Presently the vicar ascended the pulpit, and in his usual monotonous under-tone proceeded with his usual platitudes. A worthy man this, but misty, and perhaps his brain was mercifully clouded. It made his daily life more bearable, his scolding eager wife more endurable, and, taking

all things into consideration, it was well for the Rev. James that he was not a clever nor keen-eyed man. His congregation, who expected nothing new from him, each settled him or herself to their private thoughts. The men, as a rule, mentally did their weekly accounts over, the women the cost of their neighbor's dress and their own proposed new personal adornments. John Temple moved his seat to a convenient corner, whispering smilingly to his aunt-in-law as he passed her:

"It is true, I am actually going to sleep."

Mrs. Temple smiled in return, and looked at John as he closed his eyes and leaned back his head against the curtained pew. But though he closed his eyes he did not go to sleep, nor had the slightest inclination to do so. Through those closed lids he still mentally saw the lovely face in the gallery beyond; still saw the glad look with which the Mayflower had greeted his return.

Mrs. Temple noticed his face flush, though he never opened his eyes. She kept looking at him and wondering what his life had been before her own terrible loss had made him the heir of Woodlea. She had expected to dislike him, almost to hate him, but she did not. His good looks favorably influenced her for one thing, and his pleasant, sympathetic manner for another. There is really no such lasting charm as this. But it is born with the man or woman who possesses it. It is the reflection from their hearts as it were; the outcome of the inner sense that understands the feelings of others and never wounds them.

John Temple possessed this gift, to some extent at least, though not in the highest sense. But at all events he never said unsuitable things, nor hit the wrong nail on the head. Some people seemingly can not help doing this. With the best intentions they ruffle our tempers, and we are glad when they go out of our sight.

So Mrs. Temple kept looking at John, and speculating as to his past.

"He is good-looking, but scarcely handsome," she thought, and then she sighed, and her memory went back to the days of her soldier-lover, now lying in his Indian grave.

"If I had married George Hill, I would have been a good woman," she was thinking. "Now what have I to be good for?"

She glanced contemptuously, as the thought struck her first, at her poor misty father in the pulpit, and then at her eager, watchful mother in the vicar's pew below.

"They sold me," she was reflecting, "and what I can give them is all they care for. Ah, it is a weary world."

She moved, so impatiently that John Temple opened his gray eyes. The sermon was now drawing to a close, for one good quality the Rev. James Layton really did possess was not to preach too long sermons. And the moment the blessing was over Mrs. Temple rose hastily and signed to John to follow her. She wished to leave the church before her mother had an opportunity of joining her, for Mrs. Layton seldom ordered a Sunday dinner, but in general, and always if she could manage it, dined when the family at the Hall had luncheon in the middle of the day.

John looked up at the gallery as he followed Mrs. Temple out of the church, and half-smiled as his eyes met May's, and this smile was reflected on her rosy lips. A moment later Mrs. Layton also looked up over her clasped hands, and to her consternation when she glanced at her daughter's pew, she saw she was gone. Then she rose hastily from her knees and hurried out by the vestry door, only to be in time to see the Hall carriage disappear out of the churchyard, with her daughter and John Temple seated in it.

She ran to the churchyard gate; she frantically waved her umbrella, but all in vain. Mrs. Temple either did not, or pretended not to see her mother, and with a rueful heart Mrs. Layton had to turn and face the out-coming congregation, who were greatly amused at her discomfiture.

And she had very good cause for this feeling. She had in fact ordered no dinner for herself nor her husband at the vicarage, having securely reckoned on lunching at the Hall.

"Rachel should be ashamed of herself," she reflected, angrily, as she returned to the vestry, "to treat her parents so, after all I have done for her."

Only broken her daughter's heart! This was what Mrs. Layton had done, and she considered her conduct meritorious. But she had no time for further reflection. In the vestry the vicar was divesting himself of his limp surplice, and his wife felt she must act.

"James," she said, "I am just going to walk over to the Hall for lunch, and you must follow."

"Did Rachel ask us?" inquired the vicar, weakly, for he also had been looking forward to the good things on the squire's table, and a glass or two of the squire's good wine.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Layton, mendaciously, "but I stayed behind to tell you not to be long. I will walk on, as they always have lunch much earlier on Sundays."

And Mrs. Layton did walk on. She went at a brisk rate, for she was determined not to be cheated out of her dinner by her ungrateful daughter. She therefore arrived at the Hall somewhat heated in mind and body.

"The family are at lunch, madam," the footman who opened the door informed her, but, nothing daunted, Mrs. Layton walked coolly to the dining-room, and entered unannounced.

The gray-haired squire, who was sitting at the table, rose to receive her, after giving one inquiring glance at his wife, who shrugged her shoulders slightly in reply.

“I wished to see you, Rachel,” began Mrs. Layton, who was very hot, “but you hurried away from church so quickly that I had not the opportunity, and so I followed you on here.”

“Pray be seated, Mrs. Layton,” said Mr. Temple, courteously. “James,” this was to the footman, “place a chair for Mrs. Layton.”

“I must say I feel rather tired,” continued Mrs. Layton, “and shall be glad of a glass of wine. Thanks, Mr. Temple, I know your good wine of old, and I hope you will excuse me when I tell you that I have taken the liberty of asking the vicar to follow me here. I wished to see you, Rachel, on a little business that I could not defer.”

“I dare say it would have waited,” answered Mrs. Temple, coolly. She was annoyed at her mother’s appearance, and she did not care to hide this, nor did she extend any warm welcome to her father when the good vicar came shambling in.

“Your mother said you had kindly invited us, my dear,” explained the vicar. “I am sorry I am late, but there were several things I had to see about before I could leave the vestry.”

“Oh, it is all right,” said Mrs. Temple. At this moment she felt sorry for her poor down-trodden father. She heaped good things on his plate, and ordered some of his favorite old port to be placed on the table. She took very little notice of her mother; she had in truth an immense contempt for the scheming, untruthful little woman who had given her birth.

Mrs. Layton still felt angry, but her anger did not interfere with her appetite. She ate and drank to her heart’s content, and then she began talking to John Temple.

“So you were at church this morning, Mr. John?” she said. “Well, it’s a poor place, and needs a great deal of alteration, but all these things cost money.”

The squire turned a deaf ear to his mother-in-law’s remark, but John answered courteously:

“I thought it all seemed very nice,” he answered. “Of course, you can not expect everything in an old-fashioned country church.”

“Yes, old-fashioned, that is the word,” echoed Mrs. Layton, eagerly. “Look at those galleries! Did you ever see such things? They should come down, but as I said before it all costs money, and people won’t give it, and the vicar won’t rouse himself.”

The vicar looked mildly up from his plate at this remark, and that was all.

“And talking of the galleries,” went on Mrs. Layton, speaking with great rapidity, “did you notice that absurd hat that Margaret Churchill wore this morning? Absolutely preposterous! I suppose that is what you call a picture hat?” she added, looking at her daughter.

“I thought it seemed a very elegant affair!” scoffed Mrs. Temple. “What did you think of it, my nephew John?”

“Don’t be shocked at my bad taste when I confess I never noticed it,” replied John Temple, smiling.

“You only saw the face beneath?” questioned Mrs. Temple.

John made a sarcastic bow.

“Now you compliment my good taste,” he said.

“Well, people call her handsome, and she may be good-looking; I suppose she is,” said Mrs. Layton, viciously, “but I have a very poor opinion of Margaret Churchill. If you believe it, I am told she is now once more endeavoring to entangle young Henderson of the Grange, in spite of the terrible scandal about him. I hear they invite him to the house, and that he buys horses of the old man, and that the new Mrs. Churchill is bent on the match.”

John Temple felt a strong wave of anger rise in his heart, but he prudently checked it before it reached his tongue.

“Well,” he said, rising from the table, “I will leave you two ladies for the present, if Mrs. Temple will excuse me? I have some letters to write, and afterward I think I shall go out; it is too fine a day to spend indoors.”

“Of course, please yourself,” answered Mrs. Temple, carelessly. She did not like John leaving her thus, to be bored by her mother’s company, but she stood on small ceremony.

“I am tired; I will lie down and read in my own room for an hour or two, I think,” she said. “Good-day, mother.”

She just extended the tips of her slender fingers to Mrs. Layton as she spoke, and then rose languidly and left the room.

The squire was thus left alone with the vicar and his mother-in-law. But he also was tired of both. He retired into an easy chair, and put his handkerchief over his face to announce that he wanted a little rest.

“Ah, I see you want a little doze, squire,” cried Mrs. Layton, observing this. “Well, James,” she continued, addressing her husband, “I will just take another glass of port and then we must be off. It’s well for those who can afford to take rest, but a poor parson and his wife can not.”

The squire made no reply to this, and Mrs. Layton, having drank her port, took her leave, remarking to her husband as they quitted the house together:

“Poor man, he is evidently failing fast.”

“Thank heavens she is gone!” exclaimed the squire with energy, pulling the handkerchief from his face as he heard their retreating footsteps. “What a woman! She’s enough to drive anyone mad.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LOVE THAT CAN NOT CHANGE.

John Temple went up the staircase toward his own room, after quitting the luncheon, saying some very hard things indeed below his breath of Mrs. Layton. She had made him intensely angry about May Churchill and young Henderson. Not that he believed a word of it, but it enraged him to hear the girl’s name coupled with this ruffian’s, for so he mentally designated Henderson.

John indeed had always had serious doubts as to Henderson’s actual guilt regarding Elsie Wray’s death. That he had broken the poor girl’s heart he never doubted. But there had been something in the evidence of the groom, Jack Reid, something in his face that made John believe he was not speaking the truth.

And that Henderson dare go near May! “It’s that disgusting stepmother, I suppose,” thought John; “my poor little girl, my poor May, you will be happier with me.”

So John sat down to write to his poor little May when he got to his own room, and then started out across the park to post his letter at the nearest post office. He walked on with a bent head and a thoughtful brow. He was dissatisfied with himself, irresolute, and yet his heart was warm with love. In his letter he had asked May to fix some place where he could see her, but he was fated to meet her earlier than he expected.

May and her brothers had walked home from church, May feeling somewhat disappointed that she had not had an opportunity of exchanging a word with John Temple, but still she was ready to excuse him.

“He could not help himself; he was obliged to go with his uncle’s wife,” she told herself. But still it made her a little sad. It marked the social difference between them, as it were. If she had been his equal, and John had meant to make her his wife, he would assuredly have lingered to speak to her. As it was he could not help himself, but May sighed when she thought of it.

Then, when they reached home, Mrs. Churchill made herself purposely very unpleasant to her stepdaughter.

“That’s a very absurd hat of yours, May,” she said. “I don’t know what the folks in church would say to it.”

It was in truth a charming hat, though only suited to a lovely face. It became May exceedingly, and she had been conscious of this when she had started in the morning with her brothers; conscious perhaps of it when she saw John Temple’s gray eyes looking upward to the gallery, for she loved to think that she should seem fair in his sight, and now to hear it descried!

“I think it is a very pretty hat,” she answered, somewhat indignantly.

“To go on the stage with, perhaps, but not for a respectable farmer’s daughter to appear at church in,” continued Mrs. Churchill.

May slightly tossed her pretty head, and walked indignantly out of the room. She had no idea of leaving off wearing her new hat, which had just cost her two pounds, on account of her stepmother’s remarks. And immediately the early dinner was over she called to her two young brothers to go out for a walk with her, and wore the picture hat in spite of Mrs. Churchill.

During their afternoon ramble they went along the country lane where May Churchill had first met John Temple in the summer time, when she was gathering wild roses to make a wreath to place on poor young Phil Temple’s grave. It was autumn now, and the cobwebs on the grass and the chill in the breeze told of the shortening days. The wild roses were gone, and the meadow-sweet scented the air no longer, but there was a serene and sober beauty in the changing leaves, in the creeping brambles growing amid the hedge-rows. And quite suddenly the three young people encountered John Temple in this very lane. John had been thinking, also, of that first meeting when he had sat on the stile, and thought, smilingly, that this rural scene only wanted “a pretty milkmaid” to complete the picture. He remembered May as he had seen her thus, so fresh, so fair, in her white frock and her dainty basket of roses. And now with glad surprise he once more encountered her.

They smiled and clasped each other’s hands, but said very few words, and then John looked at the two boys.

“So these two young gentlemen are your brothers, I suppose?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered May, while Willie and Hal grinned responsively.

“I am so glad to have met you,” continued John, looking extremely happy to have done so, “as I was just going to post—” and then he paused and looked again at the boys.

Upon this Hal, who was the youngest, though the sharpest of the two, administered a sharp kick at his brother’s ankle.

“I say, Will,” he said, “I saw some awful jolly blackberries at the other side of the hedge; let’s go in for some?”

Will took the hint, and the two boys ran together to the stile, so as to get to the other side of the hedge, and John Temple and May were alone.

“I was on my way to post a letter to you, May,” John said; “now I will give it to you—here it is.”

He drew out his letter, and put it into May’s hand as he spoke, but he still held her hand fast.

“It is to ask you to meet me, May,” he said. “To meet me, and tell me what your answer to my last letter is to be.”

May’s face flushed, and her breath came sharp; she remembered John’s last letter only too well.

“We can not talk of it to-day,” continued John; “we must be alone. In my letter to you to-day I asked you to fix some time and name place, on Tuesday, as I thought you would only get my letter to-morrow morning. But now as you, have got it to-day, can we meet to-morrow?”

“Yes,” half-whispered May; John was still holding her hand, still looking in her face, and May’s heart was beating very fast.

“I have heard something about you to-day, May,” presently said John; “something that made me very angry—only I did not believe it.”

“And what have you heard?” asked May, raising her beautiful eyes to his.

“That you are flirting—yes, that was the horrid word—flirting with that brute, young Henderson.”

May’s fair face flushed angrily.

“What a dreadful untruth!” she cried, indignantly; “I have been so miserable about this; that woman my father has married has taken it into her head that I should marry this dreadful man, and she asks him to the house, and the other day sent him into the garden after me, and he asked me to marry him, and I told him I never should.”

“I should think not,” said John Temple, quietly.

“I detest him, and can not bear to be in the room with him,” went on May; “and Mrs. Churchill has been so rude to me about it, and makes my home and my life quite miserable. My father seems to believe everything she says, and when I got angry and said she was no mother of mine, he took her part, and said if I did not choose to treat her with proper respect, that I should not remain in his house.”

John smiled.

“And what did you say?” he asked.

“I said, ‘Very well, father; I will go.’”

“Brave little girl! And do you mean to say that your father—actually your father!—could contemplate giving you to that brute Henderson?”

“Oh, his wife can persuade him to do anything, and she has persuaded him that Mr. Henderson would be a very good match for me. It’s too disgusting,” continued May, her fair face flushing and her eyes sparkling, “and I told them both that my own mother would never have allowed such a person to come near me.”

“He shall never come near you, my dear child.”

“And he threatened—oh, don’t go near him or speak to him, Mr. Temple.”

“Did he threaten me?” asked John, disdainfully.

“He said some folly or other—he is horrid. He looks like a murderer, if he isn’t one.”

“I have a very great idea that he is one.”

“At all events he behaved shamefully to that poor girl, and yet my father’s wife praises him, and makes up to him in every way.”

“Let us forget that charming lady for awhile. What time can you meet me to-morrow, May, and where?”

“I heard my father’s wife say she was going somewhere to-morrow afternoon with my father, so I can come any time.”

“Come here at three o’clock, then, my dear little girl.”

John Temple spoke very tenderly, and felt very tenderly to the fair young girl by his side. He took both her hands in his; he smilingly admired the offending hat.

“So this is the new picture hat, is it?” he said. “By Mrs. Layton’s account, May, you are going straight on the road to perdition for wearing it.”

“And my father’s wife found fault with it, too,” answered May, smiling. “What do you think of it?”

“I think it charming; only the face beneath it is so much more charming that I can not admire it long.”

“How you are flattering me!”

At this moment Hal Churchill's rosy face appeared above from the other side of the hedge, and though it did not remain long, his observations induced him to remark to his brother Willie:

"I say, Willie, I believe those two are spoons."

"What makes you say that?" asked Will.

"He's holding her hands, and going on, anyhow. Blessed good thing it would be if they are, as then May would marry the young squire, and we would get no end of tips, and get out of the way sometimes for a bit of that awful woman at home."

"She's disgusting," answered Will, emphatically.

"Beastly," said the younger brother, equally emphatically; and then the two boys re-crossed the stile, and May and John Temple seeing this, advanced to meet them.

"Have you got lots of blackberries?" asked John.

"Barely ripe," replied Hal, amiably, to his proposed brother-in-law. "Have a few?"

He opened his stained cotton pocket handkerchief as he spoke, and offered the luxuries it contained to John, who, however, shook his head.

"I am too old to eat blackberries," he said, with a smile; "I wish I were not."

"Not do you any harm," hospitably pressed Hal; "here's a good 'un."

Again John shook his head, with a little laugh.

"When I was a boy," he said, "I adored blackberries and tips," and he put his hand into his pocket and drew out two golden coins.

Hal grinned from ear to ear.

"Buy what you like with it," continued John, pressing a sovereign into Hal's somewhat dirty little hand.

"Oh, thank you, sir," answered Hal, delightedly, but when John presented the other sovereign to Will Churchill, the elder boy drew back.

"No, thank you, sir," he said, and colored deeply.

"Not take a tip!" laughed John. "Oh, nonsense; come, take it, my lad."

Will hesitated and looked at May.

"Tell him to take it," said John, also looking at May.

"As Mr. Temple is so kind, Will, I think you ought to accept his present," answered May, with a little laugh, and then Will, as though half-unwillingly, took the golden coin.

"I will walk to the end of the lane with you, and then say good-by," said John, next moment, and so the boys fell behind, and John had time to half-whisper to May as they walked on:

"Do not forget; to-morrow, here, at three o'clock."

After this they parted, and the three young Churchills returned together to Woodside Farm.

"That's rather a nice chap," remarked Hal, patronizingly.

"Yes," answered May, with embarrassment; "but, boys, don't mention at home that we met him."

Hal winked his blue eye.

"Mum's the word," he said. "I'll tell you what, May, he's a deal better fellow, I am sure, than that surly brute, Henderson."

May gave no opinion as to the comparative merits of her two admirers. She walked home feeling intensely happy. All her troubles seemed to have melted into air. John Temple loved her; she was to see him to-morrow, and for the present she needed no more than this.

Both at tea and supper Mrs. Churchill noticed the lovely bloom on her stepdaughter's smooth cheeks, and the glad, bright look in her eyes. She was an observant woman, this, and took an opportunity of inquiring of Hal Churchill during the evening if they had met anyone they knew when they were out walking.

"Not a soul," answered Master Hal; "we met two pigs, that was all the company."

"How absurd you are, boy," said Mrs. Churchill, crossly. She had not been used to children, and their ways worried her. But Hal, with his sovereign in his pocket, and May, with her love in her heart, were both too happy to care about Mrs. Churchill. They were each thinking of their treasures, and all their stepmother's shafts fell harmless.

May was up betimes the next morning; up to watch the rosy clouds in the west heralding in the day, and the sun rise over the green meadows and the yellow fields of ripening corn. It was a beautiful morning, but would it keep fine, May asked herself anxiously again and again, as she stood there gazing out on the misty blue sky. If it rained it might prevent her stepmother starting on her expedition; it might prevent her own meeting with John Temple.

But up rose the sun in cloudless splendor, and presently its rays fell on May's bright head; on her sweet, up-turned face, and bare white throat. They fell on no fairer picture in all that bright autumn day! It was something beyond mere earthly beauty that radiated the girl's face as she

stood watching the rising sun. All that was best and noblest within her was stirred, as it were, with a deep wave of strong and unchanging love.

How the rest of that morning passed she scarcely knew. Mrs. Churchill fussed and scolded, but it all fell on deaf ears. May was living in a world of her own, and Mrs. Churchill's sharp voice could not reach it. Then came the early dinner, and after this was over her father and her stepmother drove away. They were going to Castle Hill, Mrs. Churchill's own place, and as it was some distance from Woodside, May knew it must be nightfall before their return.

She breathed a soft sigh of relief as she saw them disappear. Then she went up to her own room and moved about restlessly until it was time for her to go to keep her tryst with John Temple. She saw the two lads leave the house also from her window, and so she felt absolutely free.

At half-past two o'clock she started. She walked quickly—perhaps unconsciously—yet when she reached the place of meeting John was already there. He was not sitting on the stile this time, as he had done when they first had met in this country lane. He was walking to and fro, with a bent head and a somewhat anxious brow; but his face brightened when he saw May. He advanced quickly to meet her; he took both her hands.

"I was half afraid you might not be able to come," he said.

"My father and his wife have gone out for the day," answered May, "and the boys also are out. I have a whole afternoon to myself."

"For me?" asked John.

"Yes, all for you," smiled May.

"My sweetheart!" said John, and he bent down and kissed her. "Now, will you give me your answer—the answer I asked in my letter—is yours the love that can not change?"

She did not speak; she looked at him for a moment, and then nestled her sweet face against his breast.

"Tell me, my dear one," urged John; "will there be no change in your love?"

Again May looked up, and this time her rosy lips parted.

"Mine is a love that can not change, John," she murmured below her breath.

"Be it so, then," said John Temple, almost solemnly, and he looked up to the blue sky as he spoke, and made an inward vow. "Neither will my love change," he said aloud the next moment; "for weal or woe then, May, our future will be together."

They did not speak for a short while after this. John drew May closer to his breast, and she leaned there at rest and happy. A great content seemed to overflow her being. She was with John. John had just said they should never part.

Presently John broke the sweet silence that seemed like heaven to the girl's heart.

"It will not be all smooth sailing, you know, May," he said.

She looked up inquiringly.

"I mean," continued John Temple, with a sort of effort, "that our marriage, for a time at least, will have to be a secret one. There are several reasons for this; one is that my uncle would oppose it, and the other that Mrs. Temple has taken a very absurd prejudice against your family on account of the death of her boy."

"How is that?" asked May, quickly.

"It seems that one or both of your brothers played in the game of football when poor young Phil Temple was killed, and his mother foolishly—for she is a foolish woman—has taken it into her head that one of your brothers gave him the fatal blow on the head. She has had a dream, or some nonsense or other, and she assured me gravely last night that she heard her boy's voice say distinctly twice in one night, 'One of the Churchills killed me.' It's fancy, no doubt," continued John Temple, as he saw May's rosy bloom beginning to fade; "but you see it makes things for us more difficult."

"Yes, I see," said May, slowly.

"In fact, my dear one, there is nothing for it but a secret marriage," went on John, decidedly. "I have thought it all over—what would be best for us both—that is if you truly love me, May?"

"I do, I do!" answered May, with such emotion that her eyes grew misty with unshed tears.

"Then I will tell you my plans. They are that you should leave here at once; go up to town alone. Do not be frightened; a home will be ready for you with two very respectable old ladies, who keep a lodging-house, or rather did, in Bayswater. I lodged with them once when I was much younger, and I was such a favorite of theirs we have always kept up a kind of acquaintance. They have retired from the lodging-house business, but I will write and ask them to receive my young cousin, Miss Churchill, for a short time, and I know they will gladly do so. In a fortnight I will join you, and we will be married from their house, and all the good people here will be none the wiser. Will you consent to this?"

"I will do whatever you wish me," said May, trustfully, and she put her hand in his.

A slight change passed over John's face.

“You are not happy at home, May, are you?” he asked.

“I am most unhappy. Mrs. Churchill makes me miserable about that wretched Mr. Henderson.”

“It is all right then; when can you start for town—to-morrow?”

“To-morrow?” repeated May, startled.

“Yes, the sooner the better, for then the sooner I can join you. I will write to the Miss Websters at once, and give you their address—and May, I have brought fifty pounds with me for you.”

“Oh! I can not take that,” answered May, with a sudden blush.

“My dear one, you must! You are my little cousin, you know, until you are my wife, and my little cousin must pay her way. Here it is, May, and do not be foolish. Now what train will you start by to-morrow? I can not, I am afraid, see you off on account of the confounded gossip it would cause.”

“Oh, no, you must not do that. I will go in what train I can get quickly away by—and you will join me, John?” she added, wistfully.

“I swear it,” said John Temple, earnestly, “and I will write to you. But be cautious, dear May, for both our sakes. This is the Websters’ address. Drive straight from the station to their house.”

“Yes—and John, oh, John!—you do not repent liking me—you do care for me?”

“I care for you with all my heart and soul, May! I love you as deeply as a man can love a woman; do not, at least, doubt my love.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her again and again, and with tenderest words of affection at length they parted; May returning at once to Woodside to make her preparations for leaving it, and John Temple going back to the Hall.

On her road home May determined what to do. She would take her young brother Hal partly into her confidence, and tell him she was about to run away from home on account of her stepmother’s treatment. But when she arrived at the farm she found that a letter from her father awaited her, which had been sent by hand. This letter informed her that on account of the length of the drive to and from Castle Hill, that he and his wife had determined to remain there all night, but would return on the following afternoon or evening.

This made everything much easier for May. She said nothing to Hal that night, but packed up her small belongings ready for an early start in the morning. Then when the boys had gone to bed she went to her own room, and stood there looking wistfully around. She had slept here in her childhood; she had slept here in her blooming young maidenhood, and she knew that after the night was past she would sleep here no more. She was going to take a leap in the dark; a leap into the unknown, but there was no fear in her heart, for “perfect love casteth out fear.”

She knelt down before she went to bed, and prayed for John Temple; prayed that there should be no change in their love in all their future lives.

CHAPTER XVII.
DISAPPEARED.

Mr. and Mrs. Churchill returned to Woodside late on the following evening, and were both somewhat surprised not to find May up to receive them. The two boys, however, were.

“May has gone to bed with a bad headache,” said Hal, with a grin, for the information of his stepmother.

“I think she should have sat up; it is only proper respect to us,” retorted Mrs. Churchill.

“Not if she is ill, my dear,” said Mr. Churchill, who somehow missed seeing his pretty daughter.

Mrs. Churchill said nothing more on the subject. She ate her supper and arranged “the things” that she had brought from Castle Hill to her own satisfaction, and then retired for the night, well satisfied with herself and what she had done during the day.

And the next morning she rose early, as was her usual practice, and began her healthful daily life with her accustomed energy. At half-past eight o’clock she and her husband and the two boys were seated at the well-spread breakfast table, but still May had not appeared.

“Ring the breakfast bell again, Hal,” directed Mrs. Churchill presently. “I can not have May lying in bed all day.”

The breakfast bell was rung for the second time, but it failed to bring May down-stairs. Therefore, after she had finished her own excellent breakfast with excellent appetite, Mrs. Churchill said she would go upstairs to see after her stepdaughter.

“I’ll not take her up any tea, as she may be only idling,” she remarked, as she rose from the table; “but I’ll see what is really the matter with her.”

She accordingly went upstairs and rapped at May’s bedroom door. There was no reply, so Mrs. Churchill opened it and went in.

One glance at the bed showed her that it had not been slept in; another glance around the room

told her it was empty.

Mrs. Churchill felt half-frightened. Again she looked around, and this time her eyes fell on a letter lying on the toilet-table. She approached the toilet-table and took up the letter. It was directed to her husband, and it was sealed, and Mrs. Churchill knew at once that something very serious had happened.

She hurried out of the room carrying the letter with her. As she descended the staircase she saw her husband in the hall, about to open the front door, for the purpose of leaving the house.

"William!" she called, and waved the letter, and when Mr. Churchill noticed the expression of her face he at once turned back to meet her.

"Come in here," she said, opening the dining-room door, and putting her hand on her husband's arm as she spoke. The dining-room was empty and Mrs. Churchill closed the door behind them.

"William," she said, when they were alone, "May is not in her room; the bed has never been slept in, and she has left this letter lying on the toilet-table for you."

"Good heavens! What can be the matter?" exclaimed Mr. Churchill; and he proceeded to tear open the letter, and read it eagerly, while his wife peered over his shoulder trying to do so too.

And this was what he read:

"My Dear Father: You told me once that you did not wish me to remain in your house if I could not treat your wife with the respect which you considered was her due. I find I can not do this; nor can I endure any longer the, to me, odious visits of Mr. Henderson. I am, therefore, going away, and you need not be afraid for my future life. I should not have left you if I did not know that you had someone to look after you and care for you, but this I am sure you have. Be kind to the two dear boys, and believe me to remain still, your affectionate daughter.

May."

Mr. Churchill's clear bronzed complexion flushed darkly as he read this letter and comprehended its meaning.

"What do you think of that?" he asked, handing it to his wife.

Then Mrs. Churchill read the letter fully, and her clear skin also flushed as she did so.

"She has run away with someone," she said, as she finished the letter. "She tried to put the blame on me, but that is an excuse—she has gone with some lover."

"She has no lover that I know of but young Henderson," replied Mr. Churchill, somewhat hoarsely. He was terribly upset by May's letter, remembering the words which he himself had used to his young daughter, and to which she had referred.

"She was sure to have lovers," continued Mrs. Churchill. "You may not know of them. Who can tell? It may be someone beneath her."

"You don't know May when you say that!" said Mr. Churchill, angrily. "May is a thorough little lady whatever she is. She would not look at anyone beneath her."

"Yet such things have been."

"May would do nothing of the sort; I know that," positively asserted her father. "And how do we know that she has gone away with anyone? Most likely gone on some wild-goose chase because she could not get on with you."

"Oh! try to blame me. That's just like a man."

"I am not blaming you; but I won't have anything of that kind said of my girl. May held herself too high for that."

Mrs. Churchill did not speak. She drew in her firm lips. She bore a fresh grudge against May.

"Where are the boys? The boys may know something about this?" now said Mr. Churchill.

The boys were accordingly called into the dining-room. Will went innocently, but Hal with a guilty conscience, which, however, he was prepared to disguise.

"When did you last see your sister yesterday?" asked Mr. Churchill, sternly.

"We had tea with her at five o'clock," answered Will; "and after that I did not see her."

"And you, Hal?"

"I saw her a bit later, and she was going out for a walk then," replied the boy; "and she said she had a headache and would go to bed directly she came in, and would not sit up for you—and that I was to tell you so."

"And you did not see her again?"

"No, I went out, and when I came back I supposed May had gone to bed as she said she would, for I saw nothing more of her."

"And she said nothing to you about going away?"

"Not a word," untruthfully affirmed Hal.

"Yet she is not in the house; she has written to say she has gone away," said Mr. Churchill.

"Gone away?" repeated Will, in great surprise. "Where has she gone?"

“She does not say where,” answered his father. “This must be seen to at once. Sarah, go and ask the servants if they know anything.”

Mrs. Churchill obeyed her husband, but the servants knew nothing. “Miss,” the housemaid said, had told her she had a headache, and would not sit up to supper. She had not seen her go out, and “miss” had requested her not to go into her room, as she hoped to go to sleep and did not wish to be disturbed.

This was all Mrs. Churchill learned in the kitchen, but when she again went up to May’s bedroom she found that a small leather trunk, that belonged to her, and nearly all her best clothes, had also disappeared. Her flight, therefore, had been clearly premeditated. Someone also must have assisted her, as it was almost impossible that she could have carried away her trunk herself.

Mrs. Churchill went down and told her husband all this, and he once more questioned the boys, but both denied they knew anything about it; Willie truthfully, Hal untruthfully.

“Take my word for it, she has run away with someone,” repeated Mrs. Churchill.

Mr. Churchill now began to think there must be some truth in this. It could not be young Henderson, as she disliked him so much; and then there was Mr. Goodall, the curate—but no, May always laughed at him—and then suddenly Mr. Churchill remembered John Temple, and seeing May and him in the garden together in the moonlight.

He gave a sort of exclamation as the idea struck him, but he said nothing. Mr. John Temple was his landlord’s nephew and heir, and it was a very serious thing to bring any such accusation against him unless he had good grounds for it.

“I will drive over to the station, and see if I can hear anything there,” he said, hastily, and he accordingly did this, and was received in a friendly manner by the station-master, with whom he was well acquainted.

“I want a word with you, Mr. Johnson,” said Mr. Churchill, in some agitation.

“Certainly, sir. Come in here,” replied the station-master, leading Mr. Churchill into his private office.

“Did you see anything of my daughter, yesterday?” now asked Mr. Churchill, in an anxious voice.

“Oh, yes, sir, of course; I put her into the quarter-to-six train myself, on her road to London. She told me she was going to pay a visit there.”

“To London?” repeated Mr. Churchill; and he turned so pale that the station-master grew alarmed.

“Nothing wrong, I hope, sir?” he said.

“No,” answered Mr. Churchill, with a sort of gasp. “The truth is, Johnson—don’t mention this—but I’m afraid my daughter and my new wife did not get on over-well, and I think the foolish girl must have run away from home. Was she alone when she came to the station?”

“Quite alone, sir,” answered the station-master. “In the afternoon a boy brought a trunk and said it had to wait for a young lady who was coming to catch a train. And I just happened to look at the address, and it was ‘Miss Churchill, London.’”

“And that was all?”

“That was all, sir—‘Miss Churchill, London.’ I wondered at the time there was nothing more, but there was not.”

“And the boy who brought the trunk; it was not one of my boys, was it?”

“Oh, dear, no, sir! I know both your boys quite well. This was a common sort of lad in a fustian jacket, and I don’t think I’d know him again.”

“And she came to the train? How did she look?”

“She came into the station quite cheerful, sir, and she took a second-class fare to London, and I put her into the carriage myself. I asked her if she was going for a long visit, as you see I’ve known her ever since she was a child, and she smiled in her pretty way. ’Yes, Mr. Johnson,’ said she, ‘a long visit;’ and those were her last words to me.”

Mr. Churchill groaned aloud.

“I fear she has run away,” he said, “and as well seek for a needle in a bundle of hay as find anyone in London if they went to hide. Thank you, Johnson. Don’t say anything, but I fear it’s a bad business.”

So Mr. Churchill left the station with a heavy heart, but on the way home he saw the gray walls and towers of Woodlea Hall standing amid the trees in the distance, and again the thought of John Temple recurred to his mind.

“I’ll make some excuse and go and see if he’s there, at any rate,” he decided, and accordingly he turned his horse’s head down the avenue that led to the Hall, and a few minutes later drew up at the back entrance.

“Can I see the squire?” he asked in some agitation.

It was yet early morning, and the squire was still at breakfast. But Mr. Churchill was known to

be a favorite tenant, and one of the servants took up a message that he was waiting until the squire could see him. A message came back, would Mr. Churchill go into the library, and Mr. Temple would join him immediately.

This the squire did, and in his quiet, courteous manner held out his hand to Mr. Churchill, who took it nervously.

“I am in sad trouble, sir,” he began.

“I am extremely sorry to hear this, Mr. Churchill,” answered the squire, with real interest.

“It’s about my daughter, sir—”

“What, that pretty girl?” interrupted the squire.

“Yes, May—well, sir, the truth is that May and my new wife didn’t get on over-well together, and we—my wife and I—have been away from home for a couple of days, and when we went to seek May this morning we found she was not in the house. Then I went to the station—I have just been there—and Johnson, the station-master, he says May left last evening by the quarter-to-six train for London, and that’s every word we know about her.”

“And she left no letter? Told no one she was going?”

“Yes, she left a letter for me, to say she was going, and that was all; not a word where she was going to.”

“This is very distressing. Did she say nothing to her brothers?”

“Not a word—and squire, there is something I wanted to ask you—” and then Mr. Churchill hesitated.

“Pray ask me, Mr. Churchill, and if there is anything I can do for you, you may depend on me.”

“Well, sir, you see May and your nephew, Mr. John Temple, were a good bit together about that unfortunate girl’s death at Fern Dene, and I’ve been wondering if he could tell us anything? No offense, you know, squire, only sometimes girls tell their troubles or fancied troubles to other young people, and I thought perhaps she might have said something to Mr. John Temple—that is, if he is at the Hall.”

“He is certainly at the Hall,” replied the squire, gravely. “He returned last Saturday, and is now in the breakfast-room. Would you like to see him?”

“If I might make so bold.”

Mr. Temple rose and rang the bell, and when the footman answered it he said quietly:

“Ask Mr. John Temple kindly to come to the library for a few minutes.”

The footman bowed and disappeared, and a few moments of uncomfortable silence passed between the squire and his tenant. The squire was remembering his advice to John on the subject of May Churchill; her father seeing the two together in the moonlit garden.

Then John Temple appeared, calm, assured, and a little pale.

He shook hands with Mr. Churchill, and then looked at him inquiringly.

“John,” said the squire, as the farmer hesitated, “Mr. Churchill has called here about his daughter; it seems that the young lady disappeared from her home yesterday in the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Churchill, and as you were a good deal thrown with her about that unfortunate affair at Fern Dene, Mr. Churchill wishes to know if she ever gave you any hint regarding her intention of leaving her home?”

“Yes, Mr. John, that’s just it; just as the squire says,” put in Mr. Churchill, eagerly.

“Certainly not,” replied John Temple, calmly. “I was, as you say, a good deal thrown with Miss Churchill regarding that unfortunate affair, but she never mentioned anything whatever to me about leaving her home.”

“And she made no complaints?” asked Mr. Churchill.

“None. I think she once said she disliked that young Henderson very much; that was at the inquest.”

“And when did you last see her, Mr. John?”

“I have been away, but I saw her last Sunday at church.”

This was a bold speech, yet John Temple never faltered as he spoke it. He had made up his mind that these inquiries were sure to be made, and he risked the chance that no one had seen his interviews with May on Sunday or Monday.

At all events he convinced both his uncle and Mr. Churchill that he had nothing to do with May’s disappearance. The farmer thanked him and the squire, and then withdrew, and John and his uncle were left alone.

“It’s a strange business,” said the squire, “but I suppose it is the fault of the new wife. This pretty girl has perhaps gone to try her fortune in London, in preference to living at home in uncongenial company. But it’s a pity.”

“Someone told me, I forget who,” answered John, “that the new wife, as you call her, was bent on marrying this pretty girl to that brute young Henderson. In that case one can not wonder at her running away.”

“Well, I hope she’ll come to no trouble; she’s a very pretty girl.”

“Very,” replied John, laconically, and then he turned away; but his uncle noticed that during the rest of the day there was a cloud upon his brow.

Mr. Churchill, in the meanwhile, had returned home, and had told his news to his wife. May had gone to London alone, and the station-master had seen her off, and a strange boy had taken her trunk to the station.

“Then it has been all planned beforehand!” exclaimed Mrs. Churchill. “How deceitful!”

Mr. Churchill said nothing, and was certainly looking anything but happy.

“Will you put it into the hands of the police?” asked Mrs. Churchill.

“No,” answered the farmer, decidedly. “May would have some little money with her—a matter of twenty pounds or so, at least, and she can’t starve for a week or two with that. And when she wants money she can come home. Remember that, Sarah,” he added, emphatically, “whenever my girl wants to come back, she’s welcome here.”

CHAPTER XVIII.
AT PEMBRIDGE TERRACE.

While these inquiries about her flight were going on, May Churchill was safely sheltered in the home John Temple had provided for her in town. This she found to be an extremely comfortable one, and the two ladies of the establishment the most amiable of women.

May had arrived at King’s Cross terminus nervous, yet determined. She had left a home where she was no longer happy, and she was going to be married to the man she loved. What matter was it, she told herself, that for the present this marriage had to be a secret one? She had a perfect trust in John Temple, and she knew he would never deceive her.

She easily got her small belongings collected, and then directed the cab driver to convey her to the address in Bayswater that John Temple had given her. She found herself there before she expected, and after the cabman had rung the doorbell it was quickly opened, and no less than four people appeared to welcome her. A servant first; behind, two middle-aged ladies; and behind the middle-aged ladies, a tall young man.

This young man, however, hurried to the front, opened the cab door, and said, in a pleasant voice:

“Miss Churchill, I presume? My aunts are expecting you.”

“Yes,” gasped May, nervously. “Is this Miss Webster’s house?”

“Yes, my dear, it is!” screamed one of the middle-aged ladies from the top of the door-steps. “This is our house, mine and sister Eliza’s, and we expect you are Mr. Temple’s cousin.”

“Yes,” faltered May.

By this time the young man had handed May out, and she was standing on the flags, purse in hand, ready to pay the cabman.

“Never mind the cabman!” again screamed the lady from the door-steps. “Nephew Ralph will pay him, and get in your luggage. Come in, my dear, and welcome; any friend of Mr. Temple’s is most welcome here.”

May accordingly ascended the door-steps, and her hand was shaken most warmly, first by Miss Webster, and then by Miss Eliza. They were thin, elderly women, with pleasant faces, and were evidently pleased to see their young guest.

“You must be tired with your long journey, and hungry, too,” continued Miss Webster. “We have a little bit of hot supper ready for you. Jane,” this was to the servant, “tell cook to dish up the partridges, and mind she has the plates hot. Come in, my dear—this is the dining-room—or would you rather go upstairs and take off your hat first?”

May accepted the last offer, and was accordingly ushered into a most comfortable bedroom, where everything was ready for her occupation. After pointing out the hot water, and telling her to be sure to ring for what she wanted, Miss Webster then withdrew. Upon this May bathed her face, and let down her long hair, and in a few minutes appeared down-stairs, looking so fresh and bright no one would have supposed that she had just had a long journey.

The tall young man was standing on the hearth-rug as she entered the dining-room, for a cheerful fire was burning in the grate, and he bowed when May appeared, and offered her a chair.

“This is our nephew, Mr. Ralph Webster,” said Miss Eliza, for Miss Webster happened to be out of the room, looking after the supper. “Miss Churchill, Mr. Webster.”

Miss Eliza having accomplished this introduction to her satisfaction, sighed softly, and looked first at May’s blooming face and then at her nephew’s.

“What a handsome couple!” she was thinking, and again she sighed. By some mischance, Miss Eliza’s proper destiny had never been fulfilled. She ought to have been one of the couple, and her

whole nature pointed in that direction. She was sentimental, tender-hearted, and affectionate, and yet in her middle-age she was still unwedded. But she had no jealousy of younger women. On the contrary, the suppressed maternal instincts in her heart seemed to bloom forth when she beheld a fair young face. She also regarded her tall nephew with something like the affection of a mother.

But though he might be so in her eyes, Mr. Ralph Webster could not justly be called “handsome.” He had, however, an intelligent, clever face, with marked features and dark gray penetrating eyes. His manner was self-reliant and quick. Altogether a keen-looking man, with a face well-suited to his profession, for he was a barrister; a hard-working barrister, who had already accomplished a fair amount of success.

“And you have had a long journey?” he said, leaning on the back of a chair and addressing May Churchill.

“Yes, rather,” answered May, moving uneasily, for she did not know what John Temple had said to the Websters about her home, and Ralph Webster noticed this slight uneasiness.

“The country must be looking beautiful just now,” he continued, with his keen eyes fixed on her changing face; “this is the season of holidays, and I am longing for mine.”

“I like the autumn, too,” said May.

“Well, I think I like the spring best,” mildly remarked Miss Eliza; “in the autumn one feels that the winter is so near; you should like the spring best, too, my dear,” she added, looking at May; “you, who are in your spring-time.”

“Dear sentimental Aunt Eliza!” laughed Mr. Webster. “I am sure you are thinking of the lambkins skipping about the green fields, while I am thinking—”

“Of what, my dear?”

“I dare hardly say—lamb in another form, I am afraid.”

“Oh! Ralph,” gently rebuked Miss Eliza.

But here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the supper and Miss Webster. Miss Webster was the managing lady of the house, and though only two years older than Miss Eliza, regarded her as greatly her junior. She was more energetic and practical than the younger sister, but their affection for each other was very strong.

“I hope you are hungry, my dear,” said Miss Webster, now addressing May. “Ralph, will you set a chair for Miss Churchill, and carve the partridges?”

Ralph did both. He carved well, for he nearly did everything well that he tried, and he had the good sense if he did not do a thing well soon to leave off trying.

“One should never go on failing,” he used to say, “or you get into the way of it. If one thing doesn’t succeed, another may; there should be successful careers for us all—even for crossing-sweepers.”

He, in fact, had made up his mind to succeed in life, and he knew the way was to work hard. He spent his evenings as a rule in reading dry books, instead of amusing himself like many of his compeers. He was equipping himself for the legal battles he meant to fight, and was determined to have his armor ready when it came his turn to put it on. And he knew his turn would come. A man like this has sometimes to wait for his chance, but as a rule he does not wait long. Sagacious eyes mark the rising juniors, and are glad to push them on. Ralph Webster was already by no means an unknown man in legal circles.

“He will rise, and rise high,” a good judge of human nature had predicted of him, and certainly he was doing his best to fulfill this prophecy.

His good aunts were not a little proud of him, and he was in a way fond of these two simple, kindly women. They were the only relatives he had in town, and he sometimes used to stay with them, though as a rule he lived in the Temple. He was staying with them now, and to his great amusement had been told of the expected arrival of Mr. John Temple’s “country cousin” before May Churchill came. Now, when she had arrived, he sat looking at her with admiration and curiosity.

“She’s the prettiest girl I ever saw,” he said to his aunts, after he had lit his pipe, and May had retired for the night.

“It’s a sweet face certainly,” sighed Miss Eliza.

“It’s more than a sweet face,” answered Ralph Webster, in his energetic way; “it’s a beautiful face. What did Temple say about her to you, Aunt Margaret, when he wrote?”

“He said she was his cousin, his young cousin, and would we take her in, and be kind to her for a fortnight or so, when he would come up to town to join her.”

“Lucky dog!” laughed Ralph Webster.

“And,” continued Miss Webster, with a sudden blush spreading over her faded complexion, “he inclosed a check, a ridiculously large check, for her expenses, and asked us to take her out a little to see the sights, as she has never been in London before. It’s a bad time of the year certainly for sights; but still perhaps you will help us a little, Ralph, to amuse her till you go on your holiday?”

“For a young woman who has never been in town there are always plenty of ‘sights,’ as you call

them, to be seen in London. Yes, Aunt Margaret, I shall be glad to escort you and Aunt Eliza and the country cousin anywhere you like during the next few days."

"How good of you, Ralph!" exclaimed Aunt Margaret.

"So good!" chimed Aunt Eliza.

"Good to myself, I should suggest," said Ralph Webster. And then after one or two vigorous puffs at his pipe he drew it out of his lips for a moment or two.

"By the by," he said, "how was it you got to know this Mr. Temple? I forget."

"Oh, my dear," answered Aunt Margaret, with another sudden blush spreading over her faded skin, which was also reflected on Aunt Eliza's gentle face, "it was at the time—well, when our dear father was taken from us, and of course the pecuniary advantages of his living expired with him. We were thus left very badly off, and had our dear mother to consider. Therefore, when Mrs. Mason, our dear mother's only sister, heard of our position she proposed that we should take a house in town, and bring the furniture up, and—well, try to take in lodgers or boarders. It was, of course, a great trial to my dear sister and myself, but we felt it was our duty, and we did it, and Mr. Temple, who was a much younger man then, stayed with us three years, and we have regarded him with sincere friendship ever since. He is quite a gentleman, in word and deed, and it was a pleasure to have him with us, though, considering poor Aunt Mason's ample means, and that she had no family of her own, I almost wonder she liked her nieces to receive strangers under their roof; particularly when she meant to leave us independent a few years afterward, which she did."

"So this was how you got to know Mr. Temple?" said Ralph Webster, after listening to Miss Margaret's long explanation. "He's a barrister, you say, but does not practice? I must look up his name."

"He never practiced; he was well off, but not rich, and then some months ago he came into a great windfall. A little boy, the heir of the head of the family, Mr. Temple of Woodlea Hall, was accidentally killed at football, and Mr. John Temple became the heir of the property, and when he called the last time he was in town he told us that some day, if he lived, he would be a very rich man; but his good fortune did not seem to elate him, did it, Eliza?"

"No, indeed," replied Aunt Eliza, "Mr. Temple is quite above anything of that kind."

"I wonder where he picked up the country cousin?" said Ralph Webster, thoughtfully.

"Most probably at his uncle's, the squire of Woodlea. Where do you think we could take her to-morrow, Ralph?"

"Wait until we see what to-morrow brings forth in the way of weather," answered Ralph Webster, and they settled it thus, and shortly afterward the two sisters retired to rest, and their nephew was left to his reflections.

The next morning was fine, and when Ralph Webster saw May Churchill by daylight he decided she was prettier than ever. She had rested well; she was fresh and fair, and she carried on an animated conversation with Ralph Webster during the whole of the breakfast time.

"I suppose you row, play tennis, and hunt, and have all sorts of country occupations?" asked Ralph.

"I play tennis, but I neither row nor hunt," answered May, smiling.

"What! you are not one of those manly young ladies who intend to annihilate us poor male creatures off the face of the earth, or at least our occupations and professions?"

"Not quite; but I think it a very good thing that women nowadays can find occupations and professions for themselves."

"It's not fair to men, it's really not," answered Webster, smiling also. "Just take my profession, for instance, which I fully expect will be invaded by the female element in no time. Now I ask you what chance has a judge to be just, to say nothing of the susceptible bosoms of the twelve good men in the jury box, when confronted with a lovely creature in silk pleading the cause of some ruffian? She'd talk them all over. She'd paint the blackest crimes white, and it would certainly come to this, that the handsomest female barristers would get all the briefs, because it would be only too well known that no man could resist them."

"But I thought," said May, who was very much amused, "that before barristers wear silk that they are not quite so young as they once were? Suppose, then, an elderly female barrister, with her brow wrinkled with thought, and her sallow cheeks lined with study, were to confront the jury, do you think that she would have any more effect than a man?"

Webster laughed.

"You draw an appalling picture," he said; "for my part I can only answer I don't think she would."

"Yet you see she would be earning her living; and what can poor women do?"

"They should marry, and men should work for them."

"But they can't all marry; hundreds of things may prevent them marrying. I often wish I had been brought up to a profession."

"Please turn your eyes away from mine; I do not wish to be cut out."

“My dear, you are sure to marry,” said Aunt Eliza, mildly.

“Nothing is sure, Miss Webster,” laughed May, but she blushed so charmingly at the same time that Ralph Webster felt a new strange sensation that he did not quite understand.

“The day is lovely,” he said, starting up from the breakfast table and going to the window. “Suppose we all go down the river?”

The expedition was soon settled after this. The river was all new to May, and its reedy, willowy shores, its shining waters, and placid flow seemed delightful to her as she sat side by side with Aunt Eliza, or dipped her little hands into the cool stream.

Ralph Webster was a good oarsman, and presently he insisted that May should try to learn to row, and began instructing her. The girl was an apt pupil, and her strong young frame was quite capable of the fatigue. She enjoyed it, and when Aunt Eliza produced her luncheon basket, and they rowed in to have lunch, May declared she had never been so hungry before. Altogether they had a very pleasant day, and returned to Pembridge Terrace for dinner, where Aunt Margaret awaited them with a substantial and well-cooked repast.

“The day is not done,” said Ralph Webster, when dinner was over; “let us go to one of the theaters.”

His aunts looked at him in mild surprise.

“My dear,” they said, almost together, with a slight variation of words, “Miss Churchill will be tired.”

But May declared she was not tired, and her blooming face betokened the truth of her words. So to one of the theaters they went, though Aunt Eliza was tired if May was not. And the next day they went somewhere else, and Ralph Webster suddenly ceased to talk about going on his holiday. But on the third day of May’s stay in Pembridge Terrace Miss Webster received a letter which caused her to look a little grave.

It was from John Temple, and inclosed a letter for May. And it struck Miss Webster’s simple mind at once to wonder why he should not write to his “young cousin,” as he called her, direct. And something—she knew not what—induced Miss Webster not to give this letter to May in the presence of Ralph Webster.

Perhaps she felt that his keen eyes would see more in it than there really was. At all events she put it into May’s hand when they were alone, and she noticed the quick blush and the glad look with which the girl received it.

May retired at once with her new letter to her own room, and when she got there she read as follows in John Temple’s handwriting:

“My Dear One—My Dear Little Sweetheart: I have been thinking of you so much to-day that I must write. But I think it safer to send it under cover to dear kind Miss Webster, as one never can tell what spies there are about, and your disappearance from home has naturally created a great sensation here. The morning after you left your father came to Woodlea, and asked to see my uncle, and then me. He questioned me pretty sharply, and asked when I had last seen you. I risked it, and said at church, and that you had said nothing to me about leaving your father’s house. Then Mrs. Temple attacked me on the subject, and finally yesterday I met that brute young Henderson, and I wish you had seen the desperate look he gave me as he passed me on the road. They say he drinks heavily, and is altogether going to the bad, and that he made a frightful scene when he heard you were gone. So you see altogether we can not be too careful. I dare not in fact leave here at present, or people—Henderson, and Mrs. Temple I am certain—would suspect I was going to join you.

“Therefore, my dear one, we must wait a little while yet before I can go to you. For the reasons I told you of our marriage must be a secret one for the present, though this is very hard both on you and me. But I hope you are happy with Miss Webster, and I need not tell you that the moment I can do so with safety that I will join you, and then we can be married at once. Brighter days are, I am sure, in store for us, my Mayflower, but in the meantime when you write will you give your letters to Miss Webster to inclose to me, as it would not do for your letters to come here. Always devotedly yours,

John Temple.”

CHAPTER XIX.
THE BIG LETTER.

A vague sense of disappointment stole into May Churchill’s heart as she read this letter of John Temple’s—a vague sense of disappointment and pain. He seemed so terribly afraid that people should talk about them, and then, her father—for the first time May felt remorse about her father—and began to realize that she might have caused him great anxiety.

And her own position, too, unless they were to be married soon, would be very trying. John had said that in a fortnight at latest he would join her, but now he did not seem at all certain of this. Altogether the letter disturbed her exceedingly, and she was sitting still and silent in her own room, when kind Miss Eliza rapped at the door and put in her head.

“My dear,” she said, “our nephew Ralph wishes to know if you would like to go to one of the picture galleries this morning?”

“I think not, Miss Eliza,” answered May in a constrained voice.

“Are you feeling tired?” now asked good Miss Eliza; “Ah, I was afraid you were doing too much.”

“I think I do feel a little tired, but it is nothing; only I should rather not go out this morning,” said May, gently. “But please thank Mr. Webster for his kindness in offering to take me.”

“I am sure it gives him pleasure; but I’ll go now and tell him you do not wish to go.”

After this Miss Eliza went away, and presently May heard the front door of the house shut sharply. It was Ralph Webster going out, with also a feeling of disappointment in his heart of which he was half-ashamed.

“What can have tired her, I wonder?” he was reflecting. “She seemed as bright as possible last night.”

May in the meanwhile was thinking of what she should do about answering John Temple’s letter. She had seen that gentle look of surprise in Miss Margaret’s mild eyes when she had placed John’s letter in her hand, and no doubt she would be yet more surprised when she asked her to inclose her own to him. Yet John had requested her to do this, and she must, of course, do as he wished.

So after awhile she sat down to write to him. She had never written to him before, and this first love letter was therefore a very serious affair. She began it three times.

“Dear John”—no, that was too cold. “My own dearest John”—no, that was too warm! “Dearest John;” yes, May thought that would do. Was he not her dearest John? Not only her dearest John, but the dearest to her of all on earth.

May thought this as she went on with her letter. She told him how good and kind Miss Webster and Miss Eliza were to her, and she told him also of all the places and amusements they had taken her to see.

“Their nephew, Mr. Ralph Webster, has gone with us generally, also,” she added; “but oh! how I wish you were here, John. It all seems like a beautiful new world to me, but I miss you always. Still you must run no risks for my sake. And John, dear John, do keep out of the way of that wretched Mr. Henderson. Somehow I am afraid of him, though I know he can do you no harm. But he is a passionate-tempered man, I am certain, and cruel, as we know after the way he behaved to that poor, poor girl who shot herself. I wonder if her spirit ever haunts him? Her memory must, I am certain, for no doubt he broke her heart.”

After she had once begun her letter May found it quite easy to go on. It seemed almost as if she were talking to John; telling him her thoughts as she had done in the still garden at Woodside, when no one was by to listen. Note-sheet after note-sheet she filled with this fond prattling, until she suddenly remembered with dismay that hers would be such a big letter for Miss Webster to inclose to John. Still she could not part with one word. She pressed her sheets together as tightly as she could, and then went somewhat nervously down-stairs with her letter in her hand to seek Miss Webster.

Miss Eliza had gone out to change her novel at the nearest library, for Miss Eliza was a great lover of fiction, and thus May found Miss Webster alone in the dining-room industriously engaged in marking some household linen. May felt that she colored painfully when Miss Webster raised her kind eyes as she entered the room and greeted May with a smile.

“Well, my dear,” she said, “Eliza says you feel rather tired this morning, and I am sorry for that. Is there anything you would like? A glass of port wine before lunch?”

“Oh! no, Miss Webster,” answered May with a smile and a pretty blush. “There is really nothing the matter with me—only I had a letter to write—to Mr. Temple.”

“To Mr. Temple?” repeated Miss Webster, looking at the fair face of her young guest.

“Yes, he asked me to write,” went on May, nervously; “and—and—Miss Webster, he—”

“Well, my dear, what is it?” asked Miss Webster, gently, as May paused and hesitated.

“He said if you would be so kind as to inclose my letters to him he would like that best,” said May, taking courage. “You see he is staying with his uncle, and I believe his uncle’s wife is rather an odd woman—so he thinks it best that she should not know that we write to each other at present.”

Miss Webster did not speak for a moment or two after May had made this somewhat confused explanation. But she was thinking very seriously. So this young girl’s visit to London was evidently a secret, she was reflecting—a secret from Mr. John Temple’s relations; probably from May Churchill’s own. The knowledge of this made Miss Webster somewhat nervous. She had the greatest belief and trust in Mr. John Temple—had they not known him for years?—and she was quite sure he would not do what was wrong to anyone. Still, May was a young girl—and once more Miss Webster’s gentle eyes rested on the young girl’s face.

“Please do this for me, Miss Webster,” pleaded May, in her pretty way, laying her little white hand on Miss Webster’s thin, bluish-tinted one.

“It must seem funny to you, I know, but it won’t some day—some day,” she added, a little

proudly, raising her head, “you will know that neither John nor I are doing any wrong.”

“I am sure you are not,” answered Miss Webster, taking the little fluttering hand in hers. “I have a great regard for Mr. John Temple, and so has sister Eliza. Yes, my dear, I will inclose your letter. You will find some large envelopes lying on the writing-table there.”

So the large envelope was duly directed to John Temple, Esq., in the rather old-fashioned, shaky handwriting of Miss Margaret Webster, and was carried to the nearest post office by May herself, and sped on its way, until the next morning it was lying on the breakfast table at Woodlea Hall, near the seat that John usually occupied while he was staying there.

The squire always opened the letter-bag, and passed on the letters to their different owners, but it chanced this morning that John Temple was not yet down when his big letter arrived, neither was Mrs. Temple. Presently, however, Mrs. Temple appeared, and looked first at her own letters, and then at John’s large one.

“What old woman, I wonder, is writing to John Temple?” she said, holding up the letter to attract her husband’s attention. “Perhaps it contains one from a young one.” And she laughed.

“You should not say such things as that, Rachel,” answered the squire, rather reprovingly.

“Why not?” went on Mrs. Temple.

At this moment John Temple opened the dining-room door, and walked up to his place at the table, while Mrs. Temple still had his letter in her hand.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Temple; good-morning, uncle,” said John, pleasantly.

“Good-morning, nephew John,” answered Mrs. Temple, with just a touch of defiance in her tone. “Do you see I am meddling with your property?” And she placed the letter in his hand. “I have just been admiring the handwriting of your lady correspondent, and the size and fullness of her epistle.”

John’s brown face colored slightly, and he put out his hand for his letter, but that was all.

“Ah,” he said, looking at it with affected carelessness, “this is from my landlady in town, and no doubt contains all my unpaid bills.”

“I thought you had no unpaid bills,” retorted Mrs. Temple, smiling. “Your uncle, on my suggesting that he should pay some of mine, held you up as a pattern in the matter of bills. ‘John owes nothing,’ he said; now it appears to me that if that envelope contains nothing but bills, that John must owe a great deal.”

“Rachel, do not talk nonsense,” interrupted the squire, moving his newspaper restlessly. “John, what will you take?”

John put his letter into his pocket before he made his choice.

“Let me hide my bills first,” he said. “Thanks, uncle,” he said, “I’ll have some cold grouse.”

Thus the subject of John’s letter was dropped for the present, but Mrs. Temple had not forgotten it. She waited until the squire went out of the room, and then went up to John, smilingly.

“Well, my nephew John,” she said, “I’ll leave you now to study your unpaid bills; or,” she added archly, “to read your love letters from an old woman, and one, maybe, from a young one, too!”

“I wish it were so,” replied John, as Mrs. Temple laughed and moved toward the door of the room; “but I am not so fortunate as you think.”

But the moment she had disappeared his expression changed, and he hastily drew out the envelope Miss Webster had directed, and found inside the letter from May. This also he quickly opened, and his face softened strangely as he read the tender words it contained.

“May, dear little May,” he murmured to himself, half-aloud, “and you miss me, darling, do you? but not more, not half so much, May, as I miss you.”

He read her long letter twice, and then put it into his pocket, and going into the hall, took a cap from the hat-stand, and strolled out into the park. The mist lay on the dewy grass and floated in the air, blurring the landscape somewhat, and hanging shadow-like around the trees. But John Temple scarcely noticed the atmosphere. He was trying to unravel some of the problems of his life; to make a crooked path straight for the sake of his young love.

“But for May I should not mind,” he was thinking, “but I must shield May; she must never know.”

Then he thought of her as he had first seen her by his young cousin’s grave; thought of the day when he had met her in the country lane gathering the hedge roses; and of those other meetings when they had drifted nearer and nearer to each other’s hearts.

“A good man would have fled from temptation, I suppose,” he replied, gloomily enough. “But I did not, and now—it is too late.”

CHAPTER XX.

A HARD BARGAIN.

It was quite true that young Henderson had made a terrible scene when he first heard that May Churchill had disappeared from her home. He heard it from his groom, Jack Reid, whom he now regarded with the most bitter hate and fear, though he was obliged to suppress these feelings.

Reid had, indeed, proved a hard task-master, and had insisted on his price to the uttermost farthing. Henderson had, no doubt with some difficulty, paid him one thousand pounds, and had tried in vain to avoid paying him the other thousand, at least for a time.

“This won’t do, you know, master,” he had said, insolently enough on Henderson making some excuse about the money; “that’s all very fine, but our bargain was for two thousand, and you must keep your part of it if I keep mine.”

“But I tell you, man, I can not raise the money without old Ormsby, the lawyer, being most inquisitive about it, and asking all sorts of questions,” answered Henderson.

“It’s your money, not his, isn’t it?” retorted Reid, coolly. “And it’s your debt, too, isn’t it? Maybe if the lawyer knew the truth he would think it wasn’t much to pay for your life?”

“You are always bringing that up,” said Henderson, gloomily.

He was looking very ill; people said he drank heavily, and certainly his naturally clear brown complexion had a different hue now to what it used to have. He was irritable, too, and excitable to a painful extent, and his unhappy mother lived in constant dread of some outbreak.

“The truth is, master,” went on Jack Reid, quite coolly, a few moments later, “I really want this money down, and I must ha’ it too, for I am thinking of starting a race-horse or two in a small way, and capital I must have.”

“You never would be so mad!” cried Henderson, in a sudden passion. “You would just throw away the money and get into all sorts of debts and troubles.”

“Many a man has begun on less,” continued Reid, contemplatively. “I know a good horse when I see one, and anyhow I mean to try—now Tom, my boy—”

“How dare you speak to me thus?” almost shouted Henderson, growing pale with rage.

“A good many folks would say how dare you to speak to me so?” replied Reid, significantly.

Henderson did not speak; he stood there quivering with passion, glaring at the man who was his master and made him feel it.

“Now, Tom, my boy,” repeated Reid, with a short and somewhat scornful laugh, “it’s no good for us two to quarrel. We both know too much, and we may as well make the best of the situation. And what I was about to propose is this: My two thousand pounds I will ha’; but what about you going into partnership with me and making the capital four thousand? We could do something with that, and then old Ormsby, the lawyer, would not be surprised any longer at yer wanting the money.”

Henderson swore a bitter oath, and cursed the man before him.

“Do your worst!” he cried. “I’d rather go to the bottomless pit as have anything more to do with you.”

“Ye’ll find yer’self there most likely, whether ye have anything to do wi’ me or not,” retorted Reid. “It’s no good swearing and cursing, my friend Tom; ye’ve got the rope round yer neck, remember, if I choose to pull it.”

Again Henderson swore a tremendous oath.

“Come, come, it’s all very fine using big words,” continued Reid, “but they’re not business, and I mean business. I think we could start very well on four thousand, and ye’d best think it over, for I’ve been looking about me, and I think I know a fellow who would let me his place cheap, as he’s a bit down in his luck at present.”

“And you’ve been talking about this to other people, have you?” asked Henderson, savagely. “What do you suppose they will think? Where did you get the money? they will ask.”

Reid winked one of his shrewd brown eyes.

“I’ve thought of all that, my boy,” he answered, “and I’ve been throwing out hints lately that a relation in Australia has died and left me money.”

“I wish you would go there,” said Henderson, eagerly catching at the idea of getting rid of his incubus. “Australia’s just the country for you, Reid. With your capital you are sure to do well there, whereas this racing stable business is an immense risk.”

“I mean to try it, for all that,” answered Reid, sturdily, “and I don’t mean to be got rid of so easily as to be pushed off to Australia or anywhere else. No, I mean to try my luck where I am, and you’d best think over the proposal I’ve made. However, partnership or no partnership, I must ha’ the second thousand by next week, so ye must raise it as best ye can.”

A savage, almost murderous, gleam shot from Henderson’s eyes as the man spoke, and Reid noticed this.

“That kind of thing won’t do for the like o’ me,” he said, significantly. “It’s all very well with a poor helpless lass, but it’s man to man wi’ us, and I’d back myself against ye.”

Again that terrible look passed over Henderson’s face, but with a great effort and an inward oath he suppressed the words that rose to his lips.

“This man and I shall not live together on the earth,” he silently swore, and from this hour he never forgot his vow.

But Reid, reckoning on his own personal strength perhaps, had no fear of his master. Nay, he seemed to take a sort of grim pleasure in irritating him, and after a few moments’ silence he began on the subject of May Churchill’s disappearance, of which he had just heard, the report not having yet reached Henderson’s ears.

“Well, ha’ ye heard the last news?” he asked.

“What news?” answered Henderson, sullenly.

“About that bonnie lass fra’ Woodside Farm—”

“What!” cried Henderson, springing up erect, for he had been leaning against one of the stable stalls during the rest of this interview. “What do you say?”

“It’s just hearsay wi’ me,” replied Reid, “but I’ve been told that Miss Churchill’s run away fra’ home, and no one can hear tell of her.”

“I don’t believe it; it’s a lie,” said Henderson, every particle of color dying out of his face. “It’s just some confounded bit of gossip like the rest—but at all events I’ll ride over and see. Saddle Bob for me, Reid.”

The groom proceeded leisurely to obey this order, while Henderson stood by impatient and excited. He kept repeating, “It’s a lie; nothing but a lie;” but Reid could see that every limb of his body was quivering, and that the report had agitated him almost beyond control. The moment the horse was ready Henderson sprang on his back and galloped out of the stable yard. Nor did he draw rein until he reached Woodside Farm. Then he hastily dismounted, and after giving his horse in charge of one of the grooms, he strode to the house door and violently rang the bell.

The maid who opened it said the master was out, but the mistress was in.

“Can I see Mrs. Churchill?” asked Henderson, hoarsely.

At this moment Mrs. Churchill herself appeared at the dining-room door. She had seen Henderson arrive from the window, and now went forward to receive him.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Henderson,” she said, with extended hand. “Come in here. I suppose you have heard what has happened?”

“About May?” gasped Henderson, who was pale and trembling in every limb.

“Yes, about May,” replied Mrs. Churchill, calmly. “May has behaved in the most extraordinary manner; she has run away from home.”

Henderson did not speak; he staggered against a chair; he grasped its back to support himself.

“Mr. Churchill and I,” continued Mrs. Churchill, still calmly, “had been away from home for a couple of days, to my place at Castle Hill, and when we returned the night before last, May had left a message with one of the boys that she had a headache, and had gone to bed. Well, yesterday morning she did not come down to breakfast, and I went upstairs to look after her. Her room was unoccupied, her bed had not been slept in; in fact, she had disappeared. Her father went at once to the station, and it appears from the station-master’s account she started for London in the afternoon of the evening of our return. The whole thing had been planned beforehand.”

“And,” faltered Henderson, for he could scarcely speak the words, the violence of his emotion was so great, “was she—alone?”

“Perfectly alone. She had engaged a strange boy to take her trunk to the station, and she had taken all her best things with her. And she left a letter for her father lying on the toilet-table of her room, in which she falsely endeavored to blame me for her conduct. She said she could not get on with me, so she had gone away. But I don’t believe a word of it; I believe I was only a blind.”

Henderson gave a sort of sigh of relief; after all, May had gone alone.

“How do you mean about a blind?” he asked, after a moment’s silence.

“Well, Mr. Henderson, I will trust you; I know you liked this foolish girl, and you know what I wished concerning yourself and her. Therefore, I expect this will go no farther. But my belief is, that though she certainly ran away with no one from here, that someone will join her, and this is why I trust you. Do you know of any lover—any admirer she had?”

A dark-red dusky flush rose to Henderson’s pale face.

“No—” he said, “unless—”

“Unless whom?”

Henderson began moving restlessly up and down the room with irregular footsteps.

“There is that fellow,” he said, at length, “that is to be Mr. Temple of Woodlea’s heir, they say—well, I’ve seen May with him more than once. I saw her with him just after the boy’s death, and another time,” and then he suddenly paused, remembering that it was in Fern Dene that he had twice seen May with John Temple.

“I know she knew him; she was thrown with him, you see, when that unfortunate girl committed suicide, but I scarcely think there could be anything between them, though certainly

on the very day of our return here after our marriage trip, we found him here."

"You found him here?"

"Yes, but Mr. Churchill seemed to think nothing of it, and I have never seen him here since; still, one never can tell."

"She changed to me from the day he came," went on Henderson, in a broken voice; "before that she was always pleasant and friendly, if nothing more. If I thought this fellow had induced May to leave her home I would be even with him, that is all."

"My dear Mr. Henderson, do not speak in that way. We have really nothing to go on regarding Mr. John Temple. As I have told you, I never saw him here except that once, when we came home, and I have no reason to believe she ever met him outside, and he certainly did not run away with her. She went alone for one thing, and for another Mr. John Temple is at present at the Hall; Mr. Churchill saw him when he went to tell the squire of May's disappearance on the morning when we found she was gone."

"And what did he say?"

"I don't think anything particular. Oh, yes, he said May had never said anything to him of her intention of leaving home. No, I think we may leave him out of the question; now what I want to ask you is, is there no one else, do you think, likely? Is there any young farmer about here, or even in a lower class?"

"May never would look at them."

"That's what her father said, but one never can tell."

"I don't believe it," answered Henderson, roughly. "No, if it's anyone, it's this Temple! He's a sly, quiet fellow, with a sneer on his face always, and if he's done any harm to May he had best look to himself. He came between her and me, I know; and he'll rue the day, I swear it on my soul, if he's done any wrong to the girl."

"My dear Mr. Henderson, this is folly," began Mrs. Churchill.

But with a suppressed oath Henderson broke away from her, leaving Mrs. Churchill not a little alarmed at the wild recklessness of his whole manner and bearing. And when she told her husband of his visit he was not over-well pleased.

"It will never do, you know, Sarah, for this young fellow to go raving about the country side, talking of May and Mr. John Temple. We must remember the squire is my landlord, and that Mr. Temple will be, and I'm told Henderson has been drinking heavily lately, and has never been the same since that poor girl's death. My opinion is we will hear of May some day soon, and that she's gone off in a huff and taken some situation or other, not with any young man or lover at all."

And Mrs. Churchill saw the prudence of her husband's advice, and talked no more of May's probable lovers. Henderson, on the contrary, rode home with every nerve in his body tingling, and his brain surging with rage. His life, in fact, had become utterly unendurable to him; his position with his groom, Reid, and now the loss of May Churchill seemed actually to madden him.

And the very day after he had seen Mrs. Churchill he met John Temple riding along the road. It was to this meeting that John had alluded in his letter to May, and there was something in the dark, lowering look of hate on Henderson's face, as he passed, that John was not likely quickly to forget.

CHAPTER XXI.
MISS WEBSTER'S HINT.

Though Miss Webster had acceded to May's request, and addressed her letter to John Temple, she did not entirely forget the incident. In fact, it remained on her mind, and she began to believe there was something much more serious between John and May than mere cousinship.

May's manner, too, had been very serious when she had said that some day she would know there was nothing wrong between herself and John. Miss Webster, in fact, began to believe that there was a secret engagement between them, and this belief disturbed her, because she was getting anxious about her nephew, Ralph Webster.

She did not know what made her think so, but still she did think that Ralph was becoming very much attached to their young guest. May was such a pretty girl, and he was constantly thrown with her, so after all it was only natural. Another thing, Ralph, who had been so eager about his vacation holiday before May's arrival, now seemed to have forgotten its existence.

Little things do not escape eyes sharpened by real affection, and one evening shortly after she had addressed May's letter to John Temple, Miss Webster found the "young people," as she called them, together at the piano in the drawing-room, May playing and Ralph Webster, with violin on shoulder, performing a very fair accompaniment to May's music. True, Aunt Eliza was also present, industriously knitting a violet silk sock for her nephew Ralph, but still Miss Webster felt uneasy. And presently when they paused they both laughed good-naturedly, and Ralph looked around and jokingly asked for applause.

“Aunt Margaret, Aunt Eliza, why don’t you clap your hands?” he said. “I have never touched the violin since I was a boy at school until I persuaded Miss Churchill just now to allow me to try to accompany her. And don’t you think it was lovely?”

“I think it was lovely,” laughed May Churchill.

“It seemed very nice, my dears,” answered Aunt Margaret, gravely.

“Very nice,” sighed Aunt Eliza, mildly.

“To call anything ‘very nice’ is an insult, I consider,” went on Ralph Webster, with a laugh. “It means you don’t admire my performance, but that at the same time you do not wish to hurt my feelings. Pretty girls are told they look ‘very nice’ by jealous sisters and rivals, and there is no warmth in such an opinion! Never mind, Miss Churchill, see if we can’t do better next time—what have you here?”

He stooped down and began to turn over May’s music as he spoke, asking for this piece or that. But May naturally had no great assortment, as she had brought no music with her, and all she possessed was what she had bought in town since her arrival.

She turned round on the music-stool, however, and bent down to assist Webster in his search, and as she did so for a moment, partly by accident, he laid his hand on hers. It was only a touch, but Aunt Margaret, watching them, saw a glow, a sudden light gleam in Ralph Webster’s eyes, and a flush rise to his somewhat sunken cheeks. Then, she looked at the girl’s fair face, but it was calm and placid as a summer’s day. She had scarcely noticed the touch that had thrilled through his strong frame. Aunt Margaret fidgeted in her seat; she was one of those quiet women who we forget have once been young; forget that they too have had their deep joys, their silent sorrows, their withered hopes. Yet with Margaret Webster this had been so, and there was a green grave in a distant country churchyard, where the one she had loved best lay still in his unbroken sleep. Only a common story, but it made Margaret Webster understand the glow on her nephew’s cheeks, and the unruffled pale pink bloom on May’s. The man loved and the girl was indifferent, and Miss Webster’s gentle heart shrank from the probable pain that Ralph Webster would endure.

The idea nerved her to take some action. She waited till May and Aunt Eliza also had retired for the night, and while her nephew went on with his pipe she suddenly broached the subject of his holiday.

“Are you not going away at all this year, Ralph?” she asked, “for you see September is drawing to a close.”

Ralph drew his pipe from his firm lips, and looked steadily at his aunt.

“Have you any motive for asking that, Aunt Margaret?” he said.

Miss Webster hesitated. Her faded cheeks flushed slightly; her thin hands moved uneasily.

“I think you have,” went on Ralph Webster.

“Well, Ralph, I have,” replied Miss Webster, with an effort. “You see Miss Churchill is still with us, and for the present likely to remain, and I am not quite easy in my mind about something. I know nothing, you know, my dear; but still something a little strange, I think, occurred the other day, and I think it better to tell you. You remember Mr. John Temple wrote to ask us to receive his young cousin for a short time? A fortnight, I think he said.”

Ralph Webster nodded his head; he was listening intently to his aunt’s words.

“We were only too happy to do this, both Eliza and myself,” continued Miss Webster. “We have both the greatest regard and friendship for Mr. John Temple; but the other day I got a letter from him inclosing one for May Churchill, which, of course, I at once gave her, and the same day May gave me a very large letter to inclose to Mr. John Temple. It seemed strange, did it not? As if there were some secret?”

Still Ralph did not speak. His dark, marked brows were knitted; he was evidently thinking deeply.

“And,” proceeded Miss Webster, “when I hesitated a little, just a little, about inclosing her letter to Mr. John Temple, May suddenly said, ‘I know all this must seem strange to you, Miss Webster, but some day you will understand it; some day you will know that neither John nor I are doing any wrong’—or words to that effect at least.”

“And you addressed the letter to Temple?” asked Ralph Webster, in a low, concentrated voice.

“Yes, my dear, I did. I addressed it to him at Woodlea Hall, and May went out and posted it herself—and—and, Ralph, I have considered it over, and I thought it best to tell you.”

Again Ralph Webster nodded his head.

“I understand,” he said, briefly.

“You see you have been a good deal thrown with her,” went on Miss Webster, apologetically, “and May is such a pretty girl—”

“You thought I might lose my heart to someone engaged to another man, eh, Aunt Margaret?” interrupted Ralph Webster, as his aunt paused, but though his lips smiled, there was a ring of pain in his voice. “Well, Aunt Margaret, perhaps I am safer away—thank you for the hint.”

“Good-night, my dear,” said Miss Webster, rising, and gently kissing his brow. But though she

listened and waited long to hear the sound of Ralph's footsteps also going to his room, she did not hear them. For it was morning, and Miss Webster was sleeping her placid sleep, when a pale, haggard-faced man stole quietly up the staircase, afraid to awaken the other inmates of the house.

Yet later in the day Ralph Webster went down to breakfast with no sign of any inward conflict on his resolute face. Perhaps he was a shade paler than usual, but that was all. His manner at least showed nothing. He talked in the same fashion to May as he had talked the night before, and to his aunts. But just when breakfast was over, he made a little announcement.

"Do you know, I am obliged to tear myself away to-day from your pleasant society," he said, without addressing anyone in particular; "Bedford, a friend of mine, is starting to-day for a fortnight's trip to Switzerland, and I proposed to go with him; I can not very well get off."

"It will be a pleasant change, my dear," said Aunt Margaret, in a faltering voice.

"Yes, very pleasant," echoed Miss Eliza, in a disappointed tone.

"How you will enjoy it!" said May Churchill, heartily, looking frankly in his face.

"I hope so," answered Ralph Webster. "Shall I bring you some edelweiss?"

"Oh, yes, do; bring us all some," replied May, brightly.

"The ice-flower," said Ralph Webster, slowly, with his deep, serious eyes fixed on her face. But the next moment he roused himself and held out his hand.

"Well, good-by, Miss Churchill; I suppose I shall find you here on my return?"

"I suppose so," said May, and a slight fluttering blush rose to her smooth cheeks.

Then Webster took leave of his two aunts, who followed him to the street door, and waited until the cab he whistled for arrived. But just before he left the room he looked back at May; there was a look on her face as if she were thinking of something, but Webster felt vaguely it was not of him.

"I am better away," he thought, as he seated himself in the cab and waved his hand to his aunts. But all the same he sighed deeply as he lost sight of Pembridge Terrace.

And the week after he was gone seemed very quiet without him to the three ladies there. His comings and goings had made a little stir each day, and he had brought in the news, and it certainly was not so lovely as before. Miss Eliza, however, found consolation in gazing into the shop windows down Westbourne Grove, and Miss Webster in her household duties. And just ten days after he left, news came to May which filled her whole being with excitement.

It was contained in a letter from John Temple; a letter duly forwarded under cover to Miss Webster, and placed in May's hand by that lady with a little tremulous sigh. But five minutes after she had received it May returned to the room with a face beaming with joy, and cheeks covered with blushes.

"Oh, Miss Webster!" she cried, and ran up impetuously and kissed that kind lady; "John is coming! He is coming to-morrow; there is only one more day to wait, and he will be here!"

CHAPTER XXII.
NEWS.

May was in a state of great excitement all the day after receiving John Temple's letter. She was so restless she could not stay in the house; but it was evidently a happy restlessness. She went out to shop, and bought all sorts of pretty knick-knacks, and sorely troubled Miss Eliza's mind by her extravagance.

"Never mind, it won't matter now," she said, sweetly, when Miss Eliza ventured to remonstrate, and there was such a glad look in her eyes as she spoke that her gentle companion had not the heart to say anything further.

The truth was that John Temple was not only coming, but in his letter he had told May that they would be married at once.

"I am weary of waiting, my Mayflower," he had written, "and am longing for the sight of your dear face and the touch of your dear hand."

Sweet, welcome words that thrilled through the girl's heart, making the world all sunshine! May had always trusted John, but she had felt that in her position waiting was very trying, though she had never for a moment blamed him for the delay. She judged his love by hers; his heart by her own. But now it was all over—the anxiety, the uncertainty. John would be with her to-morrow, and her life henceforth would be full of joy.

She counted the hours until they should meet, as many a fond, foolish woman has counted them before. She brought out her prettiest frocks; she smiled at her fair reflection in the glass.

"How will he think I am looking?" she thought, and she wondered, too, if she would see any change in him.

The two quiet sisters down-stairs looked at each other with sympathetic sighs. Miss Margaret

had never told Miss Eliza about her conversation with Ralph Webster but somehow Miss Eliza had vaguely understood that some such conversation had taken place. She, too, had been afraid for the son of their love; she, too, had watched Ralph's dark eyes follow the slender girlish form, whose heart was now beating so joyously at the prospect of meeting another man!

But they did not speak of it. Miss Webster had said quietly to Miss Eliza during the morning, "Mr. John Temple is coming to-morrow," and therefore Miss Eliza concluded that May's happy looks and excitement were somehow connected with this event.

She, indeed, made no secret of this, and when the day actually came she went out the very first thing in the morning, and returned laden with flowers, with which she proceeded to fill Miss Webster's blue china vases all over the house.

"My dear, you have quite a flower show," said Miss Webster, kindly, looking at the glowing blossoms.

"He is very fond of flowers," answered May, with a soft happy blush, going on with her task; and Miss Webster turned away thinking sadly enough of Ralph Webster at some Alpine village among the snow.

But May Churchill never thought of him. Her whole mind was taken up with one idea. "John is coming to-day; John is coming!"

The thought made her go singing about the house; it deepened the lovely rose-bloom on her cheeks, and made her eyes shine like stars.

"She is beautiful," whispered Aunt Eliza to Aunt Margaret, when the girl came down dressed for dinner in her white frock, with moss-rose buds at her breast and throat.

John Temple was expected a little before seven o'clock, and a little after seven o'clock he came. We may be sure May was waiting and watching for him, and when she heard a cab stop before the house door she ran into the hall to welcome him. And a moment or two later John came in, and the two clasped each other's hands in silence, and then John drew May into the dining-room, the door of which was standing open, and clasped her to his breast.

"My own love, my own dear love," he whispered, with his lips on hers.

But presently May drew back.

"Let me look at you," she said softly, raising her beautiful eyes and looking into his gray ones. She had pictured his face so often in her day-dreams; pictured it looking down at her as it was looking now, full of love, and with a little sigh of rest the next moment her white eyelids fell.

"You are not changed," she murmured below her breath.

"Did I not tell you I would never change?" answered John Temple. "My Mayflower, I will not change."

By this time Miss Margaret in the kitchen was getting exceedingly uneasy that her turbot would be over-boiled and her ducks over-roasted. She therefore put up her head from the kitchen stairs and called to Aunt Eliza, who speedily came to her.

"Eliza, if without disturbing them, you know, dear, do you think you could give them to understand that dinner is ready?" she whispered.

Aunt Eliza nodded her head.

"What shall I do?" she said. "Knock at the door, or cough?"

"To knock would be too marked, I think," answered Aunt Margaret. "I should just give a little cough, or a gentle sneeze outside."

It is all very well to be told to sneeze when you do not want to do so, but it is almost an impossibility. Miss Eliza, however, proceeded to the dining-room door and tried to do her best. She, in fact, emitted a most extraordinary sound which was intended to represent a sneeze. But at all events it had the intended effect. The lovers started apart as if they had been shot.

"What is that?" said May.

"Sounds as if someone was choking outside," answered John; "shall I see what it is?"

He accordingly opened the door, and there stood poor Aunt Eliza in the very act of preparing to attempt to sneeze again!

"Miss Eliza," said John, warmly grasping her hand, "and how are you?"

For a few moments Miss Eliza could make no answer. She gasped for breath; she struggled to regain her ordinary expression.

"And how is Miss Webster?" went on John, kindly. "I am very pleased indeed to see you both again, and thank you very much for taking such care of my dear little girl."

He looked back at May tenderly as he spoke, and May smiled and went forward. By this time Miss Eliza had partly recovered her speech.

"My dear," she said, addressing May in a slightly choking voice, "if—if Mr. John Temple—is ready—dinner is." And then a violent fit of coughing interrupted her utterance.

"John, you have forgotten to take off your overcoat!" said May, with a little laugh.

"So I have," answered John, going out into the hall to remove it; and when he went back into

the room he once more shook Miss Eliza's kind hand.

"She looks very well," he said, with a smile, and a glance at May.

"Sweetly pretty," answered Miss Eliza, with a little gentle sigh.

Then presently Miss Webster appeared, followed by her parlor maid, with the dinner. Everything was well cooked, to Miss Webster's great satisfaction, and John Temple did fair justice to her good things. May, however, could not eat. "I am too happy," she was thinking, as time after time she raised her eyes shyly to John's good-looking face.

Then, when dinner was over and the ladies were about to retire to the drawing-room, John laid a detaining hand on Miss Webster's arm.

"Can I have a few words alone with you?" he said.

"Oh! yes, certainly," answered Miss Webster, nervously.

By this time Aunt Eliza and May Churchill had left the room, for they also had heard John Temple's request, and Miss Webster having resumed her chair, John drew his close to her.

"It's about May Churchill, Miss Webster, that I want to speak to you," he began. "I do not know whether you have guessed the truth, but May and I are engaged, and are going to be married immediately."

"I thought there must be something—" answered Miss Webster, and then she paused.

"We are going to be married at once," continued John, speaking as though he had planned beforehand what to say, "but I am sorry to tell you our marriage for the present must be a secret one. My uncle, Mr. Temple of Woodlea, is an old-fashioned man, with many class prejudices, and May is not what he would consider, nay does consider, exactly in my position of life. Her father, in truth, is a tenant-farmer, one of my uncle's tenants, and he never would give his consent to our marriage. Her young brothers also, unfortunately, played in the game of football when poor young Phil Temple was killed, and Mrs. Temple, my uncle's wife, has an extraordinary prejudice on this account against the whole family. Thus you see it would never do for me, during my uncle's life, to marry May openly."

"Does she know this?" asked Miss Webster, quickly, her delicate complexion flushing as she spoke.

"Certainly she knows it; knows that only on these conditions we could be married—do you understand, dear Miss Webster? I admit I deceived you; I called May my cousin, and she is not my cousin, but I could not explain all this to you at the time, and my object was naturally to get a respectable home for May until I could marry her; and I knew she would have this with you, and so will you forgive me?"

"And her parents?" asked Miss Webster, moving her hands uneasily.

"Her mother is dead, and her father recently married again, and his new wife has made May's home life wretched since she has been at Woodside. She is a vulgar person, I believe, and, moreover, she has taken into her head that May ought to marry a brutal young man who lives in those parts, and who very narrowly escaped being tried for murder lately. He certainly behaved disgracefully to a poor girl he had treated most cruelly, and who either shot herself, or whom he shot. At all events, this Henderson is a person not fit to speak to May. Yet this Mrs. Churchill pestered her continually about him, and finally May determined to leave her home to escape her persecution."

"And—do they know about—you?"

"Not a word, nor must they know. May left a letter for her father to tell him she was leaving because she could not get on with her stepmother, and this is enough explanation for her to give. The rest is between ourselves. I mean to marry May at once, and take her abroad for a short time, and then, Miss Webster, I have a proposition to make to you, to which I most earnestly hope you will agree. I can not acknowledge my marriage to May for the present, and she is too young to live alone. So will you allow her to remain an inmate of your house? Of course, she shall have a handsome income, and I know she is fond of both you and Miss Eliza, and my mind would be at rest regarding her if I knew she was under your kindly care."

Miss Webster had given a sort of gasping sigh more than once during this long speech of John's. In fact, it nearly took her breath away. A secret marriage! The bride to be left with them! No wonder gentle Miss Webster's soft gray hair nearly rose on end at the idea. It was so completely against her ideas of propriety and against dear Eliza's also. Miss Webster, in fact, did not know what to say; she fidgeted in her chair; her thin fingers moved nervously; her whole appearance denoted her mental distress.

"I know all this must be a little startling to you," continued John Temple, "but just consider the circumstances, and how the poor girl was actually compelled to fly from home to escape a hateful marriage that was being forced on her! We—May and I—love each other very dearly, and she is content to accept this sacrifice for my sake, and she shall never regret it. My whole future life shall be devoted to her; and at all events, Miss Webster, even if you won't help us, I am sure our secret will be quite safe with you?"

"Your secret will be quite safe," replied Miss Webster, still rather stiffly. She was thinking she was a clergyman's daughter, and wondering what would be her duty under such extraordinary circumstances. And then suddenly the remembrance of Ralph Webster flashed across her mind,

and her faded cheeks colored.

“I—I think this arrangement would hardly be suitable, Mr. Temple,” she said, with hesitation and downcast eyes. “You see, our nephew, Mr. Ralph Webster, almost lives with us, and—and of course, though May—I beg your pardon, the future Mrs. John Temple—is a dear sweet girl, and both of us, my sister Eliza and myself, are, if you will excuse me saying so, very fond of her. Still, though Ralph has rooms in the Temple, he looks on this as his home; and, indeed, it ought to be, as he is our poor dear brother’s only child, but still, as he is a young man—”

John Temple laughed softly as Miss Webster concluded her confused protest against his proposal that May should live with them.

“I shall not be jealous,” he said; “your nephew, I presume, is only a very young man?”

“Oh, dear, no! Our poor dear brother was very much older than we are, you know. Ralph is past thirty.”

“Past thirty?” replied John Temple, thoughtfully. “Still,” he added, and he smiled as he spoke, “I should not be afraid of May.”

“It is not of May—” began Miss Webster, and then she paused, painfully confused.

“Well,” said John, rising, “talk it over with Miss Eliza. I will send her to you, and go and talk to May.”

“That will be best,” answered Miss Webster, relieved, and a few moments later Miss Eliza entered the room, and Miss Webster in an awe-struck whisper told her news.

“It would never do; you see it would never do,” she concluded.

“It would never do,” echoed Aunt Eliza, dolefully, shaking her head and sighing dismally.

“It would be unjust—to Ralph,” said Miss Webster.

“Terribly unjust,” repeated Aunt Eliza, heaving another sigh.

“Then we must agree to decline. I am sure she is a sweet girl, and if there was anything I could do for her I would do it, and you, too, Eliza, but we must consider—others.”

“Yes, dear,” and after this the sisters kissed each other, and then went together nervously toward the drawing-room. But when they entered the room nothing was said of their consultation. John Temple was sitting by May on a couch, looking perfectly content, and May was smiling and looking perfectly happy. John rose with a pleasant smile as the two trembling old ladies appeared.

“Ah, Miss Webster, and Miss Eliza,” he said, “come and help May here to decide a most knotty question. Where will you sit? Now, Miss Webster, let us have your opinion first. What should May wear to be married in?”

“White, I should think,” answered Miss Webster, somewhat feebly.

“There, John, I told you so!” cried May, triumphantly.

John made an awry face.

“You see, Miss Webster, to what I have to get accustomed,” he said.

“But John, you know you like me in white best,” continued May; “at least you always said so.”

“So I do, but as we are going on our travels straight from the church, I thought something dark would be more useful. However, of course, have your own way, and to-morrow these ladies perhaps will go out and help us to buy a very smart traveling cloak and whatever else you require. We are going direct to Paris, Miss Webster, as this young lady has never seen that lively city.”

John talked on thus until he rose to take his leave for the night, but even then he said nothing of his proposition to Miss Webster. But the next morning he did.

“Have you thought over what I said last night, Miss Webster?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Temple,” answered Miss Webster, falteringly, “and we think—sister Eliza and I think—that it would be better if—the future Mrs. John Temple did not live in this house—”

“That is settled then,” said John Temple, calmly; “but perhaps you will kindly help May to find a suitable house?”

“Only too delighted to do anything for such a sweet young creature,” replied kind Miss Webster; “I assure you, Mr. Temple; both sister Eliza and myself have the greatest regard for her.”

“Thanks, very much, and now we must see about the preparations for the marriage at once. She must be married in this parish, of course; so will you kindly tell me who your parson is, and give me an introduction to him?”

After this the preparations for the marriage went on as quickly as possible, both Miss Webster and Miss Eliza assisting in every way that they could. But we will let Miss Webster describe that event in a letter which she addressed to her nephew, Ralph Webster, a few hours after it was over. She wrote this letter with a sad heart somehow, but she little guessed of the bitter and intense pain with which it was received.

“My Dearest Ralph: I have some strange news for you,” one midday Ralph Webster read at the

Swiss chalet where he was staying. “Our young guest, May Churchill, was married this morning to Mr. John Temple, and both sister Eliza and myself were present at the ceremony. But what I most regret to have to tell you is that this marriage is a secret one, and neither Mr. Temple’s relatives nor her own have the slightest knowledge of it. We have indeed promised to reveal it to no one, but we make an exception in your case, as you are our near and dear relation, and also because we are quite certain we can trust this secret with you.

“The reasons for secrecy are, Mr. John Temple informed us, that his uncle, Mr. Temple, of whom he is the heir, would not hear of the marriage, and also that May’s parents, her father and stepmother, desired her greatly to marry another gentleman who lives in their neighborhood, and who, by Mr. John Temple’s account, is of bad character. May seemed very happy, and looked sweetly pretty during the marriage service, which was performed by our vicar, Mr. Mold, and we can only pray and hope that every blessing and happiness may attend the young couple who are beginning life together under what, to our poor human foresight, do not appear very fortunate circumstances.

“They started immediately after the ceremony was over for Paris, but before leaving Mr. John Temple made, what we considered, rather a strange proposal to sister Eliza and myself, which was, that on their return to England, that Mrs. John Temple should come back to reside with us in this house, while he proceeded to his uncle’s residence. But after due consideration, sister Eliza and myself came to the conclusion that this arrangement was not desirable. But we have agreed to endeavor to find her a suitable house during their sojourn abroad.

“And now having told you my news, and with kindest love from sister Eliza and myself, I remain, my dearest Ralph, your ever affectionate aunt,

”Margaret Webster.”

“P. S.—We were exceedingly glad to learn from your letter that you were in good health, and enjoying the invigorating air of the mountains.

M. W.”

Ralph Webster read this long letter through, and his strong face grew a little gray-tinted as he did so. He had never realized until now what a terrible blow this marriage was to him; never dreamed that the girl’s face that he had seen a hundred times in his mental vision amid the glaciers and the snowdrifts had become so dear to him.

Now he knew that it was so, but he bore his pain bravely and silently. He went out from the chalet alone, down a rugged stony slope, with the snow deep on either side, and the green ice glistening at his feet. He was thinking of the woman he loved—now when he knew he loved her, when he knew she was utterly lost to him—with strange, even pathetic tenderness.

“I have not thought much of women nor love before,” he was reflecting. “She has been the only one,” and he drew his firm lips closer, “and the only one she shall remain.”

CHAPTER XXIII.
ILL-WILL.

The ill-will between Tom Henderson and his groom Reid did not diminish as time went on. For one thing, to raise a sum like two thousand pounds was not an easy matter to the young squire of Stourton Grange; for another, Reid’s manner when alone with his master grew almost intolerable.

He was insolent and overbearing, and bought horses and sold them, often actually using the stables at Stourton for his own purposes. In vain Henderson stormed and swore.

“I’ve the whip hand of ye, ye know, master,” Reid would say in reply, with a significant look, and Henderson swore to himself many a time that this state of things should not go on.

And there was another element in his life—a dark, threatening dread—of which Henderson was only too conscious. This was the bitter animosity that the landlord of the Wayside Inn, James Wray, was said to nourish against him. Reid had warned him of this, for Henderson’s life was too valuable to himself not to be taken good care of, and with brutal frankness the groom had told Henderson of his danger.

“I say, master, ye had best look out,” he said. “I’m told, and the fellow who told me knew what he was about, that old Wray swears he’ll ha’ a shot at ye the first time ye cross his way. And they say he carries his pistols about wi’ him wherever he goes.”

Henderson made no reply to this piece of information. But it came to him also from another source, for one day he received an ill-written, badly-spelt letter from Alice, the barmaid of the Wayside Inn, warning him “for God’s sake not to go near their place, as master has sworn to have your blood if ever he sets his eyes on you, and this would make more trouble than has already been.”

The letter went on to say that at times “the master was like one dement,” and that they were afraid of their lives. Henderson did not doubt that the girl’s words were true, and that this dark shadow hung like a suspended sword over his head. At times he grew almost reckless, but at others the grim penalty of his hidden crime filled his soul with shuddering dread.

After May Churchill's disappearance he more than once gave way to frightful paroxysms of passion and rage, terrifying his unhappy mother with his mad words and frantic gestures. But weeks passed—three weeks, nearly a month after May's flight—and still John Temple remained at the Hall, and even the jealous Henderson was forced to admit that this did not look as if Temple had anything to do with it. Then one day as Henderson was moodily riding down one of the country lanes he suddenly met Mrs. Temple, of the Hall, who was driving, and to his great surprise, she pulled up her ponies.

Henderson had never seen her since the great scandal about himself and poor Elsie Wray had occurred, and he was by no means sure that she would take any notice of him now. He put up his hand nervously therefore to take off his hat, but Mrs. Temple stopped, and so he also drew rein.

"Good-morning," she said; "it's a long time since I last saw you, Mr. Henderson."

"Yes," he answered, rather huskily, while a dusky flush spread over his face.

"Why don't you come and see us?" continued Mrs. Temple.

"I was not sure you would care to see me."

Mrs. Temple gave a little airy shrug of her handsome shoulders. She was looking very well, and had apparently got over her deep grief for the loss of her boy, and at one time Henderson had been rather a frequent visitor at Woodlea Hall.

"Oh, yes, I shall be glad to see you," she said.

"I lost my nephew yesterday, you know," she added; "John Temple has gone away."

"Gone away?" echoed Henderson, sharply, and the dusky flush faded from his face.

"Yes, he has gone for a week or so, I believe; abroad, I think, but he was rather vague about his movements."

Henderson did not speak. Had he gone to May, he was thinking, with a sharp and bitter pang.

"By the by," continued Mrs. Temple, "has anything ever been heard of that pretty girl, Miss Churchill, who ran away from home? You were one of her swains, were you not, Mr. Henderson?" And Mrs. Temple laughed and showed her white teeth.

"I knew them very well, at all events," muttered Henderson, with downcast eyes.

"Oh, you were one of her many admirers, they told me," said Mrs. Temple, with a smile. "Well, she certainly is pretty; such a fine complexion. John Temple called her beautiful; do you?"

"She is handsome," said Henderson, hoarsely.

"Well, I am rather curious about her flight, or disappearance, or whatever it was. Will you call to-morrow at four o'clock and tell me all about it?"

"I know nothing," began Henderson, but Mrs. Temple stopped him with a little wave of her driving whip.

"Never mind; call to-morrow at four; and now good-morning, Mr. Henderson," and she nodded her head and drove on.

But for a moment or two Henderson sat still on his saddle after she had passed him. What did she mean, he was asking himself. Did she suspect that there was anything between John Temple and May Churchill? that he had anything to do with her flight?

This idea which had haunted Henderson in spite of himself now recurred to his mind with threefold force. At all events he would go to the Hall and hear what Mrs. Temple had to say. And he did go, and was received by Mrs. Temple, who smilingly held out her hand to him.

"You see," she said in that half-reckless way which was one of her characteristics, "I have not turned my back on you in spite of your troubles."

"It is very good of you," answered Henderson.

"Oh, being a parson's daughter, I have naturally a spice of the devil in me, and a certain fellow-feeling to sinners. All men are sinners, you know," she added, with a laugh; "even my paragon of a nephew, John Temple!"

"What about him?" asked Henderson, sharply.

"Oh, he posed a great deal as a saint, but I don't quite believe in it all. Now sit down and tell me about Miss Churchill. Do you suppose she was induced to run away by John Temple?"

"How can I tell?" answered Henderson, darkly, with lowering brow.

"There was something in his manner—I don't know what—that led me to believe that he knew more of the matter than he chose to say. Of course he didn't run away with her; but I wonder if he knows where she is."

"I know nothing."

"Well, I want to find out. He promised to write to his uncle when he went away, and if I get you his address, do you think you would do something to oblige me, Mr. Henderson?"

"I will do anything," replied Henderson, eagerly, grasping at the meaning of her words.

"Well, you see, a lady can't make certain inquiries, but a young man can. If I got you John Temple's address could you go and find out what he is doing? If in fact he has joined Miss

Churchill? If he has been seen with her?

“Get me the address and I will go,” said Henderson, with such a fierce gleam in his brown eyes that Mrs. Temple drew back rather alarmed.

“Mind, I’ll have no quarreling,” she said; “only I want to know if John Temple is speaking the truth. His uncle spoke to him about this Miss Churchill, of course, disapprovingly, and he said there was nothing between them, and would not be. But how can we tell? He may have married her secretly for anything we know.”

“If I thought—” began Henderson, passionately.

“Now don’t speak and look like that, or I won’t give you the address! I am going to have no throat-cutting. All I want to know, is John Temple speaking the truth? If you can find out this quietly, I will regard you in future as a friend, and treat you as such in spite of Mrs. Grundy.”

Henderson’s lips moved convulsively, but with a great effort he controlled himself. He could only find out Temple’s address through Mrs. Temple, and therefore he must not frighten or quarrel with her.

“Very well,” he said, “get me the address, and I’ll find out all I can about him. And—if you’ll treat me as a friend I will be grateful—for I want one.” And he held out his hand, which Mrs. Temple took.

“You’ll live it down, no fear,” she answered; “I’ve always pitied you. But you had better go now, for my lord and master sometimes does not hold my views. But when John Temple writes to his uncle I will forward his address to you at once. And now, good-by.”

So Henderson left Woodlea Hall with a new hope in his heart. At all events he would be able to find out, if Mrs. Temple gave him John Temple’s address, whether there was any truth in the haunting suspicion which had pursued his own mind. But a week passed and he heard nothing from Mrs. Temple. And during this week an incident occurred that roused to fury his smoldering resentment against his groom, Jack Reid.

He had paid the man the two thousand pounds, and heard rumors of Reid swaggering at markets and meetings, but had declined to enter into any horse-racing establishments with him. Reid had tried to bully, but here Henderson was firm.

“I’ve no money, so it’s no good speaking of it,” he had said.

What was his indignation, therefore, when one day Reid coolly asked him to advance him another hundred pounds.

“There’s a little mare I must have, and I’m short a hundred of her price; so, Henderson, my boy, ye must shell out.”

Henderson’s brow grew black as night.

“She’s to be sold at Skidder’s to-morrow,” continued Reid, “and I thought I would take the dog-cart and drive over in the morning, and borrow Brown Bess for the occasion; for it’s well always to make a good appearance.” And Reid gave an insolent laugh.

“Borrow my trap and horse if you dare!” shouted Henderson, hoarse with passion.

“Well, I dare; and I must have the hundred pounds, too,” answered Reid. “Come, it’s no use swearing; ye may as well make things pleasant for us both.”

Without another word Henderson turned on his heel and strode away. The men had met in the avenue and Reid saw Henderson walk rapidly back to the house and disappear from his view. But it was impossible almost to describe the furious rage that possessed Henderson’s soul as he did so.

“This is too much,” he muttered darkly between his bitten lips, and he at once proceeded to his own room, vowing vengeance as he went.

“He shall not live to insult me again,” he swore fiercely; and then he sat down deliberately and tried to think how he could best carry out his murderous intentions.

Reid saw nothing more of him during the day, but after nightfall, about eight o’clock, Henderson walked down to the stables, where he was almost sure to find Reid at this hour. The groom was there engaged in looking after the horses, and he turned around and nodded as his so-called master entered.

“There’s the money you asked for,” said Henderson, in a sullen tone, holding out a check, “and I hope it’s the last you’ll want for some time.”

Reid took the check and glanced at it, and then put it in his pocket-book.

“That’s all right,” he said, and then he proceeded to discuss the points of the animal he proposed to purchase.

“She’s a real beauty,” he said, and so on.

Henderson took very little notice. Presently, however, he addressed the groom.

“You talked of taking the trap and Brown Bess,” he said; “if you do, what time will you be back, as I want the trap to drive over in the evening to Captain North’s?”

“What time do you want to go?” asked Reid.

“I have to be there by nine. It’s a kind of sporting supper he has on, and I promised to go.”

“It’ll not take ye more than an hour to go to Newstead? Well, I’ll be back by seven, and ye better drive one of the other horses.”

“All right,” answered Henderson, shortly, and then without another word he left the stable, and Reid looked after him curiously.

“He looked uncommon vicious,” he thought; “I wonder if he can be planning any mischief?”

And this idea recurred again to his mind when he saw Henderson the next morning. There was a dark, lowering, determined look on his face that Reid did not like, and as he indulged in no strong language the groom began to think it looked suspicious.

“Be sure you are back by seven,” was all Henderson said in allusion to their conversation of the night before; and when he had turned away, Reid began whistling softly to himself.

And all the day after Henderson was restless and strange in his manner. He told his mother that he would not be at home at dinner-time, as he was going to Captain North’s, and accordingly about half-past six o’clock he left the house, and proceeded on foot to a lonely spot in the road, that he knew Reid must pass on his return from Skidder’s, the horse dealer’s.

This part of the road ran through a little wood, and there were trees on either side of the horse path. Here behind the trunk of a great spreading oak Henderson stationed himself with murder in his heart. He meant to shoot Reid, cost him what it might, for the man’s insolence had become to him utterly unbearable.

It was nearly seven o’clock when he reached the little wood, and it was a cold, gray, drizzling evening, with a fog floating over the lowlands, and there was a general air of bleakness and discomfort in the whole scene. But Henderson with his black passions roused felt none of this. He stood there hidden, with his revolver ready in his hand, and with his ear alert to catch every sound. But none came; only the melancholy moan of the wind through the trees, or the cry of the curlew winging its way over the sedges on the marsh below.

Henderson began to get impatient. Would he never come, he thought. He looked at his watch again and again; half-past seven, eight, and then the autumn day began to close, and the night to gather in.

It was quite dark—just nine o’clock—when at last he did hear the rumble of wheels and the sharp trot of a horse’s hoofs on the stony road. Henderson stood breathless, his revolver raised ready to fire, his eyes peering eagerly through the darkness and the mist. The sounds came nearer.

“It is Brown Bess’ trot,” he told himself with savage glee; “I’ll have him this time and no mistake.”

The dog-cart passed the spot where he was standing a moment later, and Henderson fired. There was a cry; the horse swerved violently aside, and then started off in a furious gallop, and Henderson stood panting on the roadway, wondering if his enemy were dead.

CHAPTER XXIV.
A GUILTY SOUL.

He listened eagerly until the sound of the horse’s gallop grew fainter and fainter, and then Henderson proceeded to carry out the plan which he had laid down for himself. This was actually to go to Captain North’s supper, who was a somewhat disreputable sporting man in the neighborhood, who, for reasons of his own, had not given the cold shoulder to Henderson during the time of the great scandal about him.

Henderson therefore turned and walked on quickly in the direction of Captain North’s place, Newstead. It was only about a mile from the little wood where he had fired the shot at Reid, and it did not take him long to arrive there. A sort of savage exultation filled his breast as he proceeded on his way. At all events, he had wounded Reid, for he had heard the man’s startled cry. And the shot could not be traced to him, he believed, for he would be known to be at North’s supper at the time, and in the darkness it was impossible that Reid could have recognized him.

At Newstead he received a warm welcome.

“How late you are, old fellow!” cried the host, a dissipated red-faced man of fifty, rising from the table and grasping Henderson’s hand.

“Am I?” answered Henderson. “Well, my mother was not well, and so I did not start so early as I intended.”

After this he sat down to supper with the rest, and seemed in high spirits. They were a rough lot altogether, and they all seemed bent on enjoying themselves. They drank, laughed, joked, and sang, and Henderson joined in the thick of it. It was indeed after two in the morning before they began to talk of dispersing.

“I wonder if my trap is here?” asked Henderson.

“No, sir,” answered the servant he addressed; “there is nothing here from Stourton Grange.”

“Confound that fellow. I wonder why he has not come; got drunk, as usual, I suppose,” said

Henderson.

“Do you mean that groom of yours, Reid?” asked Captain North. “I’m told he’s quite a swell now, and goes about buying horses, and blustering about some money he has had left him, or that he has power over you, or something. I would get rid of him if I were you, Henderson.”

“He’s a lazy dog,” swore Henderson, and then the conversation dropped.

One of the guests who was going Henderson’s way offered to give him a lift, and Henderson accepted the offer. This man drove Henderson nearly to the avenue at Stourton, and there they parted, Henderson proceeding on foot in the direction of the Grange. As he walked on in the darkness and the gloom, for the first time since he had fired the shot at Reid, a sort of dread, of shrinking from the consequences of what he had done, stole over his soul. But he braced himself up to conquer this feeling.

“He deserved it. I hope he is dead,” he thought, and in this mood he neared his home.

He had to pass the stables on his way, and as he did so he saw they were fully lighted. He hesitated, then nerved himself to go in and inquire why this was so. He entered one of the open doors, and a peculiar gasping sound fell on his ears. He passed two of the stalls, and he saw the horses in them were restless and uneasy. Then he came to the third stall—Brown Bess’ stall—and such a sight met his eyes that he never forgot it to his dying day.

Reid was standing there and a farrier whom he knew, and on the straw of the stall lay Brown Bess, panting and struggling in her death agonies. Blood was flowing from her nostrils; blood from her distended jaws, while convulsive tremors ran through her sleek and glossy form.

“What is this? What has happened?” asked Henderson, hoarsely.

The two men, who had not noticed his approach, as they were watching the horse, now turned around and saw Henderson.

“Some scoundrel shot her on the road as we came through Henley Wood,” answered Reid, gloomily. “She’s shot through the lungs, Mr. Roberts here says—and it’s all up with her, poor beast.”

“Yes, Mr. Henderson, I fear nothing can be done,” said Mr. Roberts, the farrier, shaking his head.

Henderson gave a kind of cry, and knelt down on the straw beside the dying horse.

“Bess! Bess! My poor Bess! don’t you know me?” he exclaimed, and his words were broken by a sob.

The dumb creature in her death throes knew her master’s voice. She opened her fast glazing eyes a little wider; she tried to whinny her welcome, but the exertion killed her. A rush of blood came from her mouth, a terrible struggle convulsed her limbs, and the two men standing behind seized Henderson and pulled him forcibly away from her.

“She might kick you without knowing it, sir,” said the farrier. “Ay, poor brute, it will be all over in a moment or so.”

His words were true; there was another plunge or two, then a faint quivering ran through her frame, and then all was still. Henderson stood watching her, and then with a groan he covered his face with his hand, and turned away.

“It’s a bad business,” said the farrier. “Who on earth could have shot her?”

“It was just at the turn in Henley Wood,” repeated Reid; “we were coming home as nicely as could be when I heard a shot close at hand. Poor Bess a-kind o’ jumped in the air, and then started galloping, and never stopped till we got to the stable door.”

“And you saw no one?” asked the farrier.

“Not a living soul; it was too dark,” answered Reid.

“And what were you doing out so late?” asked Henderson, in a strange, hollow voice, now looking at his groom.

“Well, ye know, master, I’d been buying that mare I told you of, and Skidder and I wet the bargain, and I got a bit tight. But I waited till I was all right, and then I was driving away quietly home—”

“You sacrificed her life,” interrupted Henderson, darkly and sternly, “the best horse a man ever rode,” and then without another word he strode out of the stable, his heart full of inexpressible bitterness.

For he knew that his own hand had killed the creature he had loved. Brown Bess had been his favorite horse, and had been given to him by his father shortly before his death, and Henderson remembered at this moment his pride and pleasure when he received the gift.

And another memory, too, rose before him; a memory fraught with remorse and shame, and the face of the dead girl, Elsie Wray, seemed to hover near him in the darkness, as he had seen her in the days of her early love. He had ridden Brown Bess to the Wayside Inn shortly after his father had presented her to him, for the purpose of showing Elsie his new possession. And when he was leaving the girl had followed him out of the house, and laid her dark head against the mare’s glossy neck and kissed her.

He saw this little scene again now, and groaned aloud in his misery. He had killed them both,

he was thinking—the two who had loved him—and bitter and unavailing regret and remorse filled his heart. His mad passion for May Churchill had blinded him to all sense of justice and right, and he had flung away the love which was truly his for the sake of a fair face that had always looked coldly at him.

And now it all came back to him! Elsie's vain appeals and awful death, and he shuddered as he walked on; shuddered and stumbled amid his haunting visions of the past.

A pale-faced woman was standing, candle in hand, watching for him as he staggered toward the open door of Stourton Grange. This was his mother, who had grown uneasy at his prolonged absence, and was now peering into the mist and darkness looking for her only son. Presently she saw him; saw his haggard face, and his eyes full of remorse and gloom. She went forward to meet him; she took his cold, damp hand.

"My dear, are you not well?" she said, tenderly, as she led him into the hall, and put her candle down on the table. "You look ill, Tom, what is the matter?"

For a moment he looked at her, and then suddenly broke down, and a choking sob burst from his lips.

"Tom, come in here; I've a fire here," went on Mrs. Henderson, putting her hand through his arm and leading him into the drawing-room. She made him sit by the fire; she got him what he required, and hung over him and tended him with her mother's love strong in her breast, as though he had been the sinless child she had once cradled there.

She asked no questions, but presently she gathered from his half-incoherent words that Brown Bess was dead, and that he was weary of his life. She soothed and comforted him, and finally persuaded him to go to bed, but she did not leave him that night, nor for many nights to come.

Either the shock he had received, or some subtle poison floating in the damp, dank air, had struck him down, but before the morning he was in a high fever. And with extraordinary courage and devotion Mrs. Henderson nursed him alone. She sent for no doctor; she sought no help. She knew she was risking his life by doing this, but she knew also that his babbling tongue might reveal the dark secret of which she was only too sure. So no ears but hers heard the ghastly details of the tragedy on the ridge above Fern Dene.

Over and over again in the still hours of the night he related the grim story. Sometimes he fancied Elsie was standing by and would entreat her to take away her dying curse.

"I did not mean it, Elsie! on my soul I did not!" he more than once cried, and his miserable watcher fell on her knees and prayed to God that his words might be true.

But it was a terrible time. Mrs. Henderson's thick brown hair grew gray, and her once comely face lined and haggard. She let it be understood in the household "that the young master" was suffering from delirium tremens, and as Henderson was known to have been drinking heavily lately, this account of his illness was universally believed.

The groom, Jack Reid, went up to the house each morning to ask after him, but he made no attempt to see his master. The events of the night on which Brown Bess had died seemed to have had a sobering effect on this man. For in his own mind Reid now never doubted that Henderson had intended to kill him when by mischance he killed the horse. Their frequent quarrels, and something in Henderson's lowering looks when he had proposed to borrow the dog-cart and Brown Bess, had rather alarmed Reid at the time, and for this reason he had purposely delayed his return home until he thought his master would be absent at Captain North's supper party.

Then, when Henderson had gone into the stable, and flung himself in his grief down by his dying horse, Reid had seen the muzzle of a revolver suddenly appear from one of the pockets of his overcoat. It instantly struck the man at this moment who had shot Brown Bess. The bullet intended for himself had destroyed the animal that Henderson loved best, and Reid gave a little shudder when he thought of his own narrow escape.

But he said nothing of his suspicions. But a day or so afterward he walked over to Captain North's place, and after telling some of the men about the stables of his master's illness, he casually inquired what time the "young squire" had arrived at Newstead on the night of the Captain's supper party.

"Late," was the reply he received. "Nearly an hour later than the other gents. It wouldn't be less than a quarter to ten o'clock when he came, and he had a strange sort of look when he did. Ay, it was the d. t. coming on, no doubt."

This answer satisfied Reid that he had not been mistaken. Henderson had had time then to reach Newstead after he had fired the shot in Henley Wood that had killed Brown Bess. And the idea frightened Reid. He had not, in fact, believed Henderson before capable of deliberate murder. He knew he had not gone to the ridge above Fern Dene intending to shoot poor Elsie Wray. The girl's threats and taunts had maddened him, and in a moment of uncontrollable passion he had killed her. But this attempt on Reid's own life was a very different affair. It showed the man that he had to deal with a stronger and more savage and vindictive nature than he had expected. He had bullied and traded on Henderson's secret, never supposing that he dare attempt to throw off the yoke. But he had gone too far, and Reid now admitted this to himself, and determined to be more careful and more prudent in the future.

But Henderson was ill for many days, and it was weeks after Brown Bess' death that Reid first saw his master. They met in the avenue by chance, while Henderson was walking with his mother, and leaning on her arm, for his strength was completely shattered. The faces of both men flushed when they saw each other, but Reid respectfully touched his hat as he approached the mother and son.

"I hope you are feeling better, sir?" he asked, and for a moment he stopped.

"Yes, I am better," answered Henderson, briefly, and he scowled and walked on, but there was a look in his sunken eyes that Reid did not care to see.

Henderson, in fact, still nourished the bitterest animosity against the man who held his secret, and who had treated him with such insolence and disrespect. Nor as his health returned did he forget the loss of Brown Bess. He blamed Reid for this, and hated the groom with a deadly hatred that grew and grew.

And during the days of his convalescence a letter came to him which did not tend to make him any happier. It was from Mrs. Temple, but was of a very vague and unsatisfactory nature.

"I am sorry to hear you have been ill," it began, "but the address we talked of was not forthcoming, so I could not send it. J. T. wrote to his uncle certainly, but the sole address he gave was Paris, and moreover he said he was leaving that city next day. I can not help thinking it looks suspicious, but on his return we may learn more, as he mentions that in another week or so he would arrive at Woodlea. If I hear anything I will let you know; in the meanwhile perhaps you had best not come here. Yours very truly,

"R. T."

CHAPTER XXV.
THE BRIDE.

Miss Webster was agreeably surprised when she received her nephew Ralph's answer to her letter in which she had told him of May Churchill's marriage.

It was a quiet, ordinary letter, and mentioned that affair in the most commonplace manner.

"My dear Aunt Margaret," Miss Webster read with a considerable feeling of relief. "I received your letter telling me of the marriage of your pretty young friend, and I am sure we will all join in wishing her every happiness. But what I don't quite like about the matter is its secrecy. A secret marriage is, I think, always unfair to the woman; and I understood from you that this Mr. Temple was his uncle's heir, by the will of his grandfather, in the event of the elder Mr. Temple leaving no children. Now, if this is so, why should your Mr. Temple be afraid of his uncle, and prefer to cast a slur on the woman he has married, when his uncle can really (I presume) eventually do him no harm? However, it is no affair of ours.

"The weather here has been all that we could desire, and if I was not afraid of boring you with the oft-told description of Alpine scenery, I could tell you of some wonderful bits of coloring from the effect of the sunshine on the snow. However, as I hope soon to see you, I will not write a long letter to-day. In another fortnight I must be back to town, and hard at work at the old grind.

"With love to yourself and Aunt Eliza,

"Yours affectionately,

"Ralph Webster."

Miss Webster silently put this letter into her sister Eliza's hand, and after Miss Eliza had read it she returned it with one of her usual gentle sighs.

"Dear boy!" she said, and that was all. Still both the sisters felt relieved, and were glad to think no great harm had been done. The way in which Ralph had taken the news in fact made it easier for them to answer their other letters which they had received from the bride and bridegroom. In his, John Temple asked Miss Webster very kindly to look out for a suitably furnished house in their neighborhood for May. This Miss Webster had done, but she could not hear of one that was to be let at once. There was a house in the same terrace, but it would not be vacant for two months. Could Mrs. John Temple wait that long, Miss Webster had inquired.

To this John answered no. He could not be absent longer from England than another fortnight, and he must see May settled in town before he left her. Again the sisters went out house-hunting, but were still unsuccessful. At last, half-nervously, Miss Webster proposed to Miss Eliza to ask May to come to them until she could see about a house for herself.

"I have thought about that, too," answered Miss Eliza; "but I did not like to suggest it."

"It seems so unkind," said Miss Webster, "when her room is standing empty."

The offer was therefore made, and was gratefully accepted both by John Temple and May.

"It is more than good of you," wrote John, "but I will leave May to thank you herself."

May's letter was a pretty bride-like epistle, in which "dear John's" name occurred and re-occurred in every other line. "I am quite, quite happy," she wrote; "but how could I be otherwise

when dear John is so good to me, and when I am with him, for that alone means happiness to me. We wander together about this wonderful city, and dear John shows me beautiful things of which I had never dreamed, and which but for him I should have never seen. I tell him he is like some prince in the fairy tales, who found his poor little country sweetheart in the green woods. I feel so unworthy of him, but he will never listen to this, and his generous, noble words are very dear and sweet to my heart. I will tell you some day what he says on the subject, though I know it is only his great goodness that makes him speak thus. Still he says I make him very happy, and I pray to God night and day that I may always be able to do so."

"Sweet young creature!" said Miss Eliza, wiping away a tear as she read these tender, loving words.

Miss Webster also was not unmoved. But when Ralph Webster arrived they did not show him May's letter.

"She is very happy," Miss Webster said, gently, and then for the first time she noticed the change in her nephew's appearance.

"Why, Ralph!" she exclaimed, and then paused.

"You are looking at my gray hairs," said Ralph, quietly. "Yes, isn't it funny? It must have been the air of Switzerland."

Miss Webster said nothing, but she thought the more. Not only had the air of Switzerland sown many white hairs round Ralph Webster's broad brow, but it had visibly lined and aged his face. He, in fact, was looking ill, and not like a man who had just returned from his holiday.

"I am glad to get back to my work," he said, and he was. Work was good for him, and his strong, firm mind recognized this.

"And," he said, presently, "when do the bride and bridegroom return?"

Then Miss Webster and Aunt Eliza told their little story. They had tried in vain to find a suitable house for Mrs. John Temple at the time she required one, as Mr. John Temple was obliged to be back in England almost immediately. But they had heard of a house that would be vacant in two months.

"And so, dear Ralph, we thought we could not help offering her a home here until she finds one to suit herself," explained Miss Webster. "And we expect her to arrive the day after to-morrow."

A dusky flush rose to Ralph Webster's face.

"The day after to-morrow?" he repeated, "and—Mr. Temple?"

"Oh! Mr. Temple will not stay here at all, dear, at present. He proposes to bring his bride here on Thursday afternoon, and he will stay to dinner, and then start for the Midlands by the night train. You must come to dinner on Thursday, Ralph, to meet him."

But Ralph shook his head.

"No," he said, "I have a case to work up on Thursday which will take me until the small hours of the morning. Besides," he added, "it would not do, you know, for me to meet them, as I am not supposed to know that they are married at all."

"I forgot that," replied Miss Webster, nervously. "Dear me, dear me; these secret marriages are very trying!"

"Perhaps I will look in on Friday," continued Ralph Webster, "and by that time you must find out how I am to address her—by her maiden or her married name."

This was a complication that poor Aunt Margaret had never reckoned on.

"Yes, we must find out," she said; "we must ask Mr. John Temple; really it is very awkward."

But when Thursday arrived, and the sisters saw the bride's sweet, happy face, they forgot at first to make any inquiries on the subject. May was looking quite charming; her dress, her beauty, even her manner was improved. She was indeed a lovely young woman that the kindly sisters took in their thin arms, and pressed their faded lips against her rosy ones. As for John Temple, he also looked exceedingly well, and his gray eyes rested again and again on the beautiful face of his fair bride with unmistakable affection.

He remained to dinner at Pembridge Terrace, but explained how he was obliged to start on his journey to Woodlea Hall almost immediately afterward. May knew this, but her face saddened a little when John repeated it, and her lips quivered.

"My uncle would never forgive me if I disappointed him," said John, and then the little party began talking of other things.

"And how is Mr. Webster?" presently asked May. "Has he returned from abroad yet?"

This question at once reminded the sisters of their nephew's wish to know by what name he should address May, and they looked at each other significantly; and then Miss Webster—the stronger minded of the two—after a little nervous hesitation spoke.

"Yes, he has returned, and is very well," she said; "and—oh! my dear Mrs. John Temple, there is something I wish to ask you."

"What is that?" answered May, smiling.

"Well, you see it is rather awkward—but—but I believe it was your wish, and—your husband's

for your marriage at present to be kept a secret?”

“Certainly,” said John Temple, rather quickly.

“And—my nephew knew Miss Churchill, you know, Mr. Temple, before her marriage, and when he meets her again—” hesitated Miss Webster.

“He had better know her as Miss Churchill still,” answered John, gravely. “For both our sakes, Miss Webster, for the present our marriage must be kept an absolute secret.”

Miss Webster stirred uneasily, and May blushed deeply, and also made a slight restless movement.

“It is absolutely necessary,” repeated John; “but if you wish, May, that Miss Webster’s friends should know you are married, why not take another name?”

“We will talk of it afterward,” said May, gently.

“But, my dear,” he answered, and he looked at his watch as he spoke, “we shall not have very long to talk of anything this evening. I must go upstairs and look after my traps, if Miss Webster will excuse me, for the cab I ordered will be here in half an hour. You had better come with me, May.”

So the two left the room together, and when they were alone John put his arm around May’s waist and drew her to his breast and kissed her face.

“I know this must seem hard to you, darling, about the name—and having to part so soon—but you see, it would never do to offend my uncle.”

“Oh! no, no, John!” replied May, fondly, and she flung her arms round his neck as she spoke. “Do you think I would wish to do you any harm? You who have been so good to me, and married me when I was so different in every way to you? Of course, your uncle naturally would resent your marriage to me, but the only thing is—”

“What, dear?”

“I think I should rather be known to be married among Miss Webster’s friends; you see when people are not married—”

“Young men are rather apt to fall in love with a very pretty girl, eh, May? Is that what you mean? Well, darling, perhaps you are right; call yourself Mrs. Somebody-else—or no, a brilliant idea has struck me; call yourself Mrs. John!”

“Oh, yes, that will do!” cried May, smiling. “Mrs. John! that is charming—then I will bear John’s name still—my own John!”

She nestled closer to him, and John Temple murmured something about “being unworthy,” of which May took no heed. Then in wifelike fashion, she began packing what he required, and he stood watching her with a strange dimness in his eyes, which, however, May did not see. She was thinking all the time how good and noble he was; how he had risked his inheritance for her sake; for May did not know that the Woodlea estates were in truth strictly entailed on John Temple, in the event of the present owner, Mr. Philip Temple, leaving no children. She might have heard this at the time of young Phil Temple’s death, but girl’s ideas on such subjects are very vague. But she knew John’s marriage with her would offend his uncle, and therefore it behooved her for his sake to keep it a secret as long as his uncle lived.

By and by they heard a cab stop at the house-door, and the bell rang, and they knew their parting hour had come. May clung to John, and her eyes were wet with tears when they went down-stairs together, and a few minutes later he was gone! And a great blank seemed suddenly to fall on the heart of the poor young bride.

But she tried not to show this, and presently said she was tired with her journey, and asked Miss Webster’s leave to retire to bed. She kissed both the sisters before she left them, and thanked them in her pretty way for giving her for the present the shelter of their roof.

“And Miss Webster,” she said, still holding Miss Webster’s kindly hand, “I talked over the name with John—I mean the name I am to be called by—and we fixed on Mrs. John. You see there is nothing extraordinary in that, and it is still John’s name. I can not take his full name on account of his uncle, as we must run no risks; but I will be Mrs. John. Do you think you can remember Mrs. John?”

“Yes, my dear, I can remember,” answered Miss Webster, and she kissed May’s fair face again. “And it is better that you should be known as a married woman.”

“Much better,” said May, and then she left the sisters and retired to her own room to think there and pray for John with all her heart.

The next day, of course, she wished to write to John, but he had told her not to do so unless Miss Webster directed her letter. And it seemed almost too soon to ask Miss Webster to do this. Still she wrote, telling him all her sweet thoughts, and prattling to him on paper as she had done when nestling by his side. This letter would be sent the next day, she decided, after she had added this and that to it. Then after lunch she went out to walk with Miss Eliza, and when they returned they found Ralph Webster sitting in the dining-room with his Aunt Margaret.

Miss Webster had by this time told Ralph Webster that it had been decided that their young guest had for the present to bear the name of “Mrs. John.” Ralph had listened in somewhat grim silence, and when May and Aunt Eliza appeared Miss Webster rose in a little flurry.

“This is Mrs. John, Ralph,” she said, hastily.

Ralph Webster rose quietly and held out his hand.

“How are you, Mrs. John?” he said. “I hear I have to congratulate you.”

“Yes,” answered May, with a charming blush, taking his hand; “I have been married since I saw you last.”

“So my aunt has been telling me. Well, I did not forget the edelweiss, and have three separate packets of it at this moment in my coat pocket which is hanging in the hall.”

May had forgotten about the edelweiss. But she did not tell Mr. Webster this, and accepted her portion of the ice-flower smilingly. She thought he looked graver and older, but supposed he had been working very hard. She said something about this after dinner in the drawing-room, and Ralph Webster admitted it was true.

“Yes,” he said, “I have rather an important case coming on to-morrow, and have been burning the midnight oil over it. And as it is about jewelry I suppose it would interest you ladies. I do not know whether you have ever heard of Miss Kathleen Weir, the actress?”

May, to whom he addressed this question, shook her head.

“An actress?” echoed Miss Webster.

“Yes, and I am told a very fascinating and handsome young woman. But I shall see her to-morrow, as I am junior in the case, and have to examine the witnesses.”

“And are you for the prosecution or the defense?” asked May.

“For the prosecution. It is, in fact, rather a remarkable case. It seems Miss Kathleen Weir is a lady who owns a great number of diamonds, or rather, supposed she did. Well, a month or so ago she was either hard up, or she had a mind to change some of her diamonds for something else. At all events, she took what she supposed to be a valuable diamond brooch and earrings to the jeweler, of whom they had been purchased, for the purpose of disposing of them. The jeweler and his assistants examined the stones, and told her they were everyone paste—not diamonds at all in fact. The cases were theirs, and the settings, but the diamonds had been removed and replaced by false ones. They at first supposed Miss Weir had wished to impose on them, but the rage she flew into soon satisfied them that this was not the case. She entreated one of the jewelers to return with her to her flat to examine the rest of her diamonds. A nice discovery awaited her; half, nay more than half, were gone, and paste diamonds had been substituted in place of the real ones.”

“What a dreadful thing!” exclaimed May.

“Dreadful for Miss Weir at least. These diamonds were worth thousands of pounds, and someone must have stolen them. The question was who did it, and the affair had been in the hands of the detectives ever since. Now they have got hold of someone, and Miss Weir’s confidential maid, a certain Miss Margaret Johnstone, has to be put on her trial to-morrow for robbing her mistress. I am told there is a strong defense, but I think we hold the trump card.”

“We shall be interested in the result,” said May.

“Half the women in London will be interested. There is, I believe, an extraordinary fascination in jewels to your sex, and in diamonds in particular. However, by this time to-morrow Miss Margaret Johnstone will probably know this to her cost. But now I must go; I have my notes to look up on the case. Good-night, Mrs. John; good-night, Aunt Margaret and Aunt Eliza.”

He left the house a few moments later, after his aunts had pressed him to return the following evening to tell the news about the trial. And he did this, entering the drawing-room at Pembridge Terrace the next night about nine o’clock with a slight flush on his somewhat haggard face.

“Well,” he said, quietly, but still with the air of a man who has gained something he had fought for, “we have won our case.”

“Do tell us all about it, dear!” cried his aunts in chorus.

“Will it bore you?” asked Ralph Webster, looking at May.

“No, indeed, it will not,” she answered.

“I will make it as short as possible, then. The case of the prosecution was simple enough so far. Miss Kathleen Weir discovered that more than half her diamonds had been stolen and false ones substituted. She discovered this, as I told you, by taking some of them to a jeweler’s to dispose of—the defense made a point of this, as you will hear. Well, Miss Weir gave evidence that no one ever went into her jewel-case but her confidential maid, Margaret Johnstone. This woman had been in her service five years, and she completely trusted her. She admitted she sometimes left money lying about, but it was never touched. Margaret Johnstone used to take off Miss Weir’s jewels on her return from the theater, and restore them to the case, and bring them out the next day when they were required. Generally Miss Weir carried the key of her jewel-case with her, but sometimes she forgot it, and she remembered one night in particular Margaret Johnstone telling her she had done this. No suspicion, however, entered her mind as regards her maid. But no one else had access to the jewels, and when she discovered her loss she naturally told her story to the police, and Margaret Johnstone was arrested.

“The defense was peculiar. Margaret Johnstone admitted taking Miss Weir’s diamonds to a certain somewhat contraband diamond dealer, but by her mistress’ orders. This diamond dealer

gave evidence. The woman on trial had from time to time brought diamond ornaments to him for sale. He was suspicious at first, he said, but Margaret Johnstone gave distinct answers. The diamonds belonged to her mistress, Miss Kathleen Weir, the actress, and she was short of ready money, and wished to sell the diamonds for the best price she could get, and have false diamonds substituted in their place in the same settings. He still hesitated, and requested the maid to bring a letter from her mistress authorizing him to carry out this project. This Margaret Johnstone did, and the dealer produced the letter in court, which Miss Weir swore was never written by her, but the handwriting slightly resembled her own.

"After this constant transactions took place between the diamond dealer and the maid. The dealer swore that he had paid thousands to Margaret Johnstone and received receipts for the money signed Kathleen Weir. He swore also he never doubted that he was dealing with the real owner of the jewels. 'Many ladies,' he said, 'did the same thing, and the diamonds their husbands and friends gave them at their marriage were frequently exchanged in after years for fictitious ones.'

"Then the counsel for the defense pointed out that Miss Weir herself admitted she was going to try to dispose of some of her diamonds when the so-called fraud was discovered. This looked as though she was in the habit of doing so, and so on. This was the defense, but of course I have not told it in legal language. All the time, however, as I told you yesterday, I was sure we held the trump card, which was that in one of the woman's boxes, after she was arrested, a half-finished letter was found. It was to a lover in Australia, asking him if he had received safely the eight hundred pounds she had forwarded to him by the last mail. 'She will never be the wiser,' Margaret Johnstone had written to the lover, 'and the paste do quite as well for her as the real.'

"The handwriting of this letter, and the letter signed Kathleen Weir, held by the diamond dealer, and the receipts also signed Kathleen Weir, were then submitted to experts. These men decided they were all really written by the same person. To make a long story short, Margaret Johnstone totally broke down under cross-examination, and began crying hysterically.

"'It was the devil tempted me!' she finally cried, and so no doubt it was, but he played her a scurvy trick, for she got a sentence of eight years' penal servitude for listening to his voice."

"Oh! poor creature!" said May, pitifully.

"My sympathies, I confess, lie with Miss Kathleen Weir," continued Ralph Webster, smiling. "She has lost her diamonds, worth thousands of pounds, which she will never see again, and she might have had a very awkward reflection cast on her honesty. But I admit I am prejudiced in her favor, for just before I started to come here a note in the prettiest language imaginable was handed to me from Miss Kathleen Weir. My modesty forbade me to bring it, or to repeat all she had written. But she paid me a great many compliments on my 'masterly cross-examination'—please remember I am quoting—which, no doubt, she said, 'elicited the truth from that wretched woman.' And, moreover, she wanted me to go to see her to-morrow afternoon, and I mean to go."

"Oh! Ralph, to see an actress!" said Miss Webster, in dismay.

"Oh! do go," cried May, laughing. "I am dying to hear all about her."

"I will go," said Ralph Webster, slowly, not knowing that the hand of Fate was leading him into a pitfall beset with doubt and anxieties from which there was no escape.

CHAPTER XXVI.
KATHLEEN WEIR.

Ralph Webster did as he said he would, and went on the following afternoon to call on the actress, Miss Kathleen Weir.

She was expecting him, and her pretty flat was charmingly arranged to receive him, and herself charmingly dressed for the same purpose. She had admired his strong, earnest, dark face in the court the day before, and she was not in the least afraid of showing this. As she rose to receive him—a tall, graceful, slender woman—she held out a shapely white hand.

"I am very much pleased that you have come to see me, Mr. Webster," she said.

"Thanks, very much, for your kind permission to do so," replied Ralph Webster.

She was really scarcely handsome, and yet she gave you the impression that she was so. She had large, restless gray eyes, and rather a pretty, piquant nose, but her mouth was not good. It was too wide, and her smile somewhat saucy and defiant. Yet altogether her appearance was attractive, and many men, it was said, had fallen victims to her charms.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude," she went on in her airy fashion, smiling on Ralph Webster; "but for you my character for honesty would be gone."

"I trust not quite that."

Miss Weir held up her pretty white hands.

"I wish you had seen the senior Mr. Jordon's face then, when I offered my poor paste diamonds for his inspection, telling him how much the brooch and earrings had cost. He looked, 'Woman, dare you attempt to impose on me!' if ever a man's thoughts were written on his countenance."

“Do you think they often are?”

“Yes. All our thoughts are written on our faces at times, but I try to wear a mask when I can; do you?”

Ralph Webster laughed a low, soft laugh.

“We are forced to hide our thoughts and feelings sometimes,” he said.

“Do you know I could imagine your doing that with a very strong curb,” went on Kathleen Weir, fixing her large gray eyes on Webster’s face. “I can fancy you crushing down your strongest feelings and putting your heel on them allegorically. You have a strong will power.”

“I am not so sure of that.”

“Oh! yes, you have! If you were in love with a woman, and did not mean to tell her so, you would go away from her, and not flutter around the flame like a weaker man would do.”

“Suppose my wings were already singed?” laughed Webster.

“You would bear the pain and still go. I envy your strength.”

“But you are imagining it.”

“No! But here I am forgetting the duties of hospitality to you on your first visit. What will you take; tea, coffee, or some more masculine refreshment. They are standing there in the inner room.” And she pointed to the draped archway between the two small drawing-rooms as she spoke.

“Thanks, I will not take anything,” answered Webster.

“May I ask if you wear a concealed bit of blue ribbon? If you are a total abstainer, as I believe they call themselves?” smiled Kathleen Weir.

“I can truthfully answer no,” said Webster, also smiling.

“Have some champagne then.”

“I will have nothing, thanks.”

“What were we talking of? Ah, about being able to conceal one’s feelings. I can’t; I wish I could; I must speak my mind, and it’s brought me no end of trouble.”

“But you are clever enough, I am sure, to get out of trouble.”

“Not always; I had once to deal with a very peculiar nature, or mine was peculiar perhaps—so he said—but we could not pull together, and that brought me no end of trouble—but I have got over it.” And Miss Weir shrugged her handsome shoulders.

“You showed your wisdom,” said Webster, a little grimly.

“I know that; what is the use of grieving and fretting and losing one’s good looks for the sake of a person who has ceased to care for one? Love is never rekindled, you know; its ashes never again take fire.”

“Do you speak from experience?”

“Yes,” answered Kathleen Weir, sharply. “I’ve watched the flame die out, and the last flicker expire. It’s an unpleasant experience, when the ice has not already touched your own heart.”

“I could never imagine it happening to you.”

“You say that because I am an actress; a woman used to, and who loves flattery, you are thinking. But it did happen to me, Mr. Webster! Perhaps it was my temper, perhaps it was his, but my gentleman turned cold and disagreeable—and in the end we parted.”

Ralph Webster felt slightly embarrassed.

“And, now,” went on Miss Weir, throwing back her well-shaped head, crowned with its thick chestnut hair, “he is no more to me than last year’s snow! He changed first, but I afterward. But why need I bore you with all this? Perhaps you do know that I am a married woman parted from my husband?”

“I certainly did not know it.”

“Yes, nine years ago I married a young man called Temple—”

“Temple?” interrupted Webster, quickly.

“Yes, John Temple; he was then a very young man, studying for the bar, but he never practiced, for he had some money, and he had no ambition. I think he thought I had spoiled his life.”

A physical pain seemed to thrill through Webster’s heart, and he bit his lips to hide his emotion.

“And,” he said, after a moment’s pause, “do you never see him? What is he like?”

“I have not seen him for these six years, but I know he is still in the land of the living, and that I am not entitled to a widow’s cap, for each six months his lawyer regularly sends me one hundred and fifty pounds. He allows me, in fact, three hundred a year, and perfect liberty. I do whatever I like.” And Kathleen Weir laughed a little bitterly.

“And you chose the stage?” said Ralph Webster, in a low tone.

“I was on the stage when he had what I suppose he calls the misfortune to marry me. He was a young fellow—barely twenty-one—and I was three years older. We lived together for about three

years, principally abroad, and then he tired of it. That is, he had been tiring of it all the time; we did not pull together somehow."

Ralph Webster drew a long breath.

"What is he like, I may have seen him?" he asked.

"Like? Good-looking, with gray eyes and a very taking manner when he chose. But to me he was often eminently disagreeable."

"And you do not know where he is now?"

"Not in the very least; abroad most likely, for the sunny south suited his pleasure-loving nature best. He had no energy, and I hate men without it. Men are born to fight in the battle of life, but John Temple stood smiling at it; he will never succeed in anything, and I love success."

"And you have achieved it."

"Not as much as I wish, but I am fighting for it, and will fight to the end. John Temple is a dreamer; but we can not live in dreams. Had he been worth anything his name would have been known now at the bar, as yours is."

"And—" hesitated Webster, "you have heard nothing of him lately?"

"Not a word. But you seem interested? Have you ever met him?"

"I think not," answered Webster. "Do you know to what family of Temples he belongs?"

"I can not even tell you that. He told me he was a younger son's son, I remember, and he was fairly well off, and by no means given to extravagance, though in his first ardor he actually gave me the diamond earrings that so nearly got me into trouble—but for you."

"It is kind of you to say so."

"It is true; that woman Margaret Johnstone, who was as brazen as brass, broke down under your cross-examination like a reed with the strong wind. How powerful you were! Every word told."

"You must not flatter me."

"I never flatter; but the truth is that you have deservedly made a name, and will make a still greater one. I shall swagger some day that my case was won by the great Q. C., Sir Ralph Webster."

Ralph Webster laughed, and a faint color stole to his dark face, and then he rose to take his leave.

"Going so soon?" said Kathleen Weir. "Then I must conclude you are tired of my company."

"Please conclude nothing of the sort, but I am going to dine with two very kind old aunts at Bayswater, and I must not keep them waiting."

"No, of course not," and Kathleen Weir held out her white hand. "I am coming out in a new piece to-morrow; will you go and see me act, and then have supper with me afterward?"

"It is a most tempting invitation—"

"That is settled then, and now I will give you a ticket, or tickets, whichever you like. But I warn you not to bring the aunts, as the piece is a trifle fast."

"Still I should like to see it—and to see you act."

"Of course you must say that!" And Kathleen Weir rose and laughed as she did so, and, having crossed the room, she opened an inlaid cabinet, and brought out some stall tickets and placed two in Webster's hand.

"One is for to-morrow; the other for Friday—and good-by for the present; this has been your first visit to me, but I trust it will not be your last."

"I am quite sure it will not if you give me permission to come."

"I do give you permission; you will always be welcome here."

They shook hands and parted; and after Webster was gone Kathleen Weir went to a mirror at one side of the room and looked at herself attentively.

"I wonder if he thinks me good-looking," she was reflecting. "What a clever face he has! He is a man I think that a woman could be desperately in love with; that she could give up everything for, though more fool she! Luckily, I never fall in love, and I mean to stick to this in spite of Mr. Webster."

In the meanwhile Ralph Webster had called a cab, and was being driven to Pembridge Terrace in—for him—a strange state of excitement. The story he had just heard—the story of a wife forsaken by a John Temple—had filled his mind with a sudden suspicion. Could this be the John Temple who had married the fair girl in secret, now living under his aunt's roof? Was this the cause of his secrecy? This other wife, of whom he had tired, had left to fight her own way in the world. It seemed feasible, and if it were so, how was he himself to act? Could he throw a bombshell in this poor child's path, and in a moment destroy all her happiness and hopes? But on the other hand—and Webster frowned and bit his lips.

"He must be a cursed scoundrel if he has wronged her so cruelly," he muttered, and he determined during the evening to obtain from his aunts a complete personal description of the

John Temple who had married May Churchill.

“No doubt Miss Weir has some portrait of her lost husband,” he thought a little scornfully; “but at all events he did not break her heart. Her description of a dead love was not bad. However, she is a woman I could not love.”

The woman he could love was in Miss Webster’s drawing-room alone when he entered it, and as he did so May held out her hand with a smile.

“You have come to tell us all about your visit to the pretty actress?” she said.

“Yes,” he answered a little grimly.

“And is she very pretty? Does she look as well off the stage as on?”

“She looks very well off, at all events, and I have never seen her on, but I am going to see her to-morrow.”

May laughed her sweet girlish laugh.

“And is she nice?” she said. “How does she talk?”

“I don’t think you could call her nice. She talks in a hard, worldly fashion, but she is clever. She puts things in a quaint, original way that somehow has a certain charm in it. No, nice is not the word for Miss Kathleen Weir.”

“And what did she talk about?”

“She discoursed on the folly of loving anyone if they had ceased to love you.”

The rose-bloom deepened on May’s cheek.

“But,” she hesitated, “if—if you had really loved anyone I do not think you could cease to love them because they had tired of you.”

“And you really think,” went on Ralph Webster with a ring of pain in his voice, and with his dark, searching eyes fixed on May’s fair face, “that if you had cared for anyone and found out they were unworthy, that you would not change?”

“I think love can not change,” answered May in a low tone, and Ralph Webster suppressed a sigh as she spoke.

“Perhaps not,” he said, slowly, but at this moment Aunt Eliza entered the room, and hurried up to him with her kind welcoming hand.

“My dear Ralph,” she said, “I did not know you were here, or I should have been down before.”

“I have been hearing all about Miss Kathleen Weir, the actress, Miss Eliza,” said May, smiling.

“Oh! my dear—well, it may be an old-fashioned prejudice, I dare say it is—but I do not like actresses,” sighed Miss Eliza.

“It’s all a matter of training,” said Ralph Webster; “fancy Aunt Eliza on the stage!”

“Oh, Ralph, how can you say such things?” said Miss Eliza, reproachfully.

Ralph Webster laughed, and then the conversation changed. But before he left Pembridge Terrace for the night he took an opportunity of speaking to Miss Margaret Webster alone.

“Aunt Margaret,” he said, “what is Mr. John Temple like who married your pretty guest?”

“Good-looking; yes, I should say very good-looking indeed,” answered Miss Webster; “he has such a pleasant expression, and nice gray eyes.”

“Gray eyes,” repeated Webster, thoughtfully; he was remembering Miss Kathleen Weir’s description of her husband.

“Yes, gray eyes with dark lashes. But Ralph, my dear, if you would like to see it, I have a photograph of him?”

“I should like to see it,” answered her nephew; and Miss Webster at once rose and produced her old-fashioned photograph book.

“This is our dear father,” she said, turning to one page, and pointing out a mild-faced old gentleman in clerical garb; “and this, Ralph, is your dear father—ah! looking at this book always makes me a little sad, and brings back old times.”

“Yes,” said Ralph Webster, glancing somewhat impatiently at his grandfather and father; “but where is this wonderful Mr. Temple?”

Miss Webster then turned over several more pages of her book; pages where she and Miss Eliza were represented as young girls, then as young women in costumes of other days. Finally, she pointed to the smiling, good-looking face of a young man.

“This is Mr. John Temple,” she said, “and is exactly like what he was when—he resided here; but he looks rather older now.”

“He is certainly good-looking,” answered Webster, slowly, looking steadily at the face portrayed before him.

“There is no doubt of that, and he has a very pleasant manner, and one can not wonder at his young wife being so much attached to him. There is only one thing I do not like; that I can not approve of.”

“You mean that the marriage was a secret one?”

“Yes, and he made such a point of the secrecy. He said for both their sakes it must not be mentioned.”

“Perhaps he had good reason to keep it quiet,” said Ralph Webster.

“Oh! my dear, I hope not! Only he is afraid of his uncle’s anger, I suppose.”

“Perhaps so,” and then Ralph Webster shook hands with his aunt and went away; but as he walked down the quiet street he made up his mind to make further inquiries about Miss Kathleen Weir’s husband.

CHAPTER XXVII.
AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH.

The next evening, or rather in the early hours of another day, four people were seated around the hospitable board of Kathleen Weir. One of these was the actress herself, her eyes bright with joy, her cheeks flushed with excitement, for the new play had been a great success, and the character of the heroine—passionate, loving, and impulsive—had suited her, and had won genuine applause from a crowded house. And her three guests consisted of Ralph Webster, another actress, and her present lover.

This other actress was of a very different type to Kathleen Weir. If she had not been beautiful she would have been nowhere on the stage. But she was beautiful; a sleepy, languid beauty, with a skin of snow, and shadowed dreamy eyes whose power she knew. And seated near her at the round supper table was young Lord Dereham, with his eyes fixed eagerly on her face.

Lord Dereham—the Earl of Dereham—had only very lately come into his great possessions. He was rather good-looking, with an honest, open expression, and the fair woman by his side had made up her mind, in her cold-hearted, calculating way, that she would become his wife. She was not in the least in love with him, but she wished to be a countess, and have nothing to do but amuse herself, and she was doing her best to obtain these luxuries.

Her name was Linda Falconer—the lovely Falconer the men called her—and her intended quarry at the present moment was Robert, Lord Dereham. Kathleen Weir had invited these two with a motive. She knew Linda Falconer would devote herself to Dereham, and that thus without being alone with Ralph Webster, that she would virtually be so.

They had laughed and jested about the new play; Kathleen, in her quick way and with her strong sense of humor, had brightly related little incidents that had occurred during the evening. She was not afraid of Linda Falconer’s white skin and dreamy eyes; she knew Linda had no wit, and that her beauty was all she had to depend on. Kathleen, on the other hand, had many resources. She was handsome, or seemed so; she was clever, and somehow she fancied that Ralph Webster was not a man who cared only for charms that were skin deep.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet in her lithe way.

“As all you good people seem to have finished supper,” she said, “suppose we go into the other room and I will sing you a song.”

Ralph Webster at once rose.

“I am too weary to move,” said Linda Falconer, with a languid glance at Lord Dereham.

“Stay where you are then, my dear,” replied her hostess; “and you will still have the advantage of listening to my warblings. Will you stay, too?” And she looked directly at Ralph Webster.

“I will go with you, if I may?” he answered.

She smiled her saucy smile.

“Come then,” she said, and the two passed together through the draped archway that divided the two rooms.

“How sentimental that young idiot looks,” she remarked as she opened the piano.

Webster smiled, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s his calf-love, I suppose,” he said.

“From which he will speedily awake, if he does what Linda Falconer means him to do. But what matter! Yet, poor boy, I half pity him with his round, honest brown eyes fixed on her face.”

“She is a beautiful woman.”

“Yes, she is,” answered Kathleen, sharply, “with a heart of stone. There is no thought of human affection in her; neither love nor hate. She means to marry Dereham because he is Dereham, and I dare say she will succeed. She holds the whip hand, you see, because she gives him nothing.”

“And you call that holding the whip hand?”

“I mean the more a woman gives a man the less he gives her. There, sir, that is my experience, and I hope you will profit by it.”

“I will endeavor to do so.”

“Don’t sneer; that expression does not suit your face. You look best when you look earnest, and put on what I call your fighting look. But I am forgetting my song; stand here and turn over the leaves, and be sure you do not turn two together.”

Webster did as she bade him; he stood by her side and arranged her music, and the next minute or so a sweet flood of melody filled the room. Kathleen Weir had a ringing voice; a voice that somehow kept you spellbound until its last notes had died away. There was a thrill of passion in it too, as if the singer’s soul were echoing her words. Webster leaned on the piano, and drooped his eyelids listening, for these passion-swept strains stirred a strange emotion in his own breast. A flower-like face rose before his mental vision, and he sighed restlessly, and Kathleen Weir, glancing at him quickly, saw that she had touched some hidden chord in his heart.

“This man has loved someone once,” thought the keen-eyed woman, “or—does my voice charm him?”

The last thought pleased her best. Fuller and sweeter became her song; brighter and more radiant her eyes. But Webster was not looking at her. He gave a little jerk and pulled himself together when it was all over, and then for the first time since she had commenced singing he remembered he was standing by the side of Miss Kathleen Weir.

“Did you like that?” she asked, softly.

“I more than liked it,” he answered. “Miss Weir, you have the voice of a siren, and could charm any mariner down into the deep sea.”

“And how about a landsman?” she asked, archly.

“I would ask mercy for a landsman, but would advise him not to listen to your voice too often.”

“Then—you do not wish to be charmed?”

“As I am already, it is too late for me to express such a wish.”

“Then I shall sing you another song for making such a pretty speech.”

So she sang again, but the two in the next room remained where they were; the boy happy and entranced, the woman calculating and cold. Then Kathleen Weir tired of singing, and turned around on her music-stool and talked to Webster.

“Bring a chair,” she said to him, “and let us have a chat—or no, I will sit on the rug; I am like a cat, and love the warmth.”

She was like a cat, also, in the extraordinary suppleness of her limbs. She curled herself up now on the soft, white rug before the fire, and leaned back on a couch near, and fanned herself with a great feather fan.

“Now tell me something of your life,” she said, looking up at Webster, who had drawn a chair toward the fire also.

“What part of it?” he asked, looking down smilingly at the graceful woman before him.

“Oh, all of it! Were you a good boy, or a bad boy?”

“Distinctly a bad boy.”

“And a good man, or a bad man?”

“I’ve had no time to be either; I am simply a working man.”

“And—and—how shall I put it? You are not married, I presume?”

“No, I am not.”

“Nor engaged?”

“Nor engaged.”

“Happy man! You are free, then—absolutely free to do what you like?”

“I have at least no one to control me.”

“I have no one to control me, and yet I am not free,” said Kathleen Weir, half-bitterly. “I think I ought to look up that husband of mine, and see if he has not given me good cause to get rid of him altogether. What do you think, Mr. Webster?”

“I think it would be only fair to yourself.”

“I am beginning to think so, too. There is the three hundred a year to be considered, certainly, but I can command a good income now. Yes—I should rather be free.”

“And would you marry again?”

“How can I tell?” And a wave of color rose to her face. “If I did I would not marry as Linda Falconer wishes to do. I would not marry some titled boy for the sake of his name; I would marry—well, a man who has made his own.”

“You love ambition in men, then?”

“Yes, distinctly yes! I should like to look up to the man I married, not down.”

“What is your present husband, Mr. Temple, like?” asked Webster, somewhat abruptly. “Have you a portrait of him?”

“I believe I have, somewhere; as to looks he was all right.”

“May I see his portrait? I may know him by sight; I may help you to be free.”

Kathleen Weir rose from her lowly position, and crossing the room, opened an unlocked marquetry cabinet.

“There used to be one here somewhere,” she said, “but I have not seen it for ages. The last time I saw it I remember I turned its face to the wall. Ah, here it is—yes, this is John Temple.” And she shook a little dust off the photograph as she spoke.

Webster eagerly crossed the room and took the photograph from her hand. For a moment he did not recognize the face; it was certainly not a copy of the same photograph that Miss Webster had shown him. It was a picture of a young man—almost a boy—but as he closely scanned the features he became convinced that the John Temple he was now gazing at was the same John Temple who had married May Churchill.

He muttered something between his teeth which made Kathleen Weir look quickly up in his face.

“Do you know anything of him?” she asked.

“I may; I don’t quite know. Will you let me keep this photograph for one day? I wish to compare it with another.”

“Keep it forever, if you like. How strange if you should know anything of John Temple!”

“There are many strange things in life.”

“That is true; strange sympathies; strange hidden ties. We are drawn to some people, are we not, and repelled by others? We are wonderful creatures.”

“Yes,” answered Webster, slowly. He was scarcely listening to her; he was still gazing at the photograph he held in his hand, and wondering how he ought to act.

“May I ask you a question?” he said, a moment later, looking at Kathleen Weir.

“Of course you may.”

“Where were you married?”

“Do you mean in what church?”

“I mean in what place. Were you married in London?”

“Yes, certainly; I was married in an old city church called St. Jude’s. We were married there because it was out of the way, I suppose. John Temple chose the church, and I went and lived a fortnight in the parish before it took place.”

“And—forgive me—you cared for him then?”

“Yes; more fool I! But why do you ask all these questions? You make me curious.”

At this moment the curtain dividing the two rooms moved, and the beautiful actress, Linda Falconer, stepped between them, followed by her young lover.

“We have come to ask you for another song, Kate,” said Miss Falconer, languidly. “Dereham, here, is quite enchanted with your voice.”

“He will not be enchanted any more to-night, then,” answered Kathleen Weir; “this man and I,” and she nodded at Webster as she spoke, “have been talking of old times, and singing would seem frivolous after our conversation.”

“Ah! I did not know you knew Mr. Webster long ago.” And Miss Falconer rested for a moment her dreamy eyes on Webster’s dark face.

“I knew him in some spirit-land, I believe,” said Kathleen, with a light laugh. “I really feel as if I had known you somewhere else, do you know, Mr. Webster. Where can it have been.”

“In some spirit-land, perhaps, as you say,” answered Webster, with a smile. “But I must go now, and may I really take this photograph with me? I will return it the day after to-morrow.”

“Take it by all means, and come to supper the day after to-morrow. You may have something to tell me,” she added, significantly.

“I may; I can not tell. Good-night, Miss Weir.”

He shook hands with the others after this, and went away carrying the photograph with him. He was now almost convinced that the John Temple who had married May Churchill was the same John Temple who had married Kathleen Weir. If this were so May was not his wife, and Kathleen was! Webster’s dark face flushed, and his heart beat faster as he thought of it. But suddenly he remembered May’s words about faithfulness in love. Would she change even if she knew the man she had married to be completely unworthy? She might and she might not, and greatly disturbed in mind Ralph Webster returned to his chambers, and when he got there drew out the old photograph and examined again the somewhat faded likeness of the man he had never seen.

But the next morning brought him a letter, which more surely confirmed his suspicions. This was from Kathleen Weir herself, and the subject of it was her husband, John Temple.

“Dear Mr. Webster,” she wrote, “you had scarcely gone to-night, when I heard something that has surprised me greatly. It seems that Linda Falconer, in the pleasant way that we all talk of our

friends' sins or sorrows, had been telling Lord Dereham, when I was singing to you, all about my unfortunate marriage, of which he had never heard. When she mentioned John Temple's name Dereham pricked up his ears. 'Is that the man,' he said, 'who not long ago came into a fortune by his young cousin being killed at football?' Now if this is my John Temple who has come into a fortune, it is a very plain fact that he should increase my allowance to something more respectable than a paltry three hundred a year. And I want you to find out this for me. I receive my income from him through a certain Mr. Harrison, a solicitor, and I inclose Mr. Harrison's address. Will you go to him and make inquiries? I will think it most awfully good of you if you will, and I shall be eternally grateful to you if I were not so already! I am treating you as a friend, for I feel somehow that you are one, and the thought is very pleasant to me. Write after you have seen Harrison, and come the day after to-morrow to supper.

"Yours most sincerely,

"KATHLEEN WEIR."

There was no longer any doubt in Ralph Webster's mind after he had read this letter as to the identity of the John Temple who had married two women. But there was a doubt; a strange vivid doubt as to how he should act under such painful circumstances. Before him rose the sweet, girlish face of May Churchill, with her glad eyes and quiet happiness; and then he thought of the change this cruel news would bring. The light would fade from her eyes, and the color from her smooth cheeks, and a crushing sense of shame and sorrow overshadow her young life. He tried to put his own feelings out of the question. The passionate beating of his heart he would not listen to.

"I must think what would be best for her," he told himself; "but at all events I will go and see Harrison, and learn the whole story, as far as he knows of it."

Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, was a personal acquaintance of his own. He had given him a couple of briefs, and they always exchanged friendly nods when they met. He only needed some slight excuse to pay Harrison a visit, and he soon found one on some point of law which he affected not quite to understand.

The solicitor received him almost with effusion. He was a little bustling man, and had a large business, and a rising barrister was always a person of consideration to him. He had not seen Webster since Kathleen Weir's diamond case had been in court, and he quickly proceeded to compliment Webster on the way he had conducted the cross-examination of the maid.

"Ah, very good, very good indeed, Mr. Webster," he said rubbing his hands together to express his satisfaction. "You tackled her splendidly, and it was a somewhat awkward affair for the handsome actress unless it had been cleared up. Very good-looking woman Miss Kathleen Weir, though of course, that isn't her real name."

"Is it not?" answered Webster, trying not to show his eager interest.

"No, no, no; there's a bit of romance connected with Miss Weir's life that, strange to say, I've been connected with for some years. She's a married woman in fact; married to a certain Mr. John Temple, who is a client of ours; but they are separated by mutual consent, and Mr. Temple allows her a fair income to live on, but, of course, she does not need it; I am told she commands high prices on the stage, but still it is only right that Mr. John Temple should allow her something."

"Mr. John Temple," repeated Webster, quietly; "is that the man who became heir to a large fortune not long ago, by the death of his young cousin during a game of football?"

Mr. Harrison nodded his head.

"The very man, Mr. Webster! Yes, Mr. John Temple has been born under a lucky star I think. He is now heir to his uncle Mr. Temple of Woodlea Hall, a large land-owner, and a rich man to boot. But I have not told Miss Kathleen Weir of this windfall; you see she might be setting up claims that would annoy Mr. John Temple; asking for a larger allowance perhaps, or even to take his name."

"To which I suppose she has a legal right?"

"Yes, unfortunately I fear so; nay it is so. In his hot young days you see he was led away to hang a millstone round his neck, just like many young men, and now, no doubt, he bitterly repents it. Ah, it's a great mistake—a great mistake when a young fellow marries beneath him."

"No doubt, but, Mr. Harrison, I am keeping you from your work and must no longer detain you. Thank you for answering my question, and now I must say good-morning."

"Good-morning, Mr. Webster; very pleased to have seen you," and the little man bustled about saying many pleasant things. But Webster soon cut him short and went away. He had learned all that Mr. Harrison could tell him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISCOVERY.

Women in general have a strong interest in jewels, and in stories connected with them, and

Mrs. Temple of Woodlea was no exception to this rule. Thus the day after Kathleen Weir's diamond case had been decided she was reading it in the morning papers, when her husband's nephew John Temple entered the breakfast-room.

He shook hands with her and then with his uncle in his usual pleasant fashion, but had scarcely begun his breakfast when Mrs. Temple commenced talking about the actress' diamonds.

"There is such a strange case in the papers this morning," she said, addressing John Temple; "an actress, Kathleen Weir, has had her diamonds stolen in a most extraordinary manner."

John Temple was in the act of helping himself to some toast from the toast-rack as Mrs. Temple made the remark, and for a moment his hand remained suspended, and a dusky wave of color rose to his face.

"Do you know her?" asked Mrs. Temple, quickly, instantly noticing these signs of agitation.

"No," answered John Temple, a little huskily, and then he took the toast, but left it untasted on his plate.

"Have they recovered the diamonds then?" asked the squire.

"No, I suppose not; her maid had taken them and substituted false ones in the same settings. But here is the account; you had better read it." And Mrs. Temple handed the newspaper to her husband.

John Temple said nothing; he began slowly eating his breakfast, but apparently without appetite, and then he opened another newspaper and turned to the column containing the trial of Margaret Johnstone for diamond stealing.

"So," he said, a little scornfully, after he had read it, "this young lady, Miss Kathleen Weir, seemingly was tired of some of her diamonds, and wished to dispose of them?"

"Perhaps she was tired of the man who gave them to her?" replied Mrs. Temple.

"Very likely," said John, with a little shrug of his shoulders; "of the poor fool who perhaps impoverished himself to give her gauds."

"And then perhaps also tired of her?" retorted Mrs. Temple.

Again John Temple shrugged his shoulders and sat somewhat moodily glancing over the newspapers, while his uncle's wife followed his movements with her handsome dark eyes. He interested her, this good-looking man who had taken her dead boy's place, and having him at Woodlea made the house seem less dull. She had a strong craving for excitement, and to her anything was better than the wearisome company of her old husband. And she could not understand John Temple. He was always gentle and friendly in his manner to her, but he was never confidential. And this annoyed her. Unconsciously almost to herself she was beginning to regard him with warmer feelings than she would have cared to own. At all events she was jealous of him, and half-believed that for his sake May Churchill had left her home.

So when breakfast was over, and the squire after his usual fashion had retired to his library, Mrs. Temple went up to John, who was still reading the newspapers, and lightly touched his shoulder.

"If the truth were known, sir," she said, smiling, "I believe you could tell us something about Miss Kathleen Weir's diamonds."

Again a flush rose to John Temple's face, but this time it was an angry one.

"What makes you say such a thing?" he answered quickly.

"Because I was watching you when you first heard of the robbery. Ah, my nephew John, I fear you are not as good as you look."

"You have a most brilliant imagination, my handsome aunt!"

"Do not call me by that odious name! But perhaps I have more discernment than you give me credit for."

"I gave you credit for every good quality; discernment among the rest."

Mrs. Temple nodded her head and stood by his side looking down at his face. She saw he was more annoyed than he cared to show. And she knew there must be some cause for this, for as a rule John Temple was very even tempered. But she did not say anything more about the diamonds, and after a moment or two she turned away, and John Temple was left to his own reflections.

His expression changed after she left the room, and he frowned, stirred uneasily, and once more read over the evidence given at Miss Kathleen Weir's jewel case. And a bitter look came over his face as he did so; a look of contempt and scorn, and flinging down the newspaper he went to the window of the room, and stood looking out moodily at the wide park, which one day would be his own.

"I have paid pretty heavily for a boy's folly," he muttered, "and some day, my sweet flower, it may fall on you."

And this thought stung him sharply. He loved his Mayflower, as he called her, with a true and passionate love, and he would have given up almost anything for her sake. Her beauty, her tenderness, and her devotion to himself had entirely won his heart. Before he had met May Churchill he had been almost indifferent to the consequences of the "boy's folly," which now

galled him so deeply. But he little guessed how near the shadow of it was stealing across his path.

Yet this knowledge came to him only a day later after the conversation about the actress' demands had taken place between himself and his uncle's wife. He went down to breakfast on this particular morning rather earlier than usual, but the letters and newspapers had already arrived, and placed near his usual seat at the table was a large letter directed in the now well-known handwriting of Miss Webster.

He knew that this would contain an inclosure from May, and so he quietly put the envelope into his pocket without any comment.

"More bills?" said Mrs. Temple, looking at him with a curious little smile.

"I am afraid so," he answered, and his uncle glanced up at him over his newspaper with some uneasiness in his expression as he spoke.

John Temple, however, did not seem at all disconcerted. He was always glad to hear from May, and the very fact that he had a letter in his pocket from her gave him a feeling of quiet happiness. He, therefore, talked cheerfully during the rest of the meal, but as soon as it was over he left the room, carrying his letters away with him, and Mrs. Temple looked after him as he went.

Let us follow him upstairs to the small suite of rooms which had been set apart for him by his uncle's wish. These consisted of a sitting-room where he smoked, a bedroom adjoining, and a little ante-room which had a stone balcony overlooking the park.

John Temple went into his sitting-room, which opened from a corridor, and having pushed the door nearly close behind him, he pulled out his letter and began reading May's fond tender words with a smile.

Then suddenly his face darkened.

"We have been all greatly interested," he read, "about a diamond robbery, which, I dare say, you have seen in the newspapers. The maid of the popular and, I believe, pretty actress, Miss Kathleen Weir, had stolen her mistress' diamonds and substituted false ones instead of them. How we came to hear so much about it is that Mr. Webster, the nephew of the Miss Websters, was one of the barristers in the case for the prosecution and Miss Kathleen Weir was so pleased by the way Mr. Webster conducted it that she invited him to her house. He says she is handsome and clever, but not exactly what he calls 'nice.' But all the same I think he rather admires her, and their acquaintance seems to progress, in spite of the alarm of his dear old aunts! Did you ever see her? Some time when you are in town—and when is that dear time to be?—you must take me to see her act."

John Temple went on frowning as he read these innocent words. Here was a mine under his feet indeed! He knew the nature of Kathleen Weir; the outspoken frank nature, that was just as likely as not to confide her whole history to a stranger. What if she told of her early marriage to this Webster, who might repeat it to his aunts? He had warned the Misses Webster to keep his marriage to May a secret, and May did not bear his name. Still in some moment the old ladies might reveal it to their nephew, and then no one could tell where the mischief might end.

John Temple flung the letter on the table and began walking restlessly up and down the room, thinking what it would be best to do. "She must leave Pembridge Terrace at once," he decided. But then, how could this be arranged? If he went up to town he might meet Webster, and May was too young and girlish to go about house-seeking alone.

"That confounded woman," he thought bitterly of Kathleen Weir, "is forever in my way."

He was full of impatience, chafing against fate and the mad folly of his youth. The door of the bedroom beyond was standing open, and farther still he could see from the balcony window of the ante-room a green patch of the park. He went into this ante-room, opened the window and stepped out on the balcony, still cursing his ill-luck. He did not see, as he leaned over the balustrade, that someone had entered his sitting-room, on the table of which the letter from May was lying open.

Yet this was so. Moved by curiosity, and a more subtle feeling still, Mrs. Temple had followed him upstairs, shortly after he had left the breakfast room. She sometimes—not often—went into his sitting-room if she had anything that she wished particularly to say to him, and something prompted her to go into it now. The door was very slightly ajar, and she pushed it open and entered the room, and in a moment her eyes fell on the open letter on the table.

She made a step forward and looked at it. Then she read the words with which it commenced:

"My dearest, dearest John."

Her breath came fast, her heart beat quickly, and she put out her hand as if to take it up, but glancing to the open bedroom door she saw John Temple leaning on the balustrade of the ante-room balcony beyond, and her hand shrank back.

But again she looked at the letter; looked at the address in Pembridge Terrace, which was neatly printed on the paper. She noted this in an instant, but as she did so John Temple turned his head, and Mrs. Temple quickly moved back, and left the room, without his having ever been conscious that she had been there.

But she had made a discovery; a discovery which filled her heart with jealous anger. As she walked on to her room she decided in her own mind that it was the missing girl, May Churchill,

who had addressed John Temple as “My dearest, dearest John.”

“Shameful!” she thought, bitterly; “absolutely shameful; and what a liar he is, but his uncle shall know—he shall bitterly repent the part he has played.”

She walked up and down her room in a state of the greatest excitement. It seemed to her as if John Temple had done her some personal wrong, which he certainly had not. She had allowed herself to be attracted by him—to fill the waste in her heart—but he had never for a moment forgotten she was his uncle’s wife. He had pitied her in her grief about her dead boy, and his manner was always gentle and kindly to women, but he did not even admire her; she was too excitable, too uncertain in her temper, for his taste.

“But I must bring it home to him,” she now told herself; “it’s no use striking until I can bring it home—I will send for young Henderson.”

She accordingly sat down at her desk and began a letter to Henderson. At first she thought of asking him to the Hall, but afterward remembered that this might look strange to her husband and John Temple. No, she must meet him somewhere about the country, and she paused, pen in hand, thinking where it should be.

She decided in a few minutes, and then addressed the following letter to Henderson:

“Dear Mr. Henderson: Will you meet me to-morrow in the lane that leads to the West Lodge, at half-past three o’clock? I shall be walking, as I do not wish anyone to know of this appointment, and if I am not there at the time I mention, it will only be that it is absolutely impossible that I can manage to go. In that case I will go on the following afternoon, at the same time. At last I have something to tell you on the subject we talked of before; it is almost a certainty this time. In haste, yours very truly,

“R. Temple.”

She took this letter with her own hands to the nearest village post-office, not caring to place it among the other letters in the post-bag lying on the hall table, and as she was returning from her errand she encountered John Temple on the road, who was also going to the post office.

Her face flushed deeply as she met him, and a scarcely repressible feeling of anger rose in her heart; while John Temple, ignorant of the cause, looked at her with his usually pleasant smile.

“So you are taking a walk?” he said.

She hardly answered him. She was a very passionate woman, and could not hide her feelings. She stood looking at him, burning to accuse him of what she deemed his treachery and deception.

“And are you,” she said, presently, very bitterly, “carrying a letter to some hidden lady-love; a letter that you do not wish the household to see?”

John Temple was conscious that he slightly changed color.

“You are always accusing me of something or other,” he said.

“Perhaps I have good cause,” she retorted, with such marked emphasis that John Temple felt somewhat uneasy.

“I hope not,” he replied; “I have always done my best to avoid offending you.”

Mrs. Temple deigned to make no reply. She gave a little toss of her head and walked on her way, and John went his, reflecting what a sad thing it was for a woman to have a bad temper!

And all the rest of the day it was the same thing. When Mrs. Temple spoke to him at all, it was either in taunting or bitter words. Her husband even noticed this, and asked why she spoke thus to his nephew.

“You will soon learn,” she answered, and the squire said nothing more. He was accustomed to the changeful temper of his handsome wife, but all the same he was sorry that her manner had changed to John Temple.

And the next morning, at breakfast, John noticed how restless she was. There was some disturbing element in her mind he plainly saw, though he had no idea it was caused by himself. He had, as we know, his own anxieties and troubles, but he never dreamed of Mrs. Temple’s being connected with them.

In the meantime at Stourton Grange her letter had caused the strongest excitement in young Henderson’s breast, for she had discovered something about May Churchill, he told himself; something connected with Temple, no doubt. He waited impatiently until the time she had appointed to meet him came, and then walked to the lane that led to the West Lodge at Woodlea Hall. Here he waited nearly half an hour before Mrs. Temple appeared. At last, however, he saw her, and went eagerly forward to meet her.

“You got my letter?” said Mrs. Temple, as she shook hands with him.

“Yes, this morning,” answered Henderson, quickly, and his brown face flushed as he spoke. “You have something to tell me?”

Mrs. Temple gave a little scornful laugh.

“I have discovered, I think, where the beauty that all you men raved about is hidden; but I must be sure,” she said. “You guess what I mean? A letter came for John Temple yesterday morning—a passionate love letter—from this address,” and as she spoke she drew out the address that she

had seen on May's letter to John, and placed it in Henderson's hand. "I am almost sure this letter was from Miss Churchill."

"Did you see it?" asked Henderson, eagerly, and with quivering lips.

"I saw the first lines of it. It was lying open on a table in his room when I went in, and I have no doubt it was from her. But I want you to find out this; to go up to town and see this girl yourself—I mean to watch the house until she comes out of it. Do not speak to her or call upon her, or perhaps she would again disappear. But if what I believe is true John Temple shall bitterly repent the gross deception he has practiced on us all."

Henderson ground his strong white teeth together.

"And you believe," he said, hoarsely, "that—that May Churchill—is anything to Temple?"

Mrs. Temple laughed bitterly.

"I believe she is everything to him," she answered. "The letter I saw began, 'My dearest, dearest John.'"

A fierce oath broke from Henderson's lips.

"If I believed he had wronged this girl—" he began.

"He may have married her," replied Mrs. Temple, scornfully. "At all events, if she wrote this letter there is no doubt of the connection between them."

"Some other woman may have written it."

"That is what I want you to find out. Will you go to town to learn the truth, and when?"

"I will go to-morrow; no, I will go to-night; I will be at the bottom of this, and if it is as you think, Mr. Temple will find his mistake."

"Do not act like a fool, and get into any trouble about her. But find out, and then write to me at once all particulars. If you see her, follow her at a distance, and ask at the nearest shops what name she goes by. Keep the address safe, and now good-by."

"I am not likely to lose the address," answered Henderson, sullenly, as he placed it in his pocket-book. "Good-by, Mrs. Temple, I will let you know what I find out, and then—"

"Do nothing until you have heard from me. Good-by; I believe now you are on the right track."

CHAPTER XXIX.
MRS. JOHN.

Henderson parted from Mrs. Temple with every nerve in his body throbbing with excitement. In spite of May Churchill's rejection of his love, his unreasonable passion for her remained unchanged. There were times when he felt he hated her; when he cursed her memory, and blamed her for the undying remorse that overshadowed his soul. But for her, he often told himself, the miserable girl who had loved him too well might have been living still, and he himself free from the galling chains held by his groom, Jack Reid.

But if he hated May, it was a sort of loving hatred, while his feelings to John Temple were of the bitterest description. He believed but that for Temple, May would ultimately have become his wife; and as he strode down the lane, after parting with Mrs. Temple, he seemed to see again, in his mental vision, John lying at May's feet in Fern Dene in the early days of their first acquaintance.

And that he should have induced her to leave her home; that she was writing to him in the terms described by Mrs. Temple, positively seemed to madden him.

"But it may be some other woman," he told himself, as he had told Mrs. Temple. But at all events he would find out, and on his return to the Grange, to his mother's great surprise, and not a little alarm, he told her he was about to start for London in a few hours.

Hidden anxiety and grief had wrought their baneful work now on Mrs. Henderson's face. The terrible knowledge of her son's crime, the awful dread of its punishment, were ever present in her mind. She had grown old before her time, and watched Henderson with unceasing eyes of fear.

Thus when she heard of his sudden journey she could scarcely suppress her nervousness. Henderson, too, was moody and reserved, and hurried on his preparations for departure.

"Will you be long away?" inquired Mrs. Henderson.

"But a few days at most," he answered, and he told the same story to his groom, Jack Reid.

"This is something sudden," said Reid, looking at him suspiciously. It crossed the man's mind, indeed, that his master was about to leave Stourton for a much longer time than he stated.

"I'll be back probably the day after to-morrow," said Henderson, with affected carelessness; and Reid felt he could say nothing more, for he had grown certainly more respectful in his manner to his master after the episode of the shooting of Brown Bess.

“A man who would try his hand at that kind of thing might do it again,” self-argued the groom; and Reid was not one who cared to be shot at if he could help it.

So Henderson left Stourton, and having arrived in town, he went for the night to an hotel, and the next morning drove in the direction of the address which he had received from Mrs. Temple. And Fate actually favored him, for quitting his cab before he reached Pembridge Terrace, he walked up the terrace, and after passing Miss Webster’s house for a few yards he turned back again, and as he did so he saw, in a moment, descending the steps in front of the house a figure and face that he only remembered too well.

It was May Churchill, and closely following her came the prim, neat form of Miss Eliza Webster. They opened the garden gate and then went on the street, and Henderson was so near them that had May turned her head she must have recognized him. But she was smiling and talking to Miss Eliza, and never looked back, but Henderson distinctly saw the face that had cost him so dear. He paused a minute or two, and then slowly followed the two ladies before him. They went on to Westbourne Grove, and into a large bonnet and hat shop at the corner of the street. Henderson lingered outside at a little distance from the shop, and after waiting about a quarter of an hour May and Miss Eliza once more appeared, and turned their footsteps homeward. Again Henderson followed them, his heart throbbing violently and his eyes never leaving May’s form. They went straight back to the address Mrs. Temple had given him, and Henderson now knew Mrs. Temple’s surmise had been correct. John Temple had persuaded her to leave her home, and had hidden her away, and Henderson could scarcely suppress the passionate rage that swelled in his breast when he thought of it.

He was tempted to go on; to speak to May, and heap reproach on her head. But he knew he had no right to do this. She might be John Temple’s wife, for anything he knew, and what good could his hard words do? None, he felt. He might, he would, punish John Temple, but what could he do to the girl? With a curse between his bitten lips he turned away, and walking back to the shop he had seen May and Miss Webster enter and leave, he went in under the pretense of buying a bonnet for his mother.

“I want a bonnet for an old lady,” he said to a pretty, smiling shopwoman, adding immediately afterward: “Who were the two ladies who have just been here—I saw them go out—a young lady and an old one?”

The pretty shopgirl smiled pertly, and instantly understood the motive of the purchase of the bonnet for “an old lady,” by this handsome young man.

“You mean Mrs. John, I suppose, sir?” she said. “She is a very handsome young lady, and it is astonishing how many gentlemen admire her and ask about her, but she is certainly very pretty.”

“And does she live near here?” inquired Henderson.

“She lives in Pembridge Terrace with the Misses Webster. She is a newly-married lady, but I believe her husband is a good deal away. She is a customer of ours, and is often in the shop.”

“And her name is—”

“Mrs. John; rather a strange name, isn’t it, sir?”

“Mrs. John,” repeated Henderson, beneath his breath, but he did nothing more. He understood it all now; she had run away with John Temple, and was called Mrs. John, and he needed no further information.

He forgot all about the bonnet for his mother until the shopwoman reminded him of it.

“Choose what you like,” he said, “the lady is elderly—my mother—and a widow.”

“But does she wear a widow’s bonnet, sir?”

“I think not,” answered Henderson, indifferently. “Something dark and good—what will it cost?”

This matter was soon settled. The shopwoman chose a bonnet, and Henderson paid for it, and then drove back straight to his hotel. When he arrived there he at once addressed the following letter to Mrs. Temple:

“Dear Mrs. Temple: You were quite right. May Churchill is living at the address you gave me in Pembridge Terrace, and is called Mrs. John. I saw her leave the house and go into a shop, accompanied by an old woman. I went into the shop after they left it, and one of the girls there told me that she—May—was a Mrs. John, and that she was a newly-married woman, which I greatly doubt. I shall return to Stourton to-day, and go to-morrow morning with my news to Woodside Farm. May’s father shall know how his daughter has been treated. And I remain,

“Yours sincerely,

”T. Henderson.”

This letter reached Woodlea Hall on the following morning, and when the squire opened the letter-bag, as was his wont, he rose and placed Henderson’s letter in his wife’s hand.

“Here is a letter from London for you, Rachel,” he said.

Mrs. Temple’s handsome face flushed, and then grew pale. She had not expected to hear for a few days, at least, from Henderson, yet she knew this letter was from him. She gave once glance of her dark eyes at John Temple’s face, who was sitting at his usual place at the breakfast-table, and then without a word she rose and left the room, carrying her letter in her hand.

But she was scarcely outside the door when she opened it. She read it in the hall, and a hard and bitter look came over her expression as she did so. She had been prepared for this news, yet it fell like a fresh blow upon her heart. That subtle feeling, whose existence she would not even admit, filled her with indignation against John Temple.

“He shall leave here and go to his Mrs. John,” she whispered to herself vindictively. “I will wait until Philip leaves the breakfast-room, and then I shall go to him and tell him all. John Temple had better have trusted me—now he shall have to pay the fullest price for his folly.”

And she only waited until she heard her husband go, as he was accustomed to do, into the library after breakfast before she descended the staircase with Henderson’s letter in her hand. She went direct to the library and entered it, without knocking at the door, and the squire who was sitting before his writing table looked up as she did so.

“Were you not well at breakfast, Rachel?” he said, kindly. “Or,” he added, noticing the expression of her face, “did anything in that letter that you got vex you?”

“I was not ill,” she answered, “but this letter confirmed some shameful news that I have come to tell you about John Temple.”

“Shameful news about John Temple!” repeated the squire, pushing back his chair and looking straight at his wife’s pale, determined face.

“At least I call it shameful,” she went on, “to induce a country girl to leave her home—a daughter of one of your own tenants—to deceive you, his best friend. Philip, you remember the girl, May Churchill, who ran away? I suspected at the time that John Temple had something to do with it, and now I know. This girl is living at an address in London, and is called there Mrs. John, and she writes to him here, and if she is not married to him she ought to be—and I do not believe she is.”

“I will never believe this!” said the squire, rising in great emotion, his aged face growing pale. “What! John Temple wrong May Churchill; the little girl I have known since she was a child; the daughter of a man like Churchill, whom I respect, and who has lived on my land since he was a lad, and his father before him! Rachel, what folly is this? Who has been telling you this wicked, this insane story?”

“My own eyes told me first,” answered Mrs. Temple, in a hard, concentrated voice, “and every word that I have told you is true. Do you remember when he used to get large letters which he said were from some late landlady of his, and contained his unpaid bills? I suspected at that time he was not speaking the truth, and a day or two after I learned this was so. He got one of these large letters at breakfast, and he put it in his pocket unread. I said at the time, ‘more bills?’ and he answered, ‘I am afraid so.’ Well, after the breakfast was over, I went upstairs, and passed his sitting-room door, and it was standing ajar. I wanted to speak to him about going to call at Homelands, and I went into the room. He was not there, but an open letter was lying on the table. I went up to the table and read the first lines. It began: ‘My dearest, dearest John.’”

“But what of that?” said Mr. Temple, angrily. “You had no right to read or look at his letters for one thing, and for another, how could you tell by whom this letter was written?”

“I looked at the printed address on the paper, and I remembered it, and just at this moment I saw through the open bedroom door that John Temple was on the balcony of the little ante-room beyond. So I turned and left the sitting-room and he never knew that I had been there. Then I considered what to do, for I was determined to bring this home to him, and I suddenly remembered young Henderson of Stourton Grange—”

“What on earth had he to do with it?” interrupted the squire.

“He had been in love, was in love, like the rest of them, with this girl,” answered Mrs. Temple, scornfully, “and so I used him for my purpose. He had spoken to me once about his suspicions that Miss Churchill had eloped with John Temple, or rather that he had persuaded her to run away from home, so that he might join her afterward. So I wrote to ask Henderson to meet me—”

“You wrote to ask young Henderson to meet you?”

“Yes, what harm was there in that? I met him near the West Lodge for a few minutes the day before yesterday, and I gave him the address I had seen on Miss Churchill’s letter to John Temple, and I asked him to go up to town and find out the truth about this girl. He went the same night, and this is the letter I received from him this morning.”

She handed the squire Henderson’s letter, with a trembling hand as she spoke, and her husband’s hand trembled also as he took it. Then he read the words it contained, and a terribly shocked look came over his face.

“If this be true—” he said, with faltering lips.

“It is true,” answered Mrs. Temple, positively. “Don’t you remember she ran away, and then after a week or so he said he was going abroad? He went no doubt to join her; she was with him all those weeks abroad, and then he must have brought her back to town, and no doubt would have gone up from time to time to see her. The whole thing is perfectly plain.”

“Then in that case all I can say is that it is a shameful affair. Most shameful—but he may have married her—probably has, and if he has not done so, he must.”

Mr. Temple went hastily to the bell of the room and rang it as he spoke, and when the footman answered it, he said sharply and distinctly:

“Ask Mr. John Temple to come here at once; tell him I wish to see him.”

The footman disappeared with his message, and Mrs. Temple stood still. She was excited, pale, and determined, and she did not flinch when she heard John Temple’s step outside the door.

Then he entered and looked at his uncle.

“You wish to see me, Johnson says,” he began, but something in the squire’s face told him it was no ordinary message that he had received.

“Yes,” answered the squire, “I wish to see you, for I have just heard a tale which, if it be true, will make me bitterly regret that I ever asked you under my roof.”

“And what is it?” asked John Temple, and he drew himself up to his full height.

“It is that you induced the young girl May Churchill to leave her home; that you took her abroad with you, and that she is now living in London, I presume, under your protection, and is called Mrs. John. Now answer, is this true?”

A dark wave of color spread to John Temple’s very brows.

“Who has told you this?” he said, looking steadily at his uncle.

“My wife has just told me,” answered the squire. “It seems she suspected this, and she saw a letter lying on your table bearing a certain address in town. She told young Henderson of this, who it seems is, or was once, a lover of this poor girl’s, and she gave him the address, and this is the letter she has received this morning.”

The squire handed Henderson’s letter to John Temple as he spoke, and John read it through and then laid it down quietly on the writing-table before him.

“A truly honorable transaction altogether, I must say,” he said, scornfully, fixing his gray eyes on Mrs. Temple’s face.

“It is true,” she answered defiantly.

“True or false, it was an action that I thought no gentlewoman could have been guilty of. What, to send one man to watch and spy on another man’s actions; to read a letter not intended for your eyes! I could not have believed you capable of such conduct.”

Mrs. Temple’s eyes fell before John’s reproaches, and a vague feeling crept into her heart that she had left her work undone.

“It is useless to talk thus,” said the squire, with some dignity of manner; “my wife should not have read your letter, and I have told her so, but this does not alter the matter. You have not denied this grave charge, and if you have done this girl any wrong—a girl I have known since her childhood—you must undo that wrong as far as lies in your power. I mean you must marry her, if you have not already done so.”

John Temple made no answer to this; he stood there facing his uncle, and Mrs. Temple watched him fugitively.

“Have you married her, or have you not?” urged the squire.

“I decline to answer that question,” then said John Temple. “But you said you had regretted that you had asked me to stay under your roof. You need regret it no longer, for I will leave to-day.”

“But your leaving will not undo the wrong that you have done. Think for a moment who this poor girl is, the daughter of one of my oldest and most respected tenants; a beautiful girl, of blameless character hitherto, who perhaps in her foolish love for you has wrecked her young life. John, you are my nephew, you are my heir, and I entreat you to act now as an honorable man should do, and make her your wife.”

Still John Temple made no promise.

“You have read in that letter,” continued the squire, pointing to Henderson’s open letter lying on the writing-table, “how this young man is going to her father. Can you suppose that a respectable man like Churchill will, for a moment, sit down tamely under such an insult? No, you will have to answer to him for your conduct, as well as to me.”

But at this moment a rap came to the room door, and the squire paused.

“Come in,” he called, and the footman entered.

“If you please, sir,” he said, addressing the squire, “Mr. Henderson, of Stourton Grange, and Mr. Churchill have called, and wish very particularly to see you.”

“Where are they?” asked the squire.

“In the hall, sir,” replied the footman.

“You can show them in here,” said the squire, and he looked at John Temple as he spoke.

But John Temple made no sign; he had grown a little pale, and that was all.

CHAPTER XXX.

A minute later Henderson and Mr. Churchill entered the room. Henderson's face was flushed a dusky red, but Mr. Churchill's looked pale, angry, and determined. He gave a quick, sharp glance around, and then advanced toward the squire, who gravely held out his hand, which, however, his tenant scarcely touched.

"I've come on unpleasant business, Mr. Temple," he said, quickly; and then he looked at John Temple.

"You mean about—" began the squire in faltering tones.

"I mean about my daughter, sir! This gentleman," and he turned to Henderson, "has come to me this morning with a fine tale; he says my girl is living in London, and that your nephew has placed her there."

For a moment or two no one spoke. Mr. Churchill was looking indignantly at John Temple, and the dark flush on Henderson's face had deepened, while his eyes also were fixed with an angry scowl on Temple.

"John," said the squire, in a firmer voice, after a brief silence; "you hear what Mr. Churchill says; is this charge true or false?"

John Temple looked slowly round at each man in turn.

"I decline to answer any questions on the subject," he said, in a clear, firm voice.

"But I've a right to ask questions on the subject, sir!" almost shouted Mr. Churchill, angrily. "This girl, my daughter, disappeared from her home and nothing has been heard of her since; and now I hear she is writing to you in a way that if she isn't married to you she ought to be."

"I admit your right to ask questions, Mr. Churchill," answered John Temple, still firmly; "but I have no right to betray the secrets of others. And if this spy," and his eyes kindled, and he stretched out his arm in the direction of Henderson, "has already told you so much, he had better tell you more."

"You dare to call me a spy, sir!" cried Henderson, in a voice hoarse with passion.

"Yes, and something worse," answered John Temple, fiercely; "because this young lady rejected your insolent advances—advances which were an insult to her from a man like you; a man who had betrayed and broken another woman's heart, and then, as I believe there is a God above us, murdered her—!"

For an instant Henderson turned ghastly pale, as this terrible accusation reached his ears, and then, with a scream of rage, he sprang forward and struck John Temple a violent blow on the chest. But he had met his match. For the next moment a swift, hammer-like thud from John's clenched fist hit his brow, and he reeled back, and striking his head as he did so against the sharp corner of the writing table, he fell heavily on the floor.

Mrs. Temple gave a cry, and both Mr. Temple and Mr. Churchill ran forward to his assistance. They lifted up his head, but he was seemingly unconscious, and a sudden fear darted into the squire's heart.

"He—is not dead," he said, falteringly.

"What matter if he is?" said John Temple, still fiercely; and then without another word he turned and left the room, while the others raised Henderson on a couch, and Mrs. Temple violently rang the bell for further help.

In the meantime John Temple had gone to his own rooms, and for a moment stood there, panting still from his recent encounter, thinking how he should act. But his hesitation was very brief. He would go to May; in her hands alone now lay the course of their future lives.

"If she loves me as I love her, we shall not part," he thought; "the world is wide."

This was his decision, and he quickly acted on it. He pulled out a portmanteau, and was thrusting into it some things that he would require, when a rap sounded at his sitting-room door, and the next moment Mrs. Temple, pale and excited, entered the room.

In a second she saw the preparations for his departure.

"You are going away?" she said, quickly.

"Do you think I would stay?" he answered, scornfully.

Mrs. Temple made no answer; she stood there looking at him, and a strange revulsion of feeling swept through her breast.

"I—I do not want to drive you away," she said.

"Yet you have done so," answered John Temple, looking up at her, for he was kneeling on the ground, packing his portmanteau. "But for you this never would have happened."

Mrs. Temple's tall form swayed restlessly, and her pale, handsome face quivered.

"I hated to think," she said, with sudden passion, "of your degrading yourself so."

"I have not done so," replied John Temple, rising to his feet and looking at her steadily.

"You have! This girl should have been nothing to you, nothing! And if in some hour of madness

you had been betrayed into any folly, if you had trusted me I would have helped you if I could."

"I have been betrayed into nothing," answered John, coldly; "whatever I have done is by my own will."

Mrs. Temple began walking restlessly up and down the room, and then she suddenly stopped before John.

"You came here," she began; "you took my boy's place—"

"You know how deeply I grieved for you," said John Temple; "in everything I wished to consider you."

"Yet you made love to this girl—this girl, a farmer's daughter, whose brothers were playing in the fatal game when my boy was killed! One of them may have been his murderer; was I believe; and this is how you showed your consideration for me!"

"Mrs. Temple, this is unreasonable."

"What is she to you? Answer this question at least; is she your wife?"

"As I told them down-stairs, I will betray no one's secrets without their leave."

"If she is, you need never bring her here! You heard what your uncle said about your marrying her, but I will not receive her here."

"You shall never be asked to do so, nor will I ever return. What my uncle said was worthy of him—the words of a good man, whom I most heartily like and respect—but I will trouble you with my presence here no more."

Again Mrs. Temple began those restless pacings up and down the floor; in her anger she had done what she did not wish to do—driven John Temple away—and now she was sorely repenting her own action.

"And there is one thing I wish to say before I go," continued John Temple, "that I thank you for all your kindness to me while I have been here. I came to your house under most painful circumstances, but you over-looked this—"

"Do not go!" broke in Mrs. Temple, impetuously; "at least, not yet; let us think what can be done, what it will be best to do."

"I know what it is best for me to do," answered John Temple, who was now in the act of locking the small portmanteau he meant to carry away with him, "and that is to leave Woodlea at once—good-by, Mrs. Temple."

He did not offer her his hand, but she took it almost against his will, and held it.

"I have been so lonely," she said, in a broken voice; "so miserably lonely—and now I will be more lonely still."

John Temple made no answer to this appeal.

"Bid good-by to my uncle for me," he said, "as I do not care, in my present temper, to encounter again those two men down-stairs."

"What if you have killed Henderson? They were sending for the doctor for him as I came upstairs."

"If I have I can not say I shall deeply regret it, and I am ready to answer for this, as for the rest. But not he! A brute like that is not killed by a blow on the head; and now once more good-by."

He was gone before she could speak again, and Mrs. Temple sat down and looked around the desolate rooms. She had admired him during the last half-hour; admired his bravery and independence.

"After all he had a right to choose a woman he liked best," she thought; "but it is a terrible mistake. A man who marries a woman of inferior birth and position always repents it—and with such relations!"

After awhile, however, she pulled herself together, and went down-stairs, and when she entered the library she found the village doctor there, as well as her husband and Mr. Churchill.

Henderson was lying on the couch ghastly pale, with a handkerchief bound around his head, and still insensible, and the doctor was bending over him holding his wrist.

Then when the squire saw his wife, he stepped back toward her and half-whispered in her ear:

"Where is John Temple?" he said.

"He is gone," she answered, "and he says he will never return."

Mr. Temple upon this beckoned to Mr. Churchill.

"Mrs. Temple says my nephew has left the house, Mr. Churchill," he said.

"Then I'll follow him," answered the farmer, sturdily; "you have told me, squire, that if he has not already done my girl justice that you wish him and authorize him to do so?"

"Most certainly," replied Mr. Temple; "I am ready and wishful to receive your daughter as his wife."

"I thank you, sir, with all my heart. Will you give me the address, madam, where she is, for all this has well-nigh put it out of my head," he added, addressing Mrs. Temple, "and I'll go up to

London to-night, or to-morrow at latest."

Mrs. Temple went to the writing-table without a word, and wrote down Miss Webster's address in Pembridge Terrace, which she remembered only too well, and handed it to Mr. Churchill.

"Thank you kindly, madam," he said, "and now, as the doctor's here, and the squire, I think I'll go, as I leave Mr. Henderson in such good hands, and I have my missus to consult a bit, and some business to see about before I can get off to London. Good-morning, madam; good-morning, squire."

So Mr. Churchill went away, but he was scarcely gone when Mrs. Layton rushed hastily into the room. She had heard a report somehow that there had been a quarrel between young Henderson and John Temple, and that the doctor had been sent for, so she had hurried up to the Hall to see and hear all about it.

"What is this, Rachel!" she cried, looking at the prostrate figure on the couch. "Whatever has happened?"

Mrs. Temple shrugged her shoulders.

"It means a fight," she said, scornfully, "and there is the fallen one!" And she pointed to Henderson.

"But what on earth did they quarrel about?" asked Mrs. Layton, eagerly.

"The village beauty," answered Mrs. Temple, still more scornfully; "it seems my nephew, John Temple, had run away with Miss Churchill, and his uncle has given his consent to his marriage with her, so we may expect her here."

"What!" almost screamed Mrs. Layton.

"Rachel," said the squire in grave reproof, "is this a way in which to speak of a most painful affair? If John Temple did induce this young lady to leave her home, as you say he did, he is bound in honor to make her his wife."

"To make Margaret Churchill his wife!" screamed Mrs. Layton. "Why, squire, you must be mad to dream of such a thing!"

The squire gave a contemptuous bow.

"You may have your ideas, madam," he said, "and I have mine. I have told you what mine are, and in my own house. I'll see they are respected."

Mrs. Layton's face fell; the squire might be mad, was mad to talk thus, but still he was the master of the house from which so many good things went to the vicarage, and she could not afford to quarrel with him.

"Of course, I did not mean that," she began, but with another bow Mr. Temple left the room, and Mrs. Layton was alone with her daughter, except for the presence of the doctor and the unconscious Henderson, who were quite at the other end of it.

"Did I not tell you long ago," hissed Mrs. Layton in her daughter's ear, "what this John Temple was? A viper, a scorpion, and now he's turned and stung you! Oh! that I should ever live to see that upstart here! Margaret Churchill indeed!"

"She's not here yet," answered Mrs. Temple, bitterly; "ten to one John Temple will never marry her—why should he?"

CHAPTER XXXI.
TOO BITTER TO BE BORNE.

It was still very early in the day when John Temple left Woodlea, in a state of strong though suppressed excitement. It had come so suddenly, this discovery, this exposure, that he had dreaded far more on May's account than his own. But he must face the situation; he told himself this as he strode across the dewy park, as he went on with rapid steps toward the nearest railway station.

He looked at his watch; there was a train passed for the south at a quarter past eleven o'clock, and he made up his mind to endeavor to reach the station in time to travel by this. He had not a moment to spare. On he went with a pale, set face and compressed lips, running a race, as it were, with the train. And as he entered the station the engine puffed up on the metals outside. But John Temple was known to the station-master, and when he called out for a ticket to London, the station-master told him to hurry on the platform, and that he would follow with the ticket.

All this happened so quickly that John Temple had little time to think. It was not until he found himself actually in the train, speeding on his way to town, that he began quite to realize what was before him.

"Poor May, my poor, sweet May!" he almost groaned. For well he knew that the news he was bearing her would well-nigh break her heart. And he could not now keep it from her. Her father was certain now to find her, and the only thing in John's favor was that he had the start of him. There was not another train south for some hours, and in the meanwhile John determined to see

May, to try to induce her to seek a new home in another land.

“We can go to Australia,” he told himself; “who is to know anything there? and I have enough to live on, and as for Woodlea, what is that to my poor, poor girl?”

But it was a terrible task that he had before him, and he shrank from it with utter loathing.

“Why was I so weak?” he muttered. “I should have told her the truth. I was led away by her beauty, by her love, and went drifting on, and now she must know everything. But if she loves me best of all it may still come right.”

He tried to buoy himself up with this idea. He thought of May’s tenderness; her devotion, and remembered how she had told him hers was “the love that can not change.” The test had come; the bitter test she had never dreamed of, and he had to face the most painful ordeal of his life.

All too soon it seemed to him he saw the smoke of the great city; all too soon he was speeding through tunnels, and being carried rapidly over housetops. Then came the rush and hurry of a great terminus. John Temple had reached his destination, and as he entered a cab and told the driver to convey him to Miss Webster’s house in Pembridge Terrace, it was with a sinking heart and faltering tongue.

In the meanwhile at Pembridge Terrace everything seemed as quiet and peaceable as usual. Yet there was secret anxiety in the hearts of the two kind women of the house. For there had been something in their nephew’s manner during his visits of late that had certainly alarmed them. Ralph Webster had in truth been so restless, so unlike himself, that they could not understand him. He was indeed in a state of mind most unusual to his strong and determined nature, for he knew not how to act. His duty and sense of right urged him one way he told himself, and then, when he looked on May’s sweet, happy face he felt it almost impossible for him to be the one who could strike her so dire a blow.

But of one thing he had no doubt, which was the certainty of John Temple’s early marriage to Kathleen Weir. He had even gone to the city church she had named and examined the register of the ill-suited marriage which had ended so disastrously. He had seen Kathleen Weir since his interview with Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, but he had not told her that Mr. Harrison knew of the identity of the John Temple who had married her, and paid her a yearly allowance, and the John Temple who had become the heir of the Woodlea property through the death of his young cousin.

He had left this point in doubt purposely, thinking it might hasten the catastrophe if it were known for the unhappy girl who in his eyes had been so shamefully deceived. But the actress seemed determined to learn the truth.

“Very likely the old fox is keeping it back,” she said; “he would be sure I should want more money if I knew, and Dereham was so positive about the matter. What do you think it would be best for me to do? To write to Mr. Harrison himself, or send a letter to John Temple through him; for, of course, he knows his address?”

“I should do nothing immediately, I think,” answered Ralph Webster, and the handsome actress looked at him and wondered what was his motive as he spoke.

“I don’t want to see him, mind,” she continued; “to see him now would be as disagreeable to me as no doubt to him; it’s a mere matter of money, nothing more.”

“Yes, of course. Well, I’ll try to find out all about it for a certainty in the course of a few days; and now I must go, for I promised to dine with my aunts in Pembridge Terrace this evening,” and Webster rose and held out his hand as he spoke.

“What a wonderfully attentive nephew you are!” said Kathleen Weir, also rising, with a light laugh. “Do you know I’m beginning to believe there is something behind these two respectable old ladies? A pretty cousin, eh? Or, perhaps, even a housemaid?”

Webster’s dark face colored.

“There is no cousin,” he answered; “and as far as I remember the housemaid is a remarkably plain-featured young woman, so you see you are wrong.”

“It’s like my interest in John Temple then, a mere matter of money,” smiled the actress, showing her white teeth. “Ah, well, my friend, such is life!”

“Such, indeed,” thought Webster, bitterly, as he descended the stone flight of steps that led to Miss Kathleen Weir’s flat; “here is a tragedy and a comedy combined.”

He did really dine with his aunts, and it was during the evening that both Miss Margaret and Miss Eliza became convinced that, as they expressed it, he had “something on his mind.” His dark, resolute eyes lingered on the sweet face opposite him, and his usually fluent tongue was seldom heard. He went away early, and he went away as irresolute how he should act as when he arrived.

“Ralph doesn’t look well,” said Miss Margaret, as the door closed behind him.

“No, indeed,” sighed Miss Eliza.

“And how silent he was!” smiled May.

But the day after this visit, the very next day, she knew what had made him silent and sad. It was a dreary day, dull, and at times wet, and during the afternoon, about four o’clock, Miss Margaret, Miss Eliza, and May were all sitting in the dining-room at Pembridge Terrace, where a cheery fire helped to exclude some of the gloom outside. Miss Margaret was knitting, Miss Eliza

reading a novel, and May seemingly reading a novel, but really thinking of John Temple. The sound of a cab stopping at the door, however, interrupted all their occupations.

“Can that be Ralph?” said Miss Margaret, looking up.

May also looked up and turned her head so that she could see out of the window, and the next moment rose with a glad cry.

“It’s John!” she said, and as she spoke she ran out of the room into the hall, just as John Temple was entering it.

“John! dear John!” she cried, and without a word he took her in his arms and pressed her, nay crushed her, against his breast.

“John!” again May murmured, and then she raised her head and looked in his face.

It was pale and agitated, and he spoke no word. And as she looked at him he pressed his lips on hers and something in his expression, something even in his touch, with the swift and subtle knowledge of love, thrilled her heart with sudden fear.

“Is anything the matter?” she whispered. “John, are you ill?”

“I am not very well,” he answered, slowly and painfully.

“Oh, I’m so sorry—how long have you been ill?” asked May, anxiously.

“I am only tired, I think; I will tell the driver of the cab to stop—I want you to go out with me for a little while, May.”

“Yes, of course, but first come in and rest,” answered May, uneasily, for his manner was so strange.

John Temple went down the steps to speak to the driver, and May stood at the open door watching him. Then he reascended the steps, and she shut the door behind him and put her arm through his, and together they entered the dining-room where Miss Webster and Miss Eliza were standing, full of expectation and excitement.

“John is not very well, Miss Webster,” said May, a little tremulously; “I think he wants nursing and being taken care of.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” said the two kind ladies, almost with one breath.

“It is nothing,” answered John, nervously, as he shook hands with them; “I am tired, that is all.”

“You must have some wine or some tea. You must stay to dinner, of course?” the next moment suggested hospitable Miss Webster.

“Thanks, I will take a glass of wine,” answered John, “but I will not stay to dinner; I am going to take May out to dine with me.”

Both the sisters protested against this, but John Temple was firm, and after he had taken his wine he looked at May, and asked her to get ready to go out with him. May rose at once to obey his wish, but she still felt uneasy. John was not like himself; his smile was strained, his very voice was different.

“Something is worrying him dreadfully, I am sure,” she told herself as she hurried on her hat and cape, and when she turned to the sitting-room and told John she was ready, to her surprise John put out his hand to take leave of Miss Webster.

“But you’ll bring May back; we will see you, then?” said Miss Webster, also surprised.

“Oh! yes, I forgot,” answered John, and then he led May to the cab, and, having placed her in it, took his seat by her side.

May slid her little hand into his as the horse started.

“John, I am sure something is vexing you,” she said, tenderly and anxiously, looking at his half-averted face; “have you any bad news to tell me?”

“I have some news,” he answered, with an effort.

“Is it bad news?” urged May.

“I can not tell you here; wait until we get to the hotel—I will tell you then.”

“But John—”

“Hush, hush, dear; you will hear it soon enough.”

He spoke huskily, almost hoarsely, and he turned away his head from her tender gaze. After this they drove on almost in silence until they reached the Grosvenor Hotel, where John usually stayed when he was in town. When he arrived there he ordered rooms and dinner, and then when they were alone May once more looked at him questioningly.

“Tell me now, John, what is it?” she asked.

“May—” began John, and then he paused, absolutely unable to find words to tell her the truth.

“Oh! do tell me, John!” she prayed, and she laid her hand beseechingly on his arm.

Then he looked at her, and there was great pain in his eyes and on his pale face.

“I should rather be dead—I swear it, though you may not believe it—than say to you what I am forced to say to-day.”

“Oh! you frighten me! What can it be?” cried May.

“Do you remember when—when I went away and left you, May,” went on John Temple, in a broken voice; “when I wrote to you and told you that you were to be quite sure of your feelings toward me if I were to be anything more to you; when I told you that I believed that if two people truly loved each other that nothing should part or change them?”

“I remember,” answered May, lifting her head and looking with steadfast eyes in his face, “when you wrote that there were other feelings between men and women besides the love that can not change, and that I was to question my heart. I did—I told you then my love could never change, and now I tell you again—it can never change.”

“My darling!”

He caught her to his breast, he kissed her eyes, her lips, her brow, and then in hurried, agitated words he tried to tell her all.

“May, I loved you then, and I love you now, how dearly none but my own heart can tell—but I should have told you the truth. I told you there were obstacles to our marriage, and that it must be a secret one, and you agreed to this. Our secret is now known. Mrs. Temple, my uncle’s wife, it seems, saw one of your letters to me, and she actually sent that brute, young Henderson, up to town to spy on you. He saw you enter Miss Webster’s house, and he went back and told your father.”

“Oh! John!” cried May.

“My uncle sent for me this morning, and questioned me, but I would tell him nothing; and while I was with him your father and young Henderson arrived at the Hall. Your father asked me if I were married to you, and I refused to tell him also, and then when Henderson spoke I called him a murderer and a spy. He sprang at me and struck me, but with one blow I sent him reeling to the floor, and when I left Woodlea he had not recovered his senses.”

May gave a sort of cry.

“And—and what followed?” she gasped out.

“Then I left Woodlea. I was determined to see you first before I said a word to one of them—for, May, it was not for fear of my uncle’s anger that I wished our marriage to be a secret one—but there was another reason—”

“Another reason?” echoed May, with fast whitening lips.

“Yes, when I was a boy, a mere lad at least, I met a woman older than myself; a woman who took advantage of my boyish infatuation, and led me on to do what I have cursed ever since I met you. May, do not look so white! My dear one, this need not, shall not, part us. Our love is too deep and strong for a tie, broken years ago, to come between us. But in an hour of madness, I married —”

May started back as if she had received a sudden blow.

“I married,” went on John Temple, nerving himself to speak the words, “the actress, Kathleen Weir—”

But he said no more; May’s lips parted, she gasped as if for breath, and then as John Temple caught her in his arms she sank senseless on the floor.

“My God! has it killed her!” he cried in sudden anguish, looking at her white and clammy face. He lifted her up, he placed her on a couch, he rang the bell wildly for assistance. But May lay like one dead. One arm fell motionless at her side; John grasped her wrist and could feel no pulsation. Again he rang madly at the bell, and this time it was answered.

“The lady has fainted!” he cried to the astonished waiter. “Bring water, brandy—send some of the women here, and get a doctor at once.”

In a few minutes several people were in the room, and some of the female servants began bathing May’s brow and hands with water, while John Temple tried to wet her lips with the spirits they had brought him. He knelt down at her side; he called her by every endearing name, but still May made no sign. Then a doctor hurried in and proceeded to use remedies to revive the senseless girl. And at last, with faint, gasping sighs, a tinge of color stole back to the white face, and presently May opened her eyes.

“My dearest, my darling, are you better now?” whispered John Temple, bending over her, and holding one of her cold hands fast in his.

May tried to speak, but no words came from her pale lips.

“Do not crowd round her,” said the doctor, looking up; “let her have plenty of air.”

Those standing near fell back, but John Temple did not stir.

“Did the attack come on suddenly, sir?” asked the doctor, addressing John.

“Yes,” he answered slowly.

“Ah, well, she will be better presently. Try to swallow this, madam; it will do you good.”

May tried to swallow the restorative the doctor held toward her, and its effect was soon visible. It brought back memory—infinite pain! She looked at John Temple, and he saw she was remembering his words. He bent closer to her; he whispered that nothing should ever part them;

he asked her for his sake to get well; and the doctor, watching her face, slightly touched John Temple on the shoulder.

“I will give you some directions,” he said, and as John rose, he drew him to one side of the room.

“She must not be excited,” he said; “as far as I can judge, this attack has been brought on by some mental shock. Is there any tendency to heart affection?”

“I know of none,” answered John, with quivering lips.

“Is she your wife?”

“Yes.”

“Well, keep her very quiet for the next few hours, and do not talk to her of anything that would be likely to disquiet her. Are you staying here?”

“Yes,” again answered John, briefly.

“I will look in this evening then. For the present, everyone but yourself is best out of the room. But be sure you keep her quiet.”

Then he gave some further directions, and finally left the room, and presently John and May were once more alone. She lay quite still, but that terrible look of pain never left her face. John went and sat by her, and took her hand, but he dare not talk to her after what the doctor had said. And so the time passed on, and after an hour or so, May herself broke the silence.

“John,” she said in a feeble voice, “I have something to say to you.”

“What is it, my darling? But you had best not talk of anything just now.”

“I want to say—I can not go back to Pembridge Terrace,” went on May, still in those faltering accents; “I can not see my father.”

“You shall not, May—I swear you shall not! This was why I brought you away. You shall see no one, and we will go to Australia together; go anywhere you like, and you shall be my own dear wife always; my own sweet, dear wife.”

A faint shudder ran through May’s frame.

“Nothing shall ever part us, May,” continued John Temple, and once more he knelt down by her side and took both her hands in his. “We could not live apart.”

May looked in his face with strange wistfulness, and a quiver passed over her pale lips, and then she drew John’s hand closer to her.

“We could not live apart,” she murmured, and then she sighed.

“We will not, but I want to spare you all possible annoyance and worry, May. When you feel a little better, I think it would be best for me to drive over to Miss Webster’s, and tell her that as you are not feeling very well, you are not going to return there this evening, and that to-morrow you are going away for a few days with me, I will ask them to give me what you will require, and I will not tell them where you are; or rather I shall not give them the right address. Thus, if your father goes there to-morrow, he will not find you, and to-morrow I think we had better cross to France, and we can settle our future plans there, out of the way of everyone. What do you think of this?”

May lay silent for a moment or two; then she said, slowly:

“Yes, John, that will be best; you had best go now.”

“But are you well enough for me to leave you? I do not like leaving you.”

Again May sighed wearily, and then raised herself up and put her arms around his neck.

“You had better go,” she said; “and—and John, will you remember that—that I will always love you!”

“I am sure of it; you give me fresh life, May—well, then, good-by, though I shall soon be back.”

Their lips met in one long, tender, clinging kiss, and then John Temple reluctantly left her. But on the whole his mind was somewhat relieved. She had borne it better than he expected; at all events she had said they could not live apart.

But scarcely had the door of the room closed behind him when a great change came over May’s face. There came over it despair—blank, bitter despair. She sat up and thought. She put her hand to her brow.

“I can not bear it,” she said, half-aloud; “it is too hard to bear.”

She remembered all her sweet love-dream in these brief moments; remembered John Temple standing with her in the moonlit garden of Woodside; remembered his looks, the touch of his dear hand! And it had been all folly! He, the husband of another woman, must have known she could never be his wife. He had been amusing himself; she had been his plaything; what else could she be now?

“I can but die,” she thought; “I could not live without him—I will die, and then he will know I loved him to the end.”

She rose and tottered to her feet. She felt a great bodily weakness as though every nerve were unstrung. The restorative the doctor had left was standing on the table, and she drank some of

this, and it seemed to give her strength. Her hat was lying near her, and she put it on and tried to walk feebly across the room. She had no plans, but somehow she thought of the river gliding through the great city, and hiding dark sin and sorrow beneath its murky flood.

“It would hide me,” she murmured; “hide my shame forever.”

She opened the room door and went out on the corridor, and then walked feebly down the broad staircase. No one stopped her or interfered with her, and in a few moments she reached the hall. One of the servants here came forward and asked her if she required a cab. But she shook her head, and went down the steps into the lighted streets, alone with her broken heart.

CHAPTER XXXII.
DESPAIR.

The noise and glare outside almost overwhelmed May as she went tottering feebly on. She knew not which way to turn, and felt that her weary feet would not bear her much farther. She stopped and looked half-dazed around. And as she did so a lamplight fell on her white and haggard face, showing it plainly to a man who was just about to pass her when she paused. This was Ralph Webster, but he did not recognize her. This pale-faced, miserable looking woman, whose features somehow reminded him of the beautiful, blooming girl he had seen last night at his aunt’s house, however, interested him. He, too, stopped after he had passed her, and looked back. She was beckoning for a cab, and a moment later one drew up.

The driver bent forward and asked her where she wished to go. The woman Webster was watching hesitated, got slowly into the cab, and then he heard her voice. He started; it was the voice of May, and the words she uttered sounded strange and ominous to his ears.

“Take me to one of the bridges,” she said.

“Which one, miss?” inquired the driver.

Once more there was a pause before the answer came. Then again he heard May’s voice.

“Westminster,” she said, and in an instant—swift as a flash of lightning—it darted across Ralph Webster’s acute brain that this actually might be May Churchill; that she might have learned the secret of which he was but too sure!

He made a hasty step toward the cab, but as he did so it started. But Webster was not a man to hesitate with such a doubt on his mind. At once he, too, hailed a cab, and bade the driver follow the one before him at his utmost speed.

“To Westminster Bridge,” he called as he leaped in, “and do not lose sight of the cab before us.”

The driver nodded and the race began. It was easy enough at first, but in the more crowded parts it was very difficult. One hansom cab is so like the other that to keep one particular cab in view was no easy task. The driver, however, did his best, but, unhappily, a slight block stopped them for a minute or two. Webster sat burning with impatience, but there was nothing for it but to wait. At last they were off again, and at last, too, they came in sight of the bridge. Then when they reached it Webster sprang out of the cab, and flung half a sovereign to the driver.

“Wait for me here,” he said; “I may want you again.”

Then he went on along the footpath, and, halfway across the bridge, he saw another cab drawn up at one side of the roadway, and as he approached this cab the driver beckoned to a passing policeman, and for a moment Webster paused to listen to what he said.

“I say!” called the cabman, “there’s a lady just got out of this ‘ere cab that I think ye’d best look after. She looked uncommon queer, and she told me to drive to one of the bridges; I wish she may not be after some mischief or other.”

“Which way did she go?” asked the policeman, interested.

“Straight ahead, and she’d a wild, dazed look I didn’t like.”

Webster listened no longer. With swift steps he walked on, peering around him as he went. The bridge was fairly crowded, but he pushed his way, and in a little while he saw the figure of a woman before him; of a woman whose form reminded him of the slender girlish one of whom he was thinking. Some passer-by went roughly against her, and she reeled to one side, and leaned panting against the parapet of the bridge.

In an instant Webster was at her side.

“Did that man hurt you?” he asked, quickly.

Then the woman turned her head, and Webster saw the white, despairing face, and the large, violet-rimmed eyes.

“Are you Miss Churchill?” said Webster, in a low tone, and he laid his hand gently on her arm.

A cry broke from May’s white lips.

“Oh! don’t speak to me, Mr. Webster. Oh! leave me alone—please leave me alone!” she gasped out.

“I can not leave you alone,” answered Ralph Webster firmly; “I can not leave you here—”

At this moment the policeman the cabman had spoken to came up to them, and stopped and looked at May suspiciously.

“Is this the young woman the cabman was speaking of, sir?” he said, addressing Webster. “I saw you pass when he was telling me to look after her.”

“No,” said Webster, quietly; “this young lady is a friend of mine; and a man pushed against her, and she has turned rather faint. You had best take my arm,” he added, addressing May, and without any permission he drew her arm through his, and led her quietly on.

For a few moments May did not speak, nor did he. Then, with his voice full of feeling, he said:

“You have heard some bad news—I fear I know what it is.”

May’s whole form quivered.

“Oh! go away and leave me alone, Mr. Webster,” she once more prayed. “Don’t tell anyone you’ve seen me—I only wish to be alone.”

“You are not fit to be alone,” answered Webster; “you have received a great mental shock, a shock that I have feared for days must come to you—you have learnt the truth, somehow, about Mr. Temple and Miss Kathleen Weir.”

May gave a sudden cry.

“How do you know?” she asked, in a broken voice. “What do you know?”

“Miss Weir told me—of her early marriage to Mr. Temple.”

“And you knew this and never told me!” cried May. “You let me live on in my—fool’s happiness—you let me—”

But here her voice broke; she covered her face with her hand; a moan broke from, her parched lips.

“I could not bear to disturb your happiness,” said Webster, gently. “I was distressed above measure when this strange knowledge came to me. I did not know how to act, and last night when I was at Pembridge Terrace—”

“I will never go there again!” broke in May, passionately. “I will never see anyone again that I have known. You must forget this meeting, Mr. Webster; you must never tell anyone that you have seen me. Will you promise me this?”

“Only on one condition—that you will try to bear this bitter blow with fortitude—otherwise it is my duty—”

“How can I bear it?” moaned the unhappy girl. “He—was everything to me—I believed he loved me—and now, and now—”

“There is no blame to be attached to you. It is a most painful and trying position, and I do not wonder at you shrinking back from it, yet I am sure that both my aunts—”

“Mr. Webster,” interrupted May, “do not speak of this. I will never see your aunts again—never! My father is going there to-morrow—do you think I could face him?”

“Pardon my asking you, but how do you know all this?”

“He—he came to-day,” answered May in broken accents; “he took me out—and told me. He—said our secret marriage was known—for we were married—”

“I know you were; Mr. Temple has rendered himself liable by his conduct—”

“To what?” asked May, quickly, as Webster paused.

“To an action for bigamy—”

“No!” said May, sharply and quickly, and for the first time she raised her bowed head. “I will do nothing against him; I will say nothing against him—I will disappear—and you must keep my secret.”

“I will do anything for you. Will you trust me?” answered Webster, earnestly. “I know at the present time you are overwhelmed with the suddenness of the blow, and no one can wonder at it. But how did you come to be out here alone?”

“He—Mr. Temple,” faltered May, “left me for a little time, he supposed, and went to your aunts. He—he did not wish me to leave him; he did not know I never meant to see him again.”

“And then you went out?”

“I went out never to return. I will never return! I will never return, Mr. Webster—I—I—have not strength—”

“My poor, poor girl,” said Webster, very pityingly.

“And now will you leave me, Mr. Webster?” went on May, who was trembling in every limb; “I—I am better now—good-by.”

“I will not leave you,” answered Webster, quietly and firmly. “I will stay with you until I see you in some safe shelter. I do not wonder at your decision not to return to Mr. Temple, and it is natural that just at first you should shrink from seeing those that you have known. But Fate has thrown me in your path, and it is my duty to watch over you. Turn with me now; I have a cab

waiting at the other end of the bridge, and we can settle as we drive where you shall go."

"Oh! I can not go, I can not go!" moaned May.

"You must," said Webster; "do you think I would leave you alone in the miserable, desperate state you are in? I do not ask you to go back to Pembridge Terrace, or to see your father or Mr. Temple; all I ask you to do is to come with me, and I will take the best care of you that I can."

"And—and you will tell no one where I am?"

"I solemnly promise I will tell no one where you are, if in return you will promise to do nothing rash. Miss Churchill, no man is worth it," he added, half bitterly. "But come, now, let us go back to the cab."

But by this time May's trembling limbs had well-nigh failed her. She tottered on for a few minutes more, clinging to Webster's arm for support, and then a deadly faintness suddenly overcame her, and she would have fallen to the ground had not Webster held her in his arms.

But when he saw her condition, he at once made up his mind. He called a passing cab; he lifted May in.

"Drive as direct as you can to St. Phillip's Hospital," he told the cabman.

At the great hospital which I here call St. Phillip's Webster had suddenly remembered that he was a personal friend of the house surgeon, Doctor Brentwood. He remembered also that private patients could find accommodation there, and that there were private rooms where May could be nursed and taken care of.

Until she had fainted he had not known where to take her. Now her illness settled the matter, and half an hour later May was borne into the great gloomy building, where the sick and suffering spent their weary hours. But first Webster had a short, whispered conversation with his friend the house surgeon.

"Remember, money is no consideration, Brentwood," this conversation ended with; "but she must not be left alone; a nurse must never leave her."

Doctor Brentwood nodded his head and went to look after his new patient. Webster had told him as much of May's story as he deemed necessary, and the doctor quite understood.

"She is a woman in terrible grief," Webster had said, "and she might do something desperate unless she is well looked after."

Thus when May regained complete consciousness she found herself in a small, neat, clean room, with a bright fire burning in the grate, and a neat hospital nurse standing by her bedside. Doctor Brentwood was also in the room, and when May looked round and asked the nurse where she was, he too went up to the bedside.

"Well, you are better now, I see," he said, cheerfully.

"Where am I?" asked May again. "I think I must have fainted."

"You are in the private patients' ward in St. Phillip's Hospital. Yes, you fainted, but I hope you will soon be all right after you have had a night's rest."

May put her hand over her face; she was recalling her interview with Ralph Webster on the bridge.

"Who brought me here?" she asked, presently, in a low, pained tone.

"Mr. Webster—Ralph Webster; you are a friend of his, he tells me."

For a moment or two May said nothing, and the doctor was turning away to give some directions to the nurse, when she once more addressed him:

"Can I see Mr. Webster?" she asked.

"Certainly, if you wish it. I will bring him to you at once," replied Doctor Brentwood; and a few minutes later Webster was in the room.

He went up not unmoved to the bed on which May was lying, with her white face and her loosed hair.

"Doctor Brentwood says you are better, and that you wish to see me?" he said, in a low tone.

"Yes, I wish to see you alone for a few minutes," answered May.

Webster looked at the doctor, and the doctor looked at the nurse, and then they both left the room.

"Mr. Webster," began May, brokenly and agitatedly, "you have brought me here against my will—but will you promise me at least one thing?"

"I will promise you anything you wish."

"Will you tell no one where I am; remember, no one?"

"I faithfully promise you I will not. You are in a safe refuge here, and no one shall come near you nor molest you unless you wish it."

"I wish them to think me dead," said May, in a low, emphatic voice; "I wish everyone to think me dead."

"I will not betray your secret," answered Webster, and he stretched out his hand and took hers.

“Will you trust me?”

“Yes; and—and do not tell them my name here. You have not told them my name?”

“I have not; Doctor Brentwood is an old friend of mine, and I know you will be well looked after under his care. Try to sleep, and forget what has happened; and what name shall I call you by?”

“Oh, anything; it is no matter.”

Webster thought for a moment or two, and then he once more took May’s hand in his own.

“I will call you Mrs. Church,” he said; “that will do, and now good-night.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.
REMORSE.

After John Temple had left May he drove straight to Pembridge Terrace, feeling that the worst of a most painful day was over. At all events May would not leave him, and in another country they would both forget the past.

“And who knows what may happen?” he thought. “That woman,” and his brow darkened, “is not likely to lead, or to go on leading, an immaculate life. I may be able to get a divorce, and the moment I can I will marry May. My dear little May, if I have wronged you, it was because I loved you so well.”

So thinking of her tenderly, fondly, he arrived at Pembridge Terrace, and when he entered the dining-room where the two sisters were alone, they both almost at once exclaimed:

“Where is Mrs. John?”

“She is not very well, I’m sorry to say,” answered John Temple, “and I persuaded her to stay at the hotel, and let me come on alone to you. I am going to take her to-morrow for a day or two to the sea, as we both want a little change, I think, and I have come to tell you this, and ask if you will kindly let your maid pack a few things that May will require, and I will take them back in the cab with me?”

“Well, this is sudden!” cried Miss Webster.

“But she is not ill, is she?” inquired kindly Miss Eliza.

“No, but she was tired, so I thought she was better where she was than driving through the streets. She will write to you to-morrow, most likely, and I scarcely know how to thank you for all your kindness to her—poor child.”

There was a tender ring in John’s voice as he said the last two words that both the gentle-hearted women noticed.

“It has been a great pleasure to us to have her here,” said Miss Webster.

“She’s a sweet flower,” sighed Miss Eliza.

“She’s a dear girl,” said John Temple; and for a moment—just a moment—a sort of moisture stole over his gray eyes.

After this Miss Webster hurried out of the room, to pack, or superintend the packing of, what she thought May would require during her few days’ proposed excursion to the sea. Thus Miss Eliza was left to entertain John Temple, which she found by no means easy to do. He was absent-minded and silent, and rose quickly when Miss Webster and the maid returned with May’s packed portmanteau.

“I have put everything in I thought she would want,” said Miss Webster; “but if I have forgotten anything, if she will telegraph I will send it at once.”

“I am sure it is all right,” said John, and he held out his hand to Miss Webster, thinking that most likely it would be the last time for years that he would press that kindly palm. “Good-by, Miss Webster; good-by, Miss Eliza; and thank you for all your great kindness.”

He left the house a few minutes later, and it was strange that both the sisters were somewhat impressed by his manner.

“He looked very serious,” said Miss Webster. “I am sure I hope nothing is wrong?”

“Perhaps it has come out about their marriage, and he has quarreled with his uncle?” suggested Miss Eliza.

In the meanwhile John Temple was driving back to his hotel, his thoughts still dwelling very tenderly on May.

“I will make it all up to her,” he was thinking; “my little Mayflower shall never regret her choice, nor her love.”

He had grown almost cheerful by the time he had reached the hotel.

“After all, it was dull enough at Woodlea,” he was reflecting; “and I can’t quite understand Mrs. Temple’s attitude. We shall be happier out of it all; out of civilization for awhile—I think I shall like a different life.”

He soon arrived at the hotel, paid his cab fare, and then ran lightly up the staircase, after giving May's portmanteau to one of the waiters to carry. He knew the number of the sitting-room where he had left May, as he was well-acquainted with the hotel, and when he reached the door he opened it without rapping. One glance round the room told him it was empty. But this did not make him uneasy.

"She has been too tired to sit up," he thought, "and has gone to bed," and he turned round to the waiter who was following him with the portmanteau and asked the number of the bedroom he had engaged.

The man told him, and John Temple took the portmanteau from his hand and went in the direction the waiter indicated. When he arrived at the bedroom door he rapped, but there was no answer. Then he opened the door and went in, but, like the sitting-room, he found it empty.

"You have made a mistake; this is not the room," he said, sharply, to the waiter, who was still following him.

"Yes, sir, this is the bedroom you engaged," replied the waiter.

"But the lady—my wife is not here?"

"No, sir; the lady in sitting-room No. 11 left the hotel some time ago."

"Left the hotel!" repeated John Temple, blankly. "Are you sure of this?"

"Yes, sir; I saw her go down the staircase and go out. I felt sure it was the lady from No. 11, as, if you remember, I lit the room after the lady took ill? And I fetched the doctor up for her also."

A strange, cold feeling crept into John Temple's heart.

"And you saw her go out?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir; and as she passed through the hall I asked her if she required a cab."

"And did you get her one?" interrupted John, hastily.

"No, sir; she just shook her head and went out; and you'll excuse me, sir, mentioning it, but I thought the lady looked very ill."

"Went out alone! I can not understand it!" exclaimed John Temple; and then he once more entered the bedroom and looked around. Could she have left some letter, some message, he was thinking. But there was nothing; no sign that she had been there. After this he went back to the sitting-room, and here he found May's cape lying on the floor. He had unfastened it when she had fainted, and flung it over the end of a couch. But her hat was gone! The poor girl, in her despair, had never remembered her cape, and as John Temple lifted it up a sudden fear, a sudden anguish, struck his soul.

"Had she left him?" he was asking himself, with white lips. "But surely not without some word, some line."

He went up to the table; water was standing there, and some brandy which had been brought when May was ill, and the doctor's prescription. And her handkerchief and gloves. She had forgotten these too, but there was no letter, nor penciled note. He looked everywhere, but it was in vain. In the short time that he had been away she had disappeared, and the greatest anxiety naturally filled John Temple's heart.

Again he recalled the waiter who had seen her leave the hotel, but the man had nothing more to tell. Then he himself went out and wandered restlessly up and down the street, looking at every one he met in a miserable state of uncertainty and doubt. He thought once of returning to Miss Webster's, but no; she had positively refused to go there, and besides she might return at any moment. He tried to buoy himself up with this hope, but hope grew well-nigh to despair when hour after hour passed and there was no news of May.

When the last post came in he again went out into the streets. He inquired at the nearest cab-stand, but no one seemed to remember anything of a lady such as he described. He shrank from applying to the police, and spent a night of terrible misery and remorse.

"I should not have left her," he moaned aloud as he wandered up and down the sitting-room where he had seen her last. He refused to go to bed, and more than once went down to question the night porter. But the gray dawn stole over the city, and the noise and murmur of the day began, and still nothing was seen or heard of the unhappy woman who had disappeared.

The first post arrived and there was no letter for John Temple, and then he knew that May had forsaken him. He realized this with the bitterest pain. He recalled her words and looks before he had left her, and suddenly—like a dagger—a memory smote him. She had said as she lay in his arms, "We could not live apart."

"Good God! did she go out to die then!" burst from John Temple's pale, quivering lips. The anguish of this idea was almost too great to bear. He hesitated no longer about going to the police. He went—a white-faced, agitated man—to the nearest station and told his story. His wife had disappeared from the hotel, he said, and he was in a state of the utmost misery and anxiety about her.

The inspector took notes and made certain inquiries. "Had he had any quarrel with the lady? Was there any reason that she should leave him?"

"No quarrel," answered John Temple, huskily, "but I told her some bad news."

“Did this seem to upset her greatly?”

“Yes, at the time, but when I left her she was calm and composed.”

“And she said nothing about going away?”

“Nothing, or I should never have left her.”

The inspector then asked if she had any friends in town where she was likely to take refuge, and with a groan John Temple answered, “None.”

Inquiries, however, were at once commenced, and during the day a cabman came forward and stated he had seen the lady leave the Grosvenor Hotel, and had followed her, hoping for a fare. That she had stopped and beckoned to him, and that when he had asked her where she had wished to go, that she had answered: “To one of the bridges.” That he had then said, “To which bridge?” and she had replied, “Westminster.”

When this was repeated to John Temple he grew ghastly pale, and staggered back, but the police inspector tried to reassure him.

“No suicide had been known to have occurred from Westminster bridge last night,” he said, “and at the time the lady had been driven there the bridge would be crowded, and, besides, the cabman had called the attention of a policeman to her. This policeman had also been found, and had made a statement. He said the cabman called his attention to a lady who had just left his cab, and he therefore at once walked along the bridge. He came on a gentleman speaking to a lady, who looked very ill, and he asked the gentleman about her, but he made a satisfactory answer, and they went away together, and he lost sight of them. The policeman, however, had kept looking out during the time of his beat, and as far as was known no tragedy had happened on the bridge.”

With this cold comfort to his heart, John Temple was forced to be content. He saw the cabman who had driven the lady to Westminster, and from this man’s description John believed it had been May.

“She had a lot of bright, light hair, all ruffled-like,” the cabman said, “and a pretty, pale face, and looked in great trouble, and had no gloves on, but he noticed some rings.”

The policeman on the bridge also gave rather a similar description of the lady he had seen talking to the gentleman, whose arm she took before they went away. But John Temple told himself, as he listened, that it had not been the same. He went back to the hotel with a bowed head and a remorseful, miserable heart. Went back to wait in vain for news that never came.

And during the same day an incident occurred at Pembridge Terrace which greatly upset both the kind ladies there. They had been struck with John Temple’s manner when he parted with them the night before, and naturally thought it strange that May should leave home even for a few days without bidding them good-by. And they were actually talking of this; speculating in their mild, kindly way on the cause, and hoping nothing had gone wrong with their young friends, when the servant came upstairs, and having rapped at their bedroom door told them that a gentleman was waiting in the dining-room to see them.

“A gentleman?” said Miss Webster, surprised. “Did you ask his name, Jane?”

“Yes, ma’am, I did,” replied Jane, “and I think he said Mr. Churchill, but I’m not quite sure.”

“Churchill?” repeated Miss Webster, and the two sisters looked at each other in some consternation.

“We will be down directly, Jane,” then said Miss Webster after a little pause, and when the maid disappeared they again exchanged rather alarmed glances.

“I am afraid something has happened; that their secret is known,” suggested Miss Eliza, nervously.

“Do you think it will be May’s father?” asked Miss Webster, as she tied her bonnet strings with trembling fingers.

The two sisters were dressing themselves to go out on a little shopping excursion when they heard of their unexpected visitor, and they both felt very much upset. However, there was nothing for it but to go down and receive “Mr. Churchill,” whoever he might be. They accordingly did this together, and when they entered the dining-room they saw a tall, good-looking, middle-aged man, with a somewhat countrified appearance, standing there.

He made a bow as the sisters appeared, which they nervously returned.

“Excuse my calling, ladies,” he said, “but I have come to make some inquiries about my daughter, May Churchill, who, I understand, has been living with you for some time.”

Both the poor ladies gave a gasp, and for a moment or two stood silent. They did not in truth know what to say; did not know how much Mr. Churchill knew, or how far May was committed in his eyes.

“My girl,” went on Mr. Churchill, seeing their hesitation, “disappeared from her home some time ago, and we have heard nothing of her till yesterday. But yesterday I had sure information that she is living with you, and that she is now called Mrs. John. Is this so?”

Miss Webster drew herself up a little proudly.

“Yes, Mr. Churchill,” she said, “your daughter has been here, but she is not here at present.”

“Where is she now, then?” asked Mr. Churchill, somewhat roughly. “For I mean to find her. I have come up to London to find her, and also to find Mr. John Temple, who, I suppose, has taken her away if she has gone from here.”

Again both the sisters gasped. This big strong man seemed to overwhelm them, and they felt themselves almost powerless in his hands.

“The long and the short of it is,” continued Mr. Churchill, “I mean to call Mr. John Temple to account for his conduct to May. He induced her, I believe, to leave her home, and she writes to him in a manner, I am told, that if she isn’t married to him she ought to be.”

Both the faded faces before him were now suffused with a sudden blush. But a moment later Miss Webster plucked up her courage.

“Sir,” she said, with not a little indignation in her tone, “I think you speak of your daughter, who is everything that a young lady should be, in a very unbecoming manner.”

“I do not know, madam, what you think a young lady should be,” retorted Mr. Churchill; “but I think when a girl leaves her father’s house, and carries on an intrigue with a young man, that it is her father’s duty to learn whether she is married or not, and if she is not, to see that she is.”

“But she is married, sir!” replied Miss Webster, raising her head with dignity. “I and my sister Eliza here were present at her marriage, which was performed by the clergyman of the parish, Mr. Mold. It was kept a secret on account of Mr. John Temple’s uncle, and if it will do him any harm I hope you will still keep it a secret, but I can positively assure you that they are married.”

Mr. Churchill’s expression changed considerably while Miss Webster was speaking.

“Then all I can say, madam, is, that I am heartily glad to hear it,” he answered. “Naturally I was put out about my girl, and anxious to hear that it was all right with her. However, Mr. John Temple need not be afraid of his uncle, the squire. I saw the old gentleman yesterday, and he told me May would be welcomed there when his nephew brought her to the Hall.”

“I am, indeed, glad to hear this; indeed, most glad!” said Miss Webster, with a ring of genuine pleasure in her voice. “We have the greatest respect and regard for Mr. John Temple, both my sister Eliza and myself, and we have grieved a little that his marriage and your sweet young daughter’s should have been kept a secret. But now it is all right. This is delightful news, is it not, dear Eliza?” she added, turning to her sister.

“Most delightful!” replied Miss Eliza, with emotion, “Really quite affecting!” and she drew out her handkerchief as though preparing for tears.

“Well, ladies, I am sure I thank you very much for your information,” said Mr. Churchill, heartily. “It’s a great relief to my mind; a very great relief,” and Mr. Churchill wiped his brow with his handkerchief. “You see my poor little lass lost her mother when she was only a child, and though I’m married again, a stepmother’s not the same somehow, though I’ve nothing to say against my missus. But about May? Where is she now, for I would like to kiss her before I go, and shake Mr. John Temple by the hand?”

“She left yesterday afternoon, and has gone for a few days to the seaside with her husband,” answered Miss Webster. “Mr. John Temple came yesterday and took May away with him.”

Mr. Churchill looked rather puzzled.

“It’s a strange thing,” he said, “but Mr. John Temple would say nothing when he was questioned yesterday whether he was married to May or not; I suppose it’s all right about the register, and that sort of thing?”

“Certainly right!” exclaimed both sisters. “We saw it signed.”

“Still, I think I should like to have a look at it, so if you ladies will kindly tell me the name of the church and the clergyman—”

“With pleasure,” replied Miss Webster. “And now, Mr. Churchill, will you take some refreshments, and have a glass of wine to drink to the health of the young couple?”

Mr. Churchill accepted this hospitable offer, and shortly afterward took his leave. But scarcely was he gone when the sisters began to be afraid of what they had done.

“I am sure I hope we have done right in telling about the marriage,” said Miss Webster, looking at Miss Eliza for comfort.

“I am sure I hope so,” replied Miss Eliza, in an apprehensive tone.

“But you see he cast such aspersions on May?”

“It would have roused anyone to defend her—but still—”

“What do you think, dear Eliza?”

“I think it would be as well if Mr. John Temple knew that we were almost forced to tell the truth. Do you think you could write to him, dear Margaret?”

“Yes, if I knew his address. He usually stays at the Grosvenor, but then he said they were going to-day to the seaside, you remember?”

“But he might have left his address at the Grosvenor. I think I would try, dear Margaret. Let us ask Jane where he directed the cab to drive to last night when he left here?”

Jane was accordingly summoned to the dining-room, as she had carried poor May’s

portmanteau down to the cab when John Temple had left Pembridge Terrace the evening before.

"He said the Grosvenor, ma'am, I'm nearly certain," Jane answered to her mistress' inquiries. So after the maid had left the room, Miss Webster decided to write to tell John Temple of Mr. Churchill's visit and its consequences.

"DEAR MR. TEMPLE," she began, somewhat nervously. "Sister Eliza and myself have been somewhat upset this morning by receiving a visit from Mr. Churchill, your sweet young wife's father. He had heard she was living with us, and had come to seek her, and was very anxious to learn the truth about her. And he said some things—made some remarks—that neither sister Eliza nor I could hear unmoved. In fact, we were almost forced, in defense of your dear wife, to tell him that you were married to her, and this seemed a great relief to his mind. But we begged him still to keep the secret, if he thought it would injure you at all with your uncle, Mr. Temple of Woodlea Hall. But to our great joy he told us that he had seen your uncle on the subject, and that he had said he would gladly welcome dear May as his nephew's wife. I need not tell you how delighted we were to hear this, as Mr. Temple's sanction seemed the one thing wanting to your great happiness.

"With our united love to your dear wife, and best regards to yourself, I remain sincerely yours.

"MARGARET WEBSTER."

This letter was delivered to John Temple during the evening, as he sat alone and desolate, in his great remorse and pain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
MR. CHURCHILL'S NEWS.

Early on the next morning after Ralph Webster had left May at St. Phillip's Hospital, he called there to inquire after her, and saw his friend the house surgeon, Doctor Brentwood.

"You have come to ask after the poor little woman you brought here last night," said the doctor, as he shook Webster's hand. "Well, I'm sorry to say I can't give a very good account of her. She has had a bad, restless night, and is very feverish this morning."

"I am very sorry," answered Webster, gravely, and a slight quiver passed over his lips.

"She seems extremely low, almost in a hopeless state," went on the doctor. "She's had some tremendous heart-break or other, poor soul; I suppose it's not possible to give her any mental relief?"

"I fear not," said Webster, in a low, pained tone. "She has lost at one blow all that made the happiness of her life."

Doctor Brentwood looked somewhat curiously at his friend.

"She is decidedly pretty, at least she must be even remarkably so when she is well. I don't want to seem curious, Webster, but suppose the poor young woman gets worse—and it is possible—what other friends has she besides yourself?"

"I promised her faithfully not to mention anything of her past."

"Then I presume her name—Mrs. Church—is an assumed one?"

"I can not even answer that question. But let her have everything she can possibly require; I shall be answerable for all the expenses connected with her case."

"And yet—you can do nothing to relieve her mind?"

"Nothing; I only wish I could."

"Well, I must try to pull her through; poor young thing, it seems a sad case."

"It is a terribly sad case."

After this Ralph Webster went away, but each morning before he began his work he went to inquire at the hospital about "Mrs. Church." And May was very ill. The shock had affected her physically as well as mentally and she lay prostrate, hopeless, wishing the life was ended that Webster had done his best to save. There were times when her mind wandered, and the fever ran high. But as a rule her great weakness was what the doctor feared most. It was as though the spring of youth were broken—the flower blighted in its bloom.

Meanwhile as days and weeks went on naturally the friends of the absent girl began to grow again uneasy concerning her fate. Mr. Churchill had returned to Woodside after his visit to London and the Misses Webster, an elated, almost overjoyed man. He had examined the register which recorded the marriage of John Temple and May Churchill, and he had seen the clergyman who had performed the ceremony. Therefore, his mind was set at rest regarding May. He did not write his news to his wife. He wished personally to carry it to her, and felt a sort of secret triumph when he remembered the remarks Mrs. Churchill had made regarding May's disappearance.

He accordingly telegraphed to her the hour that he hoped to arrive at home, and desired the dog-cart might be waiting for him at the station to meet the train which he intended to travel by.

It was waiting for him, and he was driven home, and standing at the open hall door when he reached Woodside was his wife ready to receive him.

She went quickly forward to meet him, and looked eagerly in his face.

“Well, William?” she said.

William kissed her, but there was triumph in his heart as he pressed his mustache against her firm lips. He was thinking of his girl, and thinking of her with pride.

“Have you heard anything?” half-whispered Mrs. Churchill, as she tried to lead him into the hall. But Mr. Churchill seemed in no hurry to impart his news. He gave directions to the groom who had driven him from the station regarding the horse in the dog-cart, and inquired about another animal that was ill. Then, at last, he turned and entered the house, and Mrs. Churchill having closed the door behind him, followed him into the dining-room.

“Have you heard anything of May?” she again inquired quickly.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Churchill, nodding his head, while a pleased smile spread over his face; “it is all right; May is now Mrs. John Temple, and I saw the register of the marriage and the clergyman who married them myself.”

“You don’t say so!” exclaimed Mrs. Churchill, genuinely astonished.

And for a moment or two—so strange is the human heart—she felt a pang of disappointment at the good news. She had always prophesied evil things of May, and to hear that she was suddenly raised in social position so far above herself, gave her an unpleasant sensation.

“Yes,” continued Mr. Churchill, somewhat boastfully, “my girl has done well for herself, hasn’t she, Sarah? I went first to the ladies where she lived after she left here, until she married Mr. John Temple. They were two real ladies, clergyman’s daughters, and elderly, and had known Mr. John Temple for years, and he asked them to take charge of her until he could make her his wife. And you should have heard how they spoke of her, in the highest terms, and they went to the church when she was married, and so it’s all on the square.”

“Then why was there all this secrecy?” asked Mrs. Churchill, for she had not yet got over her chagrin.

“It seems he thought the old squire and madam wouldn’t like it,” answered Mr. Churchill. “But that’s all right now, for the squire himself told me he would welcome May as his nephew’s wife. And as for madam, well, madam will just have to take it as best as she can. My girl will step into her shoes when the old gentleman dies, for the Hall goes to the heir I’m told, and I’ll have my son-in-law for my landlord—but I was always proud and fond of May.”

Mrs. Churchill composed her lips and tried to swallow her mortification. But after all she was a sensible, though a hard woman, and she saw it was no use trying to throw cold water on her husband’s elation at the good fortune of his daughter. She therefore went up to him and kissed him.

“Well, my dear,” she said, “I am glad it has ended well, and that you are pleased. But you have forgotten to let me know one thing; did you see her?”

“No; as ill-luck would have it, Mr. John Temple had taken her away to the seaside for a few days, and she was out of London when I was there. But I expect we shall be hearing from her shortly; and to-morrow morning I’ll go over to the Hall and see the squire, and tell him the news. Ay, and in spite of madam, I expect we’ll be having her staying at the Hall in no time, and what will you think of that, Sarah?” And Mr. Churchill laughed aloud, and patted his wife’s comely chin.

This was, however, a little more than Mrs. Churchill’s temper could bear.

“Well, I hope it will end well,” she said, tartly; “unequal marriages rarely do.”

“I don’t see that it’s so unequal,” retorted Mr. Churchill. “What was madam herself, who holds her head so high? Only a poor parson’s daughter, with a skin-flint mother, who begs for milk and eggs of everyone who is fool enough to give her them. My girl is as good as madam any day, and as for looks there’s no doubt May has the best of them.”

“You are too uplifted, William,” answered Mrs. Churchill, reproachfully; “remember pride may have a fall.” And having administered this rebuke, Mrs. Churchill left the room, leaving her husband seriously offended.

He was indeed so offended that he would not speak again on the subject during the whole evening. But early the next morning he ordered his best horse to be saddled, as he thought it behooved him to make a good appearance on such an important occasion as carrying the news of his nephew’s marriage to the squire.

“I am going to ride over to the Hall, Sarah,” he said, as he rose from the breakfast table, and he felt as he spoke that he was master of the situation. And Sarah felt this too. It was disagreeable that this little “chit” should be raised above her, but Mrs. Churchill knew very well it was true. Her property consisted of one good farm, besides some savings of her first husband. But what was this to the large estates of the squire’s of Woodlea? And Mr. John Temple was heir to these estates, and May was his wife. So Mrs. Churchill had made up her mind to make the best of it. She had also offended her good-looking husband, and Mrs. Churchill did not like being on bad terms with him.

“Very well, my dear,” she therefore answered meekly, to her spouse’s announcement that he

was going to the Hall, “and I am glad you have such good news to tell the squire.”

“It is good news,” replied Mr. Churchill, still stiffly; but he felt mollified, and deigned to kiss his hand to his wife, as she stood at the hall door and watched him mount his good horse and ride away.

And it was no doubt with an uplifted heart that Mr. Churchill rode on his errand to the Hall. He knew, indeed, that Mr. Temple’s approval, or disapproval, would ultimately make no difference to John Temple’s position. The estates were strictly entailed on the next heir, in the event of the squire dying without children. The one child of the house was dead, and John Temple was the next heir, therefore the Woodlea property must some day be his, and his children’s after him. Mr. Churchill looked proudly around, as he went on, at the wide grass-lands and wooded slopes of the familiar landscape. He seemed to see them in a new light. His grandson might become their possessor, and he, the grandsire, would no doubt reap the benefit. He was a man who loved money and success in life, but to give him his due he was also not thinking only of worldly advantages. He was thinking that no one could now throw a stone at his “little girl, and that she would be able to hold up her head with the best of them.”

And his heart was still full of pride when he drew rein at the Hall. He could scarcely ask if he could see the squire in the same tone as was his wont. But he tried to do this, and not to show any undue elation, when the squire received him in the library.

“Well, Mr. Churchill, have you any news?” asked Mr. Temple, gravely, as he held out his hand to his tenant.

“Yes, squire, I have,” answered Mr. Churchill, cordially grasping his landlord’s hand in his own.

“And what is it?” asked Mr. Temple, somewhat nervously.

“Well, sir, I went up to London, as you know, the day before yesterday, and yesterday morning I went to the house in Pembridge Terrace, Bayswater, where the ladies live whose address Mrs. Temple kindly gave me, and where my daughter May has been staying since she left her home. And, squire, I found two real ladies, elderly, and clergyman’s daughters, and they seemed very fond of my girl, and had known your nephew, Mr. John Temple, for many years. And to make a long story short, squire, Mr. John Temple and May were married from their house; the ladies going to the church to witness the ceremony, and then the young people went abroad.”

Mr. Temple’s delicate, rather pallid complexion slightly flushed at this announcement, and for a moment he was silent. The pride of birth and station were not absent from his nature, but, on the other hand, he was a good and just man, and he knew that John Temple had only acted rightly.

“Well, Mr. Churchill,” he said, rather slowly, “I am glad to hear this is so. If my nephew induced your daughter to leave her home, he has only done what a gentleman ought to do in making her his wife.”

“She left her home to become his wife, sir,” answered Mr. Churchill, rather quickly. “That was the arrangement between them, and in the meanwhile my girl went to these ladies, who are friends of his, and remained with them until her marriage. And that there might be no doubt about it, squire, I went to the church where they were married, and I saw the clergyman who married them, and examined the register; and this—” and he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket-book as he spoke—“this is the copy of the register of their marriage, and if you’ll kindly look at it you will see it’s all on the square.”

The squire settled his gold-rimmed glasses on his nose, and took the paper in his hand. In it were duly set forth the date and other particulars of the marriage of John Temple and May Churchill, or rather of Margaret Alice Churchill, for May had given her full baptismal name on the occasion of her marriage.

Mr. Temple read the copy through and then returned it to Mr. Churchill.

“Well, then, there is no mistake, Mr. Churchill,” he said, “and we must earnestly hope that the young people may be happy together. Your daughter, from what I have seen of her, is, I am sure, a charming and very pretty girl—and I will write to my nephew to congratulate him. But where are they now?”

“Well, sir, I am sorry to say I missed them. Mr. John Temple had taken May away to the seaside for a few days when I arrived in town. But no doubt we will be hearing from them soon.”

The squire looked rather puzzled.

“It was strange,” he said, “that my nephew would say nothing before he left here. However, there is no doubt about their marriage, and when you hear from your daughter, Mr. Churchill, will you let me know, and then I will write to my nephew?”

“That I will, sir,” answered Mr. Churchill; “and thank you kindly for the way in which you have spoken of my girl. You might have looked higher, naturally, for your nephew, but this I will say for my daughter May—that a sweeter or bonnier lass does not live! There’s no vice about her, sir, and she’s been a blessing and a comfort to me always, and I’m sure she will be one to her husband. Her mother was a lady—a clergyman’s daughter—and May has taken after her in all her ways.”

“She is no doubt a very sweet-looking girl,” said the squire, “and I shall be glad to welcome her here. But now I am afraid I must say good-morning, Mr. Churchill, as I have an engagement I must keep.” And the squire looked at his watch.

Upon this hint Mr. Churchill took his departure, and scarcely was he gone when Mr. Temple proceeded at once to the breakfast-room, where he had left his handsome wife.

Mrs. Temple was listlessly reading the newspaper, and she looked up somewhat surprised when he entered the room, as she did not know of Mr. Churchill's visit.

"I have got some news for you, Rachel," said Mr. Temple.

"News?" asked Mrs. Temple, quickly.

"Yes; John Temple is married to Miss Churchill; must have married her two days after he left here in the autumn, when he said he went to Paris—that must have been his wedding trip."

Mrs. Temple started to her feet, and her face flushed and then grew pale.

"Is this possible?" she said. "Are you sure?"

"Mr. Churchill has just been here, and he brought with him a copy of the register of their marriage. There can be no mistake, and yet I do not understand John's conduct, or why he was so reticent about it, when I distinctly told him that if he had induced her to leave her home that it was his duty to make her his wife."

"There is something to hide, something he is keeping back!" cried Mrs. Temple, excitedly. "But you say they are actually married?"

"They are certainly married, and Rachel, now that the thing is done, we must try to make the best of it. Naturally it is not what I wished for John—still—"

"I should think not!" interrupted Mrs. Temple, scornfully. "A tenant farmer's daughter—truly her pretty face has made her fortune!"

"Well, it is done, and when I hear from John I mean to write to him; after all the girl is good and pretty, and he might have done worse."

"Not well, I think," answered Mrs. Temple, bitterly, and then she left the room, full of excitement and anger.

The news of John Temple's marriage was indeed very bitter to her. Unconsciously she had learnt to like him too well for one thing, and for another she disliked, nay hated, the whole Churchill family. The boys had played in the fatal game when her little son was killed, and she had always felt a strange jealousy of May's beauty. And now she was Mrs. John Temple, the wife of the heir of Woodlea! reflected Mrs. Temple, with curling lips.

But she was too much excited to keep the news to herself. She therefore hastily put on her hat and cloak, and started for the vicarage to tell her mother. She felt a sort of grim pleasure in thinking what a rage Mrs. Layton would be in when she heard it. And she certainly was not disappointed in this. Her arrival was most unexpected and inconvenient, for she rarely went to her father's house, and on this unfortunate morning Mrs. Layton was engaged in what she called "dressing her feathers," that is, all the feathers that she could collect from the fowls eaten at the Hall or at the vicarage were eagerly saved and stored away by Mrs. Layton until she had acquired a sufficient quantity to have a grand assortment of them. She was therefore sitting covered with feathers in her store-room, when she was told that her daughter, Mrs. Temple, was waiting below to see her.

She tried to shake herself free of the feathers, but with many still clinging to her hair and dress she finally descended, by no means in a good humor. Mrs. Temple was standing looking out of the window as she entered the room, and she gave rather a hard laugh when she saw her mother's extraordinary appearance.

"Whatever have you been doing?" she said.

"I've been dressing my feathers, my dear," replied Mrs. Layton, "my half-yearly dressing, you know, and I don't believe, Rachel, that your cook or your scullery-maid have sent me half what they should."

Mrs. Temple slightly shrugged her handsome shoulders.

"We've had a wedding in the family," she said, scornfully, "and I've come to tell you the news."

"A wedding!" repeated Mrs. Layton, blankly.

"Yes, my nephew John Temple has entered the distinguished family of Churchill," continued Mrs. Temple, yet more scornfully. "Nice for us all, isn't it?"

"It can't be true?" gasped Mrs. Layton.

"Perfectly true, I assure you! The respected head of the family has just been to the Hall to tell Phillip, and he brought a copy of the register of the marriage, and everything is all correct. My beloved nephew, it seems, was secretly married when he went away in the autumn, he said, to Paris. No doubt he did go to Paris, but it was with his highly-born bride!"

"Well, whatever is the world coming to!" cried Mrs. Layton with uplifted hands. "It will be destroyed—no doubt the end is coming—such monstrous things occur! To think that this girl, a girl I've bought eggs of, a girl whose character I consider to be far from what it ought to be, should make such a match! But I warned you, Rachel, against John Temple; a snake in the grass, I considered him; but I never thought he would be such a fool as this."

"I think he must be more a fool than a snake," answered Mrs. Temple, contemptuously. "Fancy marrying a girl like this! And Phillip says we must make the best of it, which I suppose means

inviting the bride and bridegroom to stay at the Hall! However, we shall see. But, good-morning now, mother; I'll leave you to digest my news." And with a little nod Mrs. Temple turned away and left the house, while Mrs. Layton stood absolutely speechless with disgust.

But both Mr. Churchill's elation and Mrs. Temple's indignation cooled down during the next few weeks. For, to the great surprise and disappointment of Mr. Churchill, nothing was heard at Woodside either from John Temple or his supposed bride. Each morning Mr. Churchill said he could not understand it when the letters came in and there was none from May; and Mrs. Churchill—though with caution—began again to insinuate that she feared it was not all right. And the squire himself, just a week after Mr. Churchill's visit to the Hall to announce the marriage, walked one morning over to Woodside, to ask Mr. Churchill the whereabouts of the bride and bridegroom.

"Well, squire, it's the strangest thing, but we have not had a word from them," answered Mr. Churchill, somewhat disconcerted.

"It is certainly very strange," said the squire, slowly.

"Can't understand it, because I told the ladies—the Miss Websters that she had been staying with, and who saw her married to Mr. John Temple—that you had been kind enough to say you would receive her as his wife."

"Which I certainly shall do. Well, Mr. Churchill, why not write to these ladies and ask if they know their address? They probably do."

"I never thought of that, sir; but I'll write to them this very day. Thank you very much for thinking of it, squire."

And Mr. Churchill accordingly did write to Miss Webster, and after apologizing for troubling her, told her that he was getting anxious at not hearing from his daughter, and asked her to be good enough to give him Mrs. John Temple's address, if she knew it. And he added, "Mr. Temple, the squire of Woodlea, was here this morning, and will be glad also to hear from his nephew."

An answer to this letter was most anxiously expected at Woodside, and after two days one came, which was as follows:

"Dear Sir: I am sorry I can not give you the information you require regarding the address of Mr. and Mrs. John Temple, as we have heard nothing from them since the day Mr. John Temple arrived here and took your daughter away for a proposed short visit to the seaside. But the same day that you called and told us Mr. Temple of Woodlea Hall would be glad to receive the young people, I felt it was my pleasing duty to write a few lines to Mr. John Temple to tell him of your visit, and also of his uncle's sanction to his marriage. I sent this letter to the Grosvenor Hotel, where he sometimes stays while in town, but I have received no reply. And therefore we—my sister and myself—can only conclude that Mr. and Mrs. John Temple must have gone abroad, and have not received my letter.

"Trusting, however, that you will soon hear from them, I remain,

"Yours sincerely,

"Margaret Webster."

"Yes, that's it; no doubt they are abroad," said Mr. Churchill, after he had read Miss Webster's letter, handing it to his wife.

"Of course, they may be," replied his wife.

But Mr. Churchill was quite sure that they were, and took over Miss Webster's letter to show it to the squire. But the squire still thought it very strange, and so did Mrs. Temple when her husband told her of it.

"There is something to hide. John Temple is keeping something back," she said. And she thought again and again, "What can it be?"

CHAPTER XXXV.
KATHLEEN WEIR'S GHOST.

And during this time, also, Miss Kathleen Weir had felt very much disappointed that she had neither seen nor heard anything of Mr. Ralph Webster. That is, she only received two brief notes from him, both declining her invitations to "a merry supper after the play to meet Linda Falconer, as you admired her so much—and her swain, Dereham."

But Webster, with the ever-present memory of that despairing face on the bridge, and the constant anxiety for the unhappy girl lying in St. Phillip's Hospital, nigh unto death, had felt it was impossible for him to encounter the gay and lively sallies of the actress. Not that he had lost interest in the woman who stood between poor May and happiness, but his mind was too much out of tune to go into such vivacious company, and he therefore had refused Miss Weir's invitations.

But nearly three weeks after he had taken May Churchill to St. Phillip's, a change came over her condition. Her physical health decidedly improved, and one morning when Doctor Brentwood

was paying his usual visit to her she spoke to him of her future life.

"I am going to live now, doctor, am I not?" she said, in a low, pained tone.

"Certainly you are going to live," replied the doctor. "I hope for many years; until you are quite old," and he smiled.

"That will be a long time," said May, with a weary sigh; "I am not much past twenty now—a long, long time."

"It seems long to look forward to, but time passes quickly enough, especially when it is fully employed."

"It is about this that I meant to speak to you of, doctor," continued May, and a faint color stole to her pale cheeks. "If I am going to live I must do something to gain my own living; I must find some employment."

"Everyone is better employed," answered the doctor, cheerfully; "it's good for mind and body alike. Now what do you think you would like to do?"

"Since I have felt a little better I have thought of this constantly. I—I should like to see Mr. Webster about it, as he might be able to help me."

"I am sure he will do anything to help you; he is your sincere friend, and has been most anxious about you during your illness, and has called each morning to inquire for you. Therefore you may depend on his assistance, I am certain, and, I may add, on mine."

"You are very good—"

"And now I am going to ask you a question which is not a medical one," interrupted the doctor, "and, therefore you need not answer it unless you like. But have you no friends, no relations, to whom you can now apply?"

"None!" answered May, with sudden emotion; "I wish to be as one dead to everyone I know—they must think me dead, and I would have been, but for—"

"Forgive me for having pained you, and I will promise never again to allude to the subject. So you would like to see Ralph Webster? Well, you shall see him to-morrow, and I am truly glad to find you so much better." And then he smiled kindly and went away.

He felt interested in this forlorn and broken-hearted young woman, who he was sure his friend Webster had saved from some tragic fate; and not the less interested on account of May's fair face. He therefore wrote to Webster during the day, and told him of the improvement in May's health, and also of her wish to find some employment.

"Don't throw cold water on this, my dear fellow," he added; "it will be the very best thing possible for her, and will give her an interest in life which she has well-nigh lost. Can you call to-morrow afternoon?" And so forth.

Doctor Brentwood's letter was a great relief to Webster's mind, and he received another by the same post from Miss Kathleen Weir. This was a highly characteristic epistle.

"Dear Mr. Webster: For the third and last time, unless you come, will you take supper with me this evening; or if suits you better will you call in the afternoon? Wire which. Yours ever sincerely.

"Kathleen Weir."

Webster read this note with a smile; thought it over, and then decided to call during the afternoon, and he accordingly telegraphed Miss Weir to that effect. And as he drove to the actress' flat he was wondering if she had any news to tell him, and he found that she had some.

She received him in her usual airy fashion, and she was charmingly dressed in a most becoming tea-gown.

"Well, you have come at last," she said, holding out her hand as Webster entered her drawing-room.

"Yes," he answered, taking it, "and I should have come before, but I have been a good deal worried of late."

"About money or love?"

"About neither, as it happens."

"I thought there were only two things worried men, and the want of money was the worst. Well, we must all have it; but I have been more than worried, I have been upset; I have seen a ghost!"

"A ghost?"

"Yes, the ghost of a dead love! There, can you guess what I mean? Well, I suppose not, so I must tell you. But I have really been shocked; I have seen John Temple in the flesh, though looking so awfully ill that he was much more like a dead man than a living one."

"Where did you see him?" asked Webster, quickly.

"I will tell you. Yesterday morning I drove down to see Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, as I wanted to be quite certain whether John Temple is the man who has come into the fortune, as Dereham was so positive that he was. Well, you know Harrison's offices are at Westminster, and I saw the old boy sure enough, but he was as sly as a fox. He did not deny that John Temple was the man 'that ultimately, mind ultimately, my dear madam,' he kept repeating, would succeed to his

uncle's estate or estates. 'But his position at present is unchanged,' he added, and he threw ice on my suggestion that I should have an increased allowance. 'When Mr. John Temple succeeds to the property the question can then be mooted,' and so on. In fact I got no satisfaction for my trouble, and when I came out of the office in a very bad humor I told the cabman to drive over Westminster bridge and back again, as I thought the river air might improve my temper."

"And you went?" asked Webster, eagerly.

"I went; I was in a hansom, and when we got to the other end of the bridge I told the man to turn back. He did so, and there was a block as we re-crossed, and I was bending out of the cab to see what was going to happen, when my eyes fell on the figure of a man leaning on the parapet of the bridge, and staring into the river below. As I was looking at him, he lifted his head and looked around, and I saw a ghost—the ghost of John Temple! But, oh, so horribly changed! He looked haggard, worn, and old, and a sort of pity—such fools are women—crept into my heart as I looked at him. I felt sorry for him; I thought he must be in some terrible trouble, and so I felt I should like to speak to him. I pulled out my handkerchief and waved it to attract his attention, and someone told him of this, for he looked quickly up at the cab, and our eyes met! I wish you had seen the look of horror that came over his face, of shuddering horror, as he recognized me. It was hatred! He glared at me just for a moment, and then turned and fled as if the devil himself were after him. There, what do you think of that? The end of a dead love!"

"I think it is very dramatic," said Ralph Webster, slowly. He forced himself to speak the commonplace words, but he was not thinking commonplace thoughts.

"Now, there was something in this man's face," went on the actress, "that told me a story. John Temple is grieving about something that has cut his heart-strings. It can't be money in his case because for one thing he never cared very much about it, and for another he will ultimately, as Mr. Harrison described it, succeed to his uncle's property, and with such prospects he could borrow as much as he liked, I suppose. No, it is about some woman! He was looking down into the dusky river when I first saw him. Can he have driven some poor soul to seek for refuge in its gloomy depths?"

Ralph Webster inwardly shuddered, but Kathleen Weir little thought how near she was to the truth.

"He is miserable about some woman," she repeated, "and that is why I have sent for you to-day. I am in the way, I suppose, and I don't want to be in the way any longer. I want to be free, and of course he does. Now, how can I find out about his life, for if I could find out, I expect I could go triumphantly through the ordeal of the divorce court."

Webster was silent for a few moments; he was thinking the knowledge of John Temple's second marriage would not free him from his first. It would bring disgrace to him, but not liberty to her.

"You would have to show a case against him besides this supposed woman," he said, slowly. "Did he ever treat you cruelly?"

"You mean did he ever punch my head, or pull my hair?" answered Kathleen, with a hard, little laugh. "No, I can not truthfully say he ever did; but I might say it untruthfully, and he would be too glad to get rid of me to contradict me."

"But it would be very dangerous; you would have to prove it."

"At all events he forsook me?"

"I thought you parted by mutual consent?"

"How horrid you are, Mr. Webster! At all events I mean to get quit of him. I am weary of a tie which is no tie; of a bond which galls me, and I would do anything, even something desperate, to break it."

She started to her feet, and began walking up and down the room as she spoke, swaying her tall, fine figure with a restless movement as she did so. She was looking very handsome, her excitement had flushed her face and brightened her bright eyes, and involuntarily Webster admired her.

"There!" she said, presently, "now I have told you my news, so please rouse your sharp legal brains to help me. I don't mind about the three hundred a year now, or the ultimate reversion of some bigger sum. I want to be free. I don't want John Temple to cut his own throat or mine—and upon my word he looked as if he could do it—but I want to scrape out of my marriage some other way."

"Well, let me have time to think it over."

"Thanks, and now let us drop a disagreeable subject, and tell me what you have been doing with yourself all this long time? You look thinner, and you say you have been worried?"

"Yes; we all have worries and troubles, you know, Miss Weir."

"That is true; but still I think life might be bright, might be sweet and worth living for."

"I am sure yours is."

"Oh! don't pay me those commonplace compliments; I don't want to hear them from you."

"You despise my best efforts to be agreeable."

"What a disagreeable humor you are in! I declare I think I shall send you away."

“Well, must I go?” said Webster, rising with a smile.

“Not yet; unless you will promise to come again very soon. Come to supper to meet Linda Falconer and Dereham the day after to-morrow.”

“I will see if I can, if you will allow the invitation to remain open. By the by, how is that affair progressing?”

“Oh, swimmingly, I believe, but Linda is fearfully bored with him. ‘My dear,’ she said to me the other day, ‘he is too silly.’”

“Poor boy!”

“Poor boy, indeed! However, that is settled, and you will come the day after to-morrow to supper? In the meantime, you know, don’t forget my ghost and his probable misdoings.”

“Very well,” said Webster with a laugh. Then he took leave of the actress, and Kathleen Weir was alone.

As she had done once before after he had left her, she immediately went up to one of the mirrors in the room and gazed at her own reflection in the glass.

“Am I so weak?” she thought. “Do I actually like this man, perhaps better than he likes me? But if I were free I think he would like me—I must be free!”

CHAPTER XXXVI.
BY THE SEA.

The next day Ralph Webster went to see a very different woman to the sprightly actress. He went to see pale, sad-faced May Churchill, propped up in an easy chair, with the unmistakable attitudes of weakness and languor in every movement.

A sudden flush, however, rose to her very brows as Webster entered the room, and she nervously held out her hand. She was remembering that momentous meeting on the bridge; remembering her terrible misery and despair.

And the ordinarily calm Webster was also ill at ease. He took the thin, trembling little hand in his, almost without a word; he looked at the altered face, and a strange, painful emotion stirred his heart.

“You are better?” he said a moment later, but not in his usual firm tones.

“Yes, much better,” she answered.

It was the same sweet, low voice that he had listened for too eagerly at his aunts’ house; that had touched some hidden chord in his heart that hitherto had been mute.

“Doctor Brentwood told me you were much better,” he went on, still nervously, “and I hope soon to see you quite well.”

May made no reply for a moment or so, then she looked up in his face.

“And did Doctor Brentwood tell you anything else?” she asked. “Did he tell you that I wish to find some employment at once?”

“He told me something of this,” answered Webster, taking a chair and drawing it nearer to her; “but for you to do anything at once is, I am sure, impossible.”

“But I must, indeed I must, Mr. Webster,” said May, earnestly. “I can not any longer be a burden to you—I know I have been—”

Here she paused, and tears came unbidden into her eyes, and she turned away her head to hide her emotion.

“Do not, I entreat you, speak thus,” said Webster, also much moved. “I have only been too happy, too thankful, to have been of any use to you. And anything I can do for you, anything that a most sincere friend can do, I am sure you know I will do.”

“You have been most kind, most good,” faltered May. “But—but do not let us speak of the painful past; it upsets me, and unfits me for what I have got to say, for what I must do. What I want is to find some work, some employment.”

“And what have you thought of?”

“I have thought of many things,” answered May with a wan smile. “I am not sufficiently educated to be a governess, I fear, for I have never been at any college nor passed examinations as they do now. I could go into a shop—”

“Certainly not,” interrupted Webster, quickly.

“Why not? It is a means of livelihood, and what matter is it?” said May, quietly.

“It is a life you are quite unsuited for, and one utterly unsuited to you. That is out of the question.”

“Then there are telegraph and post office clerks, are there not, who are women?”

“Yes, but—”

“But Mr. Webster, I must do something. And—there is another thing I have thought of—what I should like best, I think—to be a nurse.”

“Do you mean a hospital nurse?”

“Yes, like Nurse Margaret, who has attended upon me. I am sure I should like this best, and if Doctor Brentwood would give me a chance—”

“I am sure he will do anything for you that he can. Yes,” continued Webster, after a moment’s thought, “I think that life would suit you best. You are naturally gentle and kind, and to help poor, sick people would be a congenial task to you. But nursing, like other things, has to be taught. I will talk to Brentwood about it.”

“Yes, they receive what they call probationers at some hospitals, and perhaps Doctor Brentwood would kindly use his influence to get me admitted at one of these.”

“I will see about it, and I think it is the most likely thing to suit you. But before you do anything, or think of anything, you must have a complete change of air. You must go to the seaside for awhile.”

“I can not do this, Mr. Webster.”

“Forgive me saying so, but you must. Nothing will make you strong but that. How could you nurse anyone when you still want nursing yourself? You must go to Hastings, or one of these places.”

“I—I have no money to do so—it is impossible.”

“Have I not asked you to regard me as a sincere friend? Do you think the trifle it would cost is not most heartily at your service? When you become a very swell nurse, you know,” added Webster, smiling and trying to speak lightly, “you must repay me.”

“If—if I only could,” said May, with emotion.

“You can, and will. Now that is all settled, and tell me where would you like to go—Hastings?”

“But, Mr. Webster—”

“What sort of person has waited on you here? A nice woman?”

“A very nice woman, Nurse Margaret, Sister Margaret, they call her. She has been so good to me.”

“Then you shall go to Hastings with Sister Margaret to take care of you. And I shall expect to see quite a rosy face when I go down to see you. And now I am not going to stay any longer to-day and tire you. We have settled that you are to become a nurse, but first you must get quite well. I will see Brentwood and make all arrangements. For the present, good-by.”

He held out his hand, which May took tremulously. She dare not ask him any questions, nor even inquire after his aunts. She knew if she did she would break down, and he knew this also. They both ignored the past, or at least did not speak of it.

And when she next saw Doctor Brentwood after this interview with Ralph Webster, he told her that everything was settled. She was to go to Hastings in three days, and Sister Margaret, the hospital nurse, was to accompany her.

“And when you return I will see about receiving you here as a probationer,” said the doctor, “as Webster tells me you wish to become a nurse. Would you rather stay here, or go to another hospital?”

“I should rather stay here if I may,” answered May, gratefully.

“I think I can manage it. Yes, the sea-cure is the very thing for you, and I expect you will come back quite well.”

“But—but, Doctor Brentwood, about the expense? I can not—”

The doctor moved his well-shaped hand.

“That is all settled,” he said; “don’t you trouble your head about anything. Sister Margaret has instructions to arrange everything for you.”

And May found that Sister Margaret had instructions to go out and purchase everything she required in the way of dress or outfit. She was a nice, kind, sensible woman, whose own brow was not unlined with sorrow, and she felt great pity for the poor young widow—so May was supposed to be in the hospital—whom she had nursed through her grievous illness. She was also instructed to ask Mrs. Church no questions regarding her past life.

“She has had great troubles; let her try to forget them,” the doctor told the nurse. “She has youth to help her, and thinking of the past will do her no good.”

Ralph Webster saw May again before she left town for Hastings, but when she tried to thank him for all he had done for her he would not listen. To do anything for her indeed was his greatest happiness. But he tried to hide this, and did hide the strong, deep feelings of his heart.

But a painful incident occurred before he parted with her. Webster noticed that May was agitated, and suddenly her delicate skin flushed, and with quivering lips she asked him a question:

“Have you,” she said, in a broken voice, “seen or heard anything of—him?”

Webster hesitated, but he saw it was only cruel to prolong her suspense.

“I have heard nothing,” he answered, “of Mr. Temple; except I know a person who saw him one day.”

“Then he is still in London!” cried May, with deep emotion; “still—he must have made inquiries—he—he was sure to make inquiries—but no doubt he believes me dead. It is best that he should believe me dead!”

She suddenly broke down and burst into passionate sobs. In vain Webster entreated her to try and compose herself. It seemed as though the flood-gate of her emotion was let loose, and the long strain of silence broken.

“I am dead!” she kept on repeating; “dead to every one; no one knows I live but you.”

“And yet you pain me so deeply,” said Webster, in a low tone.

“Forgive me,” sobbed May, “but I thought I would ask.”

“Hush, hush! try not to think of all this. A new life is opening to you; try to go into it with a brave heart. Believe me, there is nothing like work; it deadens pain.”

There was an irrepressible ring of sadness in his voice as he said the last words, which told of his own hard struggle, the struggle of which May knew nothing. But something in his voice made her dry her tears and look at him. He was very pale, and his face had grown thinner and more marked, she noticed, and her heart reproached her for adding to his troubles.

“Forgive me for being so selfish,” she said, gently; “I—will not give way any more. But have you been ill? You do not look very well.”

“I have been too hard-worked, I suppose,” answered Webster, trying to smile. “I shall go down to Hastings for a day’s holiday while you are there, and that will freshen me up. And now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Nothing, nothing indeed! You have only been too good.”

“That is all right then, and now good-by.”

He stooped down as he spoke and pressed his lips upon her hand, and then turned quickly away. And May looked after him gratefully.

“How good he is!” she thought; “what a noble heart he has! I wonder what made him look so sad.”

But a few minutes later Sister Margaret bustled into the room, and she, also, was full of Mr. Webster’s praise.

“What a thorough gentleman he is!” she said, quite enthusiastically. “Have you known him long, Mrs. Church?”

“For some time,” answered May, and her tone reminded Sister Margaret she had been instructed to ask Mrs. Church no questions regarding her past life.

Yet the good woman naturally felt curious, and had decided in her own mind that Mr. Webster must have been an old lover of the young widow’s, and she began to hope that it might end in a marriage. This was, of course, entirely her own theory, for she had certainly nothing to go on. For she and May were quite a fortnight at Hastings before they either saw or heard anything more of Mr. Webster.

She took comfortable rooms for May overlooking the sea, and the change of scene and fresh air soon began to revive the drooping invalid. And a strange change came over May’s mind also at this time. Sister Margaret had many a sad tale to tell her; tales of forsaken wives and broken hearts. Her experience of life had not lain along its smooth paths. She had trod the rough roads, and the sick and sorrowful had been her daily companions. And listening to her May began to learn that her case was not worse than others; her wound not more terrible than some of her fellow sufferers.

“I loved him too much,” she told herself; “it blinded me, and I believed he loved me as I loved him. But it was not the same.”

She did not even give John Temple his due, for he had not felt for her a brief passion that soon would pass away. He had loved her with a selfish love, no doubt, but with a love that made him put everything else aside for her sake. He thought, also, that she cared for him beyond and above all earthly things; that nothing would have torn her from his side.

She had not realized the shock, the horror of her awakening. It seemed to end everything for her, and now slowly struggling back to life, she told herself that John Temple had never really loved her. She had been his plaything; his “country sweetheart,” as he had often called her in his fond hours of love.

Sitting watching the long, rolling waves breaking up against the white cliffs, or the sea-birds winging their way above the foam, May told herself again and again that her life was done—that is, her life of happiness and hope. There remained but for her a cold and colorless existence, toiling for her daily bread. Yet she did not shrink from her fate. She accepted it as inevitable, and, after the first bitterness was passed, bore herself with a certain amount of heroism and calmness.

“I was mad that night, and but for Mr. Webster—” she sometimes thought, and would shudder as she did so.

“I wonder he has never been down to see us?” at last one day said Sister Margaret, at the very moment when May was vaguely thinking of the past.

The two were sitting together on the pier, in a bright, fresh day in the early winter time, when Sister Margaret made this remark. All around them was the deep blue sea, white-crested and sparkling in the sun. Visitors were strolling about, and the whole scene was cheerful and invigorating. May roused herself from her sad day-dreams to answer Sister Margaret.

“You mean Mr. Webster?” she said. “I dare say he is too busy to come.”

She looked up as she spoke, looked across the pier, and with a little start the next moment she recognized Ralph Webster. He was leaning back against the railing watching the two women he had come to see, and when his eyes met May’s he raised his hat and crossed over to speak to them.

“Good gracious, Mr. Webster!” cried Sister Margaret, when she saw him. “What a start you gave us! we were just speaking of you.”

“Were you?” he answered, and he shook hands with them both, and then sat down by May’s side.

“May I sit beside you?” he said, as he did so.

“I have been wondering,” he went on the next moment, smiling, “how long I should stand opposite to you without your seeing me? Do you know I’ve been quite five minutes over there?”

“Really!” said May. She felt nervous and agitated. Seeing him again so suddenly had brought the past more vividly before her.

“But I have not been wasting my time,” continued Webster, still smiling; “I have been seeing, and with great and sincere pleasure, how much you are improved. The sea air has made a wonderful difference in you.”

“Yes; doesn’t she look well?” said Sister Margaret, proudly.

“Indeed she does. This is a charming day,” went on Webster, looking up at the blue sky, and then down at the blue sea. “It seems like a rest to sit here; a rest from the worries of the world.”

“And have you been very busy?” asked May, half-shyly.

“I always work fairly hard, you know,” answered Webster.

May did not speak again for a few minutes. She was thinking of what she had often thought—how she had been first interested in Webster’s work in the case concerning Kathleen Weir’s diamonds. She was wondering if he ever saw her now—the woman he knew to be John Temple’s wife.

And Webster, watching her delicate profile, almost guessed what was passing in her mind. But he tried to change the current of her thoughts. He pointed out a white-sailed little vessel scudding before the wind; he talked of the sea and of the sky, and May listened, and for the time her troubles faded from her mind.

Suddenly, however, Sister Margaret seemed uneasy, and began to fidget with her silver watch, twice unhooking it from her waistband. She looked at May, but May did not notice her. At last she said, in a slightly marked tone:

“It is a quarter-past one o’clock, Mrs. Church.”

“Is it?” answered May, dreamily.

“Yes, and I am sure Mr. Webster must require some refreshment after his journey,” said Sister Margaret, in a very pointed manner.

May now understood.

“Oh! yes,” she said, rising. “Will you come and have lunch with us now, Mr. Webster?”

“I shall be very pleased, if you will allow me to do so,” he answered.

“Then, in that case, I will just hurry home and see that it is ready,” said Sister Margaret, with alacrity. She was a handy woman, and instantly made up her mind to add considerably to the usual chops at their midday meal, on her way through the town, in honor of their guest. But she did not wish him to know this.

“I will leave you in charge of Mr. Webster,” she went on, and in a moment later hurried away so quickly that Webster looked after her with a smile.

“I hope Sister Margaret is not going to give herself any trouble on my account,” he said.

May smiled; almost the first smile he had seen on her face since she had left Pembridge Terrace.

“I think she must wish to improve our usual lunch on your account,” she answered. “She is such a good, kind woman,” she continued, “and she has gone through so much trouble, Mr. Webster.”

“Her face rather gives you that impression. But she looks happy enough now—or at least content.”

“It would be a great thing to feel content.”

“A great thing, indeed; to know no longer the restless craving for something we can not obtain.”

“And—and do you think—” began May, and then she paused, hesitated, and slightly colored.

“Do I think what?” said Webster, and he turned round his head and looked at her.

“Do you think we could ever feel happy again—after a great blow, a great shock?”

“I think we could feel happy, but not the same happiness. A sort of sobered, perhaps, a wiser happiness, no doubt, might come to us.”

“It’s dangerous to be too happy,” said May, with downcast eyes and quivering lips.

“Not many of us have the chance of being so,” answered Webster, rising. “But, come, we must not keep Sister Margaret waiting.”

“No,” and May also rose, and together they walked down the pier, but Webster merely talked of the people that they passed on their way. He wished her to forget, for a time at least, the shadow on her young life; the grief that had made it so hard to bear.

Sister Margaret had not exerted herself in vain. In addition to the usual dish of chops, she had purchased a pigeon pie, a lobster, and various trifles on her way through the town. In fact, she looked on the repast she spread before Webster with pardonable pride. And he tried to make the whole thing pleasant. He told some good stories; he complimented Sister Margaret on her pie, and the good woman thoroughly enjoyed herself. And when lunch was over, Webster, after going to the window and looking at the smooth sea and the sailing boats scudding on its blue breast, proposed that they should go out for a sail, and Sister Margaret was quite delighted with the idea.

“I have not been out for a sail since I was a girl,” she said; “it will make me feel young again.”

“And you?” said Webster, looking at May, “would you like to go?”

“I think I should,” answered May, gently.

So they went down to the beach and engaged a sailing boat, and were soon flying on white wings before the light gale. It was a beautiful day, sunny, cloudless, almost warm, and yet with the crisp touch of the early winter in the clear air. That crisp touch brought a wild-rose bloom back once more to May’s fair oval cheeks; it brightened her eyes, and she smiled more than once as she sat by Webster’s side.

“I have never been on the sea before,” she said to Webster. “Do you remember when—” and for a moment she paused—“when we rode on the Thames?”

Yes, Webster remembered that day too well; remembered the beautiful girl sitting opposite to him in the boat, on the reedy river, and dipping her white hands in the stream. There was no shadow on her face then, nor sorrow in her heart. Only sunshine and hope, with the unknown future lying before her bathed in golden light.

But he made no allusion to these memories.

“I like the sea better than the river,” he said, and there swept over his heart a strange and passionate emotion as he spoke; a wish to bear May away from her troubles forever; to carry her to a new haven of rest and peace.

But by and by the short winter day began to close, and Sister Margaret drew her cloak nearer to her throat with a little shiver, and glanced uneasily at the distant shore.

“It is time we were returning, is it not, Mr. Webster?” she said.

These words roused Webster from his love-dream.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” he said, and he gave directions to the boatmen to set sail for the shore. But it was nearly dark when they reached Hastings, and there was a silver track from a half-moon on the rippling tide.

They crossed this in the boat, and Webster hailed it as a good omen.

“It means a silver lining to our clouds,” he said; “a sign that we must always hope.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.
A SUDDEN CHANGE.

May and Sister Margaret stayed another fortnight at Hastings after this sea excursion, and Webster went twice down to see them during this time, and Sister Margaret was satisfied in her own mind that everything was progressing as she could wish. Then the weather broke up, and storms and gales swept around the coast, and the sea-foam flew into the town. And it was only when this happened that Webster yielded to May’s repeated requests for them to return to London. She wished now most earnestly to commence working to earn her own living, and had had some correspondence with Doctor Brentwood on the subject. He had arranged that she should join the staff of nurses at St. Phillip’s, as probationer, and Sister Margaret had already given her some instructions. But twice during this time a strong temptation rose in Ralph Webster’s heart; a temptation, however, which he checked, and this was to ask May to be his

wife, and so shelter her all her future life.

“It would but frighten her, and make her uneasy,” he told himself; “no, it is too soon.”

So May went back to St. Phillip’s with Sister Margaret, and when Webster saw her again she was dressed in the black gown and white cap and apron of a nurse. She looked, however, so charming in this costume that he could not conceal his admiration.

“You look like—well, what shall I say?” he said, smiling. “A sister of light.”

“Do you mean an angel?” answered May, smiling also. “Ah, I wish I felt like one.”

“And how do you really like the life?” went on Webster, with his dark eyes still fixed on her fair face.

“There are painful things, of course,” hesitated May, “but still you always feel that you are helping someone, and that is something.”

“But I hope they do not give you any hard work; any disagreeable work?”

“They are very good to me,” answered May, softly; “everyone has been very good, and as for you, Mr. Webster—”

“Being good is not in my way,” answered Webster, hastily turning away his head.

“I do not know what you call good then; I can not tell you what I think.”

May’s voice faltered a little when she said this, and Webster’s self-imposed reserve perhaps might have broken down, but just at this moment Doctor Brentwood entered the room, as it was in his sitting-room that the interview between May and Webster was taking place. Indeed, it must be admitted that “Mrs. Church” was treated with some favoritism by the house surgeon; and there were some plain nurses and some plain probationers who made their private comments and remarks on this fact. But May was so gentle and unassuming that as a rule she disarmed criticism.

“It’s her pretty face,” they said, shrugging their shoulders; “well, men are all alike.”

And her pretty face had no doubt a great deal to do with it, and her pretty manner, and her sad, sweet smile. Doctor Brentwood openly said to Webster she was too handsome for a nurse, but he knew, as all men who looked at her knew, that she never sought or desired attention or admiration of any kind.

And so the quiet, dreary months drifted away, and May stayed on at St. Phillip’s Hospital, and only Ralph Webster knew that she lived there. Of John Temple, Webster heard nothing, except that one day, when Christmas was past and gone, he accidentally met Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, who told him smilingly that he had had a visit from the actress, Miss Kathleen Weir.

“She had heard somehow,” he said, “that Mr. John Temple is now heir to his uncle’s estates, and she therefore wished her allowance increased. But I put her off, my dear sir, I put her off; quite time enough when Mr. John Temple does succeed.”

“And where is Mr. John Temple now?” asked Webster.

“He is abroad; he went abroad shortly after I had the visit from Miss Kathleen Weir, and he looks shockingly ill; really shockingly. I wish, I am sure, he may live to come into his inheritance.”

“What sort of man is he?”

“He used to be a remarkably nice fellow; pleasant, and rather philosophical in fact. But when I saw him last he had a most shattered appearance, like a man who had gone through some great mental strain, or bodily illness. I fancy, you know, Mr. Webster,” added the little man, shaking his head, “that that early and unfortunate marriage of his has been a most tremendous worry to him. At least when I mentioned Miss Weir having called at my offices he scowled, and muttered something about wishing he had never seen her face. He may, you see, now want to form a more reasonable marriage, but there is this millstone—a handsome enough millstone though, ha, ha, ha! hanging about his neck.”

“He should not forget that he hung it himself though,” answered Webster, grimly; and then he left Mr. Harrison. But when he next saw Kathleen Weir, in reply to her eager inquiries, he was able to tell her that he had heard that Mr. John Temple had gone abroad.

“But where and when?” asked the actress quickly.

“That I can not tell you.”

“But, Mr. Webster, I am anxious to know. That old rogue, Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, of course knows very well. But if I went to him he would not tell me. How am I to find out?”

“But what good would it do you to find out?”

“Because I am convinced John Temple has something to hide! I want to be divorced from him, that’s the truth, and if I knew where he was I could set detectives to watch his movements. Don’t you see?”

“Unfortunately I can not tell you where he is.”

“I wonder if old Harrison would tell you? Oh! do be a good soul and help me if you can,” and she laid her pretty, white, be-ringed hand on his arm and looked into his face. “It’s so stupid to be bound like this to a man who is perfectly indifferent to you, and, moreover, who actually detests you! I swear to you he looked as if he really hated me that day on Westminster bridge. And why

should I waste all my youth and my life? His money is not worth it."

"It is a very hard case, certainly."

"I have felt this lately," said Kathleen Weir, in rather a marked manner; "before, I think I did not care."

Again she looked in Webster's face, and with a sort of discomfort his keen dark eyes fell before her large, restless, gray ones. He was not a vain man, but a vague consciousness smote into his heart that this handsome woman had begun to regard him with different feelings to his own. This idea made him more chary of his visits and colder in his manner. And Kathleen Weir, quick to perceive this, also drew back. Thus some weeks passed without him seeing her, when one morning an announcement in the *Times* brought her affairs more prominently before his mind.

This was no less than a notice in the obituary column of the sudden death of the squire of Woodlea:

"On the 21st inst., at Woodlea Hall, Phillip Temple, Esq., aged 75, of heart disease."

Webster read the announcement twice over, thinking all the while of the great changes it might bring. Not to the fair black-robed probationer at St. Phillip's Hospital, though, he decided; it could not touch her very nearly now, but to John Temple and Kathleen Weir.

And yet on second thoughts he remembered it would bring Temple back to England, and would make the friends of the missing girl more eager in their inquiries to learn her fate. John Temple would probably now be forced to tell what he knew, and the fact of his first marriage might be brought home to him. Therefore, the knowledge of the squire's death disquieted Webster exceedingly, and the day did not pass without his receiving further news concerning it.

The evening post in fact brought him a letter from Kathleen Weir, and the notice from the *Times* of Mr. Temple's death fell out of it when Webster opened the envelope. The actress had evidently written in a state of great excitement.

"Dear Mr. Webster," he read. "The inclosed cutting from the newspaper will tell you what has occurred. This Mr. Temple, whose death it records, is the uncle of John Temple, who is his heir. John Temple is now, therefore, a rich man, and as I am unfortunately his wife, he can not prevent (I suppose) my benefiting by his accession to fortune. But though money is a great thing, an immense thing, it is not everything! John Temple, looking like a ghost, with misery stamped on every feature of his face! There was, I am sure, some strong reason for this, for as a rule he is an easy-going man, inclined to make the best of everything, as he used to think it not worth while to strive with fate.

"There I did and do disagree with him. It is worth while at any rate to try and make the best of one's life, and it is not making the best of mine, I think, to remain the wife of a man I never see. He is a rich man now, can afford to pay a long price for his freedom, and his freedom I am certain he desires. What I mean is this: He will now be coming to England, and will, of course, go down to the place he has inherited. I want, therefore, someone to go to him and make him a proposition; to say in fact, Kathleen Weir, the wife of whom you are tired, is also tired of you, and wishes to be free from so galling a tie. I am certain it might be arranged, only it is so difficult to write on such matters, and one can only do so to someone in whom you have complete confidence. I have complete confidence in you, though I have seen so little of you of late, but I think I can understand the reason of this. At all events, will you come to see me now, and we can talk the matter over? Will you come to-morrow evening? I shall be alone, as I have a whole host of things to tell you.

"Ever sincerely yours,

"Kathleen Weir."

Webster read this letter, and at once understood its meaning. Kathleen Weir wished to be free, and she believed that John Temple had given her cause to seek a divorce, and that if she were anxious to obtain one, that he would offer no opposition; nay, gladly aid her in her desire. She also meant, and Webster smiled a little scornfully as he thought this, that she intended to make him pay for his freedom. They were to play into each other's hands in fact, and she wished some confidential friend or agent to approach him on the subject.

"I wonder if she intends this honor for me," he reflected, bitterly. And he thought of May Churchill with a quick pang of pain.

If this woman could obtain a divorce, and would accept money to be divorced, which no doubt John Temple would gladly pay, he would be free to marry May. Webster bit his lips and frowned angrily at this idea. This no doubt was Kathleen Weir's design; she would not scruple, she had said, to invent a charge of cruelty against him, and for the rest she had a perfectly good case.

Webster began walking restlessly up and down the room after he had considered the actress' letter, but he determined to do nothing to aid her.

But if she succeeded, what should he do? What would be best and kindest to the poor girl whose heart John Temple had nearly broken?

It was a painful question, not easy to answer or to solve, but at all events Kathleen Weir had not yet obtained her divorce.

"I will go and see her," he decided; "I will learn exactly what she means to do."

Therefore on the following evening he did go to see her, and she was very pleased to welcome

him. She started up as he entered the room, and held out her little white hand.

“How good of you to come,” she said. “I have been wishing so much to see you.”

“I came to talk over your great news,” he answered with a smile.

“It is great news, isn’t it? Great and good news, for I hope soon it will free me of John Temple.”

“But—what have you to go upon?”

“I will find something to go upon,” said the actress, half impatiently. “I have his address, at all events, now, for he is sure to go to Woodlea Hall and look after his property, and I must find someone—or—” and she paused and thought for a moment, and then clapped her hands. “I must find someone,” she repeated, “to go to him, or go myself. There, Mr. Webster, what do you think of that? What do you think of my going to visit my lord in his new state? I would be a welcome visitor, wouldn’t I, and no doubt could make a splendid bargain with him in his eagerness to get rid of me.”

“But—it would expose you to a very painful scene.”

“I am accustomed to scenes, you know,” answered Kathleen Weir, with a little laugh. “Do you know I think it is a splendid idea. At all events, we might mutually agree to meet somewhere, and arrange also mutually to get rid of each other.”

“But what about the Queen’s Proctor intervening?”

Kathleen Weir gave an airy shrug of her shoulders.

“We must manage to be too clever for the Queen’s Proctor, and John Temple, I’m certain, will be only too glad to back me up in anything I say. I shall have some handfuls of hair ready, and swear he tore them out of my head.” And Kathleen Weir laughed.

But Ralph Webster did not laugh. He was thinking of May Churchill, and how her fate might hang on the false words of this woman’s tongue, and he looked very grave when he rose to go away.

“Going so soon?” cried Kathleen Weir, gaily. She was disappointed at his leaving so early, but she did not wish to show this.

“I can wait,” she thought, after he had quitted the room; “they say everything comes to those who wait.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.
THE DEAD MAN’S BELONGINGS.

Mr. Temple’s sudden death had also naturally created great excitement both at Woodlea Hall and at the farm at Woodside. The squire had breakfasted with his wife as usual on the morning it occurred, and about an hour later Mrs. Temple had gone into the library to ask him for some money she required, when to her surprise and alarm she found him with his gray head lying on the writing-table before him, and his arms hanging limply by his side.

“Phillip!” she exclaimed, and ran up to him, and laid her hands on his shoulder.

But the face that had ever looked gently at her did not stir. Then Mrs. Temple raised his head, and the moment she did so she gave a wild shriek. For there was no mistaking the pallid gray hue of the complexion, or the dull, glazed, half-open eyes. Mr. Temple was dead, and Mrs. Temple, ever impulsive and excitable, ran screaming to the door of the room to tell the news and summon the household.

They sent for the doctor, and the newly-made widow knelt by the squire’s side and chafed his cold hands, and wailed and wept for the man to whom in his lifetime she had given no love. Now she regretted this, she clung to him, and would fain have recalled him to her side.

And presently her mother arrived on the scene and then her father. Mrs. Layton’s first thought when she heard the squire was dead was to speculate on how much he had left behind him, and to groan in spirit at the idea that now her daughter would probably have to leave the Hall.

“And that John Temple will be coming, I suppose,” she whispered to her husband, “and where will we all be?”

“My dear, to speak of such things in the presence of death—” began the vicar, mildly. But Mrs. Layton turned her little eager face away from him before he could complete his homily.

“I must see after things,” she said, which meant a great deal to Mrs. Layton’s mind. First she had to induce her daughter to leave the dead man’s side and go to her own apartments. Then she ran from room to room, picking up little things here and there that she thought at such a time she could collect without remark. Nothing came wrong to Mrs. Layton! A few sheets of note-paper, an envelope or two, anything in fact that she could lay her hands on.

“They will never be missed; they are of no value,” she told herself as she gathered her spoil together. She was haunted by the idea that John Temple might arrive at any moment, and that she would not have such another opportunity.

The servants were all down-stairs talking of their master’s sudden death, and the whole

household naturally disarranged. Mrs. Temple was in a state of half-remorseful grief and excitement, and she also was now thinking of the coming of John Temple.

“He will be master now, I suppose,” she thought bitterly, “and I shall be turned out.”

She remembered, too, the morning he had left Woodlea through her interference, and mentally saw again his pale, set face as he had told her he would never return. He would return now, and would that girl come with him? Mrs. Temple kept asking herself. For up to the time of the squire’s death nothing had been seen or heard at the Hall of John Temple since the morning he quitted it. Mr. Temple had felt naturally offended by his nephew’s reticence, but at last, at Mr. Churchill’s earnest request, he had written to John Temple’s bankers to ask if they could tell him of his nephew’s whereabouts. The bankers wrote to inform the squire, in reply, that Mr. John Temple was abroad, and that before leaving England he had taken out a considerable sum of money in letters of credit. They wrote nothing more; they had, in fact, been instructed by John Temple before he left England to give no information if any inquiries were made about him. He had gone away a moody and remorseful man, but Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, knew where to find him, and also some officers of the police force. With these he had left orders, which he believed now to be useless, that should anything ever be heard of the lady who had disappeared from the Grosvenor Hotel on such a date that he was at once to be communicated with. But John Temple believed that May was dead; believed that in a sudden frenzy of grief and shame she had destroyed herself. And many a dark and dismal hour he had stood looking down into the murky river, moodily thinking it was sweeping over the fair head of his young love. It was on one of these miserable occasions that Kathleen Weir had seen him, and a sudden feeling of hate and anger had swept through his heart at the sight of her. And shortly after this encounter he had left England. He felt, in truth, that he could bear the strain no farther; that the terrible haunting memory of the young life he believed he had destroyed would overthrow his reason if he remained any longer on the spot.

In the meanwhile Mr. Churchill, in spite of his own secret anxieties, had gone about telling his neighbors that his daughter and her husband, Mr. John Temple, were abroad. There was no one to contradict this, yet somehow the impression got about that everything was not quite right. Perhaps it was the way in which Mrs. Churchill drew in her firm lips when her husband spoke of his daughter. At all events, she never spoke of her, nor did she encourage her stepsons to do so.

At first the boys had been overjoyed when they heard of May’s marriage, and looked forward to many a happy day at the Hall. But when week after week passed, and May never wrote to them, they could not understand it.

What was to prevent her writing? they asked each other, doubtfully, even if she were twenty times abroad. Then the banker’s letter confirmed the news that John Temple was abroad, and after that, all through the winter months, neither at the Hall nor at the homestead, was anything more heard of John Temple or May.

The squire died in the early spring-time, and the news reached Woodside in less than an hour after Mrs. Temple had found her husband dead. It naturally threw Mr. Churchill, and even his wife, into a state of excitement.

“Now, we must hear from them!” cried Mr. Churchill.

“We will know the truth at last,” said Mrs. Churchill, in a more subdued tone.

“What truth?” answered her husband, sharply. “They were married, and now Mr. John Temple is the squire of Woodlea, and May is his wife—but all the same, I am sorry to hear the old squire has passed away.”

“How will they let Mr. John Temple know that his uncle is dead, if they do not know where he is?” suggested Mrs. Churchill in her practical way.

“I will see to that,” replied Mr. Churchill, determinedly. “There will be no one, I suppose, to look after things at the Hall now but the stupid old parson and his skin-flint of a wife. Madam won’t know anything about business, so as May’s father I will ride over at once, and of course Mr. Temple, as heir, must be immediately telegraphed for. His bankers, by this time, probably really do know where he is.”

“I think you are quite right to go, William,” said Mrs. Churchill, who, in truth, was full of curiosity to know all about the matter.

So Mr. Churchill mounted his horse and speedily reached the Hall in a state of scarcely suppressed excitement. And his coming was not unnoticed. Mrs. Layton, from one of the upper windows, peered down into the court-yard when she heard the sound of his horse’s hoofs below, and gave a kind of cry when she saw who it was.

“Here is the first of them!” she exclaimed aloud to herself, and then she hastily looked round the room to see what she could pick up before “the others arrived.”

She caught up some trifle, and then hurried down to her daughter’s bedroom.

“Rachel!” she cried, “that Churchill has arrived; you must rouse yourself, and lock up all the jewels and silver, or they will be laying hands on everything.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” answered Mrs. Temple, coldly.

“What, you’ll let them have the diamonds!” screamed Mrs. Layton, in absolute despair.

“The diamonds are heirlooms, so I suppose John Temple’s wife—if he has one—has a right to

wear them," answered Mrs. Temple, contemptuously. "I will have nothing touched until John Temple arrives."

"Then you'll lose everything! Do you suppose that low people like these Churchills will not seize whatever they can get? At all events, secure the jewels and the money in the house."

"Will you go away and leave me alone!" cried Mrs. Temple, passionately. "Surely on a day like this—" And then she suddenly burst into tears. Even to her wayward mind, this greed was shocking in the house of death.

Her mother left her with uplifted hands after this outburst. But Mrs. Layton was still determined not to waste her time. She therefore hurried into the poor squire's dressing-room and snatched up and secured on her person his diamond studs, which were lying in a tray on the toilet table. Then she looked eagerly around for his keys. He was sure to have money locked away somewhere, she was thinking. But she could not find the keys, and after a vain search for them she opened a linen drawer and turned out half a dozen or so of pocket handkerchiefs.

"Poor man, he will never want them more," she reflected; "and I have such bad colds every winter they'll come in nice and handy, and the servants were sure to have stolen them."

Having pocketed these also, she went down-stairs to see Mr. Churchill. She found him closeted with her husband, the vicar. The two men were discussing the best plan how immediately to inform John Temple of his uncle's death. Mr. Churchill had told the vicar of the banker's letter, and had suggested this as a means of communication with the new heir.

The letter would probably be in the drawers of the writing-table in the library, Mr. Churchill had said, but the vicar—a timid man—had shrunk a little back from approaching a spot where so lately had lain the poor squire's gray head. Mr. Churchill, however, urged that it should be done, and they were talking it over when Mrs. Layton entered the room.

She extended her thin, claw-like hand to Mr. Churchill, but coldly.

"This is a sad affair, madam," said Mr. Churchill as he took it.

"Not for everyone," she could not help replying, spitefully.

"I think for everyone," answered the farmer, sturdily; "we all have to go, but the squire was a good man, and a good friend to all who knew him. There was but one opinion about the squire."

"But one, I am sure," said the vicar, weakly.

"I have been talking to the vicar, madam," went on Mr. Churchill, still sturdily, "about the best and quickest way of communicating with Mr. John Temple."

"But you have not his address, I understood," said Mrs. Layton, quickly and viciously.

"That will be soon found, madam."

"But I thought not," replied Mrs. Layton, yet more viciously. "I understand that since Mr. John Temple quitted this house in such an extraordinary manner, that neither he nor—your daughter have ever been heard of."

Mr. Churchill's clear, brown face turned a dusky red.

"You are mistaken then," he said, sharply. "I saw and heard of them both. I saw the register of their marriage and the clergyman who married them and the two ladies who were present at the ceremony! But I won't discuss it. Vicar, will you go with me to seek the banker's letter in the squire's writing-table, or shall I go alone?"

"Of course you must go, James?" exclaimed Mrs. Layton. "There may be family affairs in the writing-table not intended for Mr. Churchill's inspection. But I think this haste is most indecent; the poor man not cold yet, and everyone in such a hurry to get what is left! But we could expect nothing else."

With this parting shot Mrs. Layton quitted the room, and half an hour later the letter from John Temple's banker informing the squire that his nephew was abroad, was found by Mr. Churchill and the vicar in one of the drawers of the writing-table in the library. By this time the dead man had been borne away, yet there were traces of his familiar presence all around. The pen he had been using when his summons came; an unfinished letter lying on the blotting pad; the keys Mrs. Layton had coveted; the chair on which he had died!

Yet Mr. Churchill sat down there, and deemed he was doing his duty as he did so, and deliberately wrote to John Temple, his successor. He also wrote to the bankers, requesting them to forward the inclosed letter to Mr. John Temple at once when they received it, if they knew his address, and, at the same time, suggested that a telegram might be sent immediately. Then, having done this, he looked around a little sadly.

"Poor man," he said to the vicar, "everything reminds one of him—ah, well, it's very sad."

But his heart was not sad as he rode home. He felt almost as though he himself had come into some portion of the dead man's inheritance.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JOHN TEMPLE'S RETURN.

When a rich man dies the news soon spreads. Mr. Churchill had not neglected when he wrote to John Temple and the bankers, also to send an announcement of the squire's death to the *Times*. This announcement was read on the following morning, as we have seen, by Ralph Webster, by Kathleen Weir, and also by Mr. Harrison, the solicitor, as well as the bankers.

Both Mr. Harrison and the bankers knew at this time where to find the heir. John Temple, after various restless wanderings, had gone to Cairo, and had written from there to his bankers, and also to Mr. Harrison, on business. Mr. Harrison read the news of Mr. Temple's death, and at once telegraphed the information to his now rich client. And during the day the firm of bankers also telegraphed, and forwarded Mr. Churchill's letter.

These two telegrams were a great shock to the lonely and unhappy man to whom they were addressed. John Temple had gone to Egypt to try and divert his mind, and the change had no doubt been good for him; but to learn that his uncle was dead, that Woodlea was now his, seemed to bring all the past back to him with fresh pain.

At first he determined not to return to England; not to accept the fortune and position which were now his. Then came Mr. Churchill's letter—a distinct, explicit letter—and he knew as he read it that it was useless any longer to hide the truth. Mr. Churchill would insist on learning his daughter's fate; would no doubt, now that he knew his address, find him out and force it from his lips.

With an intense feeling of shrinking pain John Temple therefore accepted the position thrust upon him. He telegraphed to Mrs. Temple at Woodlea that he would arrive there, he expected, on such a date, and he telegraphed also to Mr. Harrison. He did not, however, write to Mr. Churchill; he felt this was beyond his strength.

"I will tell him the truth," he told himself, and tried to nerve himself for the bitter task. "They may do what they like," he thought, gloomily; "I can not, I think, suffer more than I have already done."

Mrs. Temple was greatly excited when she received this telegram. Her husband already lay in his grave, and had been followed there by his friends and tenantry. His young widow, however, did not go. She watched the long procession leave the Hall with dry eyes. She had got accustomed to the idea and was not even thinking of the dead when they bore him away.

Mr. Churchill was one of the mourners, and he could not help having a certain uneasy feeling in his mind as he listened to the solemn words of the service, while the old squire was laid by his young son's side. He had heard from the bankers, who had informed him that Mr. John Temple was at Cairo, and that they had forwarded his letters to him there. But no word had come from John Temple in reply. Mr. Churchill, therefore, could not understand it. But surely soon the mystery would end; in fact it must end, Mr. Churchill determined, when he turned away from the squire's grave.

And a day later brought John Temple's telegram to Mrs. Temple. Her mother, who had not left the Hall since the squire's death, carried it to her, and Mrs. Temple tore it open with trembling hands.

"He is coming home!" she cried, and that was all.

"John Temple?" asked Mrs. Layton, aghast, who had secretly begun to hope that something might have happened to the new owner of Woodlea.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Temple, without looking up.

She was re-reading John Temple's telegram, which was couched in his usual somewhat graceful language. In it he expressed his deep regret for "your, may I say our, great loss." Then came the day and date that he expected to arrive in England, and on the following day, after he had done so, he proposed to go to Woodlea, "if quite convenient to yourself."

Mrs. Temple smiled a little scornfully as she read the last words.

"He has the whip hand now," she thought; "he said I turned him out of the house, and now he can turn me."

Mrs. Temple, in fact, knew this to be the case. The squire's will had been read, and though she was most amply provided for, the Hall and its contents went to the heir. This arrangement was only in accordance with the original entailment of the property. Mrs. Layton, as we know, had tried hard to have this clause set aside, but the squire would listen to no such suggestion. The Hall went with the estate, and John Temple was now its owner.

"And—does he mention anything about bringing anyone home with him?" now inquired Mrs. Layton.

"Not a word; I don't believe that girl is his wife."

"Yet Mr. Churchill assured your father and myself that she is. And your father knows by name the clergyman who he says married them, Mr. Mold."

"Well, we shall see, at all events; he will soon be here."

Mrs. Temple, however, sent no message to Mr. Churchill that John was expected shortly at Woodlea. She desired her mother not to mention it; she wished to be the first, at all events, to know the truth about John Temple's marriage.

And until the day of his arrival she was very restless. A second telegram came on the morning of that day to tell her he expected to be at Woodlea by about seven o'clock in the evening. A

carriage was, therefore, sent to the station to meet him, and Mrs. Temple wandered about the house after this in a state of great excitement. At last she heard the sound of the carriage wheels returning, and, looking very pale and handsome, she went into the hall to meet the new owner.

But when John Temple entered the house, and the lights fell on his altered face, she gave a little start and a sort of cry.

“What is the matter?” she said, as she went forward and took his hand. “Have you been ill?”

John Temple scarcely answered her. He looked brown, lined, and haggard, and naturally returning to Woodlea was very painful to him. Yet he bore himself with a certain calmness and dignity. He nodded to some of the servants that he knew, and then, on Mrs. Temple beckoning him to do so, he followed her into the morning room, and she hastily closed the door behind him.

“Well,” she said, after she had done this, looking quickly up in his face; “are you alone?”

“Yes,” answered John Temple, and his eyes fell.

“Where is she then?” went on Mrs. Temple, excitedly. “The girl you took away?”

John Temple’s pale face grew a little paler, and his lips quivered.

“Would to God I could tell you,” he said, in a hoarse and broken voice; “but I know nothing.”

“Know nothing!” repeated Mrs. Temple in the greatest surprise. “What do you mean by this, John Temple? You can not expect us to believe you; her father, I am certain, will not.”

“I have returned here to tell what I know,” continued Temple, still in that broken voice; “and I would give all I possess in the world to be able to tell more. But I can not—she—she left me one night—”

“Left you?” interrupted Mrs. Temple, sharply.

“Yes, the night I left Woodlea. I went up to town; I saw her, and I was forced to tell her what I feared would break her heart.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that the man she had trusted—the man that she had loved, and believed to be her husband—for we were married—had yet deceived her.”

“What do you mean? How did you deceive her?”

“Because when I was a very young man, almost a lad, I had hung a millstone about my neck; I had married another woman, an actress, and I knew that this now must come to May’s ears.”

“John Temple!” exclaimed Mrs. Temple, starting back.

“You may well look startled, yet this was so. I had induced this poor girl to leave her home; to go to some old friends of mine, and from their house we were married.”

“When you said you were going abroad?”

“We did go abroad immediately after our marriage. I intended it to be a secret marriage until the time came I hoped to be able to obtain a divorce from the woman I had first married. Until I met May I had not cared nor thought of this. I made her an allowance, and never made any inquiries about her life. But the nephew of the ladies with whom I had left May got to know this woman, this actress, Kathleen Weir—”

“Kathleen Weir!”

“Yes, Kathleen Weir; and I knew after you had discovered through young Henderson where May was that the whole story could no longer be kept a secret. But I believed she cared for me too well to part from me—”

Here Temple’s voice broke and faltered, and he paused.

“But she did part from you?” asked Mrs. Temple, quickly.

“I will tell you,” went on John Temple, speaking with a great effort. “I took her to an hotel, and I told her the truth, and after the first shock, which nearly killed her, was over, I thought she had become reconciled to the idea. I said we should never part; that I would take her to Australia, anywhere, and devote my whole life to her, and that I hoped some day to be free. I left her for a short time to get some things that she required before we went away, as she did not wish to see her father, and—and when I left her she said we could not live apart. I was not away more than an hour, but when I returned to the hotel she was gone. She had left no note, no address—not a word—and from that day to this I have heard nothing,” and Temple covered his face with his hand, deeply affected.

“But you sought her, surely? You made inquiries?”

“Every effort was made to find her. I employed the police, I wandered about the streets of London day and night, but it was all in vain. One thing only I heard—that someone like her, on the night she disappeared from the hotel, had taken a cab and asked to be driven to Westminster bridge—”

“But surely you did not think—”

“What could I think?” went on John Temple, with deep emotion. “I believed she had loved me too well to leave me, and—and perhaps in her misery—her despair—”

“Oh, my poor fellow, I am sorry for you!” exclaimed Mrs. Temple, and she went up to John

Temple and laid her hand on his arm. “So this is the story, is it? A sad, sad story!”

“I left England, meaning never to return,” continued Temple, after a short pause. “Even when the news came of my poor uncle’s death I did not mean to do so. I received a letter from Mr. Churchill; a letter he had a right to write, and to which I was bound in honor to reply. I have come back for the purpose of doing this; I will tell him the truth—”

“Do not talk of it any more just now,” interrupted Mrs. Temple. “This is your own house now, but let me, for once at least, act as hostess. You will find your old rooms all ready for you, and we dine at half-past eight.”

“I think I am too tired to dine; will you excuse me?” said Temple, wearily.

“Nonsense, nonsense, I won’t excuse you. We shall be quite alone. My good mother has been with me since your poor uncle’s death until to-day; but to-day I insisted on her departure. I was not going to have you annoyed by her.”

“Thank you for being so considerate.”

“Oh! you know I always wished to be good friends with you; it was not until—well, never mind, let us forget the past.”

“I fear that is impossible,” said John Temple, sadly.

“At all events do not let us talk of it. Good-by for the present then; I will see you in half an hour.”

After this she left him, and John Temple went slowly upstairs to his old rooms. These were all lighted and ready for him, with bright fires burning in the grates, and obsequious servants eager to attend on their new master. But John Temple felt unutterably depressed. Everything reminded him of the lovely face he believed now was befouled and stained by the river’s slime, and when he was alone he covered his face and moaned aloud.

But presently the dinner-gong sounded, and he was forced to go down-stairs and act his part. To do Mrs. Temple justice, she tried in every way to divert his mind. She made him tell her about Egypt, and spoke to him about books and travels, and talked to him as best she could. She felt, in truth, sorry for the gloomy-faced man opposite to her, and in her impulsive way she showed this very plainly.

And when the dinner was over, and the servants had left the room, John Temple asked her the particulars of his uncle’s death. She told him how sudden it had been, and that she had gone into the library and found him dead.

“It was a great shock to me,” she said, and for a moment her lips quivered.

“It was a terrible shock to me also,” he answered; “he was a good man.”

“He was very fond of you,” said Mrs. Temple, turning away her head.

“I was not ungrateful,” replied John Temple, in a low tone, and his gray eyes fell; “though I fear —”

“I suppose you know this house is yours, and everything in it?” went on Mrs. Temple, the next moment.

“I shall not live here, and if you wish to do so I hope you will remain.”

“Oh, we can settle all that afterward.”

“And that Henderson, what became of him?” now asked John Temple.

“Well, after that blow he got, you know, he was very ill. He had brain fever, or something like it, and when he got a little better his mother took him away. They have not been at home all the winter, and Stourton Grange is shut up. Some people say Henderson is in a lunatic asylum, but it may not be true.”

“He drank, did he not?” said Temple, coldly.

“So they said. I can not tell, but I think he never got over the death of that girl.”

But a moment later Mrs. Temple wished her words unsaid. John Temple rose restlessly and began walking slowly up and down the room, and a few minutes later asked leave to retire. It was more painful even than he had expected, coming back to Woodlea, and he felt that it would be impossible for him to remain. In the meanwhile the news of his arrival had reached Woodside Farm. One of Mr. Churchill’s neighbors had called during the evening, and told Mr. Churchill, not without motives of curiosity, that he had seen “the new squire at the station.”

“What! are you sure?” asked Mr. Churchill, eagerly.

“Quite sure,” answered the neighbor; “I went to the station about getting the turnip seed, and saw one of the Hall carriages standing there. I know the coachman, and I asked if anyone was expected, and he said Mr. John Temple, the new Squire, was coming home from foreign parts, and he was waiting for him.”

“And,” said Mr. Churchill, with faltering tongue, and his bronzed face grew a little pale, “did you see him arrive?”

“Yes, I thought I might just as well hang about till the train came in; I was waiting for the seed, you see; and when the train did come, Mr. John Temple came with it, and he got into the carriage from the Hall and drove away.”

“And was he alone?” asked Mr. Churchill, with scarcely suppressed agitation.

“Yes, quite alone; he had no servant or nothing. The porter carried his portmanteau to the carriage; I am quite certain he had no one with him.”

Mr. Churchill asked no more questions. He also now understood the motive of his neighbor’s call, but he was not a man to gratify idle curiosity. He drew in his firm lips; he made up his mind at once to see John Temple.

He did not even tell his wife the news he had just heard. Mrs. Churchill had more than once annoyed him by the way she had spoken, or rather insinuated, her doubts concerning May’s marriage. So he was determined to say nothing more about it until he knew the true cause of May’s long silence and absence.

It was too late to go to the Hall that night, but as early as ten o’clock next morning he mounted his horse and rode to Woodlea. John Temple had prepared his mind for this visit; had told himself that if Mr. Churchill did not call on him, that he himself would go to Woodside, and tell the truth as far as he knew it. Yet, while he and Mrs. Temple were still sitting at the breakfast table, when a servant entered the room and announced that Mr. Churchill had arrived and was waiting to see him, John Temple was conscious that his heart sank within him. But the next moment, with an effort, he nerved himself for the meeting, and rose quietly from the table.

“Ask Mr. Churchill to go into the library,” he said.

The servant bowed and disappeared, and as he did so Mrs. Temple started up excitedly.

“How horrible for that man to come,” she half-whispered. “Whatever will you say to him?”

“What can I say but the truth?” answered Temple, gloomily.

“But surely you will not,” and she went nearer to him and laid her hand on his arm, and raised her dark eyes to his face; “you will not tell him—of your other marriage?”

“I must,” said Temple, hoarsely; “how otherwise could I account for—what he must know?”

“But consider—he may be violent—a hundred things may happen. John, I would not tell him that—say that you quarreled, and that she left you—anything but that.”

John Temple hesitated, and Mrs. Temple saw this in an instant.

“Take my advice, at least about this,” she went on eagerly. “Telling him could do no good, and might bring much harm. Just say you quarreled—say about another woman, if you like—and that then she left you, and that you have never seen or heard of her since. I do not think as you do about it; she probably did only leave you, and some day you may hear more.”

“If you think this—”

“I do, John Temple; you can not tell what this man might do if he knew the whole story. Leave it to time at least, and say nothing rash.”

“I meant to tell him everything.”

“And I repeat it will do no good; it would only make a violent scene, and no end of trouble might come of it.”

Still John Temple hesitated, while again and again Mrs. Temple urged him not to tell Mr. Churchill more than he could possibly help. And at last her arguments, coupled with the natural shrinking of his own heart, prevailed.

“For the present then I will say we quarreled, and that she left me,” he said in a faltering voice. “To tell him more would do no good—and yet—”

“That is right; tell him you quarreled about some woman, and tell him how you have sought for her; how you could hear nothing.”

John Temple had no answer to this, and then slowly, with a bowed head, he left the room and went toward the library to face the man whose daughter he had wronged.

CHAPTER XL.

A WOMAN’S BARGAIN.

As John Temple entered the library, Mr. Churchill, who was standing by the fireplace, looked quickly up in his face, and then crossed the room to meet him.

“Well, Mr. Temple,” he said, “I heard you had arrived last night, so I rode over early this morning to ask if May is with you?”

He had fixed to say this during his ride to the Hall, and he blurted it out in the forced way that prepared speeches are often made.

“Unhappily she is not,” answered John Temple, in a low voice, and with downcast eyes.

“Not with you! That’s odd; then where did you leave her?”

For a moment Temple did not speak; a quiver passed over his face, and his lips trembled.

“Mr. Churchill,” he began, and then he paused.

“Well, Mr. Temple, what is this mystery about?” now asked Mr. Churchill, sharply. “I know you are married to her, so what is wrong?”

“We quarreled and she has left me,” said Temple, forcing himself to utter the words. “She left me without a line, or word—I can not tell you where she is.”

“Can not tell me where she is! Quarreled with you and left you!” repeated Mr. Churchill in the utmost astonishment. “Mr. Temple, I can not believe such an incredible story.”

“Yet it is most unhappily true, Mr. Churchill. I would give everything I possess in the world to be able to tell you more—to tell you where she is.”

Temple’s voice broke and faltered as he uttered the last words, and Mr. Churchill looked at him in absolute amazement and consternation.

“And do you mean to tell me,” he said, in a hard, angry voice, “that this girl, who was so fond of you that she left her home for you, has forsaken you after a few months of marriage? I can not, I will not believe it; you are keeping something back.”

“An incident came to May’s ears—an incident of my early life,” faltered Temple.

“About some woman, I suppose?” interrupted Mr. Churchill.

“Unfortunately about a woman, and—and after that we quarreled, and she left me. She did not tell me she was going; she gave me no hint, or I should never have left her alone. But one night when I returned to our hotel I found she was gone, and though I sought her everywhere, though I put it into the hands of the police, no trace of her, no reliable trace at least, has ever been heard of her, and sometimes—I fear the worst.”

Here Temple broke down; he covered his face with his hand; his agitation was unmistakable.

“You mean that my girl has put an end to herself, though you may have given her great cause for quarreling with you and leaving you? Then I don’t believe it, sir, I tell you that.” And Mr. Churchill struck his hand heavily down on the writing-table as he spoke. “She may have left you, I suppose she has, but she had too much spirit, my May had, to take her life for any such folly.”

“If I could only hope this.”

“You may not only hope it, but be sure of it! But this must be investigated at once. I’ll move heaven and earth to find my girl; ay, and I’ll find her!”

“Would to God that you could.”

“I will; there, I’ve said it, and I seldom say what I do not do. When and how did she disappear? Who saw her last? Tell me everything.”

Then John Temple, in broken and faltering words, did tell Mr. Churchill everything he knew of May’s disappearance. Only he kept back the true cause. He gave him the address of the inspector of the police who had conducted the inquiry; he told even the cabman’s story of the lady he had driven to Westminster bridge. But Mr. Churchill would not listen to any such suggestion that May had taken her young life.

“You may have broken her heart, perhaps you have,” he said, harshly, “but my lass was no weak fool to destroy herself for a worthless man! No, she is hiding herself somewhere, and her father will find her. But it’s a pity, Mr. Temple,” he added, bitterly, “that you did not leave her alone.”

“I loved her very dearly. Since she left me my life has been one unending regret.”

“Yet you let another woman come between you! This may be the way of fine gentlemen, but my poor girl, I suppose, would not stand it.”

Temple did not speak; he stood there facing the angry man before him; his heart was full of shame and pain.

“The long and the short of it is, I suppose,” continued Mr. Churchill, “that May believed that you had ceased to love her; or had never loved her as she thought you had, and so she left you. But she should have written to her father! If I had not positively ascertained that you were married to her, if I had not seen the register of your marriage with my own eyes, I would have found you both out long before this. However, as it is—”

“Go to whatever expense you like, Mr. Churchill; find May, and you will lift a weight off my heart that is almost too heavy to bear.”

John Temple spoke earnestly, almost passionately, and Mr. Churchill could not but believe him.

“It’s a queer business,” he said; “if you were fond of her why did you not stick to her? But I’ll start to-night for London.”

“Let me hear from you every day; I will join you if you like.”

“No, I’m best alone; I’m more likely to find her alone. But what am I to go back and say at home?”

“Say anything; what matter is it?”

“But it is matter to me, Mr. Temple! I’ll say you’ve had a difference, and I’m going to London to try to make it up—yes, that will do, and I must make it up.”

Mr. Churchill left the Hall shortly after this, and John Temple returned to the morning-room, where Mrs. Temple was eagerly awaiting him.

“Well,” she said, excitedly, “is he gone? What did you tell him?”

“What you bade me; I told him everything—except why she—”

“Left you? That was right. Oh! I’m so glad, so glad, John Temple, you did not tell him that.”

“It will probably come out.”

“It may and it may not. At all events you may not be here if it does; it is a thousand times best kept quiet. And what is Mr. Churchill going to do?”

“He is going to London—going, I fear, on a vain search.”

“That may not be also. Come, we must hope for the best.”

But John Temple only sadly shook his head. It remained his fixed idea that May was dead, as he believed she had loved him too well to live apart from him.

But he felt grateful to Mrs. Temple for her kindness and consideration for his feelings; grateful perhaps that she had spared him telling May’s father all the bitter truth. And Mrs. Temple told the same story to her mother. Mrs. Layton, we may be sure, was not long in arriving at the Hall, but her daughter would not allow her to see John Temple.

“You worry him, and he and his wife have quarreled about some old love of his or other, and she has actually left him,” she said.

“Left him!” cried Mrs. Layton, triumphantly. “I knew no good would come of it; no good ever does come of unequal marriages. But I don’t believe she has left him; I believe he has left her.”

Mrs. Temple shrugged her shoulders.

“At all events they have parted,” she said; “and naturally he does not wish to be asked any questions on the subject, so while he is here please do not come.”

Mrs. Layton drew her meager little form up to its full height.

“Rachel, is it possible,” she said, “that you forbid your mother to the house?”

“It is John Temple’s house now, not mine, and he does not wish to be worried; so please stay away,” replied Mrs. Temple, coolly; and Mrs. Layton departed, feeling that “a judgment” was sure to descend on her daughter’s head.

Mrs. Temple told John Temple of this quarrel, and laughed a little scornfully at the recollection of it.

“My mother is a woman,” she said, “on whom all delicacy of feeling is wasted, for she has none;” and John Temple certainly agreed with her.

But on the third day after his arrival at Woodlea something occurred which worried and disturbed him more than twenty visits from Mrs. Layton. It was a fine spring day and Mrs. Temple had gone out for a drive, but John Temple had refused to accompany her. However, about four o’clock, tempted by the sunshine, he lit a cigar and strolled out into the park.

He walked on moodily enough with bent head, when his attention was attracted by the sound of carriage wheels approaching down the avenue. He supposed it would be Mrs. Temple returning from her drive, and so he walked on. But when the carriage drew nearer and he was about to meet it, he saw it was not one of the Hall carriages, but evidently a hired one. He therefore turned hastily into a side path, for he was in no mood to encounter strangers. Then he heard the carriage stop, and a few moments later, when he again looked around, he perceived a lady on the side path, who was evidently following him.

He stopped, and for an instant the thought, the wild hope, crossed his brain, could it be May? But no; the lady who was approaching him, though closely veiled, was taller than the slender girlish form of his lost love. She advanced quickly, and in another minute they met; and John Temple started back as they did so.

For it was the woman to whom he had not spoken for long years; the woman he had wedded in his early youth, and whose existence had been a curse and a stumbling-block in his way!

“You!” he said, sternly. “Why are you here?”

“From a natural feeling of curiosity,” answered the actress, who bore the professional name of Kathleen Weir. “I wished to see you in your new home!” And she gave a little laugh.

“It is useless—” began John Temple; but with a little airy wave of her hand she interrupted him.

“Pardon me,” she said, “it may be very useful to us both. I have come with a purpose; a purpose which I am quite sure will be a welcome one to you; I want you to help me to get rid of you.”

Again she laughed, and then flung back her veil and stood looking steadily at the husband who had forsaken her. She was a handsome woman, but John Temple saw no beauty in the large, bright, restless gray eyes; in the mocking, saucy lips.

“I do not understand you,” he answered, coldly.

“Not yet; but you will by and by. So this is your new inheritance?” she continued, looking round at the wooded park, with the fine gray old mansion standing in its midst. “My friend John, I had no idea I had made such a good match,” she added, mockingly.

“If you have come to talk thus, our interview must end.”

“What! grudge me a word or two, after these long years? Well, come, that is mean of you. But I have not come to talk nonsense, but sense. I have come, in fact, to talk business.”

“I suppose you want your allowance increased?”

Kathleen Weir nodded.

“That I certainly do,” she said, “and my terms have gone up since I have seen what a fine place you have got. But it is not only about my allowance I want to talk; I want to know if we can not arrange a divorce between us?”

John Temple looked at her quickly.

“My bait takes, I see,” went on Kathleen Weir, coolly. “Now, you can’t get a divorce from me; I’ve been too careful for that; perhaps too cold, for a burnt child dreads the fire; or maybe I was too prudent to run the risk of losing my allowance. No, you can not get a divorce from me; now, the question is, can I get one from you?”

John Temple was silent; he looked down, he moved his hands impatiently.

“By the wonderful justice which the male law-givers deal out to women, I am perfectly aware that you could run away with anyone; with a dozen if you had a mind to, and I could get no redress unless you had committed some act, or acts, of cruelty, to which I could swear. Now, to be free, I am ready to swear falsely; I am ready to swear that you tore handfuls of hair out of my head, and I have a false tress or two out of which you can tear them—if you will make it worth my while.”

“What do you mean?”

“My friend John, you are a rich man now, and I’ve no doubt will be ready to pay handsomely for your liberty. You wish, I suppose, to be free of me, and be able to marry someone else?”

“Some months ago,” answered John Temple, with quick emotion, “I would have given anything to have been so—now it is too late.”

“Why is it too late?”

“It is useless to tell you; to tell you how our miserable marriage spoilt a young life.”

“But is it spoilt? And even if it is, I think you should show a little consideration for me. I am tired of leading the life I lead; I want someone to care a little for me. I wish, in fact, to be divorced from you.”

“Do you wish to marry again?”

“Well, if you will have it so, I think I do. But then, you know, you must consider my position. You talk of a spoilt life, but you spoilt and wasted my youth.”

“It is easy to put it so,” said John Temple, bitterly.

“Well, you married me and left me, did you not?”

“We agreed to part.”

“Yes, after you had made my life so unpleasant that there was no standing it. But I don’t want to fight, or say disagreeable things. I really want to come to an arrangement with you, an arrangement by which you will benefit by being free; and I shall benefit by being free also—only you must remember you are a rich man.”

John Temple was silent for a moment or two; he was turning it over in his mind whether to accept her proposition; then he remembered he had not told Mr. Churchill of his marriage to Kathleen Weir, that he could not be divorced without this being publicly known.

“Now I’ll be quite frank with you,” she went on, looking at his moody face. “I’ll want either a lump sum down, or a largely increased allowance for swearing falsely and exhibiting in court the three handsful of beautiful hair that you tore out of my unfortunate head. You must pay, you see, for these little freaks of temper.”

“Your jesting is out of place.”

“Not at all, my friend; life has always its comical side. For instance, it is comical my coming here to make a sensible bargain with you, instead of talking of my broken heart.”

“I presume it is not broken.”

“No, it is not, thank goodness. It is a tough heart, and a man’s inconstancy and changeableness will never even make a crack in it. For me to love and grieve now,” and she looked at him straight, “a man must be worth loving and grieving for.”

“What is the bargain that you want to make, then?” asked John Temple, impatiently, a moment later.

“It is this: You are a rich man now, and I am your wife, so I ought to be a rich woman also. I have a right, you know, to come here if I choose; to claim you before your new friends; in fact, to make myself generally disagreeable. But I don’t want to do this. I have my own ideas of happiness, and it is not to force my company on an unwilling man. But if you will give me ten thousand pounds I will bring an action of divorce against you; I will show the hair you tore out of my head, and swear to a black bruise or two on my arms, and perhaps a little playful box on my ears. Mind, I am not jesting, though I talk as if I were.”

“And if I refuse your modest request?”

“Oh, well, then I must have a big allowance; and I will talk to everyone of my husband, Mr. John Temple of Woodlea Hall, and I will buy diamonds and have them put down to you; in fact, it will be worse for you than if you give me ten thousand pounds and were done with me. I really advise you to think it over.”

And John Temple actually stood and did think it over.

“Let me have time to consider,” he said, at length.

“Which means you will accept my terms,” cried Kathleen Weir, triumphantly. “I’m so glad. I really feel quite friendly toward you, and we must help each other in this business, you know, and keep our own secrets, and no one will ever be the wiser.”

John Temple made no answer; he was thinking that he would in truth be glad to be free, and yet —

“I’ll see about getting a good man to manage the case,” went on Kathleen Weir, “and I will write to you, and we must get up the evidence, you know, and have everything on the square. We’ll hoodwink the dear old judge, and I will play the injured wife to such perfection that it will be one of my best parts. I’m glad I came to see you, but you’re not looking well, my friend; you are not as good-looking as you were. Well, never mind, someone, I dare say, will think you good-looking enough, particularly when she sees your grand house; though, by the by, you have not yet asked me into it.”

“My uncle’s widow is there, but—”

“Oh! never mind; I brought a luncheon basket with me from town, as I did not know whether I could depend on your hospitality; and, besides, it might look like collusion if we were caught hobnobbing together. No one knows of my visit here, and no one need know of it. I will go straight back to town by the next train, and will write all particulars to you as soon as I have arranged my case, and, as I said before, I shall depend on your friendly assistance. So now if you will escort me back to the very shaky hired carriage that I picked up at the station, I will take leave of Woodlea Hall—and its new owner.”

Again she laughed and showed her white teeth, and without another word John Temple walked by her side back to the carriage which was waiting for her in the avenue, and when they reached it he handed her in.

“Good-by,” she said, holding his hand for a moment and looking at him smilingly. “Make a better choice the second time; you are a man who should marry a woman who thinks you perfection—I never did!”

Then she nodded, smiled again, and was driven away.

CHAPTER XLI.
A WOMAN’S OFFER.

She returned to town in the highest spirits, and the first thing she did was to write to Ralph Webster.

“Come and dine with me to-morrow night,” she wrote. “I have some wonderful news to tell you. I shall be alone, and we will dine at eight.

K. W.”

Ralph Webster received this tiny note the next morning, and after a little consideration he determined to accept her invitation. He naturally felt a strange interest in Kathleen Weir’s proceedings, and wondered what her news could be; wondered if in any way it could affect the one woman of whom he ever thought.

He had seen May Churchill the day before, and had noticed on her fair face a certain new serenity; a new peace, as if her bitter pain had passed away. And he had heard also from his friend, Doctor Brentwood, that the young probationer was learning to be a most excellent nurse; that she took interest in and studied her duties, and that some of the patients had said that her face was like an angel’s as she stood by their bedsides.

May, in truth, was learning something besides nursing. She was learning the stern, sad lessons of life. The sick and sorrowing taught her these; taught her to look beyond the passing joys and hopes of earth. She knew now that her sorrow had not been greater than that of others, nor her cross heavier to bear. So patiently and bravely did she do the work that lay nearest to her hand.

To Ralph Webster she naturally felt very grateful, and she had said something of this the last time he had seen her. But he still had never spoken of his strong, deep feelings toward her. He had not, in fact, the same opportunities of doing this at the hospital as he had at Hastings. But he was only biding his time. “Some day I will try to win her,” he told himself each time he saw her; “some day she will forget, and cease to grieve.”

He was thinking of her as he drove to the flat occupied by Miss Kathleen Weir; thinking of her, as he always did, with tender and protecting love. But the handsome woman who rose to

welcome him amid her flowers and the ornate decorations of her room, naturally knew nothing of this secret of his heart. Kathleen Weir received him with smiles and real pleasure. She looked in his dark, earnest face and compared him mentally with the man she had seen the day before.

“He is worth winning,” she thought; “worth everything—at least to me.”

“And what is your wonderful news?” asked Webster, smiling, after they had shaken hands and Kathleen Weir had once more sank down on the satin couch from which she had risen at his entrance.

“Wait until we have dined,” she answered, gaily. “It is so wonderful it would take away your appetite if we did not.”

“Very well, I am content to wait,” said Webster, and a few minutes after dinner was served. It was a luxurious little meal. Kathleen had spared nothing to make it attractive and agreeable, and during it she was bright and charming, and Webster thought he had never seen her look so well.

Then, when it was over, she rose in her lithe way and returned to the drawing-room, followed by Webster.

“Now, I am going to give you a great surprise,” she said; “where will you sit?”

He drew a chair and placed it near her.

“Well, I am prepared to be surprised,” he answered, with a smile.

“Yet you will never guess where I was yesterday. You will never guess who I saw. I went down to Woodlea Hall; I had a long interview with John Temple, its new owner.”

A dark flush rose to Webster’s face as he listened to these words.

“I went, in fact, to try to do a stroke of business, and I did it. You did not seem inclined to do it for me, and there was no one else in whom I had absolute trust but myself. I went to Woodlea for the purpose of seeing John Temple, and making him a polite offer to get rid of me. It is a splendid place, and I told him that I had no idea I had made such a good match.”

“And you saw him?” said Webster, with a great effort.

“Of course I saw him. I told him I was quite as tired of being married to him as he could be of being married to me. And I told him also it was no use his trying to get a divorce from me, as he had nothing to go upon. ‘But,’ I added, ‘I can get one from you. I have only to invent that you tore the hair out of my head, and beat me black and blue, to win my case’ and my gentleman did not deny it.”

“But surely you will not—”

“But surely I will,” went on Kathleen Weir, as Webster paused and hesitated. “However, I have not told you all. ‘And as you are a rich man,’ I continued, ’you must pay for your freedom. I am ready to swear falsely; to rid you of a wife to whom you are indifferent, and who is perfectly indifferent to you, but I must be paid for it.’ He made no objections, and I named the sum I would accept—ten thousand pounds—and to this also he made no objections. Now, don’t you think it was very clever of me?”

“But—have you any case against him?”

“Of course I have a case, and we can arrange the particulars between us. He won’t deny the hair-pulling and the beatings, and the judge will believe me to be an injured woman, and give me the release I am dying for. I will be free—free and rich—and perhaps then—”

Her voice faltered as she said the last few words, for the first time during this interview, and her eyes fell. Webster’s eyes also fell, and he moved uneasily, and then he rose and went toward the fireplace and stood leaning against the mantel-piece.

Kathleen Weir glanced after him; then also rose and followed him to where he was standing.

“Do not think me hard, or cold, or mercenary,” she said, “in making this bargain. I—I was not thinking of myself when I did so. I make a large income by my profession; more than I need. But I wanted this sum—Ralph Webster, shall I tell you why?”

She put out her white hand as she spoke, and laid it on his arm. It was trembling, and Webster saw it tremble, and an embarrassed silence followed for a few moments between them.

“Shall I tell you why?” she presently repeated, in a soft, low voice, and she looked up in his face. “I wanted it for you—for you, for whose sake I wish also to be free.”

“Hush, hush, do not speak thus,” said Webster, in great agitation. “I thank you very much for your kindness, your friendship—but—”

“But what?” asked Kathleen, quickly, and her face grew pale.

“There—there is a girl, a woman,” faltered Webster, “whom I may never marry—who—who does not love me, yet—”

“You love her?” said Kathleen, with a sort of gasp.

“Yes, and I shall love no other—forgive me, Miss Weir—but this is true.”

Again there was a few moments’ painful silence, and then with a strong effort the actress recovered herself.

“Well, there is no harm done,” she said, and she turned away. “And for the matter of that,” she

added, with a harsh little laugh, “I am not divorced yet; I may never be!”

Ten minutes later—after Webster was gone—Kathleen Weir was pacing up and down her drawing-room in a state of intense and concentrated excitement.

“Am I so mad,” she said, speaking aloud to herself, “to let this folly utterly upset me? I have wasted my affections then for the second time, but it won’t kill me! Webster shall not think he has broken my heart any more than the other one did. Yet I like him,” and her face softened; “he has a great heart—and the girl, the woman, whoever she is, may be proud of her conquest. But I am not going to pine; life isn’t long enough to waste on a vain regret.”

After this she went back into the room where they had dined and took up one of the half-emptied champagne bottles and poured some of it into a glass and drank it. Then she rang the bell and ordered her brougham to come around for her in half an hour, and having done that she sat down to her desk and wrote and dispatched telegrams to Linda Falconer, to Lord Dereham, and to two other men that she knew, inviting them to supper that evening at half-past eleven o’clock. Presently she sent out and ordered an elaborate supper to be sent in from a confectioner’s; ordered everything she could think of; the most expensive luxuries she could buy.

When she had completed her arrangements she drove to one of the theaters to pass the time until her expected guests would arrive. A man she knew joined her there, and she invited him also to return with her to supper. She seemed in the wildest spirits; she laughed and jested, and showed her white teeth; all the while a cold sharp pang lay pressing on her heart.

The supper was a great success, and never had Kathleen Weir been so witty or so gay. She sang, she coquetted, and played her part so well that Linda Falconer looked at her with her shadowed, dreamy eyes, and asked her if she had come into a fortune.

“I have the prospect of one, at all events,” answered Kathleen; “and there is nothing like money, you know, Linda—nothing, nothing!”

“I think there is something better than money,” said Dereham, with his honest brown eyes fixed on Linda Falconer’s lovely face.

“You mean love!” And Kathleen Weir shrugged her white shoulders. “My friend, that is because you are young and innocent. Love is a delusion, a pitfall into which we stumble only to find it full of disappointments. We love a man or a woman whom at the time we think perfection, but it is not the true man or woman, but an idealized creature of our own imaginations. We find this out when it is too late, and we blame the unfortunate recipient of our deluded affections, not our own folly in being deluded.”

“Well, I believe in love,” answered Dereham, sturdily.

“Long may you believe in it, then,” said Kathleen, with a light laugh. “But, Dereham, you won’t. You too will wake up and find your idol shattered.”

“How spiteful you are, Kathleen!” remarked Linda Falconer, calmly. “Have you had a disappointment in love lately?”

“No, my dear, for I have not been in love. I love myself too well to waste my affections on an ungrateful man.”

“But you might find a grateful one?” said one of her friends, smiling.

“I doubt it, greatly. However, I do not mean to try. I mean to amuse myself, and if you are always thinking of one person it is impossible to do so.”

She talked in this strain a little longer and then rose and went to the piano, and presently her wonderfully clear and ringing voice filled the room. The men present stood around her, except Lord Dereham, who remained in the supper-room with Linda Falconer.

“How excited Kathleen Weir is to-night! Do you think she has taken too much champagne?” remarked Linda of her friend.

Dereham laughed.

“Can’t tell,” he said; “but that was all rot she talked.”

“Do you mean about love?” asked Linda, softly, and for a moment she looked in Dereham’s face, and then cast down her beautiful eyes with a sigh.

“Yes,” he answered, ardently, and he bent forward and took her white hand. “I believe in it—and—and Linda, don’t you?”

“I—try not to think of it,” she half-whispered.

“But why?”

“Because—ah, Dereham, you must not ask;” and again she sighed.

“But I do ask, and I want you to answer me. Why do you try not to think of love?”

“Because—the—the person I could love is not as I am.”

“How do you mean?”

“His rank is different to mine,” answered Linda, in a low, sad tone.

“His rank! What has rank to do with it? If a man really loves he never thinks of these things. Linda, who is the person you could love? Will you tell me?”

Again Linda looked in his face, and their eyes met; Linda’s said very plainly—at least she intended them to say—“You are the person I could love”; and thus Dereham understood their meaning.

“Then—then do love me, dearest,” he said, bending closer, and half-whispering in her ear. “Let my rank be yours; your life be mine—be my wife?”

Linda Falconer smiled gently as she listened to the words. She had wished to listen to them for some little while, but she had not been in a hurry. She was too wise, too cold, to allow the young man to think she was in any haste to receive his proposal. But as he had proposed, she was also too wise to allow the opportunity to pass.

“But are you sure, quite sure, of your own heart?” she asked, pensively. “You heard what Kathleen Weir said—and—and unless you really love me—”

“I do most deeply, most truly; I have thought of this almost ever since I met you, but I was never sure of you; you do not make a rush at a fellow like some women do, and—and though I was afraid I liked you all the better for it.”

He made this ingenious confession to a woman who knew very well he was speaking the truth. She had intended to win this young lord, and she had won him, and no doubt had done it cleverly.

“I was afraid too,” she said, softly, “afraid to love you—at least to show my love—but not now.”

And before the party broke up she had time to whisper her news to Kathleen Weir.

“It is all settled,” she said; “we are engaged,” and her eyes were bright with triumph.

Kathleen Weir listened, and somehow another woman’s success and happiness gave her a fresh pang.

“So this cold, selfish woman has won, and I have lost,” she thought, bitterly, after her guests had left her. All her high spirits had now died away; she sat wearily down, but after a while returned to the supper-room and drank several glasses of champagne to benumb the aching pain at her heart. As a rule, she was a very sober woman, and the unusual quantity of wine that she had taken quickly affected her. She walked, but not very steadily, back into the drawing-room, and as she did so her foot tripped on a cushion that someone had accidentally thrown and left on the floor. She stumbled, and to save herself from falling caught hold of a brass floor-lamp, and in doing so overturned it. And in an instant—before her first agonized cry could escape her lips—the burning oil streamed over her bare neck, throat, and arms, and the light dress that she wore was in flames.

She uttered shriek after shriek, and ran—a burning mass—to the door of the room. A gentleman who lived in the flat above her heard her cries and quickly came to her assistance. He promptly wrapped her in a coverlet that he caught up, and succeeded, after a few minutes, in crushing out the cruel flames; but she was terribly burned, and the decorated room where the accident occurred, which she had made so bright with flowers when she had awaited Webster’s coming, was one blackened ruin ere the fire died out.

CHAPTER XLII.
WEBSTER’S STRUGGLE.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, as Webster was leaving one of the law courts where he had been pleading, a gentleman, a stranger, touched his arm and addressed him.

“You are Mr. Webster, the barrister, are you not?” he said.

“Yes,” answered Webster, looking up.

“I am Doctor Lynton,” continued the gentleman, who was a grave-faced, middle-aged man. “I have been to your chambers at the Temple to seek you, and have followed you here. I have come from Miss Kathleen Weir, the actress.”

An annoyed expression passed over Webster’s face.

“And I have come on a sad errand,” went on Doctor Lynton. “A terrible accident happened to Miss Weir last night, and she is lying now in, I fear—nay, I more than fear, I know—a hopeless condition.”

A shocked exclamation broke from Webster’s lips.

“How did it happen?” he asked. “What happened?”

“She accidentally overturned one of those tall floor-lamps, and is dreadfully burned. And she wishes to see you; she sent me to say she wishes to see you before she dies.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed Webster. “Do you mean to tell me there is no hope?”

“Conscientiously, I can hold out none,” answered the doctor. “It is, indeed, a sad case. But can you go to her now? My brougham is waiting for me, and I am going to drive straight back to her house, and if you will come with me I shall be glad—for, poor soul, I fear she is drifting fast

away."

"I will go," said Webster, unutterably shocked. It seemed almost impossible, this sudden change. The bright woman of last night; the gay rooms, the jests, the laughter, and now to hear of the approaching end.

He scarcely spoke after he entered the doctor's carriage. He covered his face with one of his hands, and sat thinking what the death of Kathleen Weir might mean. A fair face—sweet, serene, and sad—rose before his mental vision, and unconsciously a sort of groan broke from his lips.

"Did you know her well?" asked the doctor, in a commiserating tone.

"You mean Miss Weir?" answered Webster, trying to rouse himself. "Yes, I have known her for some time."

"She has seen her lawyer," continued the doctor, "and made her will. But I do not suppose she has much to leave; these actresses as a rule spend their money as fast as they get it."

"I do not know," said Webster, indifferently, for he was not thinking of the actress' will.

The doctor after this made a remark occasionally, and Webster just replied; and presently the carriage stopped before the handsome mansion where poor Kathleen Weir's flat was situated. Her own rooms were wrecked, almost everything in them having been destroyed before the fire was extinguished. But they had carried her to another flat in the same house, and to a darkened chamber in this suite of rooms the doctor now proceeded, followed by Webster, who was deeply moved.

The doctor faintly rapped when they reached the door of the apartment where Kathleen lay, and it was immediately opened by a professional nurse.

"I am glad you have come, doctor," she whispered; "she is very restless."

Then the doctor went into the room and approached the bedside, and the moment Kathleen saw him she said, in a faint, low voice, which Webster heard:

"Have you brought him?"

"Yes," answered the doctor, gently; "he is here. Mr. Webster, will you come and speak to Miss Weir?"

Upon this Webster, with faltering footsteps, also approached the bed, where, swathed and bandaged, lay the once lovely form of Kathleen Weir!

"Send everyone away, doctor," continued Kathleen, in the same faint, low tone; "I wish to speak to Mr. Webster alone."

The doctor and the nurse at once left the room, and then Kathleen spoke to Webster.

"Well, this is a great change," she said.

Webster was deeply agitated, and his voice broke and faltered as he strove to express his regret and sorrow.

"It came so suddenly," continued Kathleen; "like a bad dream—only there was no waking from it."

"How did it happen?" asked Webster, much moved.

"I tripped and fell over a cushion someone had left lying on the floor, and to save myself caught at a lamp and overturned it. I was like a mad creature last night, I think. After you left I went to the theater, and had people to supper, and we made merry, when—well, Mr. Webster, I seemed to care for nothing more; when the world seemed for me—as it is."

"Oh, hush, hush! do not speak thus, I entreat you!"

"Well, you have nothing to blame yourself for, at least. You acted like an honest man, and I admired you when—you gave me a blow that was far more bitter than you guessed of. But it is all over now. John Temple will be free without his divorce; and if it was money that parted you from the girl or woman you cared for, it need part you no longer—for I have left you all I have to leave."

"Miss Weir—Kathleen! Why have you done this? I want no money; I can not take it!"

"But you must, my friend; do not talk nonsense—what good can it do me now? Yes, it does do me some good, to be able thus to show you what I really think of you; to mark how I estimate you—and if it makes you happy even with someone else—"

"No money will make me happy—it was not money," answered Webster with inexpressible pain in his face. It flashed across his mind indeed at this moment that the very death of this wayward, generous heart would end all his hopes; would leave John Temple free.

"At all events, I hope you will be happy—some day," went on Kathleen, after a little pause; "so I sent for you to tell you this, and—to bid you good-by. But I don't believe it will be forever. I have a vague foreshadowing of another life—another and a better one—even for a poor sinner like me. And after all, one is often tired here—tired by the shams and follies—I feel tired now—"

Her voice sank into a whisper as she uttered these last words, and then died away. Webster bent nearer, and then grew alarmed. He rang the bell, and the doctor and nurse reappeared, and Webster left the room, but not the house. A profound feeling of melancholy seemed to come over him. A sense of desolation filled his heart. The door of poor Kathleen's wrecked drawing-room

was slightly ajar, and he went in and looked around. The flames had blackened and spoilt everything, and the water poured in by the firemen had completed the ruin. He thought of her as she had sat there yesterday—a bright, smiling, handsome woman—and he thought of her now. And her generous words! Her having remembered him amid her own agony touched his very soul.

“But she little knows, poor Kathleen—she little knows!” he murmured, half-aloud, as he gazed at the desolate scene.

And then he asked himself what he must do. It Kathleen died, John Temple would be free; free to right the wrong that he had done—but would he do it? Naturally Webster thought ill of John Temple, and was not sure how he would act when he heard the wife was dead whom he had forsaken. And then, Temple knew not where to find May. “No one knows where to find her but myself,” reflected Webster, and a great struggle took place in his heart.

“Shall I again destroy the peace that is just dawning? tell her the man who treated her so vilely is now able to marry her if he will? It would be cruel, and yet, on the other hand, what right have I to judge for her?”

None, Webster told himself, as he paced restlessly up and down the deserted room. If May still cared for Temple, he had no right to stand between them; no right to think of his own happiness in comparison to hers.

He was still thinking thus when Doctor Lynton entered the room, and Webster looked quickly in his face as he did so.

“She has revived a little for the present,” said the doctor, in answer to the unspoken question written on Webster’s face. “But the action of her heart is extremely weak, arising from the shock to the system, and she will not live over the night.”

Webster heard this verdict in silence; but the fleeting breath was not stayed even as long as the doctor had thought. A few minutes later the nurse entered the room and addressed Webster.

“The poor lady upstairs, sir,” she said, “has something to give you before she goes, and I think it won’t be long now.”

“Will it do her any harm my seeing her?” asked Webster, looking at the doctor.

“Nothing will do her any harm,” answered the doctor, gravely; “from the first there was no hope; and it is only from the original strength and vitality of her constitution that she has lasted so long.”

So Webster returned to the bedside of the dying woman, and even during the short time of his absence her voice was weaker. It was indeed only a husky whisper now, and he had to bend over her very closely to understand what she said.

“I want you to have this ring—this ring,” and a bandaged hand crept out toward Webster’s, who took it gently in his own, and stooping down kissed it. “Keep it for my sake,” went on those husky tones; “and if you see John Temple—”

But the next moment she gave a kind of cry.

“What is this? What new pain is this?” she gasped out. “Lift me up—I am choking—lift me up!”

Both the doctor and Webster at once raised her in their arms, but after a few gasping sighs, she indicated that she wished to lie back again.

“It—is—all over,” she murmured; “and—I die as I wished—with my hand in yours.”

They were her last words; there were a few faint struggles, a few long, low sighs, and then all was still. But to the end Webster kept her poor maimed hand in his, and when it was all over he again bent down and kissed it, and when he raised his head his eyes were dim with unshed tears.

Late that night he sat alone in his chambers pondering still on how he should act. A hard and bitter struggle was warring in his heart; how hard and bitter he only knew. Unconsciously almost to himself he had begun to hope that some day he would win May Churchill for his wife; that some day she might return his love. He was not a man to love lightly, nor one to change. His feelings were characteristic, strong, and undivided; his life high-toned and pure. Until he had seen May’s flower-like face he had loved no woman, and indeed scarcely had given the sex a thought. His profession, his career, had occupied his whole time, and he hardly knew that there lay a hidden fire in his breast, which had kindled and burst forth at the beauty of a country girl.

Now he did not deceive himself. He knew during that dark struggle in the midnight hours when Kathleen Weir lay dead, that if he gave May up he gave up also the best hopes of his manhood, the one love of his life. But after a stout fight with the opposing passions of his heart, the nobler part of his nature conquered.

“Shall I not give her back happiness at the cost of my own?” he determined. “I will go to him, and if he is a cur, she shall never know; if not—”

His face was very gray and pale, but he had made up his mind. He would see John Temple, and he and May must decide their fate.

CHAPTER XLIII.
STRANGE NEWS.

The next day was a wet and dreary one, almost a storm. The wind sighed through the budding trees at Woodlea Hall, and the rain beat against the window panes. A bright fire was, however, burning in the library during the afternoon, and the new master, John Temple, was there, and Mrs. Temple, the widow of the old one.

John Temple was smoking endless cigarettes and reading. He was nearly always smoking now, and Mrs. Temple declared she delighted in the smell of tobacco. She in truth delighted to be in John Temple's company, and nearly always contrived to be so.

Presently John Temple rose from his easy chair and flung the remains of his last cigarette into the grate, and having lit a new one began walking restlessly up and down the long room, and Mrs. Temple's dark eyes followed his tall, slight form as he did so.

"What are you thinking of, John?" at last she asked.

"Can't tell," he answered somewhat listlessly; "the wind disquiets me, I think."

"It is a storm," she said, and then she also rose, and went first to one of the windows of the room and looked out. Presently she turned around and joined John Temple, and slid her hand through his arm and began walking by his side.

She had scarcely done this, however, when they both heard the sound of carriage wheels approaching up the avenue, and a minute or so later the hall doorbell rang.

"What a bore!" exclaimed John Temple. "If it is any visitors, say I'm out."

"Very well," she answered, but still remained by his side. A few moments later, however, a footman rapped at the room door and then entered, carrying a salver on which lay a card, which he presented to his new master.

John Temple put out his hand carelessly and took it up, but the instant he saw the printed name a quick change came over his face.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Temple, sharply, who had noticed the change.

"A man I wish to see—you may show him in here," he went on, addressing the footman; "and perhaps you," and he looked at Mrs. Temple, "if you do not mind—"

"You wish me to go?" said Mrs. Temple, quickly. "Very well, I will—only do nothing rash."

John Temple made no answer to this, and then Mrs. Temple quitted the room, and in the hall she passed a tall, dark man, who was being ushered to the library by the footman.

And a moment later Ralph Webster entered the room. He bowed gravely to John Temple, who also bowed, and a slight flush rose to his face as he did so.

"You are Mr. John Temple, I presume?" then said Webster.

"I am."

"I have come on a strange errand, Mr. Temple," continued Webster; "but I have come because I believe it to be my duty to do so. I am the nephew of two ladies whom you used to know; of the ladies to whose care you confided the young lady whom you afterward married from their house."

John Temple bowed his head; his face contracted as if with pain.

"I understand," he said in a low tone. "Have—have you anything to tell me?"

Webster hesitated for a moment and then went on.

"I knew this young lady; I met her at my aunts', and I knew you also by name, and had been told of your marriage. But in the course of my professional career I met another lady—Miss Kathleen Weir—and from her I learned the early history of her life and her connection with you."

Temple's lip curled.

"Has she sent you to me?" he said. "I presume you know she came here, and wished to make some arrangement?"

"Yes, I know," answered Webster, gravely. "No, she has not sent me here—Miss Kathleen Weir is dead."

"Dead! impossible!" cried John Temple, and his face grew pale.

"She died yesterday afternoon; an accident had occurred the night before, and she overturned a lamp and was terribly burned. I was with her when she died; I saw her die."

"Good God! I can not believe it!" exclaimed Temple.

"It is nevertheless true—and I, knowing of her marriage to you—knowing also of your other marriage—"

"What have you got to say to me, sir?" interrupted Temple, quickly. "I am denying nothing; but what have you got to say?"

"This," answered Webster, with quiet dignity. "When I heard of your first marriage I knew that you had also contracted a second marriage, and that—the young lady was living under my aunts' roof."

“Well?” said Temple, sharply.

“But I could not—I did not feel that I was called upon to tell this—to destroy her happiness.”

Unconsciously Webster’s voice faltered as he uttered the last few words, and Temple looked at him with eager anxiety.

“But you yourself told the secret,” went on Webster, recovering himself; “you told this young girl what well-nigh broke her heart—that she was no wife—that she was—”

“Be silent! How dare you speak thus!” cried John Temple, hoarsely and passionately.

“I speak for a purpose,” continued Webster; “you told her of your early marriage to Miss Weir; and in her despair, her sudden shame and anguish, she left you, never intending to see you more.”

John Temple sprang forward; he grasped Webster’s arm.

“Do you know anything?” he gasped out. “Do you know if—she lives?”

“Yes, Mr. Temple, she lives. That night, after she left the hotel in her despair, by chance I saw her; she looked so ill, so strange, that I, knowing her story, followed her. I followed her to Westminster bridge, and then—when she was very ill—when she was unconscious, I took her to St. Phillip’s Hospital.”

“And she is living? Oh! thank God! Thank God!”

There was no doubting his great thankfulness, and Webster’s voice softened a little as he went on.

“She is living, and now nearly well. She went through a long and dangerous illness, and at times we almost despaired of her life. But at last her youth reasserted itself, though only on one condition did she struggle feebly back to life. And this condition was that her very existence had to be kept an absolute secret; she wished everyone to believe her dead.”

For a moment John Temple did not speak; his lips quivered; he turned away his head.

“I promised faithfully to keep her secret,” continued Webster; “no one knew at the hospital who she was but myself, and I have kept it until now—until after the death of Kathleen Weir.”

“And she left me to endure all this misery—a bitter, unending remorse and regret,” now said John Temple, in a broken, agitated voice. “She—who said she loved me—who said that we could not live apart—it seems that she could.”

“Mr. Temple, you are unjust.”

“It may be so, but—it was not thus that I regarded her. However, if your news be true—if poor Kathleen is indeed dead—I will, of course, at once remarry May. She knows, I suppose, that you are here; knows why you came?”

“She knows nothing. I have not seen her since Miss Weir’s death.”

“And where is she living now?”

“At St. Phillip’s Hospital. She has never left it. She is now one of the nursing sisters there; she insisted on working for her daily bread.”

For a few moments after this Temple did not speak. He stood with knitted brows as if in thought. Then he held out his hand to Webster.

“I am very grateful to you,” he said; “grateful to you for coming to tell me all this; and for your kindness—to the poor girl to whom I did so great a wrong. But I will be honest with you; I believed May loved me so well that even had I told her of that early tie—broken years ago—that she still would have shared my fortunes. I judged her feelings by my own—but it seems I was mistaken.”

Webster did not speak; he cast down his eyes; an angry throb passed through his heart.

“However, we need not speak of this,” continued Temple after a moment’s pause. “There is now but one course for me to take, which is at once to go to her, and for us to be immediately remarried. Her father is in London at this very time seeking her—he did not believe as I did.”

Still Webster was silent.

“I shall, therefore,” went on John Temple, “at once telegraph to him that she is safe and well. As for you, Mr. Webster, I do not know how to thank you.”

“I need no thanks,” answered Webster a little hoarsely.

“I have the highest regard and liking for your aunts, and I hope now my poor little May will welcome them here. And you—you will dine and stay all night here?”

But Webster shook his head.

“No,” he said, “I must return by the next train to town; my mission here is ended—I will see—”

“May? Then I will travel with you. Yes, kindly see her, and break the news to her of poor Kathleen’s death. But I feel yet as if I can scarcely forgive May. If she wished to leave me she might have done so; not cost me such bitter pain.”

“We will not discuss it.”

“No, it is useless. And now, Mr. Webster, will you kindly excuse me for a few minutes? I will

ring for some refreshments for you, and if you really must return by the next train to town, it passes our station at a quarter to six;" and John Temple looked at his watch. "I will go with you, and to-morrow—you will see May?"

"Yes."

"Then that is all settled. I will rejoin you in a few minutes; I wish to tell my news to my uncle's widow, and, Mr. Webster, I may depend on your honor, I am sure, to keep all this a secret."

"You may quite depend upon me," answered Webster, a little bitterly.

After this John Temple left the room, and went straight to the morning-room, where he expected to find Mrs. Temple. She was there, looking pale and agitated, and she went forward quickly to meet him.

"Who is that gentleman, John?" she said. "I have been feeling quite anxious."

"He has brought me strange news, Rachel," answered John Temple, gravely. He called her now by her Christian name, as she had expressed a wish that he should do so.

"Strange news?" she repeated, and her face grew paler.

"Yes; May is alive—and—"

"Then what will you do?" asked the agitated woman before him, almost with a gasp.

"There is but one thing for me to do."

"You mean—"

"I will go to her; we must be remarried—for I have other news for you; this gentleman, Mr. Webster, has brought me other news—my first wife, Kathleen Weir, is dead."

A half-cry broke from Mrs. Temple's white lips, and that was all. She stood there with wide-open eyes and heaving breast. John Temple's news was a death-blow to her new hopes of happiness and love, but still she could speak no word.

"It seems," went on John Temple, scarcely daring to look at her white face, "that this Mr. Webster knew all the time where May was—at some hospital or other—but by May's especial wish he kept this a secret."

"And she calls this love!" cried Mrs. Temple, wildly and passionately. "Love! to make you endure such pain; to make your life a burden; each day a fresh pang! If this is love, I know not what it is."

"It seems strange," said John Temple, and then without another word he went away.

An hour or so later two men were sitting in the same railway carriage together traveling to town, but they were not talking of the loves or the tragedies of their lives. They were talking gravely of the passing topics of the day, of politics, of books, and the names of May Churchill and Kathleen Weir were never once mentioned between them. Not at least until they reached the terminus and were about to separate for the night. Then as they shook hands, John Temple said quietly: "At what time will you see May in the morning?"

"Early," answered Webster; "about eleven o'clock."

"Then will you telegraph to me, and I will go to her? I will also see her father."

"And—" hesitated Webster; "what will you say to him?"

"Best tell him the truth, I think, and Mr. Churchill will see the wisdom and prudence of keeping it to himself. Besides he had better be present at our marriage."

"And my aunts?"

"Is there any reason to say anything to them? They know nothing, and they may as well continue in ignorance of a painful story. And now again many thanks."

So they parted, and Webster went back to his lonely chambers, and thought of what he had done.

"If it is for her happiness," and then he sighed wearily; somehow he was not quite sure that it would be.

And early the next morning he sent a telegram to May at St. Phillip's Hospital to say he would be with her by eleven o'clock. May received this telegram with great surprise, for Webster never wrote to her, nor sent telegrams, and when he called it was generally late in the afternoon. But precisely at eleven o'clock a message was sent to her that Mr. Webster was waiting to see her in the sitting-room of the house surgeon, Doctor Brentwood.

She accordingly went there, and found Webster standing, looking grave and pale, and so ill that she instantly remarked on it.

"Are you not well, Mr. Webster?" she said. "You do not look at all well."

Webster scarcely answered her; he had taken her hand, and stood looking in her fair face, and there was great pain and trouble in his heart.

"I have some news for you, May," he said at length.

He had never before called her “May,” and she noticed this and blushed.

“News?” she answered. “Not bad news, I hope.”

Twice he opened his lips, but somehow no words came forth. And his manner was so strange that May grew really alarmed.

“What is it?” she said. “Oh! you frighten me—has anything happened?”

Then with a great effort he told her.

“May, Kathleen Weir is dead.”

The blood rushed to May’s face as she listened to these words, and then died away, leaving her very pale.

“Dead!” she repeated; and in an instant it flashed across her mind all that this might mean to her.

“Yes,” went on Webster, trying to speak calmly, “she died the day before yesterday. It was an accident; she was burned to death.”

“How dreadful!—and does—he know?”

“Yes,” again answered Webster. “I saw him yesterday—it was but right that he should know—he is coming to you to-day.”

May gave a little cry; a little start, as if she were half afraid.

“If it is for your happiness,” continued Webster with faltering lips, “otherwise, of course—”

For a moment or two May did not speak. She stood as if thinking, as if in doubt. Then suddenly she held out her hand to Webster.

“It is but right,” she said, speaking with an effort. “And you—how am I to thank you for all you have done for me?”

Webster’s lips quivered. He tried to say some commonplace words. He stooped down and kissed her trembling hand.

“Your happiness is—everything to me,” he faltered. “I have thought of that alone.”

And somehow at this moment she understood something of the unspoken feelings of his heart. One of those glimpses into another’s soul which came unsought passed through hers. She trembled; she drew away her hand.

“May God bless you,” murmured Webster, and the next moment he was gone. And he left May strangely disturbed. His constant kindness, his generosity in word and deed, and now his unselfish love, moved her deeply. But she had not much time for thought. She had scarcely indeed returned to her duties in the wards when another message was brought to her that a second visitor was waiting for her in the house surgeon’s room, and the moment she heard this she knew who it would be.

It was in truth John Temple; and as she entered the room pale, nervous, beautiful, he advanced toward her and took her in his arms.

“How could you give me all that bitter pain, May?” were his first words, and then he bent down and kissed her lips.

“You know that I am free now,” he said, presently. “I have seen your father, and have arranged with him that we shall be married again immediately. But May, I will never believe that you really loved me now.”

She looked at him with eyes full of reproach.

“I—I meant to die,” she faltered. “But for Mr. Webster—”

“Do not, please, speak of it; you are looking very well; as pretty as ever, I think, May; and you must forget all this like a bad dream. Do you know my poor uncle is dead?”

“I never heard of it; I have lived here, and—never spoken of the past.”

“He is dead, poor man; he died quite suddenly, and I was recalled to England in consequence. I am living at Woodlea now, and you must go there, May.”

“Oh! it seems so strange—all so strange, John.”

She put her hand half-timidly into his as she spoke, and as she said it was all so strange. A long lifetime appeared to lie between her and the early days of her fond love and happiness. She looked up in John’s face; it seemed changed, too, but he was very kind and gentle to her.

“You must change this becoming dress,” he said, smiling, and laying his hand on her black gown. “The cap suits you charmingly, but it won’t do for you now, you know. You will want some money, May, so I have brought it for you.”

“Oh, how can you talk of such things—just when we have met again.”

“My child, it was your own fault that we ever parted. However, we had best agree to drop this subject forever; no one knows of it but one person, and for my sake I think she will keep the secret.”

“And—my father?”

“Oh, I was forced to tell him a garbled sort of story, but, of course, we may depend on his secrecy. He will be present at your second wedding, May, and will give you away.”

May gave a tremulous little sigh. She was remembering her first wedding, and her infinite love and trust.

“Your father will be here presently, I expect,” went on John Temple, “and I think you had better stay with him until we are married. We can be married the day after to-morrow by special license, but not to-morrow.”

Not to-morrow! for John Temple knew that on the morrow Kathleen Weir was to be laid in her untimely grave. He did not mean to follow her there; to him for long years she had been a burden and encumbrance. But all the same he did not choose to marry on her burial day.

But he did not tell May this, and while he was still talking of their future arrangements Mr. Churchill arrived. Both May and he were much affected at this meeting. Mr. Churchill caught his “little girl” in his arms and kissed her again and again, with something like a tear glistening in his brown eyes. John Temple had not told him the whole story of his first marriage; he had told him, however, that there was some flaw in the marriage to May, and that they had better be married again, and that Mr. Churchill also had better be present. And though Mr. Churchill was an affectionate father, and really fond of May, he was also a tenant. John Temple was his landlord, and it behooved him, as a prudent man, to make the best of the situation. He, therefore, accepted the explanation he was offered, and gladly agreed to keep the whole affair of the second marriage a secret at Woodside.

Thus everything was very soon arranged between the two men, and before the day was over May left the home that had sheltered her in her cruel need. But both John Temple and Mr. Churchill gave gifts to the hospital—John Temple, lavishly; Mr. Churchill, prudently. And May also slid a handsome sum into the kindly hand of Sister Margaret.

“So you are going to be married to this other gentleman,” said Sister Margaret, rather in a disappointed tone. “Well, I thought it would have been Mr. Webster.”

“Oh! hush, hush!” said May, quickly; “Mr. Webster never thought of such a thing.”

“I am almost certain he did, though I have had so little experience in lovers,” replied Sister Margaret. “Well, my dear, whoever it is, I only hope you may be happy.”

So with the good wishes of all she had known, May quitted St. Phillip’s and went with her father to the hotel at which he was staying. And the next two days were very busy ones, for May had a whole wardrobe to purchase, and John Temple was very generous. And on the night before their marriage, when they were sitting together, John Temple suddenly put his arm round her and drew her to his breast.

“May,” he said, “are you happy now? quite happy?”

“Yes,” she answered, softly; “and very grateful.”

She meant to God, but John Temple did not understand her, and kissed her very tenderly.

And early the next morning they were married, and Mr. Churchill felt sure at least that this time there was no mistake. And he was a proud and happy man as he gave his young daughter to John Temple, though not so elated as he had been when he returned to Woodside after seeing the register of their first marriage. And scarcely had the bride and bridegroom started to spend a few days at Brighton before going to Woodlea when Mr. Churchill sat down and wrote the following letter to his wife:

“Dear Sarah: I shall be back to-morrow by the first train, and I am happy to say the business that I came up to London for is now all satisfactorily settled. May had had a slight disagreement with her husband, and, like a foolish girl, quarreled with him. But it is all made up now, and I think in about a week at latest they will be going down to the Hall, and then I hope we shall often see them. May sends her love to you”—here Mr. Churchill did not quite adhere to the truth—”and to the boys, and best let all bygones be bygones. May is now Mrs. Temple of Woodlea Hall, and can hold her head up with the best of them; and Mr. John Temple, besides being my son-in-law, is my landlord, and I therefore naturally wish to keep on good terms with him. I have bought you a new silk gown, and I hope you will like it. And I remain,

“Your affectionate husband,

”William Churchill.“

John Temple wrote a letter before he left town to tell Mrs. Temple of his marriage, a letter which she received with deep emotion.

”Dear Rachel: I was remarried this morning to May, and Mr. Churchill was present. And now I am going to ask you for the sake of the friendship you have shown me, to keep the unhappy story I confided to you and this second marriage a secret. No good would come of telling it, and no one knows it but yourself, Mr. Webster (whom I can trust), and May’s father. Let us, therefore, try to forget it; but I shall not forget your kindness to me during the unhappy time when I first returned to Woodlea.

“And there is another thing that I wish to mention to you, which is that once or twice you have talked of the Hall as my house, and of your leaving it. I hope that you will do nothing of the sort, and that you will always regard it as your home. Independently of the pleasure that your company will give me, you will, of course, be the greatest advantage and assistance to my poor

little May in her new position. She is looking very well, and is very sweet and gentle, but I fear her people will be somewhat of a trial. However, we must make the best of it.

"We are going down to Brighton for a few days, and I will then return to Woodlea about to-day week, I think. But I will let you know when to expect us. And with kind regards, I remain,

"Very sincerely yours,

"JOHN TEMPLE.

"P. S.—Above all things say nothing to your mother.

"J. T."

CHAPTER XLIV.
MAY'S NEW HOME.

One evening nearly a fortnight after Mrs. Temple had received the letter from John Temple announcing his marriage to May, the windows of Woodlea Hall were all alight in expectation of their return.

Mrs. Temple had been in a state of great, though suppressed, excitement all day. The rooms were bright with flowers, and by her orders the whole place was arranged to appear to the best advantage. As for Mrs. Temple herself she wore an evening dress of black velvet, having discarded her deep mourning in honor of the occasion.

Yet she was feeling far from happy. This girl, this stranger, who was coming to take her place, she thought, she naturally regarded with hidden though deep resentment. John Temple could not have acted otherwise, she told herself, but this did not lessen the bitterness of her heart.

And when at last the carriage which contained John Temple and his young wife drove up to the entrance of the Hall, Mrs. Temple went forward, pale, handsome, and agitated, to receive them. She clasped John's hand first, who warmly shook hers, and then—as though half-unwillingly—she looked at the fair girlish face by his side.

"This is May," said John Temple, in kindly tones. "May, my dear, this is Mrs. Temple, my poor uncle's widow."

The two women shook hands after this, and exchanged a few remarks on the journey and the weather. May felt embarrassed and slightly overawed by this handsome woman who looked at her so coldly. It was not like going to her own home, somehow, she felt. John indeed referred to Mrs. Temple about everything, and showed his uncle's widow the greatest consideration and respect.

And when an hour or so afterward dinner was announced, John Temple smilingly offered one arm to Mrs. Temple and the other to May.

"I must do double duty to-night, you see," he said; and when they reached the dining-room he deliberately led Mrs. Temple to the head of the table, and indicated to May to sit at the side. But Mrs. Temple drew back.

"Nay," she said, "this is your wife's place."

"Certainly not," answered John Temple, decidedly; "this is your place, as it always has been."

Mrs. Temple said nothing more at this time; she sat opposite to John, and May, without any feeling of anger in her heart, took the chair her husband had assigned to her. She was looking very pretty, but somehow Mrs. Temple could not understand the expression of her face. There was no elation there, nor pride in her new position. Now when the first nervousness of her arrival was over, she looked very much as she had done in the wards at St. Phillip's.

But there were no allusions made to the past. John talked of Brighton, and of the theaters they had gone to in town, and to all outward seeming this first evening at Woodlea might have been an ordinary home-coming of a young couple from their bridal tour. But hidden in the hearts of the three present was the knowledge that this was not so. The storm was over, but its trace was there.

And the next morning a little incident occurred, which struck a somewhat chill feeling into May's heart. Breakfast was just over, and as John Temple rose from the table, he said pleasantly, looking at Mrs. Temple:

"And how are you two going to amuse yourselves to-day?"

"In any manner you like, or that Mrs. John Temple likes," answered Mrs. Temple.

"If you do not mind, John," said May, rather quickly, "I should like to go over to Woodside this morning to see my father, as I think he will expect me to do so. And," she added, with rather a wistful little smile, looking up in his face, "I hope you will come with me."

But John Temple's brow clouded, and he slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear child," he said, "that is a luxury which I am really not prepared to encounter. And why be in such a hurry to go over to Woodside?"

“I think my father would be disappointed if I did not go,” answered May, gently, but her face flushed and her eyes fell; “but I can go alone.”

“Then you had better drive over,” said John Temple. “And what would you like to do, Rachel?”

“Do you feel in the humor for a ride?” replied Mrs. Temple. “It is a fine morning; suppose we have a ride, John?”

“All right; what time shall I order the carriage and the horses then?”

“Shall we say eleven?” said Mrs. Temple, and she looked at May, but May’s eyes were still cast down. They, however, settled it thus, and when May returned to the morning-room about an hour later, she found Mrs. Temple already there, dressed in her habit, and John Temple talking to her.

“I hope May is not disappointed because I do not care to go to Woodside?” John was saying.

“She could not expect you to do so,” answered Mrs. Temple, just as May entered the room.

She heard the words, and somehow felt that they had been talking of her. But when a few minutes later the carriage and the riding-horses came round John Temple led his young wife to the carriage and handed her in, and nodded smilingly to her as he was turning away.

“Have you any message for my father?” said May, bending forward.

“Anything you like,” answered John, still smiling; and then he went back to the house, and May was driven in state to her old home.

And the arrival at Woodside of one of the Hall carriages, drawn by two handsome horses, with their black rosetted heads, and the servants also in mourning for their late master, naturally created quite a sensation at the homestead. Mr. Churchill was not in the house at the time, but one of the grooms hastily went in search of him to the stables. As for Mrs. Churchill, she no sooner heard that her stepdaughter was in the house than she hurried upstairs to change her dress, though she had previously determined to make no difference in her manner to May.

But the two prancing horses outside and the handsome carriage influenced her in spite of herself. She went into the drawing-room quite in a flutter, to find May standing there looking a little pensively around. What she had gone through since she had been in this room May was thinking. But Mrs. Churchill’s effusive welcome interrupted her reflections.

“Well, my dear, welcome home,” said Mrs. Churchill, and she kissed her stepdaughter as she had never kissed her before. “We heard you had arrived at the Hall last night, and your father was hoping that you could come over to see us this morning; and it’s very good of you to have done so.”

“Oh, I am very pleased to come,” answered May, with her sweet smile. “And the boys; how are the boys?”

“They are very well, my dear. They are both at school this morning, but they are looking forward to seeing you. They have talked of nothing else since your father was in London last.”

“I have brought them each a present,” said May, “and I hope they will like them. Will you give my kind love to them both? The presents are in the carriage.”

At this moment Mr. Churchill hurried into the room and caught his fair daughter in his strong arms, and kissed her vigorously.

“Well, May, my pet, and how are you? More like a Mayflower than ever, eh, May?” he added, holding May a little apart from him, and looking at her with eyes brimful of pride and pleasure. “Well, my girl, welcome to your new home! It’s kind of you to come over to see your old father the very first day you have spent at the Hall.”

“Dear father, of course I came,” said May, gently.

“And madam? She is still there, I hear; but remember, May, you’re mistress now, so don’t be put upon by any of them.”

“Oh! she is very kind.”

“Kind! I should think so; why should she not be kind? But you’re the squire’s wife, you know, now, May, and you must show her that you quite understand this. And how is your husband?”

“He is looking much better again; he has gone out for a ride with Mrs. Temple this morning.”

“Humph! Well, you should ride with him yourself, May. No one has a smarter seat on horseback than you, and I’d let them all see this.”

And during the rest of May’s visit Mr. Churchill constantly harped on this point. She was to assert herself, but May knew that, even had she wished to do so, she would have found it very difficult.

For the night before, when they were alone, John Temple had spoken to his wife on the subject of Mrs. Temple’s position in the house.

“You see, May,” he had said, “I came here and became heir of this property under very peculiar circumstances. I stepped into the place of Mrs. Temple’s only child, and therefore I feel that to disturb her in any way as mistress of the house, where she would have remained mistress had her boy lived, would be at once ungentlemanly and ungrateful of me. This is why I took her to the head of the table to-night, and I am sure you have the good taste and the good feeling to understand my wishes on the subject.”

“Then is she going to live here always?” May ventured to ask.

“She will live here, of course, as long as she wishes to do so. She is my uncle’s widow, and this was his home, and I wish her to feel that it is still her home.”

Thus May had her own position clearly defined to her. And as she listened to her father’s advice she had no idea of acting on it. But she did not tell him this; she parted with him affectionately, and Mr. Churchill was a proud man as he led her to her carriage and handed her in.

“I’ll bring your stepmother some day over to dine with you, May,” he said, before he parted with his daughter. “I want to see you in your own house; fix some day with your husband for us to come. And now good-by, my pet.”

Then, when May was gone, he returned to the house in a very boastful mood.

“She’s lovely, isn’t she, Sarah?” he remarked to his wife. “But I gave her a bit of advice about madam; madam must be taught her place, and I’ll see that she is too.”

But in the days that followed May was made to feel more than once that Mrs. Temple exercised a considerable influence over her husband’s mind. John Temple was always kind to May, always gentle, but he had fallen back into that easy-going frame of mind which had been habitual to him before he was aroused from it by his bitter remorse and self-reproach. Now, he thought, everything was right for his “little May.” He had made her his wife; he bought her a pony-carriage for herself, and two handsome ponies, so that she could drive wherever she wished, and he allowed her plenty of money, and did not object to her spending it lavishly among the poor and sick.

“I know what suffering and sickness is now, you know, John,” she one day said to him, a little wistfully; but John did not encourage her to talk on the subject. He, in fact, totally ignored, and tried to forget, the miserable time after May had left him. It disturbed him to think of it, and John Temple did not love unpleasant thoughts.

Thus weeks passed away, and May, with her sweet reasonableness of conduct, had almost won some sort of regard from the woman who was yet jealous of her, when one morning May received a letter from her father, plainly expressing a wish that he and his wife should be asked to dine at the Hall.

“It looks so odd to other people, you know, my dear,” he wrote, “and I hope you will not allow anyone to cast a slight on your own father,” and so on.

This letter disturbed May exceedingly, for she knew John Temple would not like to receive Mrs. Churchill at his table, and that Mrs. Temple also strongly objected to the whole family. Once she had had her two young brothers to spend the day with her at the Hall, and Mrs. Temple on that occasion had refused to appear.

“It won’t do, you know, May, my dear,” John had said to her afterward; “Rachel has a strong and natural objection to the boys on account of the death of her own lad in the game where they were playing. So don’t ask them again.”

May had never done so, though she knew they thought it was unkind of her. She took them presents and gave them money, but she dare not ask them to the Hall. And now about her father and stepmother she knew not what to do.

At last she took courage and went to her husband, and put her father’s letter in his hand.

“I wish to ask them so much, John,” she said.

John read the letter, shrugged his shoulders, and then put his hand kindly on his wife’s arm.

“It will be an awful bore, little woman,” he said.

“Just for once, John,” pleaded May, and John Temple finally allowed the invitation to be sent.

But May never wished for her stepmother to be asked to dine at the Hall again. Mrs. Churchill went determined to show—to use one of her husband’s phrase—that “she was as good as any of them.” She went overdressed, to be received by her stepdaughter and Mrs. Temple both in black, and Mrs. Temple took a malicious pleasure in leading her on to make herself ridiculous.

John Temple fidgeted in his chair, but Mrs. Temple enjoyed his discomfiture. She wished to make him feel what sort of family he had married into, and she certainly succeeded in her design. In fact the dinner was a most uncomfortable one, and only Mrs. Temple was amused.

“My dear May, please never ask that good lady here again,” said John Temple, after his father-in-law and his wife had taken their departure; “I really can not stand her.”

“Well, I must say,” remarked Mrs. Churchill to her spouse, as they drove home together after the entertainment was over, “that a more stupid evening I never spent; it seems to me that May can scarcely be called the mistress of her own house, with Mrs. Temple sitting at the head of the table, and that kind of thing. However, we’ve dined there, and the neighbors can’t say we’ve not, and we need not tell them it was anything but pleasant.”

“Well,” answered Mr. Churchill, who was also much disappointed, “I think it is a pity May does not make more of herself. However, Mr. John Temple is my landlord as well as my son-in-law, so we must just make the best of things.”

CHAPTER XLV.
ANOTHER HEIR.

A whole year passed away after May's arrival at the Hall as John Temple's wife; a year with its chances and changes, when it became known in the neighborhood that it was hoped an heir was about to be born to Woodlea.

The prospect of this event pleased John Temple greatly, but displeased Mrs. Temple. She did not wish this new and tender tie to draw closer the two she fain would part. But she was, of course, obliged to conceal her feelings.

"But I hope," she one day said smiling to John Temple, "that when the interesting event comes off that your charming mother-in-law will not take up her abode here?"

John Temple laughed.

"Oh! nonsense," he said, "May would not care to have her here."

Mrs. Churchill had, however, already hinted to May that she would like to be present, but May had her own ideas on the subject, and she accordingly acted on them.

"John, may I invite Miss Webster to be with me when baby is born?" she said to her husband, and John Temple immediately assented.

"Of course, my dear, invite whoever you like," he answered, kindly. "Yes, I think Miss Webster would be a very good person for you to have with you; she is a motherly woman, though she has never been a mother."

"Thank you, dear John," replied May; "I shall be so glad if she will come."

"It's strange Webster will never come here," went on John Temple; "I've asked him three times, you know, May."

"He's such a busy man, I suppose; then I will write to Miss Webster to-day, John."

And May did write, and Miss Webster accepted the invitation. Both the sisters had been previously asked to Woodlea, but an illness of Miss Eliza's had prevented their going. Now, however, Miss Eliza was well enough to be left, and Miss Webster wrote that she looked forward with sincere pleasure "again to kiss the sweet face" she "so often thought of."

May also was truly delighted to see once more the kindly woman under whose hospitable roof she had once spent such bright hours of hope and happiness. She drove to the station to meet Miss Webster. She showed her, with modest pride, all the tiny treasures she had prepared, and in which Mrs. Temple had no interest.

"And how is Mr. Webster?" she asked, shortly after Miss Webster arrived.

"Oh, Ralph is very well, I think, and desired to be remembered to you. But he works too hard, I tell him; he is rising rapidly at the bar, and has more briefs offered to him than he can possibly accept. And I believe he is going to try to get into Parliament at the next election."

"I am very glad," said May, quietly. But she sighed softly as she turned away. She was thinking of Ralph Webster, and her great debt to him which she could never pay.

But a day or two after Miss Webster's arrival at the Hall, something so terrible occurred that for many weeks May's life was as a bewildered dream. It happened so suddenly that the blow fell with crushing force, and it was well for May that she had by her side one so sincere and faithful as her old friend.

They had all lunched together, and John Temple had been in one of his brightest moods. He was going to ride after lunch, and when his horse came round May followed him into the hall to see him mount. And as she stood there—looking a little wan perhaps, but with her sweet, serene face raised to his—a sudden impulse of affection induced John Temple to stoop down and kiss her.

"Take care of yourself, little woman," he said; "I'm so glad you have Miss Webster with you."

May smiled, and thus they parted. She was feeling a little tired, and Miss Webster therefore advised her to go to her room and lie down, and in a little while she fell into a placid sleep.

In the meantime John Temple was riding quietly along the country lanes, with the hedge-rows on either side green with the hues of the spring-time. And for no particular purpose, when he reached the outskirts of Henley Wood he turned his horse toward the road through it, admiring placidly as he went the trees just budding into leafage.

It was a peaceful scene, and there was no disturbing element in John Temple's mind, when suddenly there sprang from behind the trunk of one of the great oaks the figure of a man.

John turned his head to look at this man, and in a moment recognized him. It was Tom Henderson of Stourton Grange, but a terrible change had passed over the young man's face; and in an instant it flashed across John's mind that he had heard that Tom Henderson had been, or was, mad.

And he could not doubt this now. Henderson stood straight before him on the roadway, brandishing a huge, heavy, oaken bludgeon, which he had probably cut from one of the neighboring trees. And as John Temple approached nearer, with a frightful yell he sprang

forward toward him, and struck a severe blow on the head of John's horse.

The horse reared, and John lashed the madman with his riding-whip, which was his only means of defense. But with a hoarse scream of rage Henderson now closed with him, striking him also on the head with his murderous weapon, and John reeled from his saddle and fell.

"Now I've got my revenge!" shrieked Henderson. "You who spoilt my life!"

By this time, however, John Temple had regained his feet, and a fierce struggle ensued between the two men. John was blinded by the blood flowing from the wound on his brow, but still he fought bravely for his life. They wound their arms round each other; they tore, they strained, but Henderson was a more heavily built man than John Temple, and his madness gave him unnatural strength. Finally he forced John down on the ground below him, and struck him with his clenched fist, once more on the head. John Temple's arms relaxed their grasp; a deadly faintness stole over him, and Henderson gave a hideous laugh. He had won the fight, and he rose triumphant and spurned his enemy with his foot; and then drawing his pocket-knife from his coat, plunged it into John Temple's breast.

He had scarcely done the murderous deed when he heard hurried footsteps approaching down the roadway, and he at once turned and fled. It was his keeper, from whose care he had escaped, and the man had come out to seek him. The keeper, horrified, now came on John Temple's prostrate body. He knelt down, he raised the head, and for a moment or two longer John Temple lived.

He breathed once or twice; he whispered one word—"May—" he murmured, and as the name lingered on his lips he died.

Late in the afternoon May awoke from her placid sleep. She had been dreaming, poor child, but not of the dark tragedy that had been enacted in Henley Wood. Yet she awoke with a start and sat up, and then distinctly heard loud, piercing screams of grief ringing through the house. She at once hastily rose, and was approaching the door of her bedroom when it opened, and Miss Webster's gentle face appeared.

"Oh, Miss Webster, someone is crying so dreadfully; what is it?" asked May.

"There has been an accident, my dear," faltered Miss Webster, who was very pale.

"An accident?" repeated May, alarmed. "What has happened?"

"Your husband—Mr. Temple, has been thrown from his horse," answered Miss Webster in an agitated voice.

"John! Oh! where is he?" cried May, and her face grew very white. "I will go to him at once," and she grasped Miss Webster's arm.

"No, dear, you can not go just now," said Miss Webster, soothingly; "you can not see him just now—you must think of the child, May—"

A cry burst from May's pale lips, and she looked eagerly in Miss Webster's face, which was full of pity and distress.

"Tell me the worst!" gasped May. "I—I—see—Oh! God! it can not be!"

"My dear—" began Miss Webster, and then her kindly lips refused their office.

"Tell me—" repeated May, huskily, "is he—is he—"

"My dear, he has passed away from all earthly troubles," answered Miss Webster, in broken accents; "he has been thrown from his horse and his head injured—but May, my dear, my dear, you have a duty before you—be brave, and bear this great blow for your child's sake."

But with a moan May sank prone upon the floor; and as she did so the frantic cries of Mrs. Temple still sounded in her ears!

Miss Webster at once rang the bell violently, and a moment or two later the doctor appeared. It had been known in the household that Miss Webster had gone to break the news to the poor widow, and there were anxious listeners waiting outside. Among these were Mr. Churchill and the doctor, who had been hastily summoned after John Temple's death, and who had accompanied the body to the Hall. He now—assisted by Miss Webster—lifted May on the bed, and he also spoke to May very impressively.

"My dear madam, think of your unborn child; you may irreparably injure it unless you control your grief."

And May understood. She lay there with her white face and her wide-open eyes trying to keep calm. She had looked forward to her motherhood, thinking it would fill a strange void in her heart, and she struggled now as bravely as she could with her bitter pain.

That night her child was born; born amid such anguish that for long hours they scarcely hoped the young mother would survive. But when the pale spring dawn crept through the window-blinds the early beams fell on the small, pinched features of the little heir of Woodlea. They fell too on the pale, handsome face of the dead father; on the face of John Temple lying in his unbroken sleep.

May was ill for many weeks after this. She had fever, and was happily unconscious when the

inquest was held on her husband's body. And at this inquest the miserable mother of the madman Henderson was forced to appear. She gave her evidence in a broken, faltering voice, telling those present that her son had never recovered from the effects of a blow he had received from the late Mr. John Temple; that he had had brain fever, and that for some time afterward his reason was completely overthrown, and he had been confined in a lunatic asylum. Lately, however, he had appeared to be so much better that she had brought him home, though one of the keepers from the asylum accompanied him.

This man then stated that Mr. Henderson had appeared perfectly well and sane during lunch on the day of the murder, but that he afterward suddenly missed him, and at once started out to seek him, and was horrified by finding Mr. John Temple's body lying on the roadway with Mr. Henderson's pocket knife thrust in his breast. He said Mr. Temple was not quite dead when he found him, but expired a few moments later. He also stated that when Henderson was recaptured that he was in a state of raging madness, and boasted constantly of his murderous deed; and that he was now once more confined in the asylum.

All these terrible details May was mercifully spared, and she never knew the ghastly truth about John Temple's death. He had been killed by a fall from his horse, she was told, and Miss Webster, and Miss Eliza, who had now joined her sister, took good care she heard nothing more.

These two good ladies indeed watched over her with the most devoted affection during the long days of her illness. And to their great delight the child throve, and by and by May would look sometimes in the baby's face and smile. As for Mr. Churchill his pride and pleasure in the little heir was unbounded. He brought his wife to the Hall to see him, and boasted, it must be confessed, a good deal of the babe's future possessions.

In the meantime Mrs. Temple had left the Hall. Her violent grief at John Temple's sudden death was characteristic of her nature, and everything painfully reminded her of him. She hated, too, the "baby worship," as she called it, of the two maiden sisters, and once or twice Mr. Churchill had somewhat plainly hinted in her presence that when May recovered that, as the mother of the heir of Woodlea, she ought to act as mistress of the house.

So Mrs. Temple went away, and her absence was a relief to May, and indeed to the whole household. May could see her father and brothers when she wished now; and at her earnest request the Misses Webster stayed on with her during the whole summer. They used to talk to her sometimes of "dear Ralph," but the autumn was far advanced, and John Temple had lain in his grave six months, before Ralph Webster saw again the woman he had befriended in her bitter need.

He came quite unexpectedly—at least to May—one October afternoon, when the three ladies were sitting together in the stately, old-fashioned garden of the Hall. The leaves were floating downward from the trees, but the air was scarcely chill. It was like a summer day, yet the tints and hues of the fading year were stamped on flower and leaf. And somehow May was thinking of this, of the change which comes to every living thing, when the sound of a firm step on the gravel behind the seat where she was sitting, made her raise her head and look around.

And the two sisters did the same thing, at the same instant, and then started to their feet.

"Ralph!" they both cried, and hastily went forward to meet their nephew with outstretched hands.

But May only rose; a strange nervousness came over her; seeing Ralph Webster again recalled so much.

"Will you pardon my intrusion?" he asked a moment later, as he took her hand in his.

"Of course—I—I am very glad—" she faltered in reply.

"As my aunts have entirely forsaken me," went on Webster with a smile, "I thought I might venture to look them up."

"We have often talked of you, my dear," said kind Miss Webster.

"Yes, my dear, often," sighed Miss Eliza.

"I—am afraid I have been very selfish, but I would not let them leave me," continued May, with more self-possession. "I am very glad to see you here, Mr. Webster."

"Thank you very much."

As he said these simple words he raised his eyes and looked in her fair face, and it seemed more fair to him even than he had thought it was.

"I have often thought of coming," he said, in a low tone; and a faint blush stole to May's cheeks as he spoke.

"We had better go into the house now," she suggested, the next moment, looking at Miss Webster. "Mr. Webster will be tired with his journey."

Thus they all returned to the Hall together, and the first awkwardness of the meeting was over. Ralph Webster stayed to dinner and remained all night, but when he proposed to leave the next morning, May asked him to spend another day with them.

"Can you not spare us another day?" she said, smiling.

Webster thought he could spare many, but he did not say this. He, however, accepted the invitation, and May and Aunt Eliza took him a long walk through the park, and as they trod the

mossy paths somehow both May and Webster were very silent. But Aunt Eliza was unusually loquacious, and carried on the conversation with scarcely any assistance.

“It seems almost like the delightful old days when May was with us at Pembridge Terrace, does it not, Ralph?” said the good lady at length, with a total absence of tact.

“Yes,” answered Webster, briefly; and for a moment his brow clouded.

But presently it cleared again, and no further allusion was made to bygone times. Nor did Webster during this visit make any allusion to the unchanged feelings of his heart. They parted as friends part, who know and feel the truth of that much-belied word. May knew how true a friend Ralph Webster had been to her, how unselfish and self-sacrificing, and she had not forgotten that parting before her second marriage with poor John Temple. She had understood something of his true feelings then, and perhaps a subtle instinct told her he was not one to change. And before he went, he promised to return.

“May I come down for Christmas?” he said, and May softly answered, “Yes.”

And when Christmas came, a snowy Christmas, when all the outside world was white, and at the Hall the laurels and fir-trees were weighed down with the frozen rain, and the gates blocked with the sloping drifts, Webster arrived.

His aunts hurried into the hall to welcome the chilled traveler, and a little behind them stood the gracious black-clad figure for whom Webster’s eyes eagerly sought. Then May also went forward with a welcoming smile, and the two clasped each other’s hands and exchanged good wishes, and Webster knew they were no empty words.

He arrived on Christmas Eve, and May had her two young brothers staying with her, and the boys had made the hall and the rooms bright with holly. Their presence, too, made the house more cheerful, for their young voices rang with the tones that had known no grief. Webster was soon on the most friendly terms with them, and the next morning went with them out amongst the snow, and came back, his fond aunts declared, “looking quite like a boy.”

But it was not the snow nor the frost that made Webster’s eyes bright and glad. It was a sort of inward consciousness that the fair woman he loved was not utterly indifferent to him. Yet he never had an opportunity of speaking to her alone. Mr. and Mrs. Churchill came to dinner, and as Mr. Churchill sat opposite his daughter at the foot of the table it seemed to him that his cup of prosperity was nearly full, and he could not resist glancing occasionally, somewhat triumphantly, at his wife, who on the whole felt rather subdued.

Mr. Churchill also invited Webster over to Woodside on the following day, but he declined.

“I am leaving to-morrow,” he said. “My brief holiday will soon be ended.”

But before he left he spoke the words to May that he had been intending to say. They were standing together in the afternoon, gazing out on the snowy landscape, when he turned round and looked steadfastly at her sweet, pensive face.

“I shall be leaving in less than an hour, May,” he said. “Will you give me something to take away with me?”

“What shall I give you?” asked May, in a low tone.

“Give me hope,” answered Webster; “the hope that some day I may win what to me is the dearest gift of life.”

May did not speak. Her head dropped, and she slightly turned it aside, but Webster could, still see the delicate profile.

“You know how long I have wished this,” went on Webster, earnestly; “almost from the first time I saw you I loved you—we were parted—”

“Hush, hush,” said May, in a low, trembling voice, “it is too soon to speak of such a thing—even to think of it—”

“But I can not help thinking of it.”

“I—I—can never repay you,” continued May in faltering accents. “Do not think I forget because I do not speak of the past—but for you—”

“You can repay me a hundred-fold, if there were anything to repay, which there is not, by giving me, before I leave you, the hope, even the faintest hope, that you will not quite forget me in my absence.”

“I can never forget you.”

Webster stooped down and kissed her hand.

“For the present I will try to be content, then,” he said; “but remember, May, that I think of you every day and hour of my life.”

Nothing more was said at the time; one of the boys rushed into the room, wanting, of course, something from his sister, and May was never again alone with Webster until he left. But she did not forget his words. In the spring she went up to town for a short visit to Miss Webster, and there she saw him constantly and at last—after a year of widowhood—she promised “some day” to be his wife.

But two whole years passed after John Temple’s tragic death before she would consent to marry. By this time Webster had entered Parliament, having won one of the by-elections, and in

his profession he was striding on apace. A busy, active, ambitious man; strong and faithful in all things, and most faithful to his love.

They were married by Mr. Layton, but Mrs. Layton could scarcely suppress the bitterness of her tongue on the occasion.

“It will be a lord the next time,” she whispered to one of the spectators; but from motives of prudence the moment the ceremony was over, she rushed up to the newly-married pair and heartily congratulated them.

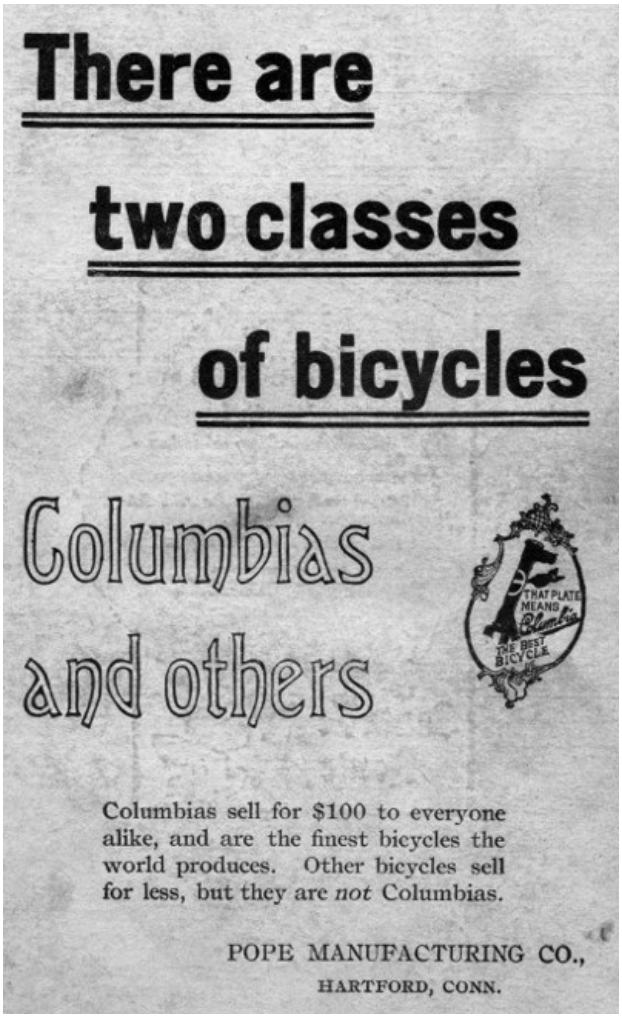
As for the Misses Webster, they were so overjoyed that they wept copiously—especially Miss Eliza—during the whole of the marriage service. Then they too hurried up to kiss the sweet, grave face of the bride, and May tenderly embraced them both.

“You have been my truest friends,” she whispered, “except Ralph.”

Mr. Churchill was also delighted with the match, and now superintends the whole of his young grandson’s property, receiving, we may be sure, a handsome income for doing so. The boys, too, are having first-rate educations, and the whole family are prosperous and well.

“And my poor daughter is now here,” sometimes Mrs. Layton thinks bitterly, sighing over the remembrance of the good things she used to obtain from the Hall in the old squire’s time. But Mrs. Temple never returned to Woodlea, though May invited her to do so. She married an officer, and went out to India with her husband; and on the rare occasions that she does write to her mother she never mentions “the new people,” as Mrs. Layton calls them, at Woodlea Hall. Nor does she inquire after “the heir,” perhaps not having quite forgotten the time when she waited and watched for the coming of poor John Temple!

THE END.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A COUNTRY SWEETHEART ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid

the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of

obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.