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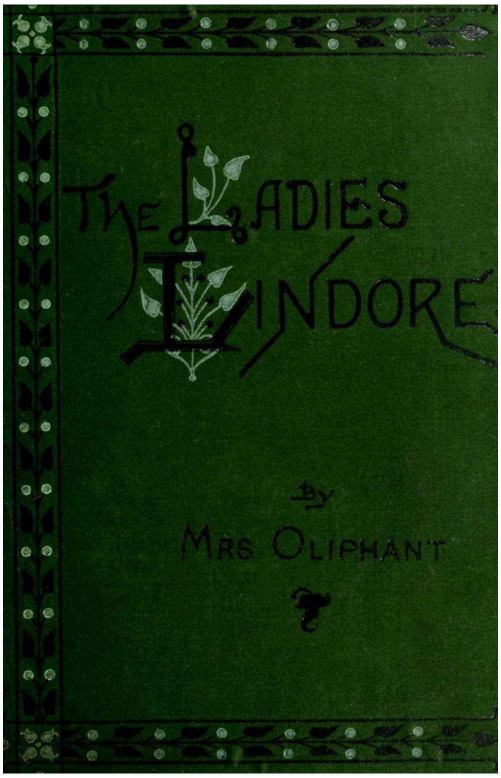

THE LADIES LINDORES

BY MRS OLIPHANT

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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"Two of the sweet'st companions in the world."

—*Cymbeline*.

THE LADIES LINDORES.

CHAPTER XV.

Lord Millefleurs had given his family a great deal of trouble—not in the old-fashioned way of youthful folly or dissipation, which is too well known in every age, the beaten road upon which young men tread down the hearts of their progenitors, and their own best hopes, in all the wantonness of short-sighted self-indulgence. The heir of the house of Lavender had gone wrong in an entirely new-fashioned and nineteenth-century way. He was devoured by curiosity, not of the modes of pleasure, but about those other ways of living which the sons of dukes in general have no knowledge of. He got tired of being a duke's son, and it seemed to him that life lay outside the range of those happy valleys in which he was born. He had gone to America, that home of all kinds of freedom, and there had disappeared from the ken of ducal circles. He had not even written home, which was the inexcusable part of it, but had sunk out of sight, coming to the surface, as it were, only once or twice in a couple of years, when a sudden draft upon his banker revealed him to his anxious family, whose efforts to trace him during this time were manifold, but always unsuccessful. It was Beaufort who had been the means at last of restoring the virtuous prodigal, who in the meantime had been occupied, not by any vicious tastes or dangerous *liaisons*, but by the most entirely innocent, if eccentric, experiments in living. Beaufort found him, but not before the young man was willing to be found—a fact which, however, the anxious relations did not take into account, as detracting from the merit of the man whom they described as Millefleurs's deliverer, his better genius, and by many other flattering descriptions. In reality, Millefleurs had set out on his way home, moved thereto by the energetic representations of a strong-minded, middle-aged maiden in Connecticut or California (how can a historian without data particularise?), who told him that a man was no gentleman who kept the women of his family in ignorance of his movements, and exposed them to all the tortures of anxiety. This puzzled the scientific adventurer. He had found out that daily work (which amused him very much) was not at all incompatible with the character of a gentleman; but he felt himself pulled up in his career when this new view of the subject was presented to him. After a little thought, he decided that Miss Sallie F—— was right. And he took off his working clothes, and put on the livery of civilisation, and found Beaufort, who had attacked the continent bravely but vaguely in search of him, on his way. Millefleurs was not proud. He let himself be brought home as if it was all Beaufort's doing, and made his peace with everybody. The consequence was, that the illustrious house of Lavender was ready to do anything in the world for that excellent Mr Beaufort, who had fished their heir out of troubles unknown; and, in respect to that heir himself, were bending all their faculties to the task of getting him married, and so put out of harm's way. It was a new sphere for the mental vivacity and curiosity of Millefleurs. He devoted himself to a study of the young ladies of the highest civilisation, just as he had devoted himself to the life of the dockyards and the backwoods. (Probably I should say to the mines and the cattle-ranches; but the reader who knows the fashion will here supply the appropriate phrase.) He found the study curious, and not at all unpleasant, and so went about scattering wild hopes about him wherever he moved. Was anything else possible? If the young ladies in our northern county had been (inevitably) fluttered and excited when Pat Torrance fixed his big light eyes upon them, knowing the value of him as, so to speak, an appointment, a post for life which would remove all anxiety about their future comfort from their own minds and those of their parents, how much more when the Marquis of Millefleurs went hopping about the drawing-rooms, carrying on his researches in a far more genial and agreeable manner than Pat Torrance was capable of doing? And it was quite certain that nobody would ever be unhappy with Millefleurs. He was always cheerful, always considerate, ready to do anything for anybody. He was more like a daughter than a son, the Duchess declared, with tears in her eyes—foreseeing what she wanted, watching over her as nobody had ever done before: although it was no doubt very wrong—oh, very wrong!—to almost break her heart, leaving her two years without a letter; but he would not do so to his wife. Thus the—we will not say candidates, rather nominees—possible occupants of the delightful and every way desirable post of Marchioness of Millefleurs had every sort of inducement to "go in" for it, and scarcely any drawback at all.

The drawback was not worth speaking of—it was the most superficial of objections. This enterprising, amusing, good-tempered, quick-witted, accomplished, and lovable hero, was, as the girls said, the funniest little man that had ever been seen. He was shorter than most of the young ladies to whom he made himself so agreeable. He was plump and round, a succession of curves and gently billowing outlines; his eyes were like little black beads, though they were sparkling with life and animation; he had a round face like a boy of ten, with nice little puffy rosy cheeks, and a lisp which completed the infantile effect of his appearance generally. A little air of the most agreeable self-satisfaction hung about him—what the vulgar and detractors generally call vanity and self-conceit, but which indeed was nothing of the kind, being only that confidence of pleasing which his natural temper gave him in the first place, and his position confirmed. For how could he be ignorant that to be Marquis of Millefleurs was enough to make any man charming? It was to escape this that he had fled from society and been called Tommy by the American labourers, with whom he was just as popular as in Mayfair. It had been intended to keep this little gentleman in the background of this narrative as really a very secondary person in it; but, with his usual determination to be in the front of everything, he has pushed himself forward against the historian's will.

Having thus yielded to his natural tendency to show himself, we may proceed to say what we had intended without this preamble, that the peculiarity of Millefleurs's appearance took all seriousness from the fact of his rapidly increasing intimacy with them, in the foolish and inexperienced eyes not only of Edith but of her mother. Lady Lindores, though she had been alarmed and startled by the importance attached to his first visit, and the penalty paid for it, could not bring herself to regard him seriously. He seemed to her a boy, notwithstanding that the peerage was produced to her and dates set before her eyes,—and she shut her eyes altogether to any danger that might be involved in the frequency of his visits. She was very glad to see him whenever he came. Never was there a more delightful household retainer; his friendliness and affectionateness and half-feminine interest in all their concerns great and small, made him delightful to the women, who wanted no more of him. He was like a boy at home from school in this friendly house, where no incense was burned before him, and ran on their commissions, and took an interest in their work, and gave his opinion about their dress, with all the freedom of long acquaintance; and it naturally added in no small degree to the brilliancy of their appearance out of doors, and to the effect they produced, that such an attendant should be constantly in their train. Lady Lindores was not insensible to this gratification; and had Millefleurs looked more grown up and less like a friend's son confided to her for the holidays, it is very likely that the chance of seeing her child elevated to the highest level of the social ladder would have been too much for her also, and turned her head a little. But whenever the idea glanced across her mind, as it was bound to do sometimes, if from nothing more than the discourses of Rintoul, she had but to look at the rounded outlines of her little hero, and all these visions dispersed in a laugh. To imagine him a bridegroom, not to say Edith's bridegroom, affected her with a sense of the ludicrous which it was beyond her power to restrain.

But this was extremely foolish, as everybody will perceive; and it was with a very different eye that Lord Lindores contemplated the frequent presence of this above-all-competitors-desirable young man. It was not only that he was a duke's son, though that in itself was much, but he was the son of a duke who was a Cabinet Minister, and eminently qualified to help on the scheme of ambition which inspired the Scotch Earl. His Grace knew the gain it would be to replace the Tory who had sat for Dee-and-Donshire for years with an out-and-out partisan of the existing Government; and there could be little doubt that he would appreciate the expediency of increasing the importance of any family to which his own should become allied. And then the prospects which would open before Edith were such as to dazzle any beholder. If her father had ever felt that he was to blame in respect to his elder daughter, here was something which surely would make amends for all. Millefleurs was no rustic bully, no compound of a navvy and a squire, but the quintessence of English gentlemanhood, good-hearted, clever in his way, universally popular, the sort of man whom, irrespective of all worldly advantages, a father would be glad to trust his child's happiness to. The idea that any reasonable objection could be grounded upon his appearance would have irritated Lord Lindores beyond all self-control. His appearance! he was not a hunchback, nor deaf, nor dumb, nor blind. Short of that, what on earth did it matter how a man looked? And no doubt Lord Lindores was in the right. But in reality, that which put all idea of him as a lover out of the mind of Lady Lindores and Edith was not any objection to his appearance, but the mere fact of his appearance, his boyish looks, his contour, his aspect of almost childhood. As has been said, when the suggestion was presented to her mind that Millefleurs might have "intentions" in respect to Edith, Lady Lindores the next time she saw him laughed. "What is the joke?" he had said to her half-a-dozen times; and she had answered, "There is no joke, only a ludicrous suggestion." "About me, perhaps," he said once, reducing her to great embarrassment. But she managed to elude his observation; and to Edith, fortunately, the idea never occurred at all. She declared herself to be very fond of him; she said there was no one so nice; she brightened when he came in, and listened to his chatter with unfailing pleasure. She said there was nobody she would miss so much when she went home. When he complained that he had never been in Scotland, she said, "You must come to Lindores." It was she, indeed, who gave the invitation. The Earl, who had not quite ventured upon this strong step, was present and heard her say it, and opened his eyes wide in admiration. What did it mean? Was it that these two had engaged themselves secretly without saying anything to father or mother? or did it mean nothing at all—the mere foolishness of a girl who did not care for, nay, did not even think for a moment, what people would say?

For the brief little weeks of the season flitted quickly away, and the date fixed for their departure drew near rapidly. By this time Millefleurs had got to be exceedingly intimate with the family. He went and came almost as he pleased, sometimes offering himself, sometimes coming in to luncheon without that ceremony,—always with something to do for them, or something to say to them, which linked one day to another. This was much, but it was not all that was wanted. Rintoul, looking on with eyes enlightened by that knowledge he had acquired of what "the fellows would say," did not feel half satisfied. He was the anxious member of the party. Even Lord Lindores, whose friends at the clubs discussed such matters less perhaps than the young men, and whose interests were more political, was not so alive to all the risks and all the changes of opinion as was Rintoul. He was nervous above measure about this business of Edith's. He even took his mother to task about it during the last week of their stay in town. "Isn't that fellow coming to the point?" he said.

"What fellow, and what point?" said Lady Lindores. It must be acknowledged that if ever a young man anxious for the true interests of his family was tried by the ignorance and stupidity—not to say callousness—of his relations, Rintoul was that man.

"Look here, mother," he said, exasperated; "just think for a moment what people will say, and ask yourself how you will like it. They will say Millefleurs has been amusing himself all this time, and never meant anything. I make no doubt that they say it already. He has been amusing himself—exposing her to all sorts of remarks; and then the end will come, and he will leave her *planté là*."

"Rintoul," said his mother, reddening with anger, "this one idea of yours makes you absurd. Who is it that has it in his power to leave Edith *planté là*? To think that I should be forced to use such words! If you mean to make me uncomfortable about that boy——"

"He is no more a boy than I am, mother. I warned you of that. He knows very well what he is about. He has had the pleasure of your society, and he has enjoyed it all and amused himself very much. But he doesn't mean to commit himself. Do you think I don't know what people say? I don't mean that it is Edith's fault, or even your fault, mother; only, some women know how to manage. It is a thing that never could happen with some people. You will see, unless you exert yourself, that the last day will come, and you will be just where you were. I don't know whether staying a week or two longer would do any good," he added, ruefully. "If there is the chance that it might bring him to the point, there is also the chance that people would divine your motive, and say that was why you were staying on. Don't you think you could put a little steam on, when the result is so important, and bring him to the point?"

"Steam on! Do you mean to insult me, Rintoul?" his mother cried.

But this was too much for the young man, who felt himself to be the only one of the family to whom the true position of affairs was apparent. "If you cannot understand me, mother, I can't say anything more," he said, feeling as if he could almost have cried over her callousness. Why was it that nobody but he would see how serious the situation was?

All this time, however, while Millefleurs was frequenting the house almost daily, Lady Lindores's perception had been partly confused by the effort it cost her to avoid being drawn into what she felt must be an unnecessary confidential disclosure to Beaufort of the history of the family since they last met. Beaufort did not insist upon accompanying his charge—for such, more or less, Millefleurs was, his family being too much alarmed lest he should disappear again, to leave him without this species of surveillance, which the good-natured young fellow allowed to be perfectly natural, and neither resisted nor resented; but he came sometimes, and he never relinquished his appeal to Lady Lindores. He was not posing in any attitude of a heart-broken lover. Even to her he expressed no despair. He took his life gravely, but not without cheerfulness, and had, she felt almost with a little pique, got over it, and been able to put Carry out of his life. But he wanted to know: that seemed all that was left of the old romance. He wanted to be told how it had happened—how his love had been lost to him. It did not seem to be resentment or indignation that moved him, but a serious kind of interest. And strangely enough, it seemed to Lady Lindores that he did not want to avoid her, or keep out of hearing of the name of the girl who had forsaken him. He seemed to like herself, Carry's mother, as well as ever, and to regard Edith with the same elder-brotherly air which had pleased her so much in the old days. Between the inquiring countenance which seemed without ceasing to ask an explanation from her, and the prattle of Millefleurs, which ran on in a pleasant stream, and to which it seemed so ridiculous to attach any serious meaning, Lady Lindores was kept in a perplexity and harassment of mind which took away altogether her pleasure in society at the end of their stay in London. After her impatient rejection of Rintoul's counsels, she began to consider them, as was natural; and much as all the particulars of the *chasse-aux-maris* disgusted her, she came at length, against her will, to recognise that there was something in what he said. "I have been imprudent, as usual," she said to herself. Alas that all the natural proceedings of life should be hampered by these rules of prudence!—these perpetual previsions of what might happen, to which she felt it was impossible she could ever bow her spirit. But the idea that it would be said that a boy like Millefleurs had "amused himself" with her daughter—that he had loved and ridden away—that Edith, her high-spirited, pure-minded girl, had been left *planté là*—broke over Lady Lindores like a wave of passionate feeling: the suggestion was intolerable and odious. This happened when Millefleurs was in the room with her, in full tide of talk, and entirely at his ease. The sudden sensation disclosed itself in a flush of colour mounting in a moment to her very hair. Intolerable! The thought was so odious that she started to her feet and walked to the open window, as if the change of position would throw it off—and also, suffocated as she felt by that sudden fiery breath, to get fresh air, lest she should, as she said, make an exhibition of herself.

"You are ill, Lady Lindores," cried Millefleurs. Those little beady eyes of his saw everything. He ran forward to support her (he was just up to her shoulder), putting forward a reclining-chair with one hand, picking up a bottle of eau-de-Cologne with the other. He had all his wits about him. "I am used to it. Sometimes my mother *se trouve mal* in the same way. It will pass over," he said encouragingly to Edith, who, unused to anything of the kind, started up in alarm. "Dear Lady Lindores, put yourself here."

"I am not ill," she said, almost angrily. "Pray do not make any—fuss. How rude I am! but there is nothing the matter with me, I assure you. The room is warm, that is all."

Millefleurs looked at her curiously. He put down the eau-de-Cologne, and took his hand from the chair. For a moment he seemed about to speak, but then stood aside more serious than his wont.

In terror lest he should have divined her thoughts, Lady Lindores returned to her seat, calming herself down with an effort, and made the best attempt she could to resume their easy conversation of the moment before. She was vexed beyond measure when Edith, a short time after, left the room to go and look for something which Millefleurs was anxious to see. He took instant advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him. "Lady Lindores," he said, with that serious air as of a candid child, going up to her, "you are not ill, but you are vexed and angry, and it is something about me."

"About you, Lord Millefleurs! how could that be?—you have never given me the least occasion to be angry."

"That is why," he said, gravely. "I see it all. You have nothing to find fault with. I am quite innocent and harmless, yet I am in the way, and you do not know how to tell me so. For my part, I have been so happy here that I have forgotten all sorts of precautions. One does not think of precautions when one is happy. Dear Lady Lindores, you shall tell me exactly what I ought to do, and I will do it. I have all my life been guided by women. I have such faith in a lady's instinct. I might be confused, perhaps, in my own case, but you will hit upon the right thing. Speak to me freely, I shall understand you at a word," the droll little hero said. Now Lady Lindores was in a strait as serious as she had ever experienced in her life; but when she glanced up at him, and saw the gravity upon his baby face, his attitude of chubby attention, such a desire to laugh seized her, that it was all she could do by main force to keep her gravity. This insensibly relaxed the tension, and restored her to her usual self-command. Still there was no denying that the situation was a very peculiar one, and his request for guidance the strangest possible. She answered hurriedly, in the confusion of her mingled feelings—

"I don't know what there is to do, Lord Millefleurs, or how I can advise you. A sudden want of breath—a consciousness all at once that it is a very warm morning,—what can that have to do with you?"

"You will not tell me, then?" he said, with an air half disappointed, half imploring.

"There is nothing to tell. Here is Edith. For heaven's sake, not another word!" said Lady Lindores, in alarm. She did not perceive that she betrayed herself in this very anxiety that her daughter should suspect nothing. He looked at her very curiously once more, studying her face, her expression, even the nervousness of the hand with which she swept her dress out of her way. He was a young man full of experiences, knowing all the ways of women. How far she was sincere—how far this might be a little scheme, a device for his instruction, so that he might see what was expected of him without any self-betrayal on the lady's part—was what he wanted to know. Had it been so, he would at once have understood his *rôle*. It is usual to say that simplicity and sincerity are to the worldly-bred much more difficult to understand than art; but there is something still more difficult than these. "Pure no-meaning puzzles more than wit." Though Lady Lindores had far more meaning in her than nine-tenths of her contemporaries, she was in this one case absolutely incomprehensible from want of meaning. She had no more notion than a child what to do, or even what she wished to be done. If this little chubby fellow asked Edith to marry him, her mother believed that the girl would laugh in his face. There could be no question of Edith marrying him. But what then? Was Edith to be held up before the whole world (according to Rintoul's version) as the plaything of this little Marquis, as having failed to catch him, as being *planté là*. She was in the most painful dilemma, not knowing any more than a child how to get out of it. She gave him a look which was almost pathetic in its incompetency. Lady Lindores was full of intellect—she was what is called a very superior woman; but nobody would have been more stupid, more absolutely without any power of invention in this crisis, which had never come within the range of her calculations, which she had not been able to foresee.

And that same afternoon Beaufort came by himself and was admitted, no one else being in the drawing-room—no one to shield the poor lady, who could not help remembering that this stranger was the man to whom she had once given a mother's kiss, receiving him as a son. He did not forget it either. He held her hand when she gave it him, and sat down by her with an expression of satisfaction which she was very far from sharing. "At last I find you alone," he said, with a sigh of content. Poor Lady Lindores had already been so greatly tried this morning, that she felt unable to keep up the strain. Why should she be forced to put on so many semblances?

"Mr Beaufort," she cried, "I cannot pretend to be glad to see you alone. Cannot you understand? You have been wronged,—we have treated you badly,—they say it is the injured person who is always most ready to forgive; but do not ask me to go into a matter which I have tried all these years to forget."

"And yet," he said, gently, "I do not mean to reproach you, Lady Lindores."

"That may be; I do not know that *you* have much occasion to reproach me. You were not yourself, perhaps, so much in earnest. No—I mean no reproach either; but you are a man of your century too, according to the usual slang. You don't force events, or do what is impossible. Men used to do so in the old days."

He listened to her in silence, bowing his head two or three times. "I accept your reproof," he said, a faint colour coming over his face. "I am glad you have made it,—it helps me to understand. Lady Lindores, there is something else I want to speak to you about. Lord Lindores has invited me, with Millefleurs, in August——"

"With Millefleurs, in August? Has he asked Lord Millefleurs in August?" Lady Lindores cried.

This was a great blow to Beaufort's self-opinion. He had thought, naturally, that the embarrassment of his appearance as a visitor would have overweighed everything else. He grew more red this time, with the irritated shame which follows a slight.

"Certainly he has asked him. It is ridiculous that a young man so entirely able to take care of himself should have any one in charge of him; but as the Duke has implored me to keep his son company——Here is my situation, Lady Lindores. God knows I would not thrust myself where I might—where I should be—I mean, to cause the faintest embarrassment to—any one."

"Mr Beaufort," cried Lady Lindores, "do not come, either of you!—oh, never mind what I mean. What is the use of going over that old ground? It would cause embarrassment—to me if to no one else. And Lord Millefleurs—what does he want at Lindores? Let him stay away; persuade him to stay away."

"But that is settled without any power of interference on my part. Of course he thought you were aware. For myself, I am ready to give up my own prospects, to sacrifice anything—rather than give you a moment's anxiety."

Lady Lindores gazed at him for a moment with wide-open eyes, like a creature at bay. Then she let her hands fall on her lap. "It is I that need to be guided what to do," she said, with a sigh; "they are too many for me. Oh, Edward! had we but remained poor and obscure, as we were when you knew us——" She put out her hand instinctively, with a kind of involuntary appeal. He took it, going upon his knees with that movement, equally involuntary, which deep emotion suggests, and put it to his lips. They were both overcome by a sudden flood of old sympathy, old communion. "Has Carry forgotten me altogether—altogether? Is she happy? God bless her!" he said.

It was in this attitude that Edith, coming in suddenly, surprised these two imprudent people. She gave a cry of amazement, and, Lady Lindores thought, reproach. "Mother! Edward!" The old name came to her lips, too, in the shock.

"Edith," Lady Lindores cried, "your father has invited him with Lord Millefleurs to Lindores."

"But I will do nothing save as you advise," said Beaufort, rising to his feet.

Then the mother and the daughter consulted each other with their eyes. "Of course he will—not——" Edith stopped and faltered. She had begun almost with passion; but she was made to break off by the warning in her mother's eyes. Lady Lindores, too, had gone through a shock and panic; but now all the secondary elements came in—all those complications which take truth out of life.

CHAPTER XVI.

The party at Tinto was increased by Dr Stirling and his wife, which made six, instead of four as the master of the house had intended. His meaning, so far as it was a meaning at all and not a mere impulse, was to get John Erskine by himself, and with skilful art to worm himself into the confidence of that open-hearted young man. Torrance had a great opinion of his own skill in this way. He thought he could find out from any man the inmost thoughts of his mind; and John seemed an easy victim, a young fellow without suspicion, who might without difficulty be led into betraying himself. Torrance had been overawed by the presence of Edith, and forced into conviction when his wife appealed to her sister on the subject of John; but he was without any confidence in the truth of others, and after a time he began to persuade himself that Lady Car's denial was not final, and that probably he should find out from John himself something that would modify her tale. When he heard that his wife had added to the party, he was furious. "I never said I wanted more people asked," he said. "If I had wanted people asked, I should have let you know. What do I want with a country parson, or minister, or whatever you call him? When I'm ill you can send for the minister. I've got nothing to say to him at present. It is for yourself, of course, you want him. When there's nobody better, he does to try your arts on, Lady Car."

"Yes," said Lady Car, with a faint smile, "I allow that I like to talk to him—for lack of a better, as you say." Sometimes she had spirit enough to be what he called aggravating, and Torrance grew red with a sense of scorn implied. He was not stupid enough, seeing that he was so little clever. He knew so much as to be constantly conscious that he was below the mark.

"Confound it!" he said, "if you were to talk to your husband, it would show more sense; but of course that would not answer your purpose." Why it would not answer her purpose he had not any idea; but it is not always necessary, especially in controversy, to know what you yourself mean, and Carry did not inquire. Sometimes she was aggravating, but sometimes she showed the better part of valour, and held her peace. That was always the wise way. And accordingly there were six people who sat down to the banquet at Tinto. It was truly a banquet though the party was so small. The table was covered with plate, huge silver epergnes, and loads of old-fashioned metal,—not old-fashioned, it must be recollected, in the right way, but in the wrong way—monstrosities of the age of William IV. or of the last George. Lady Caroline's taste had been quite inoperative so far as these ornaments were concerned. Her husband knew that she made light of them, and this usually influenced him in the long-run. But he knew also what they had cost, and would not yield a hair's-breadth. The table groaned under them as on the greatest feast-days; and Mrs Stirling, if nobody else, was always deeply impressed. "I tell the Doctor it's as good as reading a book upon the East to see that grand camel and the silver palm-trees," this excellent lady said. She thought it became a minster's wife to show a special interest in the East.

"Well, it's not often they're seen in the east—of Scotland, Mrs Stirling," said Tinto, with his large laugh. He had made the joke before.

"Oh fie, Mr Torrance! ye must not be profane," Mrs Stirling said: and they both laughed with a certain zest. Very few of Lady Car's guests admired the palm-trees; but Mrs Stirling, by a blessed dispensation of Providence, was always capable of this effort. "I hear they are not much in the way of art," Torrance said—"people are ill to please nowadays; but they're pure metal, and if they were only valued at so much an ounce——"

"You may well say they're ill to please. Bless me, Mr Torrance! one of them would be a fortune—just a fortune at that rate. When my little Jeanie is of an age to be married you must lock up these fine things, or there's no saying what I might be tempted to; but you never would miss one when there's so many," Mrs Stirling said. It was a dispensation of Providence. The Doctor himself devoutly wished he had his wife's faculty of admiration, when, after keeping her host in good humour all the evening, she withdrew with Lady Car, giving him a warning glance. All three of the ladies addressed warning glances to the gentlemen left behind. Even Nora, who had not spoken three words to John, and had, as she said almost spitefully to herself, nothing whatever to do with him, could not help warning him with her eyes to keep the peace.

Now this was the time which Torrance had looked forward to, when he should cross-examine the new-comer, and get to the rights of the story respecting John's previous acquaintance with his wife. He was balked and he was angry, and all at once it became apparent to him that this was Lady Car's design, and that she had done it to screen herself. "Doctor, you like a good glass of wine," he said; "all parsons do, whatever be the cut of the cloth. Here's some stuff that will soon lay you under the table—unless you're seasoned like Erskine here, and me."

"I must take care, then, to give that stuff a wide berth," the Doctor said gravely, yet with a smile.

"Ay, ay, but you must drink fair. We'll be having you take shelter with the ladies. I don't mean to let Erskine off so easy. This is his first dinner in my house. It ought to have been a state dinner, you know—all the big-wigs in the county; but Erskine and Lady Car are old friends. I think you knew the family intimately at—where was the place?"

"I met Miss Lindores, as she was then, in Switzerland," said John, curtly. "It was to you that I was to apply, Dr Stirling, for particulars about the asylum Lord Lindores is so much interested in."

"And a most important work," said Dr Stirling. "It is a strange thing to think of in a country so well gifted as this by Providence, and with so much intelligence, what a balance we have on the other side! You'll have noticed almost every village has a 'natural' as the people call them,—a half-witted innocent creature like Davie Gellatley in 'Waverley.'"

"What did you say was the name of the place?" said Torrance. "I'm bent on making notes of all the places Lady Car's been in. She's a poet, you know. Some time or other they will be wanted for her biography, don't you see?"

"I have observed," said John, answering Torrance only with a little bow—"I have noticed already one or two. Could nothing be done for them?"

"But you don't answer me," said Torrance, "and when I tell you my motive! That's my father-in-law's last fad. What is he so anxious about the daft folk for, Dr Stirling? Is it a fellow-feeling?" He stopped to laugh, making the table ring. "He was at me for my support, and to write to the convener. Not I! I told him they had done well enough up to my time, and they would do well enough after my time. What are we to put ourselves about for? can you tell me that?"

"It is a disgrace to the county," said Dr Stirling. "No wonder the Earl was horrified, that has seen things managed so differently. Mr Erskine, if you will come and see me, I will tell you all about it. Sir John stands out, just because the idea is new to him, not from any real objection—for he's a good man and a charitable man at heart."

"You don't wonder at me, Doctor," said Torrance. "Do you think I'm not a good man or a charitable? I'm standing out too. I'm saying, what should we put ourselves about for? It's not us that makes them daft. And what's done for the county up to our time may do now. Little Tam, he can see to that: let him have the paying of it; it is not an amusement I'm fond of——"

"And yet, Mr Torrance," said the Doctor,—"and yet—you'll excuse me—here's what would almost build the place——"

This was an exaggeration. It was founded upon his wife's *naïve* admiration of the Tinto plate; but it did not displease the proud owner of all those pounds of silver. He laughed.

"You may take your word, it will never build the place, nor any such place," he said. "No, Doctor, that's not my line—nor the Earl's either, trust me. If you think he would strip his table or empty his purse for all the idiots in Scotland, you're mistaken. You think it's all benevolence and public spirit. Not a bit! He means to run Rintoul for the county, and it's popularity he's wanting. There's always wheels within wheels. My father-in-law thinks he's a very clever man,—and so he is, I suppose. They're a clever family; but I can see through them, though they don't think much of me."

Torrance had already consumed a good deal of wine. He had been crossed in his purpose, and his temper roused. His dark face was flushed, and his light eyes staring. Both his companions were men entirely out of sympathy with him, who were there because they could not help it, and who listened rather with angry shame that they should be parties to such discourse, than with any amiable desire to cover his shortcomings. They did not look at each other, but a slight uneasy movement on the part of both was as good as a mutual confidence, and both began to speak at once, with an anxious attempt to put an end to these unseemly revelations.

"What fine weather we've been having for the crops!" said Dr Stirling. And, "I wish you'd tell me what flies you use about here. I have had no luck at all on the river," cried John.

But their host was on his mettle, and felt himself a match for them both. "As for the weather, I've no land in my own hands—not such a fool! and I don't care a——that for the crops! Flies! you may have the finest in the world, but without sense you'll make nothing of them. Come with me, and I'll let you see how to make them bite. But as I was saying," Torrance went on, elevating his voice, "if you think his lordship is bent on the good of the county, you're mistaken, I can tell you. He means to get the seat for Rintoul. And who's Rintoul, to represent a county like this? A boy, in the first place—not fledged yet; what I call fledgling. And knows nothing about what we want. How should he? He never was in the county in his life till four or five years ago. You would have thought a man like old Lindores, that has been about the world, would have had more sense. That's just it; a man knocks about these little foreign places, and he thinks he knows the world. Now there's me. I would not take the trouble of Parliament, not for any inducement. It's no object to me. I prefer quiet and my own way. There's nothing that any Ministry could give me, neither office nor rise in life. I'm content to be Torrance of Tinto, as my father was before me: but at all events, I am one that knows the county and its ways. I could tell them what's wanted for Scotland. But no! a boy like Rintoul that knows nothing—without sense or experience,—he's the man. My father-in-law, for so clever as he is, has awful little sense."

"There is no seat vacant as yet," said Dr Stirling; "we might leave that question, Tinto, till the time comes."

"That's your old-fashioned way," said Torrance; "but his lordship is a man of his century, as they call it. He'll not wait till the last moment. He'll get himself known as the friend of Liberal measures, and all that. All his tools are in the fire now; and when the time comes to use them, they'll be hot and handy." Then he laughed, turning his eyes from one to another. "You're his tools," he said.

It was not possible for either of the listeners to conceal the irritation with which they received this sudden shot. They looked at each other this time with a sudden angry consultation. Dr Stirling touched his empty glass significantly with the forefinger of one hand, and held up the other as a warning. "It seems to me," he said, "that it would be an excellent thing about this time of the night to join the ladies. It will very soon be time for my wife and me to go."

"He is afraid of his wife, you see, Erskine," said Torrance, with his laugh. "We're all that. Keep out of the noose as long as you can, my lad. You may be very thankful for what you've missed, as well as what you've got."

"I suppose you mean something by what you are saying, Mr Torrance," said John, "but I do not understand what it is."

Upon this Torrance laughed louder than before. "He's confounded sly—confounded sly. He'll not let on he knows—that's because you're here, Doctor. Join the ladies, as you say—that is far the best thing you can do—and Erskine and I will have a glass more."

"A great deal better not, Tinto," said the Doctor; "you know it's not the fashion now: and Lady Caroline will wonder what's become of us. It's a little dark down the avenue, and my wife is nervous. You must come and shake hands with her before she goes."

Both the guests rose, but the master of the house kept his seat. "Come, Erskine, stay a bit, and tell me about—about—what was the name of the place? Let the Doctor go. He has his sermon to write, no doubt, and his wife to please. Go away, Doctor, we'll join you presently," Torrance said, giving him a jocular push towards the door. "Come, Erskine, here's a new bottle I want your opinion of. If you ever drank a glass of claret like it, it will be a wonder to me."

John stood hesitating for a moment. Then he took his seat again. If he was to quarrel with this fellow, better, he thought, to have it out.

"You want to question me," he said; "then do so simply, and you shall have my answer. I am unaware what the point is; but whatever it is, speak out—I do not understand hints. I am quite at your service if I can furnish you with any information.

"Go away, Doctor," said Torrance, with another push. "Tell them we're coming. I'll be in time to shake hands with Mrs Stirling: join the ladies—that's the right thing to do."

The minister was in a great strait. He stood looking from one to another. Then he went out slowly, closing the door softly behind him, but lingering in the anteroom, that if any conflict of voices arose, he might be at hand to interfere. Torrance himself was sobered by the gravity of the proceeding. He did not speak immediately, but sat and stared at the companion with whom he was thus left *tête-à-tête*. He had not expected that John would have courage to meet this interrogation; and notwithstanding his pertinacity, he was disconcerted. Erskine met his gaze calmly, and said, "You wanted to ask me some questions. I am quite at your disposal now."

"Question?—no, not so much a question," faltered the other, coming to himself. "I'm sure—I beg your pardon—no offence was meant. I asked—for information."

"And I shall be glad to give you any I possess."

Torrance made a pause again; then he burst out suddenly—"Hang it, man, I didn't mean to give you any offence! I asked you—there couldn't be a simpler question—what was the name of the place where—you met my—you met the Lindores——"

"The place was a mountain inn on the way to Zermatt—a very secluded place. We were there only about six weeks. Mr Lindores (then) and his family were very friendly to us because of my name, which he knew. I suppose you have some ulterior meaning in these questions. What is it? I will answer you in all respects, but I ought to know what it means first."

Torrance was entirely cowed. "It means nothing at all," he said. "I daresay I am an idiot. I wanted to know——"

"We were there six weeks," repeated John—"an idle set of young men, far better pleased with mountain expeditions than with our books. We did little or nothing; but we were always delighted to meet a family-party so pleasant and friendly. There we parted, not knowing if we should meet again. I did not even know that Mr Lindores had come to the title. When I found them here it was the greatest surprise to me. I had never even heard——"

"Erskine," cried Torrance—by this time he had drank several more glasses of wine, and was inclined to emotion—"Erskine, you're an honest fellow! Whoever likes may take my word for it. You're an honest fellow! Now my mind's at rest. I might have gone on suspecting and doubting, and—well, you know a man never can be sure: but when another fellow stands up to him honest and straightforward—" he said, getting up to his feet with a slight lurch towards John, as if he would have thrown himself upon his shoulder; and then he laughed with a gurgle in his breath, and thrust his arm through that of his reluctant guest. "We're friends for life," said Torrance; "you're an honest fellow! I always had a fancy for you, John Erskine. Letsh join the ladies, as that old fogy of a Doctor said."

The old fogy of a Doctor, who had been hanging about in alarm lest he might be called upon to stop a quarrel, had no more than time to hurry on before them and get inside the drawing-room door, before the master of the house pushed in, still holding John by the arm. "Here," Torrance cried, depositing his unwilling companion suddenly with some force in a chair by Lady Caroline's side—"here, talk to her! You can talk to her as much as you please. An honest fellow—an honest fellow, Lady Car!"

Then he made a somewhat doubtful step to Mrs Stirling, and stood over her diffusing an atmosphere of wine around him. Poor ladies! in the drawing-room, even in this temperate age, how often will a man approach them, and sicken the air in their clean presence with fumes of wine! The minister's wife was tolerant of the sins of the squires; but she coughed, poor soul, as she was enveloped in these powerful odours.

"Well, Mrs Stirling," Torrance said, with cumbrous liveliness, "your husband here, we could not get him away from his wine. We've been doing nothing but talk of coming up-stairs this quarter of an hour; but get the Doctor to budge from his wine—no! that was more than we could do," and he ended with a loud guffaw. The Doctor's wife coughed, and smiled a sickly smile upon the great man, and shook her head with a "Fie, William!" at her husband. "Dear me, dear me!" Mrs Stirling said after, as she walked down the avenue with her Shetland shawl over her head, holding close by her husband's arm, "when I think of poor Lady Caroline, my heart's sore. That muckle man! and oh, the smell of him, William! You're not so particular as you should be in that respect, the best of ye—but I thought I would have fainted with him hanging over me. And that fragile, delicate bit woman!" "She should not have married him," the Doctor said, curtly. But his wife was a merciful woman; and she did not feel sure how far a girl would have been justified in refusing such a marriage. She shook her head, and said, "Poor thing!" from the bottom of her heart.

"I am glad I have met with Mr Torrance's approval," John said; but Carry gave him so wistful a deprecating look, that he was silent. And he had not yet escaped from his uncomfortable host. When Mrs Stirling went away with her husband, Torrance, whose sole idea of making himself agreeable to a woman was by rough banter, transferred himself with another lurch to Nora. "And how's the old soldier?" he said. "I suppose he's going over all the men within fifty miles to see who will make the best husband, eh? It was all I could do to keep out of their hands when I was a bachelor. If they had had their will, Lady Car would never have had the chance of me: no great harm in that perhaps, you will say. But you must not be saucy, Miss Nora. Men are not so easy to get when all's said."

"No, indeed," said Nora—"men like you, Mr Torrance. I could not hope, you know, to be so lucky as Lady Car."

Upon this, though his head was not very clear, the uneasy Laird grew red, fearing satire. It was perfectly true, to his own thinking; but he was enlightened enough to know that Nora had another meaning. He would have liked to punish the little saucy chit, who held up (he thought) her little face to his so disdainfully in his own house. As lucky as Lady Car, indeed! She should have no luck at all, with that impudence of hers. It would serve her right if she never got the offer of any man. But he dared not say exactly what he thought. Conventional restraints, in such a case, were too much for the free-born wit even of Pat Torrance of Tinto.

"That's a great compliment to me, no doubt," he said; "but never be down-hearted. There is as good fish in the sea as ever came out of the net. There's our neighbour here, for instance," he said, stooping to speak confidentially, and jerking his thumb over his shoulder at John, with one of his usual bursts of laughter. "Now, what do you think of him, Miss Nora? A real honest fellow, I can testify, and a nice little property. What do you think of him?"

The tone was meant to be confidential, but it was loud enough to have reached any ear in the room; and it was Nora's turn to redden with anger intolerable. She jumped up, while he stood and laughed, shaking his sides. "I've given her a poser there," he said. "I've given her her answer there." He could not help returning to it, as, much against Nora's will, he accompanied her to the door and put her into the little pony-carriage which had come for her. "You must think of what I say, Miss Nora. You would be very comfortable. You'll see that's what the old soldier is driving at. And I don't think you could do better, if you'll take my advice."

John, who had followed down-stairs, not wishing to have any more than he could avoid of his host's society, saw the indignant countenance of Nora looking out wrathfully upon himself as the carriage turned from the door. What had he done to deserve the angry look? But the other, standing somewhat unsteadily on the steps, greeted the departure with a laugh that was loud and long.

"One good turn deserves another," he said. "I've put her against you, Erskine, and that's the best thing I could do. Mind what you're about, my fine fellow, or you'll fall into some snare or other. I would not marry, if I were you. You have enough for one, but it wouldn't be enough for two. If you manage Dalrulzian well, you may be very comfortable as an unmarried man. Take my advice. Of course they will all be setting their caps at you. There's Aggie Sempill—she thought she had got me: but no, I knew better. Truly in vain is the snare set in the sight of any bird. There! you've Scripture for it. And now here's Nora Barrington——"

John grasped his arm violently. "Be silent!" he cried in his ear. The butler stood on the steps behind laughing decorously under his breath, as in duty bound, at his master's joke. John's new groom at his horse's head grinned respondent. What he would have given to take the big clown by the collar and fling him into the midst of the bushes! But this was not to be thought of. Such violent impulses have to be repressed nowadays.

"Well, well, we'll name no names," said Tinto. "They'll all be after you; no need to name names. And I'll tell them all you're an honest fellow. Don't you be led away by his lordship, no more than the women. Keep your vote to yourself, and your heart to yourself, that's my advice. Good night to you, John—you're a very decent fellow," cried the big voice in the darkness. Torrance had found out that this epithet annoyed young Erskine, and he liked it all the better in consequence. He shouted it after him into the night, as with another great laugh he went back into his house to Lady Car. Alas, poor Carry! The others went away, shook off the disagreeable presence, got out of the atmosphere of his wine and the roar of his laugh; but Carry, than whom there was no more fastidious, delicately nurtured woman—Carry sat helpless, scared, awaiting him. Whatever happened, she could not run away.

As for John, he flew down the avenue in the dark, taking that turn on the top of the scaur, which was allowed by everybody to be so dangerous, without knowing anything about it, guided by instinct and rage; for he had never been there before. When they had passed the danger, Peter, the groom, drew a long breath. "That's past, the Lord be thankit!" he said. It was natural that Peter should suspect his master of sitting long after dinner, and sharing the excitement of his host.

"What's past?" said John, angrily: he had nearly taken an inner gate, dogcart and all, as if it had been a fence. His horse was fresh, and his mind ablaze with irritation and impatience. "What's past?" he repeated, angrily, when the man clambered up again to his side.

"That corner, sir, they call the Scaur. There used to be a paling, but it fell to pieces, and this Laird—I beg your pardon, sir—young Tinto, that is a perfect deevil when he's on a horse, would never let it be mended. It's a' cleared away, and there's a grand view when there's daylicht to see it, and doun-bye the sound o' the river roaring. If it werena for the horse's feet and the rate we're going, you would hear it now."

"You think we're going too fast——"

"Na—no me," said the groom, cautiously, "now that I see, sir, you ken what's what. But it's a fickle corner in the dark. Not to know is maybe the best way. When you ken, you're apt to be ower cautious or ower bold—one's as bad as the ither. A wrang step, a bit swing out on the open, and there would be no help for ye. Neither you nor me, sir, would have seen a freend belonging to us again."

"It is unpardonable," said John, "if this is so, to leave it without protection or notice."

"Well, sir, you see it's no just the richt road. It's a short cut. You take the left hand at thae lilyoaks. I thought you bid to ken, as you took it so bold, without a moment's thought. I wouldna advise you to do it again. Tinto, he's a perfect deevil on horseback, as I was saying. He's aye riding that way. They say he'll break his neck sometime or other, he's so wild and reckless—ower that scaur——"

"And no such great loss either," cried John, in his indignation. He hoped the words were not audible, in the rush of his horse's hoofs and jingle of the harness, the moment they had left his lips; and he was annoyed by the confidential tone of Peter's reply.

"Maybe no, sir. There's plenty is of that opinion. There was mair tint at Shirramuir."

John felt as if he had condescended to gossip with his servant about his neighbour, and was ashamed of himself. But as he reviewed the events of the evening his pulses beat higher and higher. That he should have pleased this big bully, and received the offer of his friendship, was something half humiliating, half ridiculous. But what could he do? The bonds of neighbourhood are stringent: that you must not, if possible, quarrel with, or markedly avoid, or put any slight upon, the man whose lands march with your own, is a self-evident proposition. And the husband of Carry Lindores! When John thought of this part of it, there escaped from him an almost groan of horror and pity. The rest of the party had dispersed, and were free of the big laugh, the rude jests, the fierce staring eyes; but Carry remained behind.

Peter the groom did not feel so sure that his new master had partaken too freely of the wine at Tinto, which everybody knew to be better and stronger than wine anywhere else, by the time they got to Dalrulzian. But he announced that he was "just one of Tinto's kind, a deevil when he's behind a horse," as he took his supper. This, however, was a suggestion which brought down upon his head the indignant displeasure of Bauby, who regretted audibly that she had kept the potatoes hot for such an ill-speaking loon—and of Rolls, who, accepting the praise implied, put down the superficial judgment of this new-comer as it deserved. "There will no man beat an Erskine for clear head and steady hands," he said, "if that's what you ca' being of Tinto's kind; but you'll observe, my lad, that we're a' of a reasonable age, and I'll have nane o' your rash opinions here."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Oh yes, that's true—I'm an old Tory. I'm proud of the name," said Sir James, with his genial countenance. "If you'll believe me, my young friend, most changes are for the worse. When I remember, before I went to India, what a cheery world it was—none of those new-fangled notions were so much as thought of—we were all kindly one with another, as country neighbours should be. The parish school—that was good enough for me. I got the most of my schooling there. We had a grand dominie—there was not a more learned man out of St Andrews or Aberdeen. Old Robert Beatoun the blacksmith was at the school with me. We've been great friends ever since, but I cannot say that he ever took anything upon him in consequence. That's one of your new-fangled notions too—to part all the world into classes, and then, when their habits are formed and their ways of living settled, to proclaim they're all equal. No, no—they're not all equal; you may take my word for it, though I'm no Solomon."

"I don't think so, either, Sir James; but pardon me, if you found no evil in going to the same school as the old blacksmith——"

"Not a pin, sir—not a pin!" cried the old general. "We respected each other. We were great friends, but not associates. I had my own cronies, and he had his: but we always respected each other. And do you think to sit on the same bench with a wholesome country lad in corduroy breeks was worse for me than being packed up with a set of little dandies, taking care of their books and keeping their hands clean, and sent out of their own country till they're made strangers to it, as comes to pass with your Eton, and the rest of them——I ask your pardon, Erskine. I forgot you were there yourself——"

"There is no offence," said John. "I think I agree with you so far; but, Sir James, your theory is far more democratic, far more levelling——"

"Me democratic and levelling!" said Sir James. "That will be news. No, no; that was all in the course of nature. When a lad was to be pushed in the world, his friends pushed him. You cannot do that now. When you saw your friend with a houseful of children, you would say to him, 'What are you going to do with those fine lads of yours?' and if you knew a director, or had influence to hear of a writer-ship, or a set of colours.—Now, ye cannot help on your friend's boys, and ye cease to think of them. What little ye might do, ye forget to do it. Robert Beatoun's grandson, you'll tell me, got in high on the list for those competition-wallahs, as they call them. Well, I say nothing against it. The lad is a good lad, though he was never brought up in the way of having men under him, and he'll feel the want of that when he gets to India. The like of me—we were poor enough, but we had always been used to be of the officer kind. That makes a great difference; and if you think we did our work worse for having no bother about examinations——"

"That has proved itself, Sir James. Nobody pretends to say it did not work well."

"Then why change it?" said the old man. "And about your hospitals and things. When there was a poor natural, as they call it, in a village, everybody was good to the creature; and do you think the honest folk that had known it all its life would not put up with it, and feel for it, more than servants in an hospital? When we had a burden to bear, we bore it in those days, and did the best we could for our own. We didn't shuffle them off on the first person's shoulders that would take them up."

All this John had brought upon himself by his reference to Lord Lindores's scheme. Whatever might be well with respect to the election, he had felt that there could be but one voice in respect to a hospital; but John had soon been convinced that in that respect also there certainly was more than one voice.

"But I suppose," he said, feeling somewhat confused by this style of reasoning, for it was not a subject upon which the young man had thought for himself,—"I suppose, for the suffering and miserable—for those out of the common line of humanity, more badly off, less capable than their neighbours—hospitals are necessary."

"Let those that belong to them care for them, sir," cried Sir James. "I'm saying it in no hard-hearted way. Do you not think that when a trouble is sent upon a family, it's far better for the family to make a sacrifice—to draw close together, to bear it, and take care of their own? That's always been my opinion—that was the practice long syne. If ye had a thorn in the flesh, ye supported it. When one was ill, the rest took care of him. There were no hired sick-nurses in those days. When ye had a fever, your mother nursed you. If you were blind or lame, every one would give you a little, and nobody grudged your meat or your drink. And that was how Scotland was kept so independent, and the poor folk hated debt and beggary. Once you give your own duty over to other folks, you sacrifice that," the old soldier said, with conviction. Sir James was of the class of men who are never more entirely at home than when they are exercising the duties of beneficence—the sort of men who manage hospitals and establish charities by nature. Had the county hospital been existing, he it was, and not Lord Lindores, who would have given time and trouble to it; but Sir James was as full of prejudices as a hearty, healthy old gentleman has a right to be. He would not give in to the new thing; and his arguments were shrewd, although he himself would have been the last to be bound by them. He would have taken the burden off a poor man's shoulders and carried it himself without a compunction. Saying is one thing and doing another, all the world over; only it is usual that people profess not less, but more, benevolent sentiments than are natural to them. Sir James took the other way.

"You must excuse me saying," the old general went on, "that you must not trust too much to Lord Lindores. Part of it is political, there is no doubt about that. He's wanting to get a character for being public-spirited and a useful member of his party. They tell me he's thinking of bringing in his son in the case of an election, but that would never do—that is to say, from my point of view," said Sir James, laughing; "you're on the other side?—ah, to be sure, I had forgotten that. Well, I suppose we're all meaning the same thing,—the good of the country; but depend upon it, that's not to be procured in this way. The Lindores family are very excellent people—very worthy people; but they're new-fangled—they have lived abroad, and they have got foreign notions into their heads."

"Benevolent institutions are, above all others, English notions—or so, at least, I have always heard," John said.

This brought a slight flush on the old man's cheek. "Well, I believe you are right—I think you are right. I will not go against that. Still it is a great pity to bring foreign notions into a quiet country place."

They were walking up and down the lawn at Chiefswood, where a party of country neighbours were about to assemble. It was a kind of gathering which had scarcely been acclimatised in the North; and the pleasure of sitting out, though the seats were comfortably arranged in the most sheltered spot, was at the best an equivocal one; but fortunately the drawing-room, with its large bright windows overlooking the scene of the gentle gaieties provided for, was behind, and there already some groups had collected. John Erskine, without being aware of it, was the hero of the feast. He was the new-comer, and everybody was willing to do him honour. It was expected that he was to be the chief performer in those outdoor games which were not yet very well known to the young people. And it was somewhat disconcerting that he should have chosen this moment to discourse with old Sir James upon the county hospital, and the poor lunatics and imbeciles of the district, for whose benefit Lord Lindores was so anxious to legislate. Had it been any other subject, the old general would have dismissed the young man to his peers, for Sir James had a great notion that the young people should be left to entertain each other. But as it happened, the theme was one which had disturbed his genial mind. He was vexed at once in his prejudices, and in his honest conviction that the county, to which he was so glad to get back after his long exile, was the best managed and most happy of districts. He had found nothing amiss in it when he came home. It had been welcome to him in every detail of the old life which he remembered so well. There were too many changes, he thought, already. He would have liked to preserve everything. And to have it suggested by a new gingerbread, half-English, half-foreign intruder, with all the light-minded ways that belonged to the unknown races on the Continent, that the beloved county wanted reorganisation, almost betrayed the old man into ill-humour. The guests kept arriving while he talked, but he talked on, giving forth his views loosely upon general questions. "We're going the wrong road," he said, "aye seeking after something that's new. The old way was the best. Communistic plans are bad things, whatever ye may say for them; and shuffling off your sick and your poor on other folk's hands, and leaving them to the public to provide for, what's that but communism? You'll never get me to consent to it," Sir James said.

"Where is the general?" Lady Montgomery was saying in the drawing-room. "Bless me! has nobody seen Sir James? He cannot expect me to go out without my bonnet, and get my death of cold setting all the young people agoing. No, no, I told him that. I said to him, you may put out the chairs, but if you think Barbara Erskine and me, and other sensible women, are going to sit there in a May day and get back all our winter rheumatism, you are mistaken, Sir James. But now, where is the general? Nora, you must just go and look for him, and say I'm surprised that he should neglect his duty. When I yielded to this kind of party, which is not my notion of pleasure, I told him plainly he must take the lawn part of it upon his own hands."

"And where's my nephew John?" said Miss Barbara Erskine, who sat in one of the seats of honour, within pleasant reach of a bright fire. "Nora, when you look for Sir James, you'll look for him too. I'm affronted, tell him, that he was not the first to find me out."

"I hear Mr Erskine is a great friend of the Lindores," said Mrs Sempill. "Having no son at home, I have not had it in my power, Miss Barbara, to show him any attention, but I hoped to make his acquaintance to-day. They tell me he knew the Lindores well in their former circumstances. That is, no doubt, a fine introduction for him to the county."

"If an Erskine of Dalrulzian wanted any introduction," said Miss Barbara, "it would be a very ill one, in my opinion. For there are as many that think ill of them as there are that think well of them, and they're not our kind of people. But John Erskine wants nobody to introduce him, I hope. His father's son, and my father's great-grandson, should have well-wishers enough."

"And a well-looking, well-spoken young man. He minds me of your uncle Walter, the one that went abroad," said old Mrs Methven of the Broomlees. She was older than Miss Barbara, older than the imagination could conceive. Her memory slipped all the recent generation, and went back to heights of antiquity unknown. Miss Barbara Erskine was still a young person to this old lady, and Sir James a frisky young soldier. "Walter Erskine was the first person I ever saw that wore his own hair without so much as a ribbon. It had a terrible naked look, but you soon got used to it. This one is like him. But you'll scarcely mind him. He was young when he left the county. I cannot remember if you were born."

"He's like his father, which is not so far back," Miss Barbara said.

"Bless me, bless me! where is the general?" cried Lady Montgomery. She was standing in front of the great bow-window which looked upon the lawn, with her beautiful Indian shawl on her shoulders. Grouped upon the grass were several parties of the younger people, not quite knowing what to do with themselves. Some of the ladies, wrapped in warm cloaks and shawls, were seated round, waiting for some novelty of amusement with which they were unacquainted, and wondering when it was going to begin. It seemed to Lady Montgomery the most dreadful neglect of duty that there was no one to set the young people agoing. "Will anything have happened to Sir James?" she said, in anxious Scotch, and cast a glance back at the pleasant fire, and wrapped her shawl more closely round, with a sense that Providence might require of her the heroic effort of stepping outside. But just then she perceived in the distance that her general had been captured, and was being led back in triumph to the lawn by Nora and Agnes Sempill, two of his chief favourites. John followed after them, looking by no means triumphant. When Lady Montgomery saw this, she gave a nod of satisfaction, and returned to the fire. "Whatever they're going to do, it'll begin now," she said. "If it's worth looking at, we can see it from the window; but for my part, I'm very anxious about putting folk to sit on the grass at this time of the year. I would not wonder to hear of bronchitis or inflammation after it—but it's none of my doing. Sir James is just daft about all the new-fashioned ways of amusing young people. For my part, I say there's nothing like the old way. Just to clear out the rooms, and get the fiddlers, and let them dance. But that would be a daftish thing too, in daylight," the old lady said; for she was not at all up to the current of events.

It was, I believe, the venerable game of croquet which was the "new-fashioned thing" in question, and which all the people outside crowded round to see, while a few highly-instructed young persons, who had brought the knowledge from "the South," proceeded, with much modest importance, to exhibit for the benefit of their neighbours. "It's quite easy," they said, each feeling a sort of benevolent missionary. John Erskine was one of these *illuminati*, and he was the partner of Agnes Sempill, the girl who had trembled for a moment lest Mr Torrance of Tinto might be going to select her from the many that smiled upon him. She would have married him had this been; but it must be said for her that she was unfeignedly glad to have escaped. This having been the case, it will be apparent that poor Agnes was no longer in her first youth. She was five or six and twenty—young enough, yet not altogether a girl; and she knew, poor young woman, that she must marry the next man who offered himself,—they were so poor! and her mother did not fail to impress upon her that she was losing all her chances. She looked upon John Erskine, accordingly, with more critical interest than is ordinarily felt. He was about her own age, but she decided that he was too young; and she hoped, whatever he was going to do in the matrimonial way, that he would show his intentions at once, and not force her mother into unnecessary efforts. "Too young—but he might do very well for Mary," she said to herself; and then she turned to him to talk about croquet, as if there was no such important subject.

"It is such a thing to have something that can be played out of doors!" she said. "Well, not so much in Scotland, that is true, but still we want a little variety. Do you play golf, Mr Erskine? The ladies' golf is very nice; it is only *Putting*—but you won't understand what that means. At St

Andrews there is the Ladies' Links——"

"Which sound romantic and picturesque, at least."

"Oh, it is not at all romantic—picturesque after a sort. Seaside slopes—what you call downs in England; but I can't describe it. Is it my turn? You should be able to get me nicely through that hoop next stroke you make. Sir James is always the first to get us any novelty that is going. He is always on the outlook for something. This is the very first in the county. They have not got croquet yet even at Lindores."

"Does Lindores generally set the fashion?" said John indiscreetly, not knowing what to say.

"The fashion! oh no, certainly not," cried Miss Sempill. "Of course they are the highest rank, and walk in and out before us all; but for anything else——You used to know them, I hear, Mr Erskine. Tell me something about them. Oh, we are neighbours, but not great friends. We do not move about very much; we are humble people, without carriages and horses. I suppose *they* lived very quietly before——"

"I only knew them," said John, learning to employ the universal formula, "abroad; and as the way of living is so different——"

"Ah! is it really so?" said Agnes, with quick interest; "do people really live so much cheaper abroad? I suppose you are not expected to keep up appearances in the same way; and then you get all your amusements so cheaply, and you can do a great deal, and go about a great deal, on very little. I have always heard that. But when you've a large family, the mere travelling must be a large item. I should think it would swallow up all the savings for the first year."

The question was one which interested her so much that she scarcely left time for a reply.

"I have often thought of it," she said. "The girls, poor things, get so little to amuse them here. Abroad, so far as one hears, there is nothing but amusement. Concerts and operas for next to nothing, and always a band playing somewhere—isn't it so? And you get houses quite cheap, and servants that will turn their hand to anything. I suppose the Lindores lived in quite a humble way out there?"

"They moved about a great deal, I believe," said John. "In summer, in the mountains, whether you are rich or poor, it does not make much difference."

This was all the young man knew. Miss Sempill interrupted him with an eager light in her eyes, "Doesn't it, really? Then that is the ideal place I have been looking for all my life—a place where, to be rich or poor, makes no difference——Oh, is it my turn again? what a nuisance! Mr Erskine is telling me of a place I have dreamt of all my life."

"But you must bestir yourself—you must bestir yourself," cried the old general. "Reflect, my dear; you're one of many—you must not mind your own enjoyment for the moment. Ay, my young friend, so you've been telling a lady of a place she's dreamed of all her life?—that's better than bothering your head about hospitals or my lord's schemes. Come, come, John Erskine, put your heart into it: here are some of the bonniest faces in the North waiting to see you play."

John was not dull to this inducement. It was a pretty group which gathered round as spectators, watching every stroke. All the Sempill girls, an eager group of pretty portionless creatures, eager for every kind of pleasure, and getting very little, envious in a sisterly way of Agnes, who knew the new game, and who had secured the new gallant. They were envious yet proud of her. "Our Agnes knows all about it," they said; "she has tried to teach us; but one person can never teach a game: when you see it played, you learn in a moment." They looked over each other's shoulders to see John play, which he did very badly, as was natural; and then they dropped him and followed the next player, Willie Montgomery, Sir James's grand-nephew, who, they all agreed, did a great deal better. Our young man, in spite of himself, felt a little discomfited. He came back to his partner to be consoled,—though, as he had failed to do her the service with her ball which she expected, she was a little dissatisfied too. She was disposed to be cross because her play in the new game had failed of its triumphant effect through her partner's fault. "You have not played much, Mr Erskine, I suppose? Oh, it does not matter—when nobody knows, one style of play is just as good as another; but I thought no one could have missed that ball. Never mind, it is not of the least importance. Tell me more about—abroad."

"If you will tell me," said John, much mortified by these remarks, "what you understand by abroad."

"Oh, it is all a little the same thing, isn't it? The first place you can think of—where the Lindores lived. I daresay it was just as important to them then as it is to us now to be economical, and spend as little as they could."

"The interest that people take in the place where I met the Lindores is astonishing," said John. "I had to go through a catechism at Tinto the other night."

"Ah! then you have been at Tinto. Do you think, Mr Erskine, they are so very unhappy as people say?"

"I do not know what people say," was all the answer John could make.

"There is nothing they don't say," cried Miss Sempill; "that he beats her—I have heard as much as that. I wonder if it can be at all her fault? I never cared for Pat Torrance myself, but nobody thought *that* of him before he was married. Do you think, perhaps, if she had taken a little more interest at first——One can never tell; he was always rough, but not such a savage as that."

"I have no opinion on the subject. I am only a stranger, you know," John said.

"Ah! but I can see your opinion in your face. You think it is he that is to blame. Well, so he is, no doubt; but there are generally faults, don't you think, on both sides? And then, you see, she was brought up abroad—one always feels that is a little risky for a girl. To be sure, you may turn upon me and say, why ask so many questions about it if you hold such an opinion of it? But there is a difference: we are all grown up but Lucy; and if mamma and five of us cannot take care of Lucy——Both of the Lindores have that disadvantage. Don't you think Lady Edith is a little high and mighty? She thinks none of us are good enough for her. They are not very friendly, neither the one nor the other. They don't feel at home among us, I suppose. No doubt it is our fault as much as theirs," this candid critic said.

Thus John heard nothing but the same sentiment over and over again repeated. His friends were not popular, and he himself stood in some danger of being reckoned as of their faction. There was no one so bold as to undertake the defence of Torrance; and yet there was a certain toleration accorded to him, as if his case had extenuating circumstances. John did not distinguish himself that afternoon as his friends expected him to do. His play was feeble, and did no credit to his training in "the South;" and as he continued to be interrogated by every new-comer about his own antecedents and his former acquaintance with the Lindores, it was difficult for him to repress all signs of impatience. There was not very much variety in the talk of the county, to judge by these specimens. They all asked how he liked the North, what he thought of the society, and something or other about the absent family. The monotony was broken when he was taken into the drawing-room to be surveyed by the old ladies. Old Mrs Methven, in her old yellow lace and shabby feathers, who looked to him like a superannuated cockatoo, pronounced once more that he was the image of Walter Erskine, who was killed in the French war, and who was the first man she ever saw in his own hair, without even a ribbon. "It looked very naked like," the old lady repeated; "no just decent, but you soon got used to it." When these greetings and introductions were over, Miss Barbara took his arm, and declared her intention of taking a turn on the green and inspecting the new game. But it was not the game which interested the old lady. She had a word of warning to say.

"John, my man! at your age you think little of good advice—above all, from an old woman; but just one word. You must not bind yourself hand and foot to the Lindores. You have your own place to uphold, and the credit of your family. We've all formed our opinion of *them*; and if you're to be considered as one of them, a kind of retainer of theirs——"

"Retainer!" cried John, deeply piqued. Then he made an effort to recover his temper. "You must see how unreasonable this is," he said, with a forced smile. "They are the only people I know. I have the greatest respect for them all, but I have done nothing to—identify myself with the family."

He spoke with some heat, and reddened, much to his annoyance. What way but one was there of identifying himself with them? and what hope was there that he would ever be permitted to do that? The mere suggestion in his own bosom made him red, and then pale.

"You take up their opinions—you support their plans; you're a partisan, or so they tell me. All that is bad for you, John, my man! You'll excuse me speaking; but who should take an interest in you if it's not me?"

"All this is absurd," he cried. "Take up their opinions! I think the Earl is right about a county hospital. I will support him in that with all my heart. Your favourite minister, Aunt Barbara——"

"I have no favourite minister," said Miss Barbara, somewhat sharply. "I never let myself be influenced by one of them. You mean the Doctor, I suppose?—he's far too advanced for me. Ay, that's just the man I'm meaning. He tells me you're taking up all the Lindores's plans—a great satisfaction to him, for he's a partisan too. Mind, I say nothing against the hospital. What other places have, we ought to have too. We have the same needs as our neighbours. If Perth has one, I would have one—that's my principle. But I would not take it up because it's a plan of Lord Lindores's. And I hear you and that muckle lout Pat Torrance were nearly coming to blows——"

"Is that the minister too?" John cried, angrily.

"No, it's not the minister; the minister had nothing to say to it. Don't you take up a prejudice against the minister. That's just as silly as the other way. It was another person. Pat Torrance is just a brute; but you'll make little by taking up the defence of the weaker side there. A woman should hold her tongue, whatever happens. You must not set up, at your age, as the champion of ill-used wives."

"So far from that," said John, with fierce scorn, "the tipsy brute swore eternal friendship. It was all I could do to shake him off."

But Miss Barbara still shook her head. "Let them redd their quarrels their own way," she said. "Stand you on your own feet, John. You should lay hands suddenly on no man, the Apostle says. Mr Monypenny, is that you? I am reading our young man a lecture. I am telling him the old vulgar proverb, that every herring should hang by its ain head."

"And there's no' a truer proverb out of the Scriptures, Miss Barbara," said Mr Monypenny, a man of middle age, and grizzled, reddish aspect. It irritated John beyond description to perceive that the new-comer understood perfectly what was meant. It had evidently been a subject of discussion among all, from Sir James to the agent, who stood before him now, swaying from one leg to another, and meditating his own contribution to the arguments already set forth.

"Miss Erskine is very right, as she always is. Whatever her advice may be, it will carry the sympathy of all your well-wishers, Mr John, and they are just the whole county, man and woman. I cannot say more than that, and less would be an untruth."

"I am much obliged to my well-wishers, I am sure. I could dispense with so much solicitude on their part," cried John, with subdued fury. Old aunts and old friends may have privileges; but to be schooled by your man of business—that was more than flesh and blood could bear.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It happened after this that John Erskine, by no will of his own, was drawn repeatedly into the society of the somewhat lonely pair at Tinto. Torrance had never been popular, though the county extended to him that toleration which a rich man, especially when young, is apt to receive. There were always benevolent hopes that he might mend as long as he remained unmarried; and after his marriage, his wife bore the blame of more than half his misdeeds. To tell the truth, poor Carry, being so unhappy, did not take pains to conciliate her neighbours. Some she took up with almost feverish eagerness, and she had two or three impassioned friends; but she had none of that sustaining force of personal happiness which makes it possible to bear the weariness of dull country company, and she had not taken any particular pains to please the county: so that, except on the periodical occasions when the great rooms were thrown open to a large party, she and her husband, so little adapted as they were to indemnify each other for the loss of society, lived much alone in their great house, with none of that coming and going which enlivens life. And since what he called the satisfaction which John had given him, Torrance had experienced a sort of rough enthusiasm for his new neighbour. He was never weary of proclaiming him to be an honest fellow. "That's the way to meet a man," he would say—"straightforward; if there's any mistake, say it out." And Erskine was overwhelmed with invitations to "look in as often as he pleased," to "take pot-luck,"—to come over to Tinto as often as he wearied. Sometimes he yielded to those solicitations out of pity for poor Carry, who seemed, he thought, pleased to see him; and sometimes because, in face of this oppressive cordiality, it was difficult to say no. He did not enjoy these evenings; but the soft look of pleasure in poor Carry's eyes, the evident relief with which she saw him come in, went to John's heart. Not a word had passed between them on the subject which all their neighbours discussed so fully. No hint of domestic unhappiness crossed Carry's lips: and yet it seemed to John that she had a kind of sisterly confidence in him. Her face brightened when he appeared. She did not engage him in long intellectual conversations as she did Dr Stirling. She said, indeed, little at all to him, but she was grateful to him for coming, and relieved from that which she would not complain of or object to—the sole society of her husband. This consciousness touched John more than if he had been entirely in her confidence. A kind of unspoken alliance seemed to exist between them.

One evening when June was nearly over in the long never-ending Northern daylight, this tacit understanding was at once disturbed and intensified. John had been captured by his too cordial neighbour in the languid afternoon when he had nothing to do, and had been feeling somewhat drearily the absence of occupation and society. Torrance could not supply him with either, but his vacant condition left him without excuse or power to avoid the urgent hospitality. He had walked to Tinto in all the familiarity of county neighbourhood, without evening dress or ceremony of any kind. They had dined without the epergnes and mountains of silver which Torrance loved, in the low dining-room of the old house of Tinto, which still existed at one end of the great modern mansion. This room opened on the terrace which surrounded the house, with an ease not possible in the lofty Grecian erection, well elevated from the ground, which formed the newer part. Lady Caroline, who had left the gentlemen some time before, became visible to them as they sat at their wine, walking up and down the terrace with her baby in her arms. The child had been suffering from some baby ailment, and had been dozing a great part of the day, which made it unwilling to yield to sleep when evening came. The mother had brought it out wrapped in a shawl, and was singing softly to lull it to rest. The scene was very tranquil and sweet. Sunset reflections were hanging still about the sky, and a pearly brightness was diffused over the horizon—light that looked as if it never meant to fade. The trees of the park lay in clustered masses at their feet, the landscape spread out like a map beyond, the hills rose blue against the ethereal paleness of the distance. Close at hand, Lady Caroline's tall, pliant figure, so light and full of languid grace, yet with a suggestion of weakness which was always pathetic, went and came—the child's head upon her shoulder, her own bent over it—moving softly, singing under her breath. The two men, sitting together with little conversation or mutual interest between them, were roused by the sight of this passing figure. Even Tinto's rude gaze was softened by it. He looked out at his wife and child with something more like human tenderness than was usual to him. Himself for a moment gave place in the foreground to this embodiment of the nearest and closest ties of life. He stopped in the talk which he was giving forth at large in his usual loud monologue, unaffected by any reply, and something softened the big balls of his light projecting eyes. "Let's step outside and finish our cigars," he said, abruptly. Lady Caroline herself looked different from her wont. The child against her heart soothed the pain in it: there is no such healing application. It was not a delightful child, but it was her own. One of its arms was thrown round her neck; its head, heavy with sleep, to which it would not yield, now nestled into her shoulder, now rose from it with a sleepy half-peevish cry. She was wholly occupied with the little perverse creature, patting it with one thin soft hand, murmuring to it. The little song she was crooning was contemptible so far as music went, but it was soft as a dove's cooing. She had forgotten herself, and her woes, and her shipwrecked life. Even when that harsher step came out on the gravel, she did not recognise it with her usual nervous start. All was soothed and softened in the magical evening calm, in the warm softness of the baby, lying against the ache in its mother's heart.

And Torrance, for a wonder, did not disturb this calm. He stopped to touch the child's cheek with his finger as his wife passed him, but as this broke once more the partial slumber, he subsided into quiet with a sense of guiltiness, puffing his cigar at intervals, but stepping as lightly as he could with his heavy feet, and saying nothing. A touch of milder emotion had come to his rude bosom. Not only was that great park, those woods, and a large share of the surrounding country, his own, but this woman with her baby was his, his property, though so much more delicate, and finer than he. This moved him with a kind of wondering sense of the want of something which amid so much it might yet be possible to attain—happiness, perhaps, in addition to possession. His breast swelled with pride in the thought that even while thus engrossed in the humblest feminine occupation, like any cottager, nobody could mistake Lady Car Torrance for anything less than she was. They might think her a princess, perhaps. He did not know any princess that had that carriage, he said to himself; but less or meaner, nobody could suppose her to be. And he was touched to see her with his child, her whole soul—that soul which had always eluded him, and retained its chill superiority to him—wrapped up in the baby, who was his as much as hers. There was in the air a kind of flutter of far-off wings, as if peace might be coming, as if happiness might be possible even between this ill-matched pair.

John Erskine was the spectator in this curious domestic scene. He looked on with wondering, half-pleased, half-indignant observation. He was almost angry that Carry should be lowered to the level of this husband of hers, even if it gave her for a time a semblance of happiness; and yet his heart was touched by this possibility of better things. When the child went to sleep, she looked up at the two men with a smile. She was grateful to her husband for his silence, for bringing no disturbance of the quiet with him; and grateful to John for having, as she thought, subdued Torrance by his influence. She made to them both that little offering of a grateful smile as she sat down on the garden-seat, letting the child rest upon her knee. The baby's head had slid down to her arm, and it lay there in the complete and perfect repose which a mother's arms, protecting, sustaining, warm, seem to give more than any bed. The air was so sweet, the quiet so profound, that Carry was pleased to linger out of doors. Not often had she shown any desire to linger in her husband's society when not bound by duty to do so. This evening she did it willingly. For the moment, a *faux air* of well-being, of happiness and domestic peace, seemed to pervade the earth and the air. "It is so sweet, it cannot do her any harm to stay out a little," she said, smiling at them over the baby's sleeping face, which was half hidden in the soft, fleecy white shawl that enveloped it. John Erskine sat down at a little distance, and Torrance stood with a half humility about him, half ashamed, willing to do or say something which would be tender and conciliatory, but not knowing how. They began to talk in low tones, Erskine and Carry bearing the *frais* of the conversation. Sometimes Torrance put in a word, but generally the large puffs of his cigar were his chief contribution. He was willing to let them talk. Nay, he was not without a certain pleasure, in this softened mood of his, in hearing them talk. He would have allowed freely that conversation was not in his way.

"They are coming now in about ten days," Carry said. "Of course they have stayed longer than they meant to stay. People never leave town on the appointed day."

"There are so many people to see."

"And so many things are put off till the last. I remember how hurried we were,—how rapidly the days flew at the end."

"You do not go to town now?"

"No," she said, hurriedly; "it is no deprivation. We—neither of us—care for London."

Torrance felt a certain gratitude to his wife for thus identifying her inclinations with his. "If truth were told, maybe that might be modified," he said. "I daresay you would like it, Car. You would get people to talk to. That's what amuses her," he added, with an explanatory glance at John. It was a novel sort of pleasure to him to give this amiable explanation of Lady Caroline's peculiarities, without any of the rough satire in it with which he was accustomed to treat the things he did not understand; and his constant pride in her found a new outlet. "It's not gaieties she wants, it's conversation," he said, with a softened laugh. "Next year we must see if we can't manage it, Car."

She turned to him with a startled glance, not knowing whether to deprecate all change so far as herself was concerned, or to thank him for this unusual thoughtfulness. Fortunately, her instinct chose the latter course. "It is kind of you to think of me," she said, in her soft voice. In all their wretched married life, they had never been so near before. He replied by his usual laugh, in which there was always a consciousness of that power of wealth which he could never forget he possessed. Oh yes, he would do it—he could do it whenever he pleased—buy pleasures for her, just as he might buy dresses or jewels for her, if she would take a little pains to make herself agreeable. But even the laugh was much softer than usual. She gave him a little nod over the sleeping child, in which there was kindness as well as an astonished gratitude. Perhaps she had never been so much at her ease with him before.

"They are going to fill the house in the autumn," she said, returning to the previous subject. "I hear of several people coming. A certain Lord Millefleurs——"

"That reminds me," said John, "that I had a letter the other day—from one of our old Swiss party. You will remember him, Lady Caroline——"

Here he paused, with a sudden recollection and putting together of various things which, in the curious inadvertence of an indifferent mind, he had not thought of before. This made him break off somewhat suddenly, and raise his eyes to Carry, at whom he had not been looking, with an alarmed glance.

He saw her take a large grasp, in the hand which had been laid softly upon it, at ease, with extended fingers, of the baby's shawl. Her face, which had been so smiling and soft, grew haggard and wild in a moment. Her eyes seemed to look out from caverns. There was a momentary pause, which seemed to arouse heaven and earth to listen. Then her voice came into this suddenly altered, vigilant, suspicious atmosphere. "Who was it, Mr Erskine?" Poor Carry tried to smile, and to keep her voice in its usual tone. But the arrow flying so suddenly at a venture had gone straight into her heart. She had no need to ask—had she not divined it all along?

"Probably you have forgotten—his very name. It was—one of those fellows," stammered John. "I forget how little a party like ours was likely to interest you. Beaufort—you may remember the name."

He felt that every word he uttered—his artificial levity, his forced attempt to make that unimportant which only his consciousness that it was deeply important could have suggested such a treatment of, was a new folly. He was doing it for the best—most futile of all excuses. When he looked at her again at the end of this speech, not daring to meet her eyes while he gave it forth, he saw, to his astonishment, a rising colour, a flutter of indignation, in Carry's pale face.

"Surely," she said, with a strange thrill in her voice, "you do your friend injustice, Mr Erskine. So far as I remember, he was very distinguished—far the most remarkable of the party. I do not think I can be mistaken."

"No, no, you are quite right," John cried; "I only meant that—these things were much to us; but I did not know whether you would recollect—whether to a lady——"

"You are all so contemptuous of women," Lady Caroline said, with a faint smile, "even the kindest of you. You think a lady would only notice frivolous excellences, and would not care for real distinction. That is a great mistake. It is all the other way. It is we who think of these things most."

"I beg a thousand pardons—I had no such meaning," John said; and she made him a little tremulous bow. She was so deadly pale, that he expected every moment to see her faint. But she did not. She continued, naturally calling him back to what he had been about to tell her.

"You had a letter from Mr Beaufort? about——you were going to tell me——"

"About coming here," said John, feeling that to say it out bluntly was now the best. "It appears he has a sort of charge of this Lord Millefleurs."

"Charge of Lord?——That is not a dignified position—for—your friend, Mr Erskine."

"No. I don't know what it means; he has not made the progress he ought to have made; but there is something special about this," said John, hesitating, not knowing how far to go.

Again Lady Caroline made him a little bow. She rose, with some stiffness and slowness, as if in pain. "It grows late, though it is so light. Baby will be better indoors," she said. She went quickly away, but wavering a little in her gait, as if she were unconscious of obstacles in the way, and disappeared through the window of the old library, which was on the same level as the dining-room. John stood looking after her, with a bewildering sense of guilt, and alarm for he knew not what. All this time Torrance had not said a word; but he had taken in every word that was said, and his jealous eyes had noted the changes in his wife's face. He watched her go away, as John did. When she had disappeared, both of them listened for a moment in silence. Neither would have been surprised to hear a fall and cry; but there was nothing. Torrance threw himself down heavily in the seat from which she had risen.

"That was a pity, Erskine," he said; "you saw that well enough. You can tell me the rest about this Beaumont—Beaufort—what do you call him?—that you thought it best not to tell Lady Car."

"There is nothing to tell about Beaufort," said John, "which Lady Caroline, or any lady, might not hear."

"Now just look you here, John Erskine," said Tinto, projecting his big eyes, "I thought you were he—that is the truth. She told me there was somebody. I thought it was you, and I was determined to be at the bottom of it. Now here's the man, beyond a doubt, and you know it as well as I do."

"I don't know it at all," cried John, "which probably is as much as you do. Can you suppose I should have spoken to Lady Caroline as I did if I had supposed—believed—known anything at all?"

"I will say," said Torrance, "that you're an honest fellow. That stands to reason: you wouldn't have opened your mouth if you had thought—but then you never thought till after you had spoken. Then you saw it as well as me."

"Torrance!" cried John, "for heaven's sake, don't imagine things that were never thought of! I know nothing about it—absolutely nothing. Even had there been anything in it, it is six years ago—it is all over; it never can have had anything to say to you——"

"Oh, as for that," said Torrance, "if you think I've any fear of Lady Car going wrong, set your mind at rest on that point. No fear of Lady Car. If you suppose I'm jealous, or that sort of thing"—and here he laughed, insolent and dauntless. "I thought it was you," he said—"I don't see why I should conceal that—I thought it was you. And if you think I would have shut her ladyship up, or challenged you!—not a bit of it, my fine fellow! I meant to have asked you here—to have seen you meet—to have taken my fun out of it. I'm no more afraid of Lady Car than I am of myself. Afraid!—not one bit. She shall see just as much of him as possible, if he comes here. I mean to ask him to the house. I mean to have him to dinner daily. You can tell him so, with my compliments. You needn't say any more to Lady Car; but as for me, there's nothing I'd enjoy more. Tutoring, is he?" Torrance said, with a sort of chuckle of wrathful enjoyment: and he cast an eye over his demesne, with a glow of proud satisfaction upon his face.

The sentiment of the evening calm had altogether disappeared. The peace of nature was broken up; a sense of human torture, human cruelty, was in the air. It was as if a curtain had been lifted in some presence-chamber, and the rack disclosed beneath. Torrance lounged back—with his hands in his pockets, his cheeks inflamed, his great eyes rolling—in the seat from which poor Carry with her baby had risen. His mind, which had been softened, touched to better things, and which had even begun to think of means and ways of making her happier, turned in a moment to more familiar preoccupations. To have *him* here—he who was merely "tutoring," a genteel attendant upon a foolish young lord,—to exhibit him, probably penniless, probably snubbed by everybody around, a dependant, a man without position or wealth,—was an idea altogether delightful to him. It was indeed a fierce delight, a cruel pleasure; but it was more congenial to his mind than the unnatural softness of the hour before.

And was it all John Erskine's doing?—his foolishness, his want of thought? When he left Torrance in disgust, and hurried away along the now familiar avenue, where he no longer took any wrong turns, his foolishness and thoughtlessness overwhelmed him. To be sure!—a thousand recollections rushed upon his mind. He had known it all along, and how was it that he had not known it? The moment he had committed himself and begun to speak of Beaufort's letter, that moment he had foreseen everything that followed—just as poor Carry had read what was coming in his first sentence. It was he who had disturbed the evening calm—the *rapprochement* of the two who, doomed as they were to live their lives together, ought by all about them to be helped to draw near each other. Full of these disquieting thoughts, he was skirting a clump of thick shrubbery at some distance from the house, when something glided out from among the bushes and laid a sudden light touch upon his arm. He was already in so much excitement that he could not suppress a cry of alarm, almost terror. There was no light to distinguish anything, and the dark figure was confused with the dark foliage. Almost before the cry had left his lips, John entreated pardon. "You are—breathing the evening air," he said, confused, "now that the little one is asleep."

But she had no leisure for any vain pretences. "Mr Erskine," she said, breathless, "do not let him come—ask him not to come! I have come out to tell you. I could not say it—there."

"I will do whatever you tell me, Lady Caroline."

"I know you will be kind. This makes me very miserable. Oh, it is not that I could not meet him! It is because I know my husband has an idea,—not that he is jealous—and he does not mean to be cruel,—but he has an idea——He would like to look on, to watch. That is what I could not bear. Tell him, Mr Erskine—beg him—of all places in the world, not to come here."

"He will not come, I am sure, to give you a moment's uneasiness."

"Mr Erskine, I must say more to you," she said, drawing closer, putting once more her hand on his arm. "It must not be on that ground—nothing must be said of me. Cannot you understand? He must not come; but not because of me—nothing must be said of me. If it was your sister, oh would you not understand?"

He took her hand into his in the profound feeling of the moment. "I will try to do—what I should do if it were my own sister," he said, resting it in his. "It was my fault; I ought to have known."

"There was no fault," she said, faintly; "an accident. I knew it must happen some time. I was—prepared. But, Mr Erskine, it is not because I could not meet—any one. Do not think that for me only——It is because—because——But if you understand, that is all."

"Let me walk back with you to the house," John said.

"No, no; it is almost wrong to speak to you in this clandestine way. But what can I do? And you who know—all parties——If I said anything to my brother, it might make a breach. There is no one I could speak to but you. I should have had to suffer helplessly, to hold my peace."

"Believe me—believe me," cried John, "all that a brother can do, I will do."

In the midst of this misery, which he felt to the bottom of his heart, there ran through him a secret stir of pleasure. Her brother!—the suggestion went through all his veins. Strange encounter of the dream with the fact! The cold trembling hand he held in his gave him a thrill of warmth and happiness, and yet his sympathy was as strong, his pity as profound, as one human creature ever felt for another. He stood still and watched her as she flitted back to the house, like a shadow in the gathering darkness. His heart ached, yet beat high. If it should ever be so, how different would be the fate of the other daughter of Lindores's!—how he would guard her from every vexation, smooth every step of her way, strew it with flowers and sweetnesses! He resumed his way more quickly than ever, hastening along in the soft darkness which yet was not dark, by the Scaur—the short cut which had alarmed his groom. To the pedestrian the way by the Scaur was the best way. He paused a moment when he reached it, to look out through the opening in the trees over the broad country, lying like a dream in that mystical paleness which was neither night nor day. Underneath, the river rushed joyously, noisily, through the night—not still, like a Southern stream, but dashing over the stones, and whirling its white eddies in foam against the bank. The sound of the water accompanied the quick current of his thoughts. He had a long walk before him, having come without preparation and left in haste and displeasure. But seven or eight miles of country road in a night of June is no such punishment. And the thoughts that had been roused in him, made the way short. How different—how different would be the fate of that other daughter of Lindores's! It was only when he reached his own gate that he woke up with a start to remember indeed how different it would be. The bare little white house, with its little plantation, its clump of firs on the hill-top, its scanty avenue—the little estate, which could almost be said, with scornful exaggeration, to lie within the park of Tinto—the position of a small squire's wife,—was it likely that Lord Lindores would smile upon that for his daughter? John's heart, which had been so buoyant, sank down into the depths. He began to see that his dream was ridiculous, his elation absurd. He to be the brother, in that sweetest way, of Carry Lindores! But nevertheless he vowed, as he went home somewhat crestfallen, that he would be a brother to her. She had given him her confidence, and he had given her his promise, and with this bond no worldly prudence nor rule of probabilities should be allowed to interfere.

CHAPTER XIX.

John Erskine woke with the singing of the birds on the morning of Midsummer-day. It was early—far before any civilised hour of waking. When he suddenly opened his eyes in the sweet strangeness of that unearthly moment, the sensation came back to his mind of childish wakings in summer mornings long departed; of getting up in the unutterable stillness with the sense of being the first adventurer into an unknown world; of stealing down-stairs through the silent visionary house all full of unseen sleepers, like ghosts behind the closed doors; of finding, with heart beating and little hands trembling, half with alarm, half with delight, the bolt low down on some easily opened door; and of stepping out into the sweet dews, into the ineffable glory of sunshine in which there was no shadow but that little one which was his own. Nobody alive, nobody awake, except that riot of the birds in every tree which wounded the ideal sense of unearthly calm, yet gave a consolatory consciousness of life and motion in the strange quiet, though a life incomprehensible, a language unknown. Strange that this was the first recollection brought to him in his waking—for the next was very different. The next was a confused sweet tumult in the air, a sound in his ears, an echo in his heart: "They are coming, they are coming!" He could not feel sure that somewhere or other in the words there were not joy-bells ringing—a tinkle of chimes, now rising, now falling, "as if a door were shut between us and the sound." "They are coming," everything seemed to say. The air of the morning blowing in by the open window puffed it at him with playful sweetness. The birds sang it, the trees shaped their rustlings to the words, "They are coming."

Well, it was perfectly true. The Earl and Countess of Lindores, and their daughter, Lady Edith Lindores, and perhaps their son Lord Rintoul, and it might be other noble persons in their train, were certainly expected to arrive that day; but what was that to John Erskine of Dalrulzian, a country gentleman of the most moderate pretensions, with nothing about him above mediocrity, and no claim to any part or share in the life led by these great people? For the moment John did not ask himself that question. He only felt after this long interval of solitude and abandonment that they were coming back. He had been as it were shipwrecked in this country with which he was so little acquainted, though it was his own country: and the time of their absence had appeared very long to him. He said to himself their absence—but it will be understood that the absence of Lord Lindores, for example, had very little importance to the young man. He would not have been deeply concerned if that nobleman had been induced to serve his country and his party in any other sphere. But it was safer, easier to say *their*, and to make to himself a little picture of the reopening of the house, the feeling of population and warmth that would breathe about it, the chance even of meeting any day or hour smiles and pleasant looks on the very road, and a sense of society in the atmosphere. He tried to persuade himself that this was what he was thinking of, or rather he refused to enter into any analysis of his feelings at all, and allowed his mind to float upon a vague and delightful current of anticipations, which he preferred not to examine too closely, or put into any certain and definite form.

John had not seen either Lady Caroline or her husband since that unlucky evening. When he returned home and took out once more Beaufort's letter, it seemed to him that he could now read between the lines enough to have enlightened him as to the real state of affairs. Why should Beaufort hesitate to accept Lord Lindores's invitation, and ask to be received into a much humbler house, if there had been no stringent reason for such a preference? Beaufort had been very cautious in the wording of his letter. He said that it was entirely uncertain whether he could make up his mind to come at all; whether, indeed, in the circumstances he ought to come. He explained the position in which he stood to Lord Millefleurs,—not his tutor, which would have been ridiculous, but his friend, to whom, to please his father, the young man paid a certain deference. The control which he thus exercised was merely nominal, Beaufort added, and quite unnecessary, since nobody could be more capable of taking care of himself than Millefleurs; but it was a satisfaction to the Duke—and as his future prospects depended upon the Duke's favour, Beaufort did not need to point out to his friend the expediency on his part of doing what that potentate required. He was unwilling to relinquish all these prospects, and the permanent appointment which he could confidently expect from the Duke's favour: but still, at the same time, there were reasons which might make him do so, and he was not at all sure that it would not be better to make this sacrifice than to intrude himself where he was not wanted in the capacity of attendant on Lord Millefleurs. Thus, he explained elaborately twice over, his coming at all was quite uncertain; but if he did decide to come, it would be an advantage and ease to him in every way, to be sure of a *pied-à-terre* in his friend's house, instead of being forced to thrust himself into a party where his presence was only invited as an appendage to his charge. It had occurred to John to wonder why there was so much hesitation in Beaufort's mind as to an ordinary visit; but he had accepted it, as a susceptibility natural enough to such a mind—with perhaps a little inconvenient recollection of those far-past days in which he had been admitted so entirely into the intimacy of the family, which it was possible enough he might dislike to visit on another standing. But now he saw what was the true meaning of the anxious, cautious letter. Beaufort's object had been to ascertain from him how the circumstances stood; whether he ought or ought not to show himself among people who once held to him such very different relations. The light of poor Carry's haggard face threw illumination upon the whole matter. And what was he to reply?

It might give the reader but a poor idea of John's intellect if I were to tell how long it took him to concoct his reply. Never had a task so difficult fallen into his hands. It was not his part to betray Carry's alarm and distress, or her husband's fierce and vindictive gratification in this new way of humbling her. He assured Beaufort diplomatically that Dalrulzian was at his entire command then and always, but owned that he saw all the difficulties of the position, and felt that his friend had a delicate part to play. To appear as bear-leader to Millefleurs among people who had known him in different circumstances would of itself be disagreeable, and all the more that the position was nominal, and he had in reality nothing to do. John had known Millefleurs at Eton, where he was always the drollest little beggar, but quite able to take care of himself. It was too funny to find him cropping up again. "But to waste such talents as yours," he cried, with the greatest sincerity, "looking after Millefleurs!" The Duke ought indeed to show his gratitude for such self-abnegation. Thus John went on for a page or two, allowing it to be seen that he thought the position undesirable, and that he did not encourage Beaufort's appearance in it. "Of course you know beforehand that my house is yours in all circumstances," he repeated—"that goes without saying;" but even this was so put that it seemed to say, not "come," but "stay away." It was not a pleasant office to John. To be inhospitable, to shut his doors upon a friend, was unspeakably painful to him. It was something of which he had thought that he never could be guilty. He longed to modify this coldness by some explanation of what he meant, but he dared not. He had promised to be a brother to Carry, and was it possible that he should betray her? It seemed to him that he was betraying Beaufort instead, who was more to him than Carry had ever been—pretending to open his doors to him with one hand while he closed them with another. In such circumstances a letter is very hard to write. Two or three copies of it were written before one was produced good enough to be sent. At last he put together the best version of his plea which he could accomplish, and sent it off, very doubtfully. He might be losing his friend. Beaufort could not fail to see the want of welcome in it, and he could not be sure that it would save Carry after all.

All this had passed some time before the day of the return, and John was convinced at heart that the purpose of his letter had been accomplished; that Beaufort had understood him, and intended rather to sacrifice his prospects than to make his appearance in a false position. John was satisfied, and yet he was wounded to think that he had been the means of wounding his friend. This, however, and all connected with it—all the painful part of his life and of theirs, so far as he was acquainted with it—passed out of his mind in the excitement and elation of the consciousness that this day he should see "them" again. John spent the morning in a kind of suppressed ecstasy, altogether out of reason. He did not even ask himself what their return was to him. What it was to him! a change of heaven and earth, a filling up of the veins of life and quickening of every faculty. He did all he had to do in the morning, with the consciousness of this coming event running through everything, filling up every moment with that altogether foolish elation and rapture. For this it was: a kind of subtle penetration of every thought by something which was nothing—by an air, a breath, as from the celestial fields. They were to arrive about three o'clock, and John's foolish ecstasy lasted till about the moment when, if he were going to meet them, it was time to set off for the station. He had taken his hat in his hand, with a vague smile about the corners of his mouth, a light in his eyes, and was just about to step forth for this happy purpose, when there suddenly struck him, like a blow, this question,—"What right have you to go to meet them?" He was so entirely taken aback by it, that he retreated a step as if some one in actual bodily presence had put the question to him, and opposed his exit. He gazed round him once, appalled, to see where it came from; but, alas! it came from nowhere,—from a monitor more intimate than any intruder could be—from his own judgment, which seemed to have been lying dormant while his imagination and heart were at work. What right had he to go to meet them? Was he a relative, a retainer, a member of the family in any way? What was he to the Lindores, or they to him? Everything, but nothing: a neighbour in the county, a friend that they were so good as to be very kind to; but this gave him nothing as a right,—only the position of gratitude—no more.

He stood in a confusion of doubt and pain for ten minutes in his own hall. There seemed an invisible barrier before his feet, something which prevented him from moving. His smile turned to a sort of deprecating, appealing gaze—to whom? to nobody—to himself; for was it not indeed he, and only he, that stopped his own steps? At last he stepped out boldly, flinging scruples to the winds. Why should he say to any one, even himself, that he was going to meet them? Nobody could prevent him walking along the highroad where everybody walked; and if they came that way, and he by chance encountered them?—The smile returned to John's mouth, lurking behind his soft, young, silky moustache. In that case it would be ludicrous to think that there could be anything wrong. Saying which to himself he hurried down the avenue, feeling that the ten minutes' delay was enough to have made him late. He walked on quickly, like a man with a serious object, his heart beating, his pulse going at full speed. For a long way off he watched a white plume of steam floating across the landscape. He could see it creeping along for miles, stopping now and then, taking little runs as if to amuse itself. No, that was not the train, but only one of those stray locomotives which torment expectant spectators by wandering wildly up and down like spirits of mischief. Before he reached the station, Lady Caroline's carriage drove past, and she bent forward to smile and wave her hand to John. But this encouraging gesture brought back all his personal doubts: she was going by right of nature. And even Torrance had a right to come, though he had no affection for any of them, nor they for him. Once more John lingered and delayed. He knew very well they would be pleased to see him, and if an extreme desire to see them and welcome them justified his going, then surely he had that right. But the Earl would look politely surprised; and Rintoul, if Rintoul was there, would look broadly at him with that stony British stare which petrifies an intruder. John did not at all like the idea of Rintoul. If there is a natural sense of opposition (as people say) between women who may be considered rival beauties, the sentiment is so natural a one that it is shared by that sex which is so much the nobler; and as a woman sees through a woman's wiles, so does a man see through the instincts of another man. John felt that Rintoul would see through him—that he would set up an instant opposition and hostility—that he would let him perceive that where Edith was, a small country squire, a little Scotch laird, had no business to push himself in. Rintoul, when John knew him, had been an innocent little lieutenant—as innocent as a lieutenant could be expected to be; yet he knew very well by instinct that this was what was to be expected from him. And what if he were there to change the character of the group?

John's pace slackened at the thought. From the moment when Lady Caroline's carriage passed him he went slower and slower—still, indeed, turning his face towards the station, but almost hoping that the train would arrive before he did. However, country trains are not of that expeditious character. They do not anticipate the hour, nor the appearance of those who are coming to meet them. When he reached the entrance of the station it was not yet in sight, and he had no further excuse for dallying. But he did not go in. He walked up behind to a spot where he could see without being seen, and there waited, with a sense of humiliation, yet eagerness. It was a very undignified position. If he meant to meet them, he should have done it openly: if he did not intend to do so, he ought to have gone away. But John did neither: he watched them coming with his heart in his mouth; but he did not go forward to greet them when they came. He saw them get out of the carriage one by one. He saw the hurried embrace and greeting of Lady Car to her mother and sister. Then there could not be any doubt about it. Edith gave a searching glance all about, sweeping the highway with her glance both up and down. She was looking for some one. Who was it? Something of the elation of the morning came back into his mind. For whom was she looking? She even stood for a moment shading her eyes with her hand before she followed her mother to the carriage, to cast another glance round her. Could it be that she was looking for—oh, never mind who she was looking for, John cried to himself, springing over a wall or two, and speeding along by all the turns he could think of, till he reached a point of the road where he turned and came quickly back. He had resolution enough to forego the greeting at that first moment of arrival; but the chance of still seeing them, and thus saving both his pride and his pleasure, seduced him from all higher thoughts of self-abnegation. He walked on slowly, but with his heart beating, and at length heard the roll of the wheels coming towards him, the sound of voices in the air. The family were all together in one carriage, all joyful and beaming in the reunion. Even Lady Car's pale face was lighted with smiles; and Lord Lindores, if he did not take much part in the family talk, did not frown upon it. The coachman drew up of himself as John appeared, and Lady Lindores called to him almost before the carriage stopped. "Late, Mr Erskine, late!" she cried. "Carry told us you were coming to meet us." John was half wounded, half consoled by the accusation; he could not hear himself blamed without an impulse of self-defence. "Indeed I was not late; I saw you arrive; but I thought—you might think—it seemed presumptuous to thrust myself in." "Why, here is chivalry!" said Lady Lindores with a smile, giving him her hand. And then the flutter of conversation was resumed, one voice interrupting another, putting questions to which there was no answer, and making statements to which nobody paid any attention. John stood and nodded and smiled by the side of the carriage for a minute or two. And then that moving little world of expressive faces, of hasty words, understood *à demi-mot*, of hearts so closely united, yet so different, swept past him again with ringing of the horses' hoofs and jingle of the harness, and lively murmur of the voices. It swept past, and John was left,—why, just as he had been before—just as he knew he would be left,—out of it—altogether out of it! as he knew very well he should be. He walked along the way he had been going, away from his own house, away from anywhere that he could possibly want to go, plodding very silently and solemnly along, as if he had some serious purpose, but meaning nothing—thinking of nothing. What a fool he was! Had he even for a moment expected to be taken away with them, to follow them up to Lindores, to be admitted into all their first talk and confidence? Not he: he had known well enough that his place was outside,—that a roadside greeting, a genial smile, a kindly hand held out, was all the share he could have in the pleasure of the homecoming. Nothing more—what could there be more? He knew all that as well as he knew anything. Why then was he such an idiot as to walk on mile after mile he did not know where, with his head down, and the most deadly seriousness depicted on his countenance? At length he burst into a sudden short laugh, and turning back went home slowly. Never had his house looked so dreary, so secluded, so shut in before. He went in and ate his dinner humbly, without a word (so people say) to throw at a dog. He had been quite aware that he was to dine alone; he knew exactly the dimensions of the room, the shabby air of the old furniture, the lowness of the roof,—why then should he have been so depressed by all these familiar objects? There was nothing at all to account for it, except that event which had filled him with such delightful anticipations, and brightened earth and heaven to him this morning. They were coming home. They had come home. This, which was enough to change the very temperature, and turn earth into heaven, was now the cause of a depth of moral depression which seemed to cloud the very skies; and this without any unkindness, any offence, anything that he had not fully expected, and been certain would happen. But human nature is very fantastic, and so it was.

"You would hear, sir," said old Rolls, "that my lord and her ladyship, they've come home."

"Oh yes; I have just met them; all very well and very bright," said John, trying to assume an air of satisfaction. What he did succeed in putting on was a look of jaunty and defiant discontent.

"They would naturally be bright coming out of that weary London to their own place," said Rolls, with grave approbation. And then he added, after a pause, "You'll be thinking now, sir, of making some return of a' the ceevilities that's been shown you."

"Making a return!" this was a new idea to John. He looked up at the Mentor who condescended to wait upon him, with alarm and almost awe. "To be sure—you are quite right, Rolls," he said, with humility; "I wonder I did not think of it before. But can we?" John looked round ruefully at his old walls.

"Can we?" cried Rolls in high disdain. "You neither ken me, nor Bauby, nor yet yourself, to ask such a question. If we can! That can we! If you'll take my advice, ye'll include a' classes, sir. Ye'll have the elders to their denner; and the youngsters, ye'll give a ball to them."

"A ball!" cried John, opening his eyes. The boldness of the suggestion, the determined air with which Rolls faced his master, setting down his foot as one who was ready to face all dangers for the carrying out of a great design, touched the humorous sense in the young man's mind. He laughed, forgetting the previous burden of his desolation. "But how to give a ball, Rolls," he said, "in this small house?"

"I ask your pardon, sir," said Rolls, gravely. "In the light o' Tinto, maybe it's a small house; but Tinto never was a popular place. Oh ay, there were balls there, when he was a Seeker himsel'—I'm meaning when he was looking out for a wife, before he married her ladyship, poor thing! But this is not a small house if ye consider the other houses, where everything that's lightsome goes on. And it's you that's the Seeker now. You're wanting a leddy yoursel',—that stands to reason."

Here John felt that he ought to be angry, and shut the mouth of so inappropriate a counsellor. But Rolls had no sense of his own inappropriateness. He went on calmly, notwithstanding the laugh and exclamation with which his master interrupted him.

"That's aye an attraction," said the old servant. "I'm not saying, sir, though I think far more of you in a moral point of view—that ye're the equal of Tinto as a worldly question. Na, we must keep a hold of reason. Ye're no' a grand catch like the like o' him. But ye're far better; ye're a son-in-law any gentleman in the country-side might be proud o'; and any lady, which is far mair important——"

"Come, Rolls, no more of this," cried John. "A joke is a joke; but you know you are going too far."

"Me joking! I'm most serious in earnest, sir, if you'll believe me. I served the house before you were born. I was here when your father brought his wife home. Na, I'm not joking. I'm thinking what's best for my maister and the credit of the house. The haill county will come; and if ye think we're not enough to wait upon them, there's Andrew will put on his blacks; and that sma' groom of yours—I would have likit him bigger—is a smart lad, though he's little. The three of us will do fine. I would recommend a denner, say the Wednesday. I'm fond of the middle of the week, no' too near the Sabbath-day, neither one side nor the other. The denner on Wednesday; and syne on Thursday night the ball. There would be cauld things left that would eke out the supper, and it would all be like one expense. The fiddlers you could have from Dundee, or even Edinburgh. And the eatables—there would be no difficulty about that. We mostly have them within ourselves. Chickens is aye the staple at a supper. And I make bold to say, sir, though she is my sister, that there's no person can tell what Bauby Rolls is capable of till they've seen her try."

"Rolls," cried John, "you're ideas are too magnificent; you take away my breath."

"No' a bit, sir; no' a bit," said Rolls, encouragingly; "if ye'll leave it to me, I'll take all the trouble. We have always said—Bauby and me—that if we were just left to ourselves—You will make out the list, sir, and settle the day, and send the invitations; and if I might advise, I would say to consult with Miss Barbara, who naturally would come over for the occasion, as being your next friend, and take the place of the mistress; and to send for some of your friends (I would recommend officers for choice) would not be a bad thing; for young men are aye scarce in the country, mair especially at this time of the year. We could put up half-a-dozen," Rolls proceeded, "and trouble nobody; and that would be a great help if they were good dancers, and fine lads—which I make no doubt, sir," he added, with a little inclination of his head, "friends o' yours would be."

This unexpected new idea was of great service to John in the dreariness of the long summer evening. He laughed loud and long, and was infinitely tickled by the gravity of the project in which Rolls saw no laughing matter; but when he strolled listlessly along the Walk in the long, long, endless light, with no better companion than a cigar, with wistful eyes which sought the clear wistful horizon far away, and thoughts that seemed to fill the whole wide atmosphere with an unreal yet unconquerable sadness, the idea of making this silence gay, and seeing *her* here who had come home, who had changed the world, but not for him; but who yet for him—who could tell?—might still turn earth into heaven,—seized upon him with a curious charm. A ball at Dalrulzian would not be a very magnificent entertainment, nor was there anything very elevated or poetical in the idea. But there are certain conditions of mind and moments of life in which that vague terrestrial paradise which belongs to youth is always very close at hand, and ready to descend by the humblest means, by almost any machinery, out of the skies, making of the commonest territory enchanted ground.

CHAPTER XX.

They were very glad to see him,—very kind to him—impossible to be kinder; ready to enter into all their experiences of town, and to find out who were the people he knew among their friends, and to discuss all their amusements and occupations. Perhaps the fact that there were few people with whom they could discuss these proceedings had something to do with it; for the county in general went little to town, and was jealous and easily offended by the superior privileges of others. But this was a cynical view to take of the friendly effusion of the ladies when John paid them the visit which he thought he had timed religiously, so as neither to be too early, as presuming on the intimacy they had accorded him, nor too late, as showing any indifference to it. No such calculation was in the cordial greeting he received from Lady Lindores. "You are a great deal too timid, Mr Erskine," she said. "No, it is not a fault for a young man,—but you know what I mean. You would not come to meet us though you were there, and you have let two days pass without coming to see us. Fie! As your aunt Barbara says, you should have more confidence in your friends."

Was it possible to be more encouraging, more delightful than this? and then they plunged into the inevitable personalities which are so offensive to outsiders, but which people with any mutual knowledge of a certain restricted society are scarcely able to refrain from. "You know the Setons. There have been great changes among them. Two of the girls are married. To whom? Well, I scarcely remember. Yes, to be sure. Sir Percy Faraway married the eldest, and they went off to California on their wedding-trip. And Charley is with his regiment at Cabul. Old Lady Seton, the grandmother—you know that delightful old lady—is——" and so on, and so on. The county people thought, with strong disapproval, that for intelligent people like the Lindores, who gave themselves airs on this score, it was both frivolous and derogatory to talk so much about individuals; but John, who knew the individuals, was not so critical.

"Rintoul has come with us," said Lady Lindores. "He has paused on the way to pay a little visit; but we expect him this evening. He will stay only a very short time; but he is coming back again in August, when the house will be full."

John made a little bow, and no reply. He did not care for the intelligence. Rintoul, he felt instinctively, would be no friend to him. And in the little contrariety produced by this, he, too, brought forth his piece of news. "I heard of one of your visitors—Lord Millefleurs. He was my fag at Eton, and the drollest little fellow. How has he grown up? I have not seen him since the Eton days."

"He is droll still—like a little fat robin-redbreast," said Edith, with a laugh.

Lady Lindores checked her daughter with a look. "He is—odd," she said, "but very original and—entertaining." She had begun in her heart to feel that something was worth sacrificing to the chance of seeing Edith a duchess. "They say he has been a kind of prodigal—but a very virtuous one,—wandering over the world to see life, as he calls it—a very different thing from what many of you young men call life, Mr Erskine."

John felt nettled, he did not quite know why. "I am glad to know Millefleurs has become so interesting," he said. "The only thing that now gives him interest to me is that I hear Beaufort—you will perhaps recollect Beaufort, Lady Lindores——"

The two ladies started a little, then gave each other a mutually warning look. "Indeed I remember Mr Beaufort very well," said Lady Lindores, shaking her head,—"very well. We have seen him—seen a good deal of him lately. He is perhaps coming here."

"But we hope not," said Edith, under her breath.

"Edith, you must not say anything so unkind."

"Oh, mamma, what is the use of pretending to Mr Erskine? either he knows already, or he will be sure to find it out."

"There is nothing to find out," said Lady Lindores, hastily; and then her countenance melted, and she turned to John, holding out her hand. "You are an old friend—and I am sure you are a true friend, Mr Erskine."

"I am sure I am true," he said.

"Yes, I know it—I know it! Mr Erskine, there was—something between Carry and Mr Beaufort. You guessed it even if you did not know? But afterwards it became impossible. Her father objected—as he had a good right to object. And now you know everything is changed. We women, who take all these things so much to heart—we don't want Mr Beaufort to come here. We think it might be painful. Lord Lindores, who probably has never given the subject another thought, has invited him to come with Lord Millefleurs. You know he is acting as a sort of—best friend to Lord Millefleurs."

"I must tell you now on my side that I have heard from Beaufort," said John. "He wrote to me asking to come to Dalrulzian, if it was decided that he should come North at all. I answered him that I did not think he had better come. Pardon me, there was no betrayal. He did not explain—nor did I explain. I could not; it was a mere—intuition with me. I can scarcely tell even what induced me to do it. I thought he would find everything so different, and get no pleasure out of it. I told him he might come to Dalrulzian whenever he liked; but I think I showed him that it would be better not to do so. So that is all I know of it, Lady Lindores."

She looked somewhat anxiously in his face. Was that all he knew? Edith, who had been a keen spectator of the latter part of this conversation, shook her head slightly, with a faint incredulous smile; but Lady Lindores saw no reason to doubt him. She answered with a little excitement and agitation. "You were quite right, Mr Erskine—no pleasure, especially to him. He could not but feel the difference, indeed. Thanks for your kind and sensible advice to him. I hope he will take it. Naturally we had a delicacy——" And here she looked again at her daughter, who made no reply. Edith had in some points more insight than her mother, and she had been reading John's meaning in his looks, while his other listener considered his words only. Edith thought enough had been made of Beaufort. She changed the immediate subject with a laugh, which provoked Lady Lindores.

"Will Lord Millefleurs," she said, "be permitted, do you think, mother, to come by himself? Is it safe to allow him to run about by himself? He is a dangerous little person, and one never knows what is the next wild thing he may do."

"You are speaking very disrespectfully of Lord Millefleurs," said Lady Lindores, provoked.

"I never intended to be respectful." Edith said. But her mother was really annoyed, and put a summary conclusion to the talk. She was angry because her daughter's opinions had not changed, as her own, all imperceptibly and within herself, had done. Lady Lindores had gone through a great deal on account of the little Marquis, whom she had persisted so long in thinking a nice boy. Rintoul's sermons had become almost beyond endurance before they left London, and even her husband had intimated to her that she was treating a very important suitor far too lightly. It is hard for a sympathetic woman to remain uninfluenced, even when she disapproves of them, by the sentiments expressed around her. Millefleurs had become of additional importance in her eyes unconsciously, unwillingly almost, with every word that was said. And when she had no longer his plump little figure before her eyes—when he was left behind, and his amusing personal peculiarities were veiled over by distance—she ceased to have the relief of that laugh which had always hitherto delivered her from too grave a consideration of this subject. The idea of paying court to any man (much less a fat boy!), in order to secure him as a husband for Edith, was revolting to her mind; but worried and troubled as she was on the subject, Lady Lindores fell, first, into the snare of feeling, with relief, that to escape from further persecution of the same kind was an advantage worth a sacrifice; and second, that Millefleurs, if he was fat, was good and true, and that to be a duchess was something when all that could be said was said against it. For, to be sure, the season in town had its influences, and she was more susceptible to the attractions of greatness, wealth, and high title before it than after. Indeed he was not the husband she would have desired for her child; and she wanted—imprudent woman!—no husband at all for her child, who was the chief consolation left to her in the world. Still, if Edith must marry, as Rintoul said—if she must marry to increase the family importance and influence, which was what Lord Lindores had insisted upon in respect to that pitiful sacrifice at Tinto—why then, influence, wealth, greatness, everything, were united in the little person of Millefleurs, who was, besides, a very nice boy, and amused Edith, and would never harm any woman. This was the conclusion to which a thousand harassing lectures and remonstrances had brought her. She had not said a word of the change, which had worked imperceptibly, and chiefly in the long sleepless night of the railway journey, to Edith; and yet, with natural inconsistency, she was vexed and annoyed that Edith should still laugh, as they had so often laughed together, at little Millefleurs. And both Edith and John, though his suspicions were not yet aroused on this subject, felt the keenness of irritation and vexed dissatisfaction in her tone. He withdrew soon after—for even the merest insinuation of a family jar is painful to an outsider—but not before Lord Lindores had come in, with much friendliness, to beg him to come back to dinner, and engage his immediate aid in the scheme which had already brought our young man some trouble. "I want you to meet Rintoul," said the Earl. "I want you both to make your appearance at Dunearn next week at the county meeting. I am going to produce those plans I spoke to you about, and I hope to move them to some definite step. We shall have a strong opposition, and the more support I can calculate on the better. Rintoul has no gift of speech; he'll say his say in his solid, straightforward, positive sort of manner. But the Scotch are proud of good speaking. I don't know what your gifts may be in that way."

"Oh, *nil*," said John.

"If you were a Frenchman, I should take you at your word; but in England there's no telling. A young man has but one formula. If he is a natural orator, he gives just the same answer as if he can't put two words together. That is what we call our national modesty. I wish for the moment you were as vain as a Frenchman, Erskine—then I should know the facts of the case. I daresay you speak very well—you have the looks of it; and it will be a great thing for me if you will second and stand by Rintoul. If he muddles his statement—which is quite likely, for the boy is as ignorant as a pig—you must set him right, and laugh a little at the defects of English education: that pleases a Scotch audience."

"I think," said Lady Lindores, "that you are putting a great deal upon Mr Erskine."

"Am I?" said her husband; "but it is in a good cause."

Perhaps this was too lightly said. John took his leave with a half-mortified, half-humorous consciousness that he was to have about the person of this young nobleman something like the same post enjoyed by Beaufort in respect to Millefleurs, but with neither present emolument nor prospect of promotion. And he felt sure that he should not like the fellow, John said to himself. Nevertheless seven o'clock (they kept early hours in the country) saw him walking lightly, as no man ever walked to a disagreeable appointment, towards the Castle. Impossible to thread those shrubberies, to cross those lawns, without a rising of the heart. "Doors where my heart was wont to beat." Nowhere else in the world did he hasten with the same step, did he feel the very neighbourhood of the place affect his pulses in the same way. It was the home to which his thoughts went before him, imagining many happinesses which perhaps did not come, but which always might come—which lived there, to be tasted one time or another. This occupation with the affairs of Lindores, with the new-comer, and the Earl's schemes, and so many secondary subjects, prevented him from entering into the questions which had so deeply discouraged him on the night of their return. He did not ask himself what he had to expect, what he had to do with them. He had a great deal to do with them in the meantime, and that by their own desire.

But John's instinct had not been at fault in respect to Rintoul. They met as a gamekeeper and poacher might meet, if persons of these classes had an indifferent meeting-ground in polite society, like their masters. A mutual scrutiny and suspicion were in their eyes. John, the more generous of the two, made up his mind to nothing save an instinctive hostility to the heir of the house, and a conviction that Rintoul would stand in his way, though he scarcely knew how. But Rintoul, on his side, being what his mother called positive and practical in the highest degree, had no hesitation whatever in deciding upon John's meaning and motives. They were each so much preoccupied in this hostile sense with each other, that Lord Lindores's exhortations after dinner, as to the part he expected both to play, were received with small appreciation. Rintoul yawned visibly, and asked his father whether it was in reason to expect a fellow to plunge into business the moment he got home. John's natural desire to say something conciliatory to the father thus contradicted by his son, which is the instinct of every spectator, was strengthened by his opposition to the special son in question; but even he could not cast off his personality enough to embrace an abstract subject at such a moment: and the two young men escaped, by the only mutual impulse they seemed likely to feel, to the ladies, leaving Lord Lindores to take his share of the vexation and disappointment which visit most mortals impartially in their time. The ladies were out upon the lawn, which lay under the windows of the drawing-room, and from which, as from most places in the neighbourhood, a wide expanse of landscape, culminating in the house of Tinto with its red flag, was visible. The house of Tinto was to the Lindores family that culminating-point of human care, the one evil that heightens all others, which is almost invariable in family experiences. Here their one prevailing pain, the one trouble that would not allow itself to be forgotten; and sometimes they felt the very sight of the scene to be intolerable. But quiet was in the air of the lingering endless night, so sweet, so unearthly, so long continued, making the hours like days.

"Ah, to be sure, that's Tinto," said Rintoul; "what a fine place it is, to be sure! Carry ought to be proud of such a place. And how do all the squires and squireens—or the lairds, I suppose I should say, for local colour,—how do they like his red flag? There ought to be plenty of hatred and malice on that score."

"Nobody hates or bears malice to our Carry, that I can hear of," said his mother, with a reproving glance. Her eye caught that of John, and she blushed almost violently—for was not he the representative of the squires and squireens?

"But Torrance and Carry are one flesh," said Rintoul.

"I ought to speak on the subject, as I am the only representative of the accused," said John, with an attempt at a lighter tone; but it was not very successful, and there was a sense of possible commotion in the air, like the approach of a thunderstorm, which the women were far too sensitive not to feel—and they threw themselves into the breach, as was natural. When John took his leave, as the lingering daylight still lasted, they strolled with him through the shrubberies, accompanying him towards the gate. It was Lady Lindores herself who took the initiative in this, as her son thought, extraordinary condescension. Rintoul followed, keeping his sister walking by his side, with indignant surprise painted all over him. "Do you mean to say you do this every time that fellow is here?" he asked, wrathfully. "We have never been out of doors before when Mr Erskine has gone away," cried Edith, equally angry, in self-defence. Meanwhile the voices of the others, who were in advance, went on peacefully: they talked, unconscious of criticism, while the brother and sister listened. John had begun to tell Lady Lindores of the entertainments he meant to give. He avowed that they had been planned by Rolls, though his first intention had been to keep this fact to himself; but the humour of it overcame him. He could not refrain from communicating so amusing a circumstance to the kind woman, who never misunderstood, and who received all his confidences with maternal pleasure. He was pleased to hear her laugh, and not displeased to lay open the condition of his household to her, and the humours of the old servants, in whose hands he was still a boy. "It is, don't you think, a judicious despotism on the whole?" he said. The sound of her laugh was delightful in his ears, even though a more sensitive narrator might have thought the laugh to be directed against himself.

"It is a delightful despotism," said Lady Lindores; "and as we shall benefit by it in the present case, I entirely approve of Rolls. But I think, perhaps, if I were you, I would not unfold the whole matter to Miss Barbara. Your aunt is born a great lady, Mr Erskine. She might take it as quite right and within the duty of an old retainer; but again, she might take a different view. For my part, I entirely approve. It is exactly the right thing to do."

"You are always so kind," said John, gratefully; "and perhaps you will advise me in matters that are beyond my prime minister's sphere."

"Rolls and I!" she said, laughing; "it is not often a young man has such a pair of counsellors." Her laugh was so fresh and genuine that it sounded like the laugh of youth. Her children behind her had their curiosity greatly excited: Edith with a little wonder, to think what John could be saying to amuse her mother so much; Rintoul with high indignation, to see in what favour this country neighbour was held.

"What does my mother mean?" he said, grumbling in Edith's ear. "She will turn that fellow's head. I never knew anything so out of place. One would think, to see you with him, that he was—why, your dearest friend, your,—I don't know what to say."

"Perhaps you had better not say anything, in case it should be something disagreeable," said Edith, with a sudden flush of colour. "Mr Erskine is our nearest neighbour—and I hope my mother, at least, does not want any guidance from you."

"Oh, doesn't she, though!" murmured Rintoul in his moustache. To his own consciousness his mother was the member of his family who stood the most in need of his guidance. He thought her the most imprudent woman he had ever come across, paying no attention to her children's prospects. They went on thus till they came to the gate, where the Countess of Lindores was actually to be seen by the woman at the lodge, or by any passing wayfarer, in her dinner-dress, with nothing but a lace cap on her head—and Edith, in her white robes and shining hair—saying good-bye to this rustic neighbour, this insidious squire! Rintoul could not for some time relieve his soul as he wished. He was compelled to shake hands too, in a surly way; and it was not till Edith had left them that he permitted himself to make, as he said, a few remarks to his mother. She was lingering outside, for it was still daylight though it was night.

"Mother," said Rintoul, solemnly, "I see it's all exactly as I feared. You have let that fellow Erskine get to be a sort of tame cat about the house."

"After?" said his mother, with a smile.

"After! well, that's as you choose. But of this you may be sure, mother, my father won't stand it. It will only make trouble in the house. He won't let Edith throw herself away. You had better put a stop to it while you are able. I suspected it from the first moment I knew that Erskine was here."

"You are very wise, Rintoul," said his mother, with grieved displeasure, all the pain and disenchantment which she had managed to put aside and forget coming back into her troubled eyes.

"I don't know if I'm very wise; but I know something of the world," said the son, who was so much better instructed than she was; "and I know, when one has charge of a girl, one oughtn't to allow her to throw herself away."

"Carry is supposed not to have thrown herself away," said the indignant mother, with a glance towards that centre of her saddest thoughts, the arrogant front and false battlements of Tinto, faintly gleaming like royal Windsor itself in the mists of distance. This was all in contradiction to the changed state of her mind towards Millefleurs and the gradual leaning towards a great marriage for Edith which had come over her. But we are never more hot in defence of our own side than when we have begun to veer towards the other; and Rintoul's lectures had been for a long time more than his mother could endure.

"No, Carry cannot be said to have thrown herself away," he said thoughtfully, stroking that moustache which looked so young, while its owner was so wise and politic. "Carry should remember," he said, after a pause, "that she's an individual, but the family comprises many people—heaps of her descendants will be grateful to her, you know. And if the fellow is unbearable, why, a woman has always got it in her own hands to make his life a burden to him. Why is she so absurdly domestic? They have quantities of money, and there are plenty of brutes in society to keep him in countenance. She ought to come to town and see people, and enjoy herself. What is the good of living like a cabbage here?"

"If you will persuade Carry to emancipate herself a little—to think of herself a little—I will forgive you all your worldly-mindedness," said his mother, with a smile.

"I will try," he said; "and as for my worldly-mindedness, as you call it, how is a fellow to get on in the world, I should like to know? It isn't by money *I'll* ever push my way. I must look out for other ways and means."

"Does that mean an heiress, Rintoul?"

His mother was half laughing, half serious. But there was no laughter in Rintoul's countenance. The corners of his mouth were drawn down. His eyes were as solemn as if the matter in question had been life or death.

"You may be sure I'll do my duty to the family, whether I like it or not," he said, with heroic gravity. "I don't mean to recommend other people to do what I'll not do myself."

But Rintoul sighed. He was heroic, indeed, but he was human. A breath of soft recollections came over him. He, too, had entertained other thoughts—he had allowed himself to be beguiled to gentler visions. But when the voice of duty bade, he felt that he had it in him to be superior to all weaknesses. Come an heiress of sufficient pretensions to be worthy of the son of Lindores, and he would buckle his manhood to him, and marry her without wincing. His duty he was at all times ready to do; but yet to the softer part of life, to the dreams of a youth unawakened to such stern purposes of heroism, he might yet be permitted to give a sigh.

John Erskine was the very opposite of this predestined martyr. He felt no weight of family responsibility upon him. All that he wished was—a good wish enough, if it had not been altogether beyond possibility of fulfilment—that the last lord of Lindores had lived to be a patriarch, and had been succeeded by his son in the course of nature. What a difference that would have made to everybody concerned! But our young man did all he could to keep definite plans and hopes out of his mind. He preferred to get the good of each day as it came. If he thought too much of them, he felt a dismal certainty that disappointments would follow. He preferred that his present existence should flow *au jour le jour*.

CHAPTER XXI.

When the news of the approaching festivities at Dalrulzian were known in Dunearn, Miss Barbara Erskine and her household were flung into a whirlpool of excitement such as had not disturbed their calm for more years than could be reckoned. There was, of course, no question as to the immediate acceptance by the old lady of her nephew's invitation to her to do the honours of his house. She was very much touched and pleased—with that satisfaction, above all, which is so sweet to a woman—of feeling that John was doing absolutely "the right thing" in placing her, his old aunt, at the head of affairs. It was a compliment to the family, to the old neighbours, as well as to herself. But it is not too much to say that from the scullery to the drawing-room her house was turned upside-down by this great event. Miss Barbara's first thought was, as was natural, that a great many things would be wanted. She went instantly to her "napery" closet,—Agnes, her old maid, attending her with the key,—and brought out stores of shining damask, milk-white and fragrant, every tablecloth with its pile of napkins, like a hen with chickens. "I never inquired into the napery at Dalrulzian," the old lady said; "but it would be a great temptation to a woman with a sma' family to take the use of it; and for anything I know, he may be in want of table-linen. Ye'll pack a boxful, Agnes, whether or no. There's the great table-cloths with the crown pattern, they are the biggest I have. Ye'll take them, and table-napkins. You may take ten or twelve dozen. They are always useful."

"And you'll take the best silver, mem," said Janet, for this was in her department. If it had been suggested to them that their best Paisley shawls, on which both Janet and Agnes set great store, would have been useful to cover the faded places on the carpet, these devoted women would have sacrificed their most cherished possessions. Miss Barbara's old epergnes and table ornaments, which, happily, were older and less solid than the camel and palm-trees at Tinto, were packed into a huge box, with all her available forks and spoons, and sent off in a cart before her to the scene of the entertainment. Then a still more important question arose as to the help that would be required to produce a dinner and a ball-supper worthy of the Erskine name. Miss Barbara put her trust in Janet, who had managed all her own household affairs for a great number of years. "I'll take ye both with me," she said to the two women, who made her comfort and credit the occupation of their lives, "and when ye consider what's at stake, you'll just put your hand to anything; and ye like a ploy, both of ye, and plenty of young faces about the house."

"Eh, but I do that," said Agnes; "and I would not wonder but Mr John's meaning to take a survey of all the misses, and him a wanter and a bonnie lad into the bargain. We'll maybe hear who it is to be."

But Janet demurred. "It's not to be denied but I would like to go," she said; "and blithe, blithe would I be to put to my hand, if it was only to boil a pitawtie, and proud to think the auld family, so lang away, was holding up its head again. But then there's Bauby Rolls, that's been housekeeper so long, and a good cook and a good woman. She would think we meant to interfere."

"It would ill become either Bauby or any other person to think me interfering in my nephew's house," said Miss Barbara. "Ye'll just come, Janet. I am saying nothing against Bauby; but she'll be out of the way of managing for a pairty."

"There are plenty of pairties in the winter-time," said Janet. "I wouldna stand in other folk's gait. Na, naebody would say *you* were interfering, Miss Barbara. Wha has a better right in your ain nephew's house?—but me, it's another question. I couldna gang ben to her kitchen, or look at a single article, but it would be thought I was meddling. What would I think if Bauby Rolls came here on a veesit to help me? I would say I maun be getting doited, though I cannot see it: I maun be losing the use o' my faculties. I judge of her by mysel'. She would think the same of me. But Agnes, you can take her," said the housekeeper, with a fine and delicate contempt. "She has aye her head full of whigmaleeries; but she'll stand in nobody's way."

"I'll not ask your leave, Janet, to take my own woman with me," said Miss Barbara, with some annoyance.

"Na, mem, I never thought that," retorted her factotum. "I'm seldom consulted, though maybe it would be none the worse for the family if I were letten say my say. For a ball-supper there's naething better than a fine boned turkey well stuffed and larded," she added, reflectively; "and I'm no' against soup. It's new-fashioned; but there's new-fashioned things that's just as good as the old. One thing I set my face against is thae new drinks—Cup as they call them. They take an awfu' quantity of wine; and in the heat o' the dancing thae young things will just spoil their stomachs, never thinking what they're swallowing. That's my opinion. I'm no' saying I'm ony authority, and Mr Rolls will have a' that in his hands, and will not lippen to a woman; but that's my opinion. It's an awfu' waste of wine. I would rather give them good honest champagne out of the bottle, that they might see what they are taking, far sooner than that wasteful Cup."

"That's very true, Janet," said Miss Barbara; "I'm of that opinion myself. But in most houses it's the gentleman himself (when there is a gentleman) that manages the cellar; and it would never do for a lady to say anything. But I will mind to tell him (for it's my own opinion), if he consults me."

"And for sweet things, there's nothing like ice-creams, if she can make them," said Janet. "If she were to say, mem, of her own accord, that she has little experience, you might send me a line by the postman, and I would do my best; but no' unless it's of her own accord. Na, na; I ken by mysel'. If a strange woman were to come into my kitchen and meddle with my denner! But tak' you Agnes, Miss Barbara. She might make up a match yet, for a' that's come and gane, with Tammas Rolls."

Miss Barbara appeared accordingly at Dalrulzian the day before the great dinner, in her old coach, with her two best gowns in the imperial, and all her old ornaments, and with Agnes her maid seated primly by her, inside. The chariot was almost as old as Miss Barbara herself, and was kept for great occasions. It was drawn by two somewhat funereal black horses from the Red Lion at Dunearn—altogether a solemn turn-out, and quite unlike the handy little phaeton in which usually the old lady drove about. The postboy took away those noble steeds when he had housed the chariot in the Dalrulzian stables, to which he was to return in four days to take it back with its mistress. And Miss Barbara bore a grave though cheerful countenance as she walked into the drawing-room, and took her place there on the great tapestry sofa. The box of plate and linen had arrived before her, and she felt that it was necessary at once to look into the details of the proposed entertainment. "Will you send the housekeeper to me," she said to Rolls, with dignity, thinking it beneath the solemnity of the occasion to call Bauby by any less weighty title. Bauby came in with good-natured alacrity; but she was somewhat abashed by the air of gravity on Miss Barbara's face, whom she was not accustomed to see in such state. "Come in, my woman," said the old lady. "It's a great responsibility for you to have the charge of all this. You will like a little assistance with your dinner. I'm well aware that both that and the supper for the ball are in very good hands so far as the provisions go. But your master being young, and without experience, and as there's no lady in the house, I think it my duty to be of service," Miss Barbara said. Bauby stood before her greatly flushed, and laid a number of hems, one over the other, on her apron. "Hoot, mem, we'll just manage fine," she said, growing red. But this did not satisfy the august old lady.

"If you're in want of any help," she said, "there's a woman of mine——"

Rolls, who had been waiting outside the door, came to the rescue. He appeared behind the flushed Bauby. "She's a confused creature," he said, "but she knows her business. We've put it all down, Miss Barbara, in the new-fashioned way. I'm aware that at the Castle and other grand places it's written in French, but good Scots is good enough for us."

It was no small effort to find and produce from Bauby's pocket the bill of fare of the approaching dinner. But this document took away Miss Barbara's breath. It was some time before she got over it. Instead of the chaos which she half feared, yet half hoped for, as a means of exercising her own gifts on her nephew's behalf, it was an elaborate *menu*, drawn out in full form, that was placed before her eyes. The old lady was struck dumb for a moment, and when she spoke there was a certain awe in her tone. "If you can set a dinner like that on the table," she said, "I have not a word to say."

"Oh, mem, we'll manage fine," said Bauby, in her soft, round, good-humoured voice.

"Miss Barbara," said Rolls, "I'm no braggart; but I've seen a thing or two in my life. And Bauby, she has far more in her than appears. She's just a confused creature in speech; but pit her to her goblets and her sauces, and she kens well what she's about. She has the real spirit of it in her; and when her blood's up for the credit of the family——"

"Eh, mem!" cried Bauby herself, putting her apron to her eyes, for her tears came readily; "do you think I would let them say that Mr John couldna give a denner as good as the best? and he such a fine lad, and wanting a wife, and his mammaw so far away!"

"Never you mind his mammaw," cried Miss Barbara, with natural family feeling; "she was never a great manager. But if you set that dinner on the table, Bauby Rolls, you're a woman worthy of all respect, and I hope my nephew will know when he's well off."

She withdrew to the room prepared for her after this, a little crestfallen, yet doing due honour to the native powers. "We'll say nothing to Janet," she said to her faithful old maid, as she sat at her toilet. "Janet is an excellent woman, and just the right person for a house like mine. But she has not that invention. Four made dishes, besides all the solids! We'll not say a word to Janet. It would be more than she could bear."

"You see, Miss Barbara, there's two of them to settle it," said Agnes, as she brushed out the old lady's abundant white hair; "and a man is awfu' discriminating about eating and drinking. He may not have sense like a woman, but he has more taste of his mouth."

"There is something in that," said her mistress; "if it's Rolls, John has got a treasure in that man. The Cornel's dinners were always very English, to my way of thinking—but that would be their own fault; or if it's my nephew himself——" she added, doubtfully. What was a great quality in Rolls catering for other people, would have been almost a vice, in the eyes of this prejudiced old lady, in the young master of the house.

"Mr John!" said Agnes, still more moved,—"a bonnie lad like him! Na, na; it would never be that. It'll be the young misses, and not the dishes, he will be thinking about. And who knows but we may see the one that's his choice? And I wish she may be a lovely young lady for his sake."

"She would need to be something more than that," said Miss Barbara, shaking her head. "A little money would be a great advantage to the estate."

"Eh, but mem, he maun marry for love," said Agnes; "what's siller in comparison? And I think I know Somebody for my pairt——"

"Whisht, Agnes," said her mistress peremptorily; "whatever thought may be in your head, to name it spoils all."

For these two simple women were still of opinion that Providence had created John Erskine's wife for him, and that he could not mistake the guidance of that unerring hand.

CHAPTER XXII.

The ball was in full career; everybody had come to it from all the houses within reach, and the radius was wide—extending over the whole county. It was universally acknowledged that nobody could have imagined the drawing-room at Dalrulzian to be so large—and though the mothers and the old ladies were in a great state of alarm as to the facilities for stepping forth through the long windows after a dance, yet the young people, indifferent to the northern chill which they had been used to all their lives, considered the Walk, which seemed almost a portion of the room, to be the most delightful of all. Rintoul, though with many protestations and much scorn of the little rustic assembly, had been persuaded to wait for it, and was an object of attraction as great as—nay, in some respects greater than—John himself. There were no great young ladies in the company for whom it was worth his while to exert himself, and consequently the young man yielded to the soft flattery of all the pleased and grateful faces around him, and made himself agreeable in general, ending, however, almost invariably at the side of Nora, to whom it was a pleasing compensation for the indifference of the young master of Dalrulzian, who had been so distinctly destined for her by the country. John was very civil to Nora. He went out of his way, indeed, to be civil. He took her about the house, into the library, and the hall, to show her the alterations he was making, and appealed to her about their propriety in a way which Nora felt might have taken in some girls. But she was not taken in. She knew it was merely politeness, and that John would go away as soon as he had done his duty with a certain sense of relief. But Rintoul's attentions were paid in a very different spirit. He asked her to dance as many times as he could without attracting too much notice. Nora felt that he discriminated this line finely, and was half provoked and half flattered by it, feeling acutely that whereas John Erskine did his best to show her all the civility which his position required, Rintoul went against all the duties of his position to get near her, to talk to her in a corner, to devote to her every moment which he could devote to her without remark. He was very careful, very desirous not to commit himself with society; but to Nora, every tone of his voice, every look committed him. She felt—she was a great deal cleverer than Rintoul, and saw through and through him—that to her he was a totally different person from the young man of fashion, who, with a touch of condescension, did his duty to the other young ladies. She saw him in a different light. He toned his words for her. He changed his very sentiments. She was pleased and amused, and at the same time touched, when (for she was too clever) she noted this change coming over him in the middle of a sentence, in the figure of a dance, when he suddenly found himself near her. There could not have been a more complete proof of these sentiments which he was as yet afraid to indulge in, which vanquished him against his will. A girl's pride may be roused by the idea that a man struggles against her power over him, and is unwilling to love her; but at the same time there is a wonderful flattery in the consciousness that his unwillingness avails him nothing, and that reason is powerless in comparison with love. Nora with her keen eyes marked how, when the young man left her to dance or to talk with some one else, he kept, as it were, one eye upon her, watching her partners and her behaviour—and how, the moment he was free, he would gyrate round her, with something which (within herself, always laughing, yet not displeased) she compared to the flutterings of a bird beating its wings against the air, resisting yet compelled to approach some centre of fascination. He would have kept away if he could, but he was not able. She was so much occupied in watching these proceedings of his—seeing the humour of them so completely that she was fain to put her head out at the window, or retire into a corner of the hall, to laugh privately to herself—that she lost the thread of much that was said to her, and sadly wounded the feelings of several of the young officers from Dundee. What they said was as a murmur in her ears, while her mind was engaged in the more amusing study—watching the movements of Rintoul.

The Lindores family had come out in force to grace John's entertainment. Even the Earl himself had come, which was so unusual. He had made up his mind so strenuously as to the support which John was to give to Rintoul's candidateship and his own plans, that he thought it necessary to "countenance," as he said, our young man's proceedings in everything personal to himself. And Lord Lindores, like so many people, did not perceive, in his inspection of the horizon, and desire that this thing and that should be done in the distance, the danger which lay under his very eye. No doubt it was natural that his little daughter Edith should be, as it were, the queen of the entertainment. Not only was she one of the prettiest girls in the county, but she was the first in rank, and therefore the most to be thought of; the first to be honoured, if any honours were going. That was simple enough, and cost him no consideration at all. He made another effort to overcome old Sir James Montgomery's prejudiced opposition, and talked on political matters in the doorways with a great deal of liberality and good-humour, taking with perfect serenity the clumsy gibes which his neighbours would launch at innovators, at people with foreign tastes, at would-be philanthropists. He smiled and "never let on," though sometimes the gibes were galling enough. Lady Lindores sat at the head of the room with Lady Car by her, very gracious too, though sometimes yawning a little privately behind her fan. They spoke to the people who came to speak to them, and acknowledged the new-comers who were introduced to them with benignant smiles. But both mother and daughter were somewhat out of their element. Now and then a lively passage of conversation would break out around them, and anon die off, and they would be left again smiling but silent, giving each other sympathetic glances, and swallowing delicate yawns. "No, I do not dance. You must excuse me," Lady Car said quietly, with that pretty smile which lighted up her pale face like sunshine. She was not pretty—but there could not be a face more full of meaning. Her eyes had some anxiety always in them, but her smile gave to her face something of the character of one whose life was over, to whom it mattered very little what was going to happen, to whom, in short, nothing could happen—to whom Fate had done its worst.

There was a brief pause in the gaiety, and of a sudden, as will sometimes happen, the murmur of talk in all the different groups, the hum of the multitude at its pleasantest and lightest, was suspended. When such a pause occurs it will frequently be filled and taken possession of for the moment by some louder or more persistent scrap of conversation from an individual group, which suddenly seems to become the chief thing in the crowd, listened to by all. Ordinarily it is the most trivial chit-chat, but now and then the ranks will open, as it were, to let something of vital importance, some revelation, some germ of quarrel, some fatal hint or suggestion, be heard. This time it was Torrance, always loud-voiced, whose words suddenly came out in the hearing of the entire company. He happened at the moment to be standing with John Erskine contemplating the assembly in general. Rintoul was close by, lingering for a moment to address a passing civility to the matron whose daughter he had just brought back to her side. Torrance had been in the supper-room, and was charged with champagne. He was not a drunkard, but he habitually took a great deal of wine, the result of which was only to make him a little more himself than usual, touching all his qualities into exaggeration—a little louder, a little more rude, cynical, and domineering. He was surveying the company with his big staring eyes.

"This makes me think," he said, "of the time when I was a wanter, as they say. Take the good of your opportunities, John Erskine. Take your chance, man, while ye have it. When a man's married, he's done for; nobody cares a fig for him more. But before he's fixed his choice, the whole world is at his call. Then's the time to be petted and made of—everybody smiling upon you,—instead of sitting with one peevish face on the other side of the fire at home."

He ended this speech with one of his huge rude laughs; and there are a great many such speeches permitted in society, laughed at even by those who are themselves the point of the moral. But Rintoul was in an excited condition of mind; contradictory to all his own tenets; going in his heart against his own code; kicking against the pricks. He turned round sharply with a certain pleasure in finding somebody upon whom to let forth an ill-humour which had been growing in him. "You forget, Torrance, who I am, when you speak of this peevish face before me."

"You!—troth I forgot your existence altogether," said Torrance, after a pause of astonishment, and a prolonged stare ending in another laugh.

Rintoul flushed a furious red. He was excited by the rising of a love which he meant to get the better of, but which for the moment had got the better of him; and by all the restraints he had put upon himself, and which public opinion required should be put upon him. He flashed upon his brother-in-law an angry glance, which in its way was like the drawing of a sword.

"You had better," he said, "recall my existence as quickly as you can, Torrance—for it may be necessary to remind you of it very sharply one of these days, from all I hear."

Torrance replied by another loud insulting laugh. "I mind you well enough when I hear you crow, my little cock-o'-the-walk," he said.

The conversation had got thus far during the pause which has been described. But now the whole assembly rushed into talk with a general tremor, the band struck up, the dancers flew off with an energy which was heightened by a little panic. Everybody dislikes a family quarrel: the first beginnings of it may excite curiosity, but at a certain point it alarms the most dauntless gossip. To get out of the way of it, the world in general will take any trouble. Accordingly the ranks closed with the eagerness of fear, to continue the metaphor, and the two belligerents were hidden at once from sight and hearing. Men began to talk in their deepest basses, women in their shrillest trebles, and how it ended nobody knew. There were a great many whispered questions and remarks made afterwards when the crisis was over. "Young Erskine had all the trouble in the world to smooth it over." "One doesn't know what would have happened if old Sir James had not got hold of Lord Rintoul." "Half-a-dozen men got round Pat Torrance. They made believe to question him about some racing—and that quieted him," cried one and another, each into the nearest ear; and the whole assembly with a thrill watched the family of Lindores in all its movements, and saw significance in every one of these. This was the only *contretemps* that occurred in the whole programme of the festivities at Dalrulzian. It passed out of hearing of Lady Car, who sat the evening out with that soft patience as of one whose day was over—the little smile, the little concealed yawn, the catch of conversation when any one who could talk drifted by her. Dr Stirling and she discussed Wordsworth for a whole half-hour, which was the only part of the entertainment that withdrew her at all from herself. "And his noble philosophy of sorrow," she said, "which is the finest of all. The part which he gives it in the world——" "I am not clear in my own mind," said the Doctor, "that sorrow by itself does good to anybody." "Stretch a hand through time to catch the far-off interest of tears," cried Lady Car with an unfathomable distance in her mild eyes, shaking her head at him and smiling. This was her point of enjoyment. When she thought the hour at which she might withdraw was coming, she sent to her husband to know if he was ready, still quite unaware of his utterance about the peevish face. Poor Lady Car! her face was not peevish. It was somewhat paler than usual, so much as that was possible, as she watched him coming towards her. The more wine he took the less supportable he was. Alarm came into her gentle eyes. "Oh yes, I'm ready," he said; "I've been here long enough," in a tone which she understood well. She thought it was possibly John who had given him offence, and took leave of her host quickly, holding out her hand to him in passing with a word. "I must not stop to congratulate you now. I will tell how well it has gone off next time I see you," she said hastily. But her brother would not be shaken off so easily. He insisted on keeping by her side, and took a tender leave of her only at the carriage-door, walking along with her as though determined to make a demonstration of his brotherly regard. "I shall see you again, Rintoul, before you go?" "No," he cried; "good-bye, Car. I am not coming to Tinto again." What did it mean? But as they drove home through the dark, shut up together in that strict enclosure, her husband did not fail to make her acquainted with what had happened. "What's his business, I should like to know?" Torrance cried. "Of course it's your complaints, Lady Car. You set yourselves up as martyrs, you white-faced women. You think it gives you a charm the more; but I'll charm them that venture to find fault with me," he cried, with his hot breath, like a strong gale of wine and fury, on her cheek. What disgust was in her breast along with the pain! "There's no duels now, more's the pity," said Torrance: "maybe you think it's as well for me, and that your brother might have set you free, my lady." "I have never given you any cause to say so," she cried from her corner, shrinking from him as far as possible. What a home-going that was! and the atmosphere of wine, and heat, and rude fury, and ruder affection, from which she could not escape, was never to escape all her wretched life. Poor Lady Car! with nothing but a little discussion about Wordsworth or Shelley to stand in place of happiness to her heart.

"I have been quarrelling with that brother-in-law of mine," Rintoul said to Nora in the next dance, which he ought not to have had, he knew, and she knew, though she had been persuaded to throw off, for him, a lagging partner. He had not said a word about the quarrel to his mother or sister, but to Nora he could not help telling it. He broke even the strained decorum which he had been painfully keeping up for this cause. Already he had danced more than was usual with one partner, but this was too strong for him. He could not resist the temptation.

"Oh, Lord Rintoul!"

"Yes, I have quarrelled with him. To hear how he spoke of Carry was more than I could bear. Now *you* will never betray me; tell me, I daren't ask any one else. Is he supposed to be—Jove! I can't say the word—unkind to poor Car?"

"He is very proud of her—he thinks there is no one like her. I don't think he means it, Lord Rintoul."

"Means it!—but he is so, because he is a brute, and doesn't know what he is doing."

"They are not—very like each other," said Nora, hesitating; "but everybody must have seen that before."

"Yes, I own it," said Rintoul. "I take shame to myself. Oh that money, that money!" he cried with real passion, giving her hand a cruel unnecessary grip, as he led her back to the dance; "the things that one is obliged to look over, and to wink at, on account of that."

"But no one is forced to consider it at all—to that extent," Nora said.

"To what extent?" Rintoul asked, and then he gave her hand another squeeze, always under cover of the dance. "You are above it—but who is like you?" he said, as he whirled her away into the crowd. This was far indeed for so prudent a young man to go.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The summer went over without any special incident. August and the grouse approached, or rather the Twelfth approached, August having already come. Every bit of country not arable or clothed with pasture, was purple and brilliant with heather; and to stand under the columns of the fir-trees on a hillside, was to be within such a world of "murmurous sound" as you could scarcely attain even under the southern limes, or by the edge of the sea. The hum of the bees among the heather—the warm luxurious sunshine streaming over that earth-glow of heather-bells—what is there more musical, more complete? These hot days are rare, and the sportsman does not esteem them much; but when they come, the sun that floods the warm soil, the heather that glows back again in endless warmth and bloom, the bees that never intermit their hum "numerous" as the lips of any poet, the wilder mystic note that answers from the boughs of the scattered firs, make up a harmony of sight and sound to which there are few parallels. So Lord Millefleurs thought when he climbed up the hill above Dalrulzian, and looking down on the other side, saw the sea of brilliant moorland, red and purple and golden, with gleams here and there of the liveliest green,—fine knolls of moss upon the grey-green of the moorland grass. He declared it was "a new experience," with a little lisp, but a great deal of feeling. Lady Lindores and Edith were of the party with John Erskine. They had lunched at Dalrulzian, and John was showing his poor little place with a somewhat rueful civility to the Duke of Lavender's son. Millefleurs was all praise and admiration, as a visitor ought to be; but what could he think of the handful of a place, the small house, the little wood, the limited establishment? They had been recalling the Eton days, when John was, the little Marquis declared, far too kind a fag-master. "For I must have been a little wretch," said the little fat man, folding his hands with angelical seriousness and simplicity. Lady Lindores, who had once smiled at his absurdities with such genial liking, could not bear them now, since she had taken up the idea that Edith might be a duchess. She glanced at her daughter to see how she was taking it, and was equally indignant with Millefleurs for making himself ridiculous, and with Edith for laughing. "I have no doubt you were the best fag that ever was," she said.

"Dear Lady Lindores! always so good and so kind," said Millefleurs, clasping his little fat hands. "No, dearest lady, I was a little brute; I know it. To be kicked every day would have been the right thing for me—and Erskine, if I recollect right, had an energetic toe upon occasions, but not often enough. Boys are brutes in general:—with the exception of Rintoul, who, I have no doubt, was a little angel. How could he be anything else, born in such a house?"

"If you think Lindores has so good an effect, Rintoul was not born there," she said, laughing, but half vexed: for she had not indeed any idea of being laughed at in her turn, and she was aware that she had never thought Rintoul an angel. But Lord Millefleurs went on seriously—

"Rintoul will despise me very much, and so, probably, will Erskine; but I do not mean to go out to-morrow. I take the opportunity here of breaking the news. If it is as fine as this, I shall come out here (if you will let me) and lie on this delicious heather, watch you strolling forth, and listen to the crack of the guns. No; I don't object to it on principle. I like grouse, and I suppose that's the best way to kill them, if you will take so much trouble; but for me, it is not my way of enjoyment. I was not made to be a son of civilisation. Do not laugh, Lady Edith, please; you hurt my feelings. If you take luncheon to the sportsmen anywhere, I will go with you: unless you, as I suppose you will, despise me too."

"I don't think it is such a noble thing to shoot birds, Lord Millefleurs."

"But yet you don't dislike grouse—and it must be killed somehow," said John, somewhat irritated, as was natural.

"My dear fellow, I don't find fault with you. I see your position perfectly. It is a thing you have always done. It is an occupation, and at the same time an excitement, a pleasure. I have felt the same thing in California with the cattle. But it doesn't amuse me, and I am not a great shot. I will help to carry your luncheon, if Lady Lindores will let me, and enjoy the spectacle of so many healthy happy persons who feel that they have earned their dinner. All that I sympathise in perfectly. You will excuse me saying dinner," said Millefleurs, with pathos. "When we got our food after a morning's work we always called it dinner. In many things I have quite returned to civilisation; but there are some particulars still in which I slip—forgive me. May we sit down here upon the heather and tell stories? I had a reputation once in that way. You would not care for my stories, Lady Edith; you know them all by heart. Now this is what I call delightful," said little Millefleurs, arranging himself carefully upon the heather, and taking off his hat. "You would say it is lovely, if you were an American."

"Do you mean the moor? I think it is very lovely, with all the heather and the gorse, and the burns and the bees. Out of Scotland, is there anything like it?" Edith said.

"Oh yes, in several places; but it is not the moor, it is the moment. It is lovely to sit here. It is lovely to enjoy one's self, and have a good time. Society is becoming very American," said Millefleurs. "There are so many about. They are more piquant than any other foreigners. French has become absurd, and Italian pedantic; but it is amusing to talk a foreign language which is in English words, don't you know."

"You are to come back with them to dinner, Mr Erskine," Lady Lindores said. She thought it better, notwithstanding her prevailing fear that Millefleurs would be absurd, to leave him at liberty to discourse to Edith, as he loved to discourse. "I hope you are going to have a fine day. The worst is, you will all be so tired at night you will not have a word to bestow upon any one."

"I have not too many at any time," said John, with a glance, which he could not make quite friendly, at the visitor—who was flowing blandly on with his lisp, with much gentle demonstration, like a chemical operator or a *prestidigitateur*, with his plump hands. Our young man was not jealous as yet, but a little moved with envy—being not much of a talker, as he confessed—of Millefleurs's fluency. But he had thrown himself at Edith's feet, and in this position felt no bitterness, nor would have changed places with any one, especially as now and then she would give him a glance in which there was a secret communication and mirthful comment upon the other who occupied the foreground. Lady Lindores preferred, however, that he should talk to her and withdraw his observation from her daughter. Reluctantly, against the grain, she was beginning in her turn to plot and to scheme. She was ashamed of herself, yet, having once taken up the plan, it touched her pride that it should be carried out.

"I have always found you had words enough whenever you wished to say them," she said. "Perhaps you will tell me everybody has that. And Lord Lindores tells me you don't do yourself justice, Mr Erskine. He says you speak very well, and have such a clear head. I think," she added with a sigh, "it is you who ought to be in Parliament, and not Rintoul."

"That is past thinking of," John said, with a little heightened colour. He thought so himself; but neither could the party bear a divided interest, nor had he himself any influence to match that of Lord Lindores.

"You are going to Tinto on Tuesday," said Lady Lindores, "with the rest? Do you know, Mr Erskine, my boy has never met his brother-in-law since that evening here, when some words passed. I never could make out what they were. Not enough to make a quarrel of? not enough to disturb Carry——"

"I do not think so. It was only a—momentary impatience," John said.

"Mr Erskine, I am going to ask you a great favour. It is if you would keep in Rintoul's company, keep by him; think, in a family how dreadful it would be if any quarrel sprang up. The visit will not last long. If you will keep your eye upon him, keep between him and temptation——"

John could not help smiling. The position into which he was being urged, as a sort of governor to Rintoul, was entirely absurd to his own consciousness. "You smile," cried Lady Lindores, eagerly; "you think what right has this woman to ask so much? I am not even a very old friend."

"I am laughing at the idea that Rintoul should be under my control; he is more a man of the world than I am."

"Yes," said his mother, doubtfully, "that is true. He is dreadfully worldly in some ways; but, Mr Erskine, I wonder if you will disapprove of me when I say it has been a comfort to me to find him quite boyish and impulsive in others? He is prudent—about Edith for example."

"About—Lady Edith?" John said, faltering, with a look of intense surprise and anxiety on his face.

There is no doubt that Lady Lindores was herself a most imprudent woman. She gave him a quick sudden glance, reddened, and then looked as suddenly at the other group: Millefleurs, flowing forth in placid talk, with much eloquent movement of his plump hands, and Edith listening, with a smile on her face which now and then seemed ready to overflow into laughter. She betrayed herself and all the family scheme by this glance,—so sudden, so unintentional,—the action of one entirely unskilled in the difficult art of deception. John's glance followed hers with a sudden shock and pang of dismay. He had not thought of it before; now in a moment he seemed to see it all. It was an unfortunate moment too; for Edith was slightly leaning forward, looking at her companion with a most amiable and friendly aspect, almost concealing, with the forward stoop of her pretty figure, the rotund absurdity of his. She smiled, yet she was listening to him with all the absorbed attention of a Desdemona; and the little brute had so much to say for himself! The blood all ran away from John's healthful countenance to replenish his heart, which had need of it in this sudden and most unlooked-for shock. Lady Lindores saw the whole, and shared the shock of the discovery, which to her was double, for she perceived in the same moment that she had betrayed herself, and saw what John's sentiments were. Some women divine such feelings from their earliest rise—foresee them, indeed, before they come into existence, and are prepared for the emergencies that must follow; but there are some who are always taken by surprise. She, too, became pale with horror and dismay. She ought to have foreseen it—she ought to have guarded against it; but before she had so much as anticipated such a danger, here it was!

"I mean," she faltered, "that she should—meet only the best people, go to the best houses—and that sort of thing; even that she should be perfectly dressed; he goes so far as that," she said, with an uneasy laugh.

John did not make any reply. He bowed his head slightly, that was all. He found himself, indeed, caught in such a whirlpool of strange emotion, that he could not trust his voice, nor even his thoughts, which were rushing head-long on each other's heels like horses broken loose, and were altogether beyond his control.

"But he is himself as impulsive as a boy," cried the unlucky mother, rushing into the original subject with no longer any very clear perception what it was; "and Mr Torrance's manner, you know, is sometimes—offensive to a sensitive person. He does not mean it," she added hurriedly; "people have such different degrees of perception."

"Yes—people have very different degrees of perception," said John, dreamily; he did not mean it as a reproach. It was the only observation that occurred to him; his mind was in too great a turmoil to be able to form any idea. To think he had never budged from his place at her feet, and that all in a moment this should have happened! He felt as if, like a man in a fairy tale, he had been suddenly carried off from the place in which he was, and was hearing voices and seeing visions from some dull distance, scarcely knowing what they meant.

Meanwhile Millefleurs purled on like the softest little stream, smooth English brooklet, without breaks or boulders. He was never tired of talking, and himself was his genial theme. "I am aware that I am considered egoistical," he said. "I talk of things I am acquainted with. Now, you know most things better than I do—oh yeth! women are much better educated nowadays than men; but my limited experiences are, in their way, original. I love to talk of what I know. Then my life over yonder was such fun. If I were to tell you what my mates called me, you would adopt the name ever after by way of laughing at me: but there was no ridicule in their minds."

"I hope you don't think I would take any such liberty, Lord Millefleurs."

"It would be no liberty; it would be an honour. I wish you would do it. They called me Tommy over there. Now, my respectable name is Julian. Imagine what a downfall. I knew you would laugh: but they meant no harm. I acknowledge myself that it was very appropriate. When a man has the misfortune to be plump and not very tall—I am aware that is a pretty way of putting it; but then, you don't expect me to describe my personal appearance in the coarsest terms—it is so natural to call him Tommy. I was the nurse when any of them were ill. You have no notion how grateful they were, these rough fellows. They used to curse me, you know—that was their way of being civil—and ask where I had got such soft hands." Here Millefleurs produced those articles, and looked at them with a certain tenderness. "I was always rather vain of my hands," he said, with the most childlike *naïveté*, "but never so much as when Jack and Tim d——d them, in terms which I couldn't repeat in a lady's presence, and asked me where the something I had learned to touch a fellow like that? It occurred to me after that I might have studied surgery, and been of some use that way; but I was too old," he said, a soft little sigh agitating his plump bosom—"and then I have other duties. Fortune has been hard upon me," he added, raising pathetically the eyes, which were like beads, yet which languished and became sentimental as they turned upwards. It was when he spoke of Jack and Tim that Edith had looked at him so prettily, bending forward, touched by his tale; but now she laughed without concealment, with a frank outburst of mirth in which the little hero joined with great good-humour, notwithstanding the pathos in his eyes.

This pair were on the happiest terms, fully understanding each other; but it was very different with the others, between whom conversation had wholly ceased. Lady Lindores now drew her shawl round her, and complained that it was getting chilly. "That is the worst of Scotland," she said—"you can never trust the finest day. A sharp wind will come round a corner all in a moment and spoil your pleasure." This was most unprovoked slander of the northern skies, which were beaming down upon her at the moment with the utmost brightness, and promising hours of sunshine; but after such a speech there was nothing to be done but to go down hill again to the house, where the carriage was waiting. John, who lingered behind to pull himself together after his downfall, found, to his great surprise, that Edith lingered too. But it seemed to him that he was incapable of saying anything to her. To point the contrast between himself and Millefleurs by a distracted silence, that, of course, was the very thing to do to take away any shadow of a chance he might still have! But he had no chance. What possibility was there that an obscure country gentleman, who had never done anything to distinguish himself, should be able to stand for a moment against the son of a rich duke, a marquis, a millionaire, and a kind of little hero to boot, who had been very independent and original, and made himself a certain reputation, though it was one of which some people might be afraid? There was only one thing in which he was Millefleurs's superior, but that was the meanest and poorest of all. John felt inclined to burst out into savage and brutal laughter at those soft curves and flowing outlines, as the little man, talking continuously, as he had talked to Edith, walked on in front with her mother. The impulse made him more and more ashamed of himself, and yet he was so mean as to indulge it, feeling himself a cad, and nothing else. Edith laughed too, softly, under her breath. But she said quickly —"We should not laugh at him, Mr Erskine. He is a very good little man. He has done more than all of us put together. They called him Tommy in America," said the traitress, with another suppressed laugh. John was for a moment softened by the "we" with which she began, and the gibe with which she ended. But his ill-humour and jealous rage were too much for him.

"He is Marquis of Millefleurs, and he will be Duke of Lavender," he said, with an energy which was savage, trampling down the tough heather under his feet.

Edith turned and looked at him with astonished eyes. It was a revelation to her also, though for the first moment she scarcely knew of what. "Do you think it is for that reason we like him, Mr Erskine? How strange!" she said, and turned her eyes away with a proud movement of her head, full of indignation and scorn. John felt himself the pettiness and petulance of which he had been guilty; but he was very unhappy, and it seemed to him impossible to say or do anything by which he might get himself pardoned. So he walked along moodily by her side, saying nothing, while Lord Millefleurs held forth just a few steps in advance. Edith bent forward to hear what he was saying, in the continued silence of her companion, and this was a renewed draught of wormwood and gall to John, though it was his own fault. It was with relief that he put the ladies into their carriage, and saw them drive away, though this relief was changed into angry impatience when he found that Millefleurs lingered with the intention of walking, and evidently calculated upon his company. The little Marquis, indeed, took his arm with friendly ease, and turned him with gentle compulsion towards the avenue. "You are going to walk with me," he said. "An excellent thing in Scotland is that it is never too warm to walk, even for me. Come and talk a little. I have been telling tales about myself. I have not heard anything of you. The first is such an easy subject. One has one's little experiences, which are different from any one else's; and wherever there are kind women you find your audience, don't you know?"

"No, I don't know," said John, abruptly. "It never occurs to me to talk about myself. I can't see what interest anybody can have in things that happen to me. Besides, few things do happen for that matter," he added, in an undertone.

"My dear fellow," said Millefleurs, "I don't want to appear to teach you, who are a man of much more intelligence than I. But that ith a mithtake, I must say it. You can always talk best on the subject you know best. Don't you find it a great difference coming here after knocking about the world? Yes, I feel it; but society is quite fresh to me, as fresh as California while it lasts. Then I have had my eyes opened as to my duties. My father and mother are as kind as possible. A friend of mine tells me, and I am partly convinced, that to keep them comfortable is my chief business. You are of that opinion too? there is much to be said for it. It belongs to civilisation; but so long as civilisation lasts, perhaps——And so I am going to marry and range myself," Millefleurs said, with his air of ineffable self-satisfaction, turning up the palms of his fat pink-tinged hands.

"Really!" John cried, with faint derision, feeling as if this innocent exclamation were an oath. "And the lady?" he added, with a still more fierce laugh.

Millefleurs gave his arm a little squeeze. "Not settled yet," he said—"not settled yet. I have seen a great many. There are so many pretty persons in society. If any one of them would ask me, I have no doubt I should be perfectly happy; but choice is always disagreeable. In America also," he added, with some pathos, "there are many very pretty persons: and they like a title. The field is very wide. Let us take an easier subject. Is Beaufort coming to you?"

"His answer is very enigmatical," said John. "I do not know whether he means to come or not."

"He is enigmatical," said Millefleurs. "He is the queerest fellow. What is the connection between him and the family here?"

This question took John entirely by surprise. It was so sudden, both in form and meaning. He had expected his companion, before he paused, to go on for at least five minutes more. He hesitated in spite of himself.

"There is no connection that I know of between him and the family here."

"Oh yes, yes, there is," said Millefleurs, with gentle pertinacity; "think a minute. Erskine, my dear fellow, forgive me, but you must have Beaufort here. If he is not near me, he will lose the confidence of my papa—who will think Beaufort is neglecting his precious son. I speak to you with perfect freedom. Beaufort and I understand each other. I am in no need of a governor, but he is in want of a *protégé*. Don't you see? By this arrangement everything is made comfortable. Beaufort understands me. He knows that control is a mistake in my case. He found me and brought me home, because I was already on my way: he keeps me from harm—for what you call harm has no attraction for me, don't you know. It is only my curiosity that has to be kept in check, and at present I have plenty to occupy that; but my father does not understand all this. Minds of that generation are a little limited, don't you know. They don't see so clearly as one would wish them to see. If Beaufort is long away from me, he will think I am in danger,—that I may bolt again. Also, it will interfere with Beaufort's prospects, which the Duke is to take charge of——"

"But this seems to me rather—not quite straightforward on Beaufort's part," said John.

At this little Millefleurs shrugged his plump shoulders. "It is permitted to humour our elders," he said. "It pleases them and it does no one any harm. Beaufort, don't you know, is not a fellow to walk alone. He is clever and all that; but he will never do anything by himself. Between him and me it suits very well. So, to save the Duke's feelings and to help Beaufort on, you must stretch a point and have him here. It will be thought he is watching over me at a little distance like the sweet little cherub, don't you know, in the song. What objection have they got to seeing him here?"

"None that I know of," said John steadily, turning his face to the other side to escape the scrutiny of those small black bead-like eyes.

"Oh come, come, come!" said little Millefleurs, remonstrating yet coaxing, patting him lightly on the arm, "one sees it must have been one of the daughters. It will do no harm to tell me. Am I such an ignorant? These things are happening every day. Is it this one here?——"

"What are you thinking of?" cried John, angrily. "Lady Edith was only a child."

"Ah! then it was the other one," Millefleurs said, seriously; "that suits me better. It would have been a trifle ridiculous—Beaufort might keep in the background if there is any reason for it: but we must really think of the Duke. He will be in a state of mind, don't you know, and so will my mother. They will think I have bolted again."

"And when is it," said John satirically, for he was sick at heart and irritable in the discovery which he had made, "that Beaufort's mission is to be accomplished, and the Duke to fulfil his hopes?"

Millefleurs laughed a soft rich laugh, not loud. "My dear fellow," he said, "that is when I marry, don't you know. That is my occupation now in the world. When I have a wife, the other will be off duty. I am much interested in my occupation at present. It brings so many specimens of humanity under one's eyes. So different—for women are just as different as men, though you don't think so perhaps. It might make a man vain," he said, turning out his pink-tinged palm, "to see how many fair creatures will take notice of him; but then one remembers that it was not always so, and that takes one down again. In California I was liked, I am proud to say, but not admired. It was, perhaps, more amusing. But I must not be ungrateful: for life everywhere is very entertaining. And here are fresh fields and pastures new," said the little man. "When you have a pursuit, every new place is doubly interesting. It does not matter whether you are hunting or botanising or——, a pursuit gives interest to all things. Now is the time for the country and rural character. I sometimes think it is that which will suit me best."

"Then I suppose you are on a tour of inspection, and one of our country young ladies may have the honour of pleasing you," said John, somewhat fiercely. His companion, looking up in his face with deprecating looks, patted his arm as a kind of protest.

"Don't be brutal, Erskine," he said with his little lisp; "such things are never said." John would have liked to take him in his teeth and shake him as a dog does, so angry was he, and furious. But little Millefleurs meant no harm. He drew his old schoolfellow along with him, as long as John's civility held out. Then, to see him strolling along with his little hat pushed on the top of his little round head, and all the curves of his person repeating the lines of that circle! John stopped to look after him with a laugh which he could scarcely restrain so long as Millefleurs was within hearing. It was an angry laugh, though there was nothing in the young man to give occasion for it. There was nothing really in him that was contemptible, for to be plump is not an offence by any code. But John watched him with the fiercest derision going along the country road with his cane held in two fingers, his hat curling in the brim, his locks curling the other way. And this was the man whom even Lady Lindores—even she, a woman so superior to worldly motives—condescended to scheme about. And Edith? was it possible that she, too—even she? Everything seemed to have turned to bitterness in John's soul. Tinto before him in the distance, with its flaunting flag, gave emphasis to the discovery he had made. For mere money, nothing else, one had been sacrificed. The other, was she to be sacrificed, too? Was there nothing but wealth to be thought of all the world over, even by the best people, by women with every tender grace and gift? When he thought of the part in the drama allotted to himself—to entertain Beaufort, who was the keeper of Millefleurs, in order that Millefleurs might be at liberty to follow his present pursuit, John burst into a laugh not much more melodious than that of Torrance. Beaufort and he could condole with each other. They could communicate, each to each, their several disappointments. But to bring to the neighbourhood this man whom Carry dared not see, whom with such tragic misery in her face she had implored John to keep at a distance—and that it should be her parents who were bringing him in cold blood in order to advance their schemes for her sister—was it possible that anything so base or cruel could be?

CHAPTER XXIV.

"The thing is, that he must be brought to the point. I said so in town. He dangled after her all the season, and he's dangled after her down here. The little beggar knows better than that. He knows that sharp people would never stand it. He is trusting to your country simplicity. When a man does not come to the point of his own accord, he must be led to it—or driven to it, for that matter," said Rintoul. He was out of humour, poor fellow. He had gone astray in his own person. His disapproval of his mother and of everybody belonging to him was nothing in comparison with his disapproval of himself. This put him out in every way: instead of making him tolerant of the others who were no worse than himself, it made him rampant in his wisdom. If it was so that he could not persuade or force himself into the right way, then was it more and more necessary to persuade or force other people. He took a high tone with Lady Lindores, all the more because he had discovered with astonishment, and a comical sort of indignation, that his mother had come over to his way of thinking. He could not believe it to be possible at first, and afterwards this inconsistent young man had felt disgusted with the new accomplice whom he had in his heart believed incapable of any such conversion. But such being the case, there was no need to *ménager* her susceptibilities. "Or driven to it," he repeated with emphasis. "I shall not stand by, I promise you, and see my sister *planté là*——"

"You have used these words before, Rintoul. They disgust me, and they offend me," said his mother. "I will not be a party to anything of the kind. Those who do such things dishonour the girl—oh, far more than anything else can do. She does not care at all for him. Most likely she would refuse him summarily."

"And you would let her—refuse a dukedom?" cried Rintoul.

"Refuse a—man whom she does not care for. What could I do? I should even like now, after all that has happened, that it should come to something; but if she found that she could not marry him, how could I interfere?"

"Jove! but I should interfere," cried Rintoul, pacing up and down the room. "How could you help interfering? Would you suffer me to throw away all my prospects?" Here he paused, with a curious, half-threatening, half-deprecating look. Perhaps his mother would be one who would suffer him to sacrifice his prospects. Perhaps she would sympathise with him even in that wrong-doing. She was capable of it. He looked at her with mingled disdain and admiration. She was a woman who was capable of applauding him for throwing himself away. What folly! and yet perhaps it was good to have a mother like that. But not for Edith, whose case was of an altogether different complexion from his own. He made a pause, and then he added in a slightly louder tone, being excited: "But he must not be allowed to dangle on for ever. When a fellow follows a girl into the country he must mean something. You may take my word for that."

At this moment the handle of the door gave a slight clink; a soft step was audible. "Pardon me for disturbing you, dearest lady," said the mellifluous voice of Millefleurs. The little Marquis had a foot which made no sound on the carpet. He was daintily attired, and all his movements were noiseless. He came upon the sestartled conspirators like a ghost. "Send me away if I am *de trop*," he said, clasping his plump hands. "It is my hour of audience, but Rintoul has the first claim."

"Oh, I don't want any audience," said Rintoul. He had exchanged an anxious glance with his mother, and both had reddened in spite of themselves. Not to betray that you have been discussing some one who appears, while the words of criticism are still on your lips, is difficult at all times; and Rintoul, feeling confused and guilty, was anxious to give the interrupted conversation an air of insignificance. "My mother and I have no secrets. She is not so easy as the mothers in society," he said, with a laugh.

"No!" said Millefleurs, folding his hands with an air of devotion. "I would not discuss the *chronique scandaleuse*, if that is what you mean, in Lady Lindores's hearing. The air is pure here; it is like living out of doors. There is no *dessous des cartes*—no behind the scenes."

"What does the little beggar mean?" Rintoul said to himself, feeling red and uncomfortable. Lady Lindores took up her work, which was her flag of distress. She felt herself humiliated beyond description. To think that she should be afraid of any one overhearing what she said or what her son had said to her! She felt her cheeks burn and tingle; her needle trembled in her fingers; and then there ensued a most uncomfortable pause. Had he heard what they were saying? Rintoul did not go away, which would have been the best policy, but stood about, taking up books and throwing them down again, and wearing, which was the last thing he wished to do, the air of a man disturbed in an important consultation. As a matter of fact, his mind was occupied with two troublesome questions: the first, whether Millefleurs had overheard anything; the second, how he could himself get away. Millefleurs very soon perceived and shared in this embarrassment. The phrase which had been uttered as he opened the door had reached his ear without affecting his mind for the first moment. Perhaps if he had not perceived the embarrassment of the speaker he would not have given any weight to the words—"When a fellow follows——" Funny alliteration! he said to himself. And then he saw that the mother and son were greatly disturbed by his entrance. He was as much occupied by wondering what they could mean, as they were by wondering if he had heard. But he was the first to cut the difficulty. He said, "Pardon me, dear lady, I have forgotten something. I'll come back directly if you'll let me"—and went out. Certainly there had been some discussion going on between mother and son. Perhaps Rintoul had got into debt, perhaps into love; both were things which occurred daily, and it was always best when such a subject had been started between parent and child that they should have it out. So he withdrew, but with that phrase still buzzing in his ears, "When a fellow follows——" It was a comical combination of words; he could not get rid of it, and presently it began to disturb his mind. Instead of going to the library or any of the other rooms in the house, he went outside with the sensation of having something to reflect upon, though he could not be sure what it was. By-and-by the entire sentence came to his recollection. "When a fellow follows a girl into the country—but then, who is it that has followed the girl into the country?—Rintoul?——" This cost him about five minutes' thought. Then little Millefleurs stopped short in the midst of the path, and clasped his hands against his plump bosom, and turned up his eyes to heaven. "Why! it is I!——" he said to himself, being more grammatical than most men in a state of agitation. He stood for a whole minute in this attitude, among the big blue-green araucarias which stood around. What a subject for a painter if there had been one at hand! It was honour confronting fate. He had not intended anything so serious. He liked, he would have said loved, the ladies of the house. He would not have hesitated anywhere to give full utterance to this sentiment: and to please his father, and to amuse himself, he was consciously on the search for some one who might be suitable for the vacant post of Marchioness of Millefleurs. And he had thought of Edith in that capacity—certainly he had thought of her. So had he thought of various other young ladies in society, turning over their various claims. But it had not occurred to him to come to any sudden decision, or to think that necessary. As he stood there, however, with his eyes upraised, invoking aid from that paternal Providence which watches over marquises, a flood of light spread over the subject and all its accessories. Though he had not thought of them, he knew the prejudices of society; and all that Rintoul had said about leaving a girl *planté là* was familiar to him. "When a fellow follows" (absurd alliteration! said Millefleurs, with his lisp, to himself) "a girl into the country, he muth mean thomething——" and once more he clasped his hands and pressed them to his breast. His eyes, raised to heaven, took a languishing look; a smile of consciousness played about his mouth; but this was only for a moment, and was replaced at once by a look of firm resolution. No maiden owed her scath to Millefleurs: though he was so plump, he was the soul of honour. Not for a moment could he permit it to be supposed that he was trifling with Edith Lindores, amusing himself—any of those pretty phrases in use in society. He thought with horror of the possibility of having compromised her, even though, so far as he was himself concerned, the idea was not disagreeable. In five minutes—for he had a quick little brain and the finest faculty of observation, a quality cultivated in his race by several centuries of social eminence—Millefleurs had mastered the situation. All the instructions that Rintoul had so zealously endeavoured to convey to his mother's mind became apparent to Millefleurs in the twinkling of an eye. It would be said that he had left her *planté là*; he allowed himself no illusion on the subject. So it might be said,—but so it never must be said of Edith Lindores. He was perfectly chivalrous in his instant decision. He was not to say in love—though did Providence bestow any one of five or six young ladies, among whom Edith stood high, upon him, Millefleurs felt positively convinced that he would be the happiest man in the world. And he was not sure that he might not be running the risk of a refusal, a thing which is very appalling to a young man's imagination. But notwithstanding this danger, Millefleurs, without hesitation, braced himself up to do his duty. He buttoned his coat, took off his hat and put it on again, and then pulling himself together, went off without a moment's hesitation in search of Lord Lindores.

An hour later the Earl entered his lady's chamber with a countenance in which gratification, and proud content in an achieved success, were only kept in check by the other kind of pride which would not permit it to be perceived that this success was anything out of the ordinary. He told her his news in a few brief words, which Lady Lindores received with so much agitation, turning from red to white, and with such an appearance of vexation and pain, that the Earl put on his sternest aspect. "What is the meaning of all this flurry and disturbance?" he said. "I hope we are not going to have it all over again, as we had before Carry's wedding."

"Oh, don't speak of poor Carry's wedding in comparison with this. This, God grant it, if it comes to pass, will be no degradation—no misery——"

"Not much degradation, certainly—only somewhere about the best position in England," with angry scorn Lord Lindores said.

But the lines were not smoothed away from his wife's forehead, nor did the flush of shame and pain leave her face. She looked at him for a moment, to see whether she should tell him. But why poison his pleasure? "It is not his fault," she said to herself; and all that she gave utterance to was an anxious exclamation: "Provided that Edith sees as we do!"

"She must see as we do," Lord Lindores said.

But when Rintoul came in, his mother went to him and seized his arm with both her hands. "He heard what you said!" she cried, with anguish in her voice. "Now I shall never be able to hold up my head in his presence—he heard what you said!"

Rintoul too, notwithstanding his more enlightened views, was somewhat red. Though it was in accordance with his principles, yet the fact of having helped to force, in any way, a proposal for his sister, caused him an unpleasant sensation. He tried to carry it off with a laugh. "Anyhow, since it *has* brought him to the point," he said.

This was the day on which Millefleurs was to be taken to Tinto to see the house and all its curiosities and wealth. In view of this he had begged that nothing might be said to Edith, with a chivalrous desire to save her pain should her answer be unfavourable. But how could Lady Lindores keep such a secret from her daughter? While she was still full of the excitement, the painful triumph, the terror and shame with which she had received the news, Edith came in to the morning room, which to-day had been the scene of so many important discussions. They had been perhaps half an hour together, going gaily on with the flood of light-hearted conversation about anything and nothing which is natural between a girl and her mother, when she suddenly caught a glimpse in a mirror of Lady Lindores's troubled face. The girl rushed to her instantly, took this disturbed countenance between her hands, and turned it with gentle force towards her. Her own face grew grave at once. "Something is the matter," she said; "something has happened. Oh, mother, darling, what is it? Something about Carry?"

"No, no; nothing, nothing! Certainly nothing that is unhappy——Don't question me now, Edith. Afterwards, you shall know it all."

"Let me know it now," the girl said; and she insisted with that filial tyranny against which mothers are helpless. At last Lady Lindores, being pressed into a corner, murmured something about Lord Millefleurs. "If he speaks to you to-night, oh, my darling—if he asks you—do not be hasty; say nothing, say nothing, without thought."

"Speaks to me—asks me!"—Edith stood wonder-stricken, her eyes wide open, her lips apart. "What should he ask me?" She grew a little pale in spite of herself.

"My dearest! what should he ask you? What is it that a young man asks—in such circumstances? He will ask you—perhaps—to marry him."

Edith gave a kind of shriek—and then burst into a peal of agitated laughter. "Mother, dear, what a fright you have given me! I thought—I didn't know what to think. Poor little man! Don't let him do it—don't let him do it, mamma! It would make us both ridiculous, and if it made him at all—unhappy; but that is nonsense—you are only making fun of me," said the girl, kissing her, with a hurried eagerness as if to silence her. Lady Lindores drew herself away from her daughter's embrace.

"Edith, it is you who are making yourself ridiculous—consider how he has sought you all this time—and he came after you to the country. I have felt what—was coming all along. My dearest, did not you suspect it too?"

Edith stood within her mother's arm, but she was angry and held herself apart, not leaning upon the bosom where she had rested so often. "*I* suspect it! how could I suspect it?" she cried. It went to Lady Lindores's heart to feel her child straighten herself up, and keep apart from her and all her caresses.

"Edith, for God's sake, do not set yourself against it! Think, only think——"

"What has God got to do with it, mother?" the young creature cried sternly. "I will set myself against it—nay, more than that, I am not like Carry; nothing in the world will make me do it—not any reason, not any argument." She was still encircled by her mother's arm, but she stood straight, upright, erect as a willow-wand, unyielding, drawing her garments, as it were, about her, insensible to the quivering lines of her mother's upturned face, and the softer strain of her embrace. No, not indifferent—but resisting—shutting her eyes to them, holding herself apart.

"For heaven's sake, Edith! Oh, my darling, think how different this is from the other! Your father has set his heart on it, and I wish it too. And Millefleurs is——Millefleurs will be——"

"Is this how you persuaded Carry?" cried Edith, with sad indignation; "but mother, mother, listen! not me. It is better that never another word should be said between us on this subject, for I will never do it, whatever may be said. If my father chooses to speak to me, I will give him my answer. Let us say no more—not another word;" and with this the girl unbent and threw herself upon her mother, and stopped her mouth with kisses, indignant, impassioned—her cheeks hot and flushed, her eyes full of angry tears.

It may be thought that the drive to Tinto of this strange party, all palpitating with the secret which each thought unknown to the other, was a curious episode enough. Millefleurs, satisfied with himself, and feeling the importance of his position with so much to bestow, found, he thought, a sympathetic response in the look of Lady Lindores, to whom, no doubt, as was quite right, her husband had disclosed the great news; but he thought that Edith was entirely ignorant of it. And Edith and her mother had their secret on their side, the possession of which was more momentous still. But they all talked and smiled with the little pleasantries and criticisms that are inevitable in the conversation of persons of the highest and most cultivated classes, and did not betray what was in their hearts.

CHAPTER XXV.

John Erskine was on the steps leading to the great central entrance when the carriage from Lindores drove up at the door. It was not by chance that he found himself there, for he was aware of the intended visit; and with the sombre attraction which the sight of a rival and an adversary has for a man, felt himself drawn towards the scene in which an act of this drama in which his happiness was involved, was going on. He hurried down before the footman to get to the carriage-door, and hand the ladies out. He had seen them several times since that day when Lady Lindores, unused to deception, had allowed the secret to slip from her. And he had accustomed himself to the fact that Millefleurs, who was in person and aspect so little alarming, but in other ways the most irresistible of rivals, was in full possession of the field before him. But John, with quickened insight, had also perceived that no decisive step had as yet been taken, and with infinite relief was able to persuade himself that Edith as yet was no party to the plot, and was unaware what was coming. He saw in a moment now that some important change had come over the state of affairs. Lady Lindores avoided his eye, but Edith looked at him, he thought, with a sort of appeal in her face,—a question,—a wondering demand, full of mingled defiance and deprecation. So much in one look!—and yet there seemed to him even more than all this. What had happened? Millefleurs was conscious too. There was a self-satisfaction about him more evident, more marked than usual. He put out his chest a little more. He held his head higher, though he refrained from any special demonstration in respect to Edith. There was an air about him as of a man who had taken some remarkable initiative. His very step touched the ground with more weight: his round eyes contemplated all things with a more bland and genial certainty of being able to solve every difficulty. And Rintoul had a watchful look as of a man on his guard—a keen spectator vigilantly attentive to everything; uncertain whether even yet he might not be called upon to interfere. All this John Erskine saw at one glance,—not clearly as it is set down here, but vaguely, with confused perceptions which he could not disentangle, which conveyed no distinct information to his mind, but only a warning, an intimation which set every vein of him tingling. Lady Lindores would not meet his eye; but Edith looked at him with that strange look of question—How much do you know? it seemed to say. What do you suspect? and with a flash of indignation—Do you suspect me? Do you doubt me? He thought there was all this, or something like it, in her eyes; and yet he could not tell what they meant, nor, so far as she was concerned, what length her knowledge went. He met her look with one in which another question bore the chief part. But it was much less clear to Edith what that question meant. They were all as conscious as it was possible for human creatures each shut up within the curious envelope of his own identity, imperfectly comprehending any other, to be. The air tingled with meaning round them. They were all aware, strangely, yet naturally, of standing on the edge of fate.

Lady Caroline and her husband received this party in the great drawing-room which was used on state occasions: everything had been thrown open professedly that Lord Millefleurs should see, but really that Lord Millefleurs should be dazzled by, the splendour which Torrance devoutly believed to be unrivalled. It was in order that he might see the effect of all the velvet and brocade, all the gilding and carving, upon the stranger, that he had waited to receive the party from Lindores with his wife, a thing quite unusual to him; and he was in high expectation and good-humour, fully expecting to be flattered and gratified. There was a short pause of mutual civilities to begin with, during which Torrance was somewhat chilled and affronted to see that the little Marquis remained composed, and displayed no awe, though he looked about him with his quick little round eyes.

"You will have heard, Lady Caroline, how I have lost any little scrap of reputation I ever had," Millefleurs said, clasping his plump hands. "I am no shot: it is true, though I ought to be ashamed to acknowledge it. And I don't care to follow flying things on foot. If there was a balloon indeed! I am an impostor at this season. I am occupying the place of some happy person who might make a large bag every day."

"But there is room for all those happy persons without disturbing you—who have other qualities," said Carry, with her soft pathetic smile. There was a little tremor about her, and catching of her breath, for she did not know at what moment might occur that name which always agitated her, however she might fortify herself against it.

"If not at Lindores, there's always plenty of room at Tinto," said Torrance, with ostentatious openness. "There's room for a regiment here. I have a few fellows coming for the partridges, but not half enough to fill the house. Whenever you like, you and your belongings, as many as you please, whether it's servants—or guardians," Torrance said, with his usual rude laugh.

Something like an electric shock ran round the company. Millefleurs was the only one who received it without the smallest evidence of understanding what it was. He looked up in Torrance's face with an unmoved aspect. "I don't travel with a suite," he said, "though I am much obliged to you all the same. It is my father who carries all sorts of people about with him. And I love my present quarters," said the little Marquis, directing a look towards Lady Lindores of absolute devotion. "I will not go away unless I am sent away. A man who has knocked about the world knows when he is well off. I will go to Erskine, and be out of the way during the hours when I am *de trop*."

"Erskine is filling his house too, I suppose," Torrance said. And then having got all that was practicable in the shape of offence out of this subject, he proposed that they should make the tour of what had been always called the state apartments at Tinto. "There's a few things to show," he said, affecting humility; "not much to you who have been about the world as you say, but still a few things that we think something of in this out-of-the-way place." Then he added, "Lady Car had better be the showman, for she knows more about them than I do—though I was born among them." This was the highest possible pleasure to Pat Torrance. To show off his possessions, to which he professed to be indifferent, with an intended superiority in his rude manliness to anything so finicking, by means of his wife—his proudest and finest possession of all—was delightful to him. He lounged after them, keeping close to the party, ready with all his being to enjoy Lady Car's description of the things that merited admiration. He was in high good-humour, elated with the sense of his position as her husband and the owner of all this grandeur. He felt that the little English lord would now see what a Scotch country gentleman could be, what a noble distinguished wife he could get for himself, and what a house he could bring her to. Unfortunately, Lord Millefleurs, whose delight was to talk about Californian miners and their habitudes, was familiar with greater houses than Tinto, and had been born in the purple, and slept on rose-leaves all his life. He admired politely what he was evidently expected to admire, but he gave vent to no enthusiasm. When they came to the great dining-room, with its huge vases and marble pillars, he looked round upon it with a countenance of complete seriousness, not lightened by any gratification. "Yes—I see: everything is admirably in keeping," he said; "an excellent example of the period. It is so seldom one sees this sort of thing nowadays. Everybody has begun to try to improve, don't you know; and the *mieux* is always the *ennemi du bien*. This is all of a piece, don't you know. It is quite perfect of its kind."

"What does the little beggar mean?" it was now Torrance's turn to say to himself. It sounded, no doubt, like praise, but his watchful suspicion and jealousy were roused. He tried his usual expedient of announcing how much it had cost; but Millefleurs—confound the little beggar!—received the intimation with perfect equanimity. He was not impressed. He made Torrance a little bow, and said with his lisp, "Yeth, very cothtly alwayth—the materials are all so expensive, don't you know." But he could not be brought to say anything more. Even Lady Caroline felt depressed by his gravity; for insensibly, though she ought to have known better, she had got to feel that all the wealth of Tinto—its marbles, its gilding, its masses of ornate plate, and heavy decorations—must merit consideration. They had been reckoned among the things for which she had been sacrificed—they were part of her price, so to speak: and if they were not splendid and awe-inspiring, then her sacrifice had indeed been made in vain. Poor Lady Caroline was not in a condition to meet with any further discouragement; and to feel that her husband was beginning to lose his air of elated good-humour, gave an additional tremor to the nervousness which possessed her. She knew what he would say about "your fine friends," and how he would swear that no such visitors should ever be asked to his house again. She went on mechanically saying her little lesson by heart, pointing out all the great pieces of modern Sèvres and Dresden. Her mind was full of miserable thoughts. She wanted to catch John Erskine's eye, to put an imploring question to him with eyes or mouth. "Is he coming?" This was what she wanted to say. But she could not catch John Erskine's eye, who was gloomily walking behind her by the side of Edith saying nothing. Lady Caroline could not help remarking that neither of these two said a word. Lady Lindores and Rintoul kept up a kind of skirmishing action around them, trying now to draw one, now the other, into conversation, and get them apart. But the two kept by each other like a pair in a procession—yet never spoke.

"The period, dear lady?" said Millefleurs,—"I am not up to the last novelties of classification, nor scientific, don't you know; but I should say Georgian, late Georgian, or verging upon the times of the Royal William"—he gave a slight shiver as he spoke, perhaps from cold, for the windows were all open, and there was a draught. "But perfect of its kind," he added with a little bow, and a seriousness which was more disparaging than abuse. Even Lady Carry smiled constrainedly, and Torrance, with a start, awoke to his sense of wrong, and felt that he could bear no more.

"George or Jack," he cried, "I don't know anything about periods; this I do know, that it ran away with a great deal of money—money none of us would mind having in our pockets now." He stared at Rintoul as he spoke, but even Rintoul looked as if he were indifferent, which galled the rich man more and more. "My Lady Countess and my Lord Marquis," he said, with an elaborate mocking bow, "I'll have to ask you to excuse me. I've got—something to do that I thought I could get off—but I can't, don't you know;" and here he laughed again, imitating as well as he was able the seraphic appeal to the candour of his hearers, which Millefleurs was so fond of making. The tone, the words, the aspect of the man, taught Millefleurs sufficiently (who was the only stranger) that he had given offence; and the others drew closer, eager to make peace for Carry's sake, who was smiling with the ordinary effort of an unhappy wife to make the best of it and represent to the others that it was only her husband's "way."

But Torrance's ill-humour was not as usual directed towards his wife. When he looked at her, his face, to her great astonishment, softened. It was a small matter that did it; the chief reason was that he saw a look of displeasure—of almost offence—upon his wife's countenance too. She was annoyed with the contemptible little English lord as much as he was. This did not take away his rage, but it immediately gave him that sense that his wife was on his side, for which the rough fellow had always longed—and altered his aspect at once. As he stood looking at them, with his large light eyes projecting from their sockets, a flush of offence on his cheeks, a forced laugh on his mouth, his face softened all in a moment. This time she was no longer the chief antagonist to be subdued, but his natural supporter and champion. He laid his heavy hand upon her shoulder, with a pride of proprietorship which for once she did not seem to contest. "Lady Car," he said, "she's my deputy: she'll take care of you better than I."

Lady Caroline, with an involuntary, almost affectionate response, put her hand on his arm. "Don't go," she said, lifting her face to him with an eloquence of suppressed and tremulous emotion all about her, which indeed had little reference to this ill-humour of his, but helped to dignify it, and take away the air of trivial rage and mortification which had been too evident at first. Lady Lindores, too, made a step forward with the same intention. He stood and looked at them with a curious medley of feeling, touched at once by the pleasure of a closer approach to his wife, and by a momentary tragic sense of being entirely outside of this group of people to whom he was so closely related. They were his nearest connections, and yet he did not belong to them, never could belong to them! They were of a different species—another world altogether. Lady Car could take care of them. She could understand them, and know their ways; but not he. They were all too fine for him, out of his range, thinking different thoughts, pretending even (for it must surely have been mere pretence) to despise his house, which everybody knew was the great house of the district, infinitely grander than the castle or any other place in the county. He was deeply wounded by this unlooked-for cutting away of the ground from under his feet: but Lady Car was on his side. She could manage them though he could not. Not one of them was equal to her, and it was to him that she belonged. He laughed again, but the sound of his laugh was not harsh as it had been before. "No, no; Lady Car will take care of you," he said.

"I hope," said Millefleurs in his mellifluous tones, "that it is not this intrusion of ours that is sending Mr Torrance away. I know what a nuisance people are coming to luncheon in the middle of an occupied day. Send us away, Lady Caroline, or rather send me away, who am the stranger. Erskine will take me with him to Dalrulzian, and another day I shall return and see the rest of your splendours."

"Mr Torrance has really business," said Carry; "mamma will show you the other rooms, while I speak to my husband." She went swiftly, softly, after him, as his big figure disappeared in the long vista of the great dining-room. After a moment's pause of embarrassment, the rest went on. Carry hurried trembling after her tyrant. When they were out of hearing she called him anxiously. "Oh, don't go, Pat. How do you think I can entertain such a party when they know that you are offended, and will not stay?"

"You will get on better without me," he said. "I can't stand these fellows and their airs. It isn't any fault of yours, Lady Car. Come, I'm pleased with *you*. You've stood by your own this time, I will say that for you. But they're your kind, they're not mine. Dash the little beggar, what a cheek he has! I'm not used to hear the house run down. But never mind, I don't care a pin,—and it's not your fault this time, Car," he said, with a laugh, touching her cheek with his finger with a touch which was half a blow and half a caress. This was about as much tenderness as he was capable of showing. Carry followed him to the door, and saw him plunge down the great steps, and turn in the direction of the stables. Perhaps she was not sorry to avoid all further occasion of offence. She returned slowly through the long, vulgar, costly rooms—a sigh of relief came from her overladen heart; but relief in one point made her but more painfully conscious of another. In the distance Millefleurs was examining closely all the ormolu and finery. As she came in sight of the party, walking slowly like the worn creature she was, feeling as if all the chances of life were over for her, and she herself incomparably older, more weary and exhausted than any of them, and her existence a worn-out thing apart from the brighter current of every day, there remained in her but one flicker of personal anxiety, one terror which yet could make everything more bitter. The group was much the same as when she left them,—Lady Lindores with Millefleurs, Edith and John silent behind them, Rintoul in a sort of general spectatorship, keeping watch upon the party. Carry touched John Erskine's arm furtively and gave him an entreating look. He turned round to her alarmed.

"Lady Caroline! can I do anything? What is it?" he said.

She drew him back into a corner of the great room with its marble pillars. She was so breathless that she could hardly speak. "It is nothing—it is only—a question. Are you expecting—people—at Dalrulzian?"

Carry's soft eyes had expanded to twice their size, and looked at him out of two caves of anxiety and hollow paleness. She gave him her hand unawares, as if asking him by that touch more than words could say. John was moved to the heart.

"I think not—I hope not—I have no answer. No, no, there will be no one," he said.

She sank down into a chair with a faint smile. "You will think me foolish—so very foolish—it is nothing to me. But—I am always so frightened," said poor Carry, with the first pretence that occurred to her, "when there is any dispeace."

"There will be no dispeace," said John, "in any case. But I am sure—I can be certain—there will be no one there."

She smiled upon him again, and waved her hand to him to leave her. "I will follow you directly," she said.

What emotions there were in this little group! Carry sat with her hand upon her heart, which fluttered still, getting back her breath. Every remission of active pain seems a positive good. She sat still, feeling the relief and ease flow over her like a stream of healing to her very feet. She would be saved the one encounter which she could not bear; and then for the moment *he* was absent, and there would be no struggle to keep him in good-humour, or to conceal from others his readiness to offend and take offence. Was this all the semblance of happiness that remained for Carry? For the moment she was satisfied with it, and took breath, and recovered a little courage, and was thankful in that deprivation of all things—thankful that no positive pain was to be added to make everything worse; and that a brief breathing-time was hers for the moment, an hour of rest.

Edith looked at John as he came back. She had lingered, half waiting for him, just as if he had been her partner in a procession. In that moment of separation Rintoul allowed himself to go off guard. She looked at John, and almost for the first time spoke. "Carry has been talking to you," she said hastily, in an undertone.

"Yes,—about visitors—people who might be coming to stay with me."

"Is any one coming to stay with you?" she asked, quickly.

"Nobody," John replied with fervour; "nor shall at any risk."

This all passed in a moment while Rintoul was off guard. She looked at him again, wistfully, gratefully, and he being excited by his own feelings, and by sympathy with all this excitement which breathed around him in so many currents, was carried beyond all prudence, beyond all intention. "I will do anything," he said, "to please you, and serve her, you know. It is nothing to offer. I am nobody in comparison with others; but what I have is all yours, and at your service,—the little that it is——"

"Oh," said Edith, in a mere breath of rapid, almost inaudible, response, "it is too much; it is too much." She did not know what she said.

"Nothing is too much. I am not asking any return. I am not presumptuous; but I am free to give. Nobody can stop me from doing that," said John, not much more clearly. It was all over in a moment. The people within a few yards of them scarcely knew they had exchanged a word; even Rintoul did not suspect any communication that was worth preventing. And next moment they separated. John, panting and breathless, as if he had been running a race, went up to where Millefleurs was discoursing upon some bit of upholstery, and stood by in the shelter of this discussion to let himself cool down. Edith kept behind in the shelter of her mother. And just then Carry came softly out of the door of the great dining-room from behind the marble pillars, having recovered herself, and called back the smile to her face. In the midst of all these emotions, Millefleurs talked smoothly on.

"My people," he said, "have a place down in Flintshire that is a little like this, but not so perfect. My grandfather, or whoever it was, lost confidence before it was done, and mixed it up. But here, don't you know, the confidence has been sublime; no doubt has been allowed to intrude. They say that in Scotland you are so absolute—all or nothing, don't you know. Whether in furniture or anything else, how fine that is!" said the little Marquis, turning up his palms. He looked quite absorbed in his subject, and as calm as a man in gingerbread. Nevertheless, he was the only person to notice that slight passage of conversation *sotto voce*, and the breathless condition in which John reached him. What had he been doing to put him out of breath?

When the house had been inspected, the party went to luncheon—a very sumptuous meal, which was prepared in the great dining-room, and was far too splendid for an ordinary family party such as this was. John, whose excitement had rather increased than diminished, and who felt that he had altogether committed himself, without chance or hope of any improved relations, was not able to subdue himself to the point of sitting down at table. He took his leave in spite of the protests of the party. His heart was beating loudly, his pulses all clanging in his ears like a steam-engine. He did not get the chance even of a glance from Edith, who said good-bye to him in a tremulous voice, and did not look up. He saw her placed by the side of Millefleurs at table, as he turned away. He had all the modesty of genuine feeling,—a modesty which is sometimes another name for despair. Why should she take any notice of him? He had no right to aspire so high. Nothing to give, as he said, except as a mere offering—a flower laid at her feet,—not a gift which was capable of a return. He said to himself that, so far as this went, there should be no deception in his mind. He would give his gift—it was his pleasure to give it—lavishly, with prodigal abundance; as a prince should give, expecting no return. In this he would have the better of all of them, he said to himself, as he went through the great house, where, except in the centre of present entertainment, all was silent like a deserted place. He would give more liberally, more magnificently, than any duke or duke's son, for he would give all, and look for nothing in return. The feeling which accompanied this *élan* of entire self-devotion and abandonment of selfish hope gave him something of the same calm of exhaustion which was in Carry's soul. He seemed to have come to something final, something from which there was no recovery. He could not sit down at table with them; but he could not go away any more than he could stay. He went out through the vacant hall, where nobody took any notice of his going or coming, and emerged upon the wide opening of the plateau, sheltered by fir-trees, upon which the house stood dominating the landscape. His was the only shadow that crossed the sunshine in front of the huge mass of building which was so noiseless outside, so full of life and emotion within. He could not go away any more than he could stay. He wandered to the fringe of trees which clothed the edge of the steep cliff above the river, and sat there on the bank gazing down on the depths below, till the sound of voices warned him that the party was moving from the dining-room. Then he hastened away to avoid them, taking the less frequented road which led by the Scaur. He had passed that dangerous spot, but the way was still narrow between the bushes, when he heard the hoofs of Torrance's great black horse resounding upon the path. Pat was returning home after what had evidently been a wild gallop, for the powerful animal had his black coat flecked with foam, and was chewing the bit in his mouth. Torrance had almost passed without perceiving John, but catching a glimpse of him as he pushed along, suddenly drew up, making his horse rear and start. He had an air of heat and suppressed passion which corresponded with the foam and dishevelled looks of the horse. "Hollo!" he cried, "you, Erskine, have they broken up?" and sat swaying his great bulk with the impatient movements of the fagged yet fiery beast. John answered briefly, and was about to pass on, when Torrance gave him what was intended to be a playful poke with the end of his whip. "When's your visitor coming?" he said, with his harsh laugh.

"My visitor! I expect no visitor," said John, stepping back with anger which he could scarcely restrain. It was all he could do not to seize the whip, and snatch it out of the other's hand. But neither the narrow path, nor the excited state in which both men were, was safe for any scuffle. John restrained himself with an effort.

"Oh yes, you are!" cried Torrance; "you let it out once, you know—you can't take in me. But I'm the last man in the world to find fault. Let him come! We'll have him up to Tinto, and make much of him. I told you so before."

"You seem to know my arrangements better than I know them myself," John said, white with suppressed fury. "I have no visitor coming. Permit me to know my own affairs."

"Ah! so you've forbidden him to come! Let me tell you, Mr Erskine, that that's the greatest insult of all. Why shouldn't he come? he, or any fellow? Do you think I'm afraid of Lady Car?" and here his laugh rang into all the echoes. "Not a bit; I think more of her than that. You're putting a slight on her when you ask any man not to come. Do you hear?"

"I hear perfectly, and would hear if you spoke lower. There's enough of this, Torrance. I suppose it's your way, and you don't intend to be specially objectionable—but I am not going to be questioned so, nor will I take the lie from any man," cried John, with rising passion. There was scarcely room for him to stand in safety from the horse's hoofs, and he was compelled to draw back among the bushes as the great brute pranced and capered.

"What! will you fight?" cried Torrance, with another laugh; "that's all exploded nowadays—that's a business for 'Punch.' Not that I mind: any way you please. Look here! here's a fist that would soon master you. But it's a joke, you know, nowadays; a joke, for 'Punch.'"

"So much the worse," cried John, hotly. "It was the only way of keeping in order a big bully like you."

"Oh, that's what you call me! If there was any one to see fair play—to you (for I'm twice your size)—I'd let Blackie go, and give you your fill of that."

John grasped instinctively at the bridle of the big black horse, which seemed charging down upon him; and for a moment the two men gazed at each other, over the tossing foam-flecked head, big eyeballs, and churning mouth. Then John let go the bridle at which he had caught, with an exclamation of scorn.

"Another time for that, if that is what you want," he said.

"No," cried the other, looking back, as the horse darted past,—"no, that's not what I want; you're an honest fellow—you shall say what you please. We'll shake hands——" The horse carrying him off lost the rest of the words in the clang of jingling reins and half-maddened hoofs.

John went on very rapidly, excited beyond measure by the encounter. His face was flushed and hot; his hat, which had been knocked off his head, was stained with the damp red soil. He had torn his sleeve in the clutch he had made at the bridle. He dashed along the narrow road at a wild pace to calm himself down by rapid movement. A little way down he encountered a keeper crossing the road, who disappeared into the woods after a curious glance at his excited looks and torn coat. Further on, as he came out of the gate, he met, to his great astonishment, old Rolls, plodding along towards Tinto in company with another man, who met him at the gate. "Bless me, sir! what's the maitter? Ye cannot walk the highroad like that!" was the first exclamation of old Rolls.

"Like what? Oh, my sleeve! I tore it just now on a—on a—catching a runaway horse. The brute was wild, I thought he would have had me down." There was nothing in this that was absolutely untrue, at least nothing that it was not permissible to say in the circumstances, but the explanation was elaborate, as John felt. "And what are you doing here?" he said, peremptorily. "What do you want at Tinto?" It seemed almost a personal offence to him to find Rolls there.

"I have something to say to Tinto, sir, with all respect. My father was a tenant of his father—a small tenant, not to call a farmer, something between that and a cotter—and I'm wanting to speak a good word for my brother-in-law, John Tamson, that you will maybe mind."

Upon this the man by Rolls's side, who had been inspecting John curiously, at last persuaded himself to touch, not to take off, his hat, and to say: "Ay, sir, I'm John Tamson. I was the first to see ye the day ye cam' first to Dalrulzian. I hae my wife ower by that's good at her needle. Maybe ye'll step in and she'll shue your coat-sleeve for you. You canna gang like that all the gate to Dalrulzian. There's no saying who ye may meet."

John Erskine had not been awakened before to the strangeness of his appearance. He looked down upon his torn coat with a vague alarm. It was a start of the black horse while he held its bridle which had torn the sleeve out of its socket. While he was looking at this, with a disturbed air, the lodge-gates were thrown open and the Lindores's carriage came through. Lady Lindores waved her hand to him, then bent forward to look at him with sudden surprise and alarm; but the horses were fresh, and swept along, carrying the party out of sight. Millefleurs was alone with the ladies in the carriage—that John noticed without knowing why.

A minute after, accepting John Tamson's offer of service, he went over with him to his cottage, where the wife immediately got her needle and thread, with much lamentation over the gentleman's "gude black coat." "Bless me, sir! it must have been an ill-willy beast that made ye give your arm a skreed like that," she said: and John felt that his hand was unsteady and his nerves quivering. After all, it was no such great matter. He could not understand how it was that he had been agitated to such an extent by an encounter so slight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Old Rolls went up the road which led by the Scaur. It was shorter than the formal avenue, and less in the way of more important visitors. He was much distressed and "exercised in his mind" about the agitated appearance of his master—his torn sleeve, and clothes stained with the soil. He pondered much on the sight as he walked up the road. John was not a man given to quarrelling, but he would seem to have been engaged in some conflict or other. "A runaway horse! where would he get a runaway horse at Tinto?" Rolls said to himself; "and Tinto was a man very likely to provoke a quarrel." He hurried on, feeling that he was sure to hear all about it, and much concerned at the thought that any one belonging to himself should bring discredit on the house in this way. But whether it was an excited fancy, or if there was some echo in the air of what had passed before, it seemed to Rolls that he heard, as he proceeded onwards, the sound of voices and conflict. "Will he have been but one among many?" he said within himself. "Will they be quarrelling on?—and me an unprotected man?" he added, with a prudent thought of his own welfare. Then Rolls heard a wonderful concussion in the air—he could not tell what, and then a solemn stillness. What was the meaning of this? It could have nothing to do with John. He turned up the narrow road down which John Erskine had once driven his dogcart, and which Torrance continually rode up and down. When he came to the opening of the Scaur, and saw the daylight breaking clear from the shadow of the over-reaching boughs, Rolls stood still for a moment with consternation. Broken branches, leaves strewn about, the print of the horse's hoofs all round the open space as if he had been rearing wildly, showed marks of a recent struggle,—he thought of his master, and his heart sank. But it was some time before his fears went any further. Where had the other party to the struggle gone? Just then he thought he heard a sound, something like a moan in the depths below. A terrible fear seized the old man. He rushed to the edge of the cliff, and gazed over with distracted looks. And then he gave utterance to a cry that rang through the woods: "Wha's that lying doun there?" he cried. Something lay in a mass at the bottom of the high bank, red and rough, which descended to the water's edge—something, he could scarcely tell what, all heaped together and motionless. Rolls had opened his mouth to shout for help with the natural impulse of his horror and alarm, but another thought struck him at the moment, and kept him silent. Was it his master's doing? With a gasp of misery, he felt that it must be so; and kneeling down distracted on the edge of the Scaur, catching at the roots of the trees to support himself, he craned over to see what it was, who it was, and whether he could do anything for the sufferer, short of calling all the world to witness this terrible sight. But the one explanation Rolls gave seemed to thrill the woods. He felt a hand touch him as he bent over the edge, and nearly lost his precarious footing in his terror. "Is't you, sir, come to look at your handiwork?" he said, solemnly turning upon the person whom he supposed to be his master. But it was not his master. It was Lord Rintoul, as pale as death, and trembling. "What—what is it?" he asked, scarcely able to articulate, pointing vaguely below, but averting his eyes as from a sight he dared not look at. Divided between the desire of getting help and of sparing his master, Rolls drew back from the Scaur and returned to his habitual caution. "I canna tell you what it is, my lord," he said; "it's somebody that has fallen over the Scaur, for all that I can see. But how that came about is mair than I can tell. We maun rouse the place," said the old man, "and get help—if help will do any good."

"Help will do no good now," cried Rintoul in his excitement. "Nobody could fall from that height and live. Does he move?—look—or the horse?" His tongue, too, was parched, and clung to the roof of his mouth.

"The horse! then your lordship kens wha it is? Lord in heaven preserve us! no' Tinto himsel'?"

Rintoul's dry lips formed words two or three times before they were audible. "No one—no one but he—ever rides here."

And then the two stood for a horrible moment and looked at each other. Rintoul was entirely unmanned. He seemed to quiver from head to foot; his hat was off, his countenance without a tinge of colour. "I have never," he said, "seen—such an accident before——"

"Did ye see it?" Rolls cried anxiously; and then the young man faltered and hesitated.

"Heard it. I—meant to say—I heard the horse rearing—and then the fall——"

He looked intently at the old man with his haggard eyes as if to ask—what? Poor old Rolls was trembling too. He thought only of his young master—so kind, so blameless,—was his life to be thus associated with crime?

"We must go and get help, my lord," said Rolls, with a heavy sigh. "However it happened, that must be our duty. No doubt ye'll have to give a true account of all ye've seen and all ye've heard. But in the meantime we must cry for help, let them suffer that may."

While this scene was proceeding so near her, Carry, upon the other side of the great house, had retired to her room in the weariness that followed her effort to look cheerful and do the honours of her table. She had made that effort very bravely, and though it did not even conceal from Millefleurs the position of affairs, still less deceive her own family, yet at least it kept up the appearance of decorum necessary, and made it easier for the guests to go through their part. The meal, indeed, was cheerful enough; it was far too magnificent, Torrance having insisted, in spite of his wife's better taste, on heaping "all the luxuries of the season" upon the table at which a duke's son was to sit. The absence of the host was a relief to all parties; but still it required an effort on the side of Carry to overcome the effect of the empty chair in front of her, which gave a sense of incongruity to all the grandeur. And this effort cost her a great deal. She had gone into her room to rest, and lay on a sofa very quiet in the stillness of exhaustion, not doing anything, not saying anything, looking wistfully at the blue sky that was visible through the window, with the soft foliage of some birch-trees waving lightly over it—and trying not to think. Indeed, she was so weary that it was scarcely necessary to try. And what was there to think about? Nothing could be done to deliver her—nothing that she was aware of even to mend her position. She was grateful to God that she was to be spared the still greater misery of seeing Beaufort, but that was all. Even heaven itself seemed to have no help for Carry. If she could have been made by some force of unknown agency to love her husband, she would still have been an unhappy wife; but it is to be feared, poor soul, that things had come to this pass with her, that she did not even wish to love her husband, and felt it less degrading to live with him under compulsion, than to be brought down to the level of his coarser nature, and take pleasure in the chains she wore. Her heart revolted at him more and more. In such a terrible case, what help was there for her in earth or heaven? Even had he been reformed—had he been made a better man—Carry would not have loved him: she shrank from the very suggestion that she might some time do so. There was no help for her; her position could not be bettered anyhow. She knew this so well, that all struggle, except the involuntary struggle in her mind, which never could intermit, against many of the odious details of the life she had to lead, had died out of her. She had given in to the utter hopelessness of her situation. Despair is sometimes an opiate, as it is sometimes a frantic and maddening poison. There was nothing to be done for her,—no use in wearying Heaven with prayers, as some of us do. Nothing could make her better. She had given in utterly, body and soul, and this was all that was to be said. She lay there in this stillness of despair, feeling more crushed and helpless than usual after the emotions of the morning, but not otherwise disturbed, —lying like a man who has been shattered by an accident, but lulled by some anodyne draught—still, and almost motionless, letting every sensation be hushed so long as nature would permit, her hands folded, her very soul hushed and still. She took no note of time in the exhaustion of her being. She knew that when her husband returned she would be sent for, and would have to re-enter the other world of eternal strife and pain; but here she was retired, as in her chapel, in herself—the sole effectual refuge which she had left.

The house was very well organised, very silent and orderly in general, so that it surprised Lady Caroline a little, in the depth of her quiet, to hear a distant noise as of many voices, distinct, though not loud—a confusion and far-away Babel of outcries and exclamations. Nothing could be more unusual; but she felt no immediate alarm, thinking that the absence of her husband and her own withdrawal had probably permitted a little outbreak of gaiety or gossip down-stairs, with which she did not wish to interfere. She lay still accordingly, listening vaguely, without taking much interest in the matter. Certainly something out of the way must have happened. The sounds had sprung up all at once—a hum of many excited voices, with sharp cries as of dismay and wailing breaking in. At last her attention was attracted. "There has been some accident," she said to herself, sitting upright upon her sofa. As she did this she heard steps approaching her door. They came with a rush, hurrying along, the feet of at least two women, with a heavier step behind them: then paused suddenly, and there ensued a whispering and consultation close to her door. Carry was a mother, and her first thought was of her children. "They are afraid to tell me," was the thought that passed through her mind. She rose and rushed to the door, throwing it open. "What is it? Something has happened," she said,—"something you are afraid to tell me. Oh, speak, speak!—the children——"

"My leddy, it's none of the children. The children are as well as could be wished, poor dears," said her own maid, who had been suddenly revealed, standing very close to the door. The woman, her cheeks blazing with some sudden shock, eager to speak, yet terrified, stopped short there with a gasp. The housekeeper, who was behind her, pushed her a little forward, supporting her with a hand on her waist, whispering confused but audible exhortations. "Oh, take heart—oh, take heart. She must be told. The Lord will give you strength," this woman said. The butler stood solemnly behind, with a very anxious, serious countenance. To Carry all this scene became confused by wild anxiety and terror. "What is it?" she said; "my mother? some one at home?" She stretched out her hands vaguely towards the messengers of evil, feeling like a victim at the block, upon whose neck the executioner's knife is about to fall.

"Oh, my leddy! far worse! far worse!" the woman cried.

Carry, in the dreadful whirl of her feelings, still paused bewildered, to ask herself what could be worse? And then there came upon her a moment of blindness, when she saw nothing, and the walls and the roof seemed to burst asunder, and whirl and whirl. She dropped upon her knees in this awful blank and blackness unawares, and then the haze dispelled, and she saw, coming out of the mist, a circle of horror-stricken pale faces, forming a sort of ring round her. She could do nothing but gasp out her husband's name—"Mr Torrance?" with quivering lips.

"Oh, my lady! my lady! To see her on her knees, and us bringin' her such awfu' news! But the Lord will comfort ye," cried the housekeeper, forgetting the veneration due to her mistress, and raising her in her arms. The two women supported her into her room, and she sat down again upon the sofa where she had been sitting—sitting, was it a year ago?—in the quiet, thinking that no change would ever come to her,—that nothing, nothing could alter her condition—that all was over and finished for her life.

And it is to be supposed that they told poor Carry exactly the truth. She never knew. When she begged them to leave her alone till her mother came, whom they had sent for, she had no distinct knowledge of how it was, or what had happened; but she knew *that* had happened. She fell upon her knees before her bed, and buried her head in her hands, shutting out the light. Then she seized hold of herself with both her hands to keep herself (as she felt) from floating away upon that flood of new life which came swelling up all in a moment, swelling into every vein—filling high the fountain of existence which had been so feeble and so low. Oh, shut out—shut out the light, that nobody might see! close the doors and the shutters in the house of death, and every cranny, that no human eye might descry it! After a while she dropped lower, from the bed which supported her to the floor, prostrating herself with more than oriental humbleness. Her heart beat wildly, and in her brain there seemed to wake a hundred questions clanging like bells in her ears, filling the silence with sound. Her whole being, that had been crushed, sprang up like a flower from under a passing foot. Was it possible?—was it possible? She pulled herself down, tried by throwing herself upon her face on the carpet, prostrating herself, body and soul, to struggle against that secret voiceless mad exultation that came upon her against her will. Was he dead?—was he dead? struck down in the middle of his days, that man of iron? Oh, the pity of it!—oh, the horror of it! She tried to force herself to feel this—to keep down, down, that climbing joy in her. God in heaven, was it possible? she who thought nothing could happen to her more.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The drive home would have been very embarrassing to the ladies had not Millefleurs been the perfect little gentleman he was. Rintoul, though he ought to have been aware that his presence was specially desirable, had abandoned his mother and sister; and the consciousness of the secret, which was no secret, weighed upon Lady Lindores so much, that it was scarcely possible for her to keep up any appearance of the easy indifference which was her proper *rôle* in the circumstances: while it silenced Edith altogether. They could scarcely look him in the face, knowing both the state of suspense in which he must be, and the false impression of Edith's feelings which he was probably entertaining. Lady Lindores felt certain that he was aware she had been informed by her husband of what had passed, and feared to look at him lest he might, by some glance of intelligence, some look of appeal, call upon her sympathy; while on the other hand, it was all-essential to keep him, if possible, from noticing the pale consciousness of Edith, her silence and shrinking discomfort, so unlike her usual frank and friendly aspect. Millefleurs was far too quick-sighted not to observe this unusual embarrassment; but there was no more amiable young man in England, and it was his part for the moment to set them at their ease, and soothe the agitation which he could not but perceive. He talked of everything but the matter most near his heart with that self-sacrifice of true politeness which is perhaps the truest as it is one of the most difficult manifestations of social heroism. He took pains to be amusing, to show himself unconcerned and unexcited; and, as was natural, he got his reward. Lady Lindores was almost piqued (though it was so great a relief) that Edith's suitor should be capable of such perfect calm; and Edith herself, though with a dim perception of the heroism in it, could not but console herself with the thought that one so completely self-controlled would "get over" his disappointment easily. Their conversation at last came to be almost a monologue on his part. He discoursed on Tinto and its treasures as an easy subject. "It has one great quality—it is homogeneous," he said, "which is too big a word for a small fellow like me. It is all of a piece, don't you know. To think what lots of money those good people must have spent on those great vases, and candelabra, and things! We don't do that sort of thing nowadays. We roam over all the world, and pick up our *bric-a-brac* cheap. But, don't you know, there's something fine in the other principle—there's a grand sort of spare-no-expense sentiment. I'd like to do it all over again for them—to clear away all that finery, which is mere *Empire*, and get something really good, don't you know. But at the same time, I respect this sort of thing. There is a thoroughness in it. It is going the 'whole animal,' as we say in America. Mr Torrance, who is a fine big man, just like his house, should, if you'll allow me to say so, have carried out the principle a little further; he should not have gone so entirely into a different *genre* in his wife."

"You mean that Carry is—that Carry looks——She is not very strong," said Lady Lindores, with involuntary quickening of attention, taking up instantly an attitude of defence.

"Dear Lady Lindores," cried little Millefleurs, "entirely out of keeping! A different *genre* altogether; a different date—the finest ethical nineteenth century against a background *Empire*! preposterous altogether. We have no style to speak of in china, or that sort of thing—which is odd, considering how much we think of it. We can't do anything better than go back to Queen Anne for our furniture. But in respect to women, it's quite different. We've got a Victorian type in that, don't you know. I am aware that it is the height of impertinence to make remarks. But considering the family friendship to which you have been so good as to admit me, and my high appreciation—Lady Caroline, if you will allow me to say so, is a different *genre*. She is out of keeping with the decoration of her house."

"Poor Carry!" Lady Lindores said with a sigh; and they were thankful to Millefleurs when he ran on about the china and the gilding. It was he, with those keen little beady eyes of his, who saw

John Erskine disappearing among the trees. He had possession of the stage, as it were, during all that long way home, which to the ladies seemed about twice as long as it had ever been before.

Lord Lindores had not accompanied the party. He did not come in contact with his son-in-law, indeed, any more than he could help. Though he had taken up Tinto so warmly at first, it was not to be supposed that a man of his refinement could have any pleasure in such society; and though he made a point of keeping on scrupulously good terms with Torrance, even when the latter set himself in opposition to the Earl's plans, yet he kept away from the spectacle afforded by his daughter and her husband in their own house. If Lord Lindores's private sentiments could have been divined, it would probably have been apparent that in his soul he thought it hard upon poor Caroline to have married such a man. There were reasons which made it very desirable, even necessary; but it was a pity, he felt. In the present case, however, there was nothing but congratulations to be thought of. Edith was, there could be no doubt, a thoroughly fortunate young woman. Nobody could say a word against Millefleurs. He had shown himself eccentric, but only in a way quite approved by his generation; and there was no doubt that a wife, at once pretty and charming, and sufficiently clever, was all that he wanted to settle him. Not Carry—Carry was too intellectual, too superior altogether, for the democratic little Marquis; but Edith had just the combination of simplicity and mental competence that would suit his position. It was the most admirable arrangement that could have been devised. Lord Lindores sat in his library with much satisfaction of mind, and thought over all the new combinations. He had no doubt of the Duke's content with the alliance—and through the Duke, the whole Ministry would be affected. It would be felt that to keep a man of Lord Lindores's abilities in the hopeless position of a mere Scotch lord, would be a waste prejudicial to the country. With Millefleurs for his son-in-law, a mere representative seat in the House of Lords no longer seemed worth his while—an English peerage would be his as a matter of course. He had said a few words to Rintoul on the subject before the party left the house. There could be no harm in drawing the bonds tighter which were to produce so admirable an effect. "There is Lady Reseda, a very charming girl," he said. "It is time you were thinking of marrying, Rintoul. I don't know any girl that has been more admired."

"One doesn't care for one's wife having been admired," said Rintoul, somewhat sulkily. "One would rather admire her one's self."

His father looked at him with some severity, and Rintoul coloured in spite of himself. Perhaps this was one reason why his temper was so unpleasant at Tinto, and moved him to fling off from the party in the midst of their inspection of the place, and declare that he would walk home. In his present temper, perhaps he would not have been much help to them, whereas Millefleurs managed it all capitally, being left to himself.

They got home only in time to dress for dinner, at which meal Rintoul did not appear. It was unlike him to stay behind and dine at Tinto; but still there was nothing impossible in it, and the minds of the four people who sat down together at table were all too much absorbed by the immediate question before them to have much time to consider Rintoul. Lady Lindores's entire attention was given to Edith, who, very pale and with a thrill of nervous trembling in her, which her mother noted without quite understanding, neither ate nor talked, but pretended, at least, to do the first, veiling herself from the eyes of her lover behind the flowers which ornamented the centre of the table. These flowers, it must be allowed, are often a nuisance and serious hindering of conversation. On this occasion they performed a charitable office. There was one plume of ferns in particular which did Edith the most excellent service. She had been commanded to repair to the library when she left the table, to await her father there. And if she trembled, it was with the tension of high-strung nerves, not the hesitation of weakness, as her mother thought. Lord Lindores, for his part, watched her too, with an uneasy instinct. He would not allow himself to imagine that she could have the folly to hesitate even; and yet there was a sensation in him, an unwilling conviction that, if Edith resisted, she would be, though she was not so clever, a different kind of antagonist from poor Carry. There arose in him, as he glanced at her now and then, an impulse of war. He had no idea that she would really attempt to resist him: but if she did! He, too, had little to say during dinner. He uttered a formal sentence now and then in discharge of his duty as host, but that was all; and by intervals, when he had leisure to think of it, he was angry with his son. Rintoul ought to have been there to take the weight of the conversation upon him: Rintoul ought to have had more discrimination than to choose this day of all others for absenting himself. His mother was of the same opinion. She, too, was almost wroth with Rintoul—to leave her unsupported without any aid at such a crisis was unpardonable. But Millefleurs was quite equal to the emergency. He took everything upon himself. The servants, closest of all critics, did not even guess that anything was going on in which "the wee English lord" was involved. They made their own remarks upon Lady Edith's pallor and silence, and the preoccupation of Lady Lindores. But Millefleurs was the life of the company; and not even the butler, who had seen a great deal in his day, and divined most things, associated him with the present evident crisis. It was amazing how much he found to say, and how naturally he said it, as if nothing particular was going on, and no issues of any importance to him, at least, were involved.

When the ladies left the table, Lady Lindores would have detained her daughter with her. "Come into the drawing-room with me first, Edith. Your father cannot be ready for you for some minutes at least."

"No, mamma. I must keep all my wits about me," Edith said, with a faint smile. They were in the corridor, where it was always cold, and she shivered a little in spite of herself.

"You are chilly, Edith—you are not well, dear. I will go myself and tell your father you are not able to talk to him to-night."

Edith shook her head without saying anything. She waved her hand to her mother as she turned away in the direction of the library. Lady Lindores stood looking after her with that strange struggle in her mind which only parents know,—the impulse to take their children in their arms as of old, and bear their burdens for them, contradicted by the consciousness that this cannot be done—that the time has come when these beloved children can no longer be carried over their difficulties, but must stand for themselves, with not another to interfere between them and fate. Oh the surprise of this penetrating the heart! Lady Lindores went back to the drawing-room with the wonder and pain of it piercing her like an arrow, to sit down and wait while Edith—little Edith—bore her trial alone. It was intolerable, yet it had to be endured. She stood aside and let her child do what had to be done; any trial in the world would have been easier. The pang was complicated in every way. There seemed even an ingratitude in it, as if her child preferred to stand alone; and yet it was all inevitable—a thing that must be. She waited, the air all rustling round her, with expectation and suspense. What would the girl find to say? Caroline had wept and struggled, but she had yielded. Edith would not weep, she would stand fast like a little rock; but, after all, what was there to object to? Millefleurs was very different from Torrance of Tinto. Why should he not please the girl's fancy as well as another? He had so much in him to please any girl's fancy; he was clever and amusing, and romantic even in his way. If Edith would but content herself with him! True, he was little; but what did that matter after all? He would no doubt make the best of husbands—unquestionably he would make the best of sons-in-law. And then, your mind must be impartial indeed if you are impervious to the attractions of an English dukedom. Who could be indifferent to that? With a little laugh of nervous pleasure, Lady Lindores permitted herself to think how amusing it would be to see her little girl take precedence of her. Alas! things were far from being so advanced as that; but yet she could not help more or less being on the side of ambition this time. The ambition that fixed upon Torrance of Tinto was poor enough, and shamed her to think of it; but the Marquis Millefleurs, the Duke of Lavender, that was an ambition which had some justification. Not love him! Why should not she love him? Lady Lindores even went so far as to ask herself with some heat. He was delightful; everything but his stature was in his favour. He was excellent; his very failings leant to virtue's side.

While, however, her mother was thus discussing the question with so strong a bias in favour of Millefleurs, Edith was standing in her father's library waiting for him, not entering into any argument with herself at all. She would not sit down, which would have seemed somehow like yielding, but stood with her hand upon the mantelpiece, her heart beating loudly. She had not summoned herself to the bar of her own judgment, or asked with any authority how it was that she neither could nor would for a moment take the qualities of Millefleurs into consideration. The question had been given against him before even it was put; but Edith would not allow herself to consider why. No doubt she knew why; but there are occasions in which we do not wish to see what is going on in our spirits, just as there are occasions when we turn out all the corners and summon everything to the light. She heard the door of the dining-room open, then the voices of the gentlemen as they came out, with a sudden tightening of her breath. What if little Millefleurs himself were coming instead of her father? This idea brought a gleam of a smile over her face; but that was driven away as she heard the heavy familiar step approaching. Lord Lindores, as he came along the corridor, had time enough to say to himself that perhaps he had been foolish. Why had he determined upon speaking to Edith before he allowed her lover to speak to her? Perhaps it was a mistake. He had his reasons, but it might be that they were not so powerful as he had supposed, and that he would have done better not to have interfered. However, it was now too late to think of this. He went into the library, shutting the door deliberately, asking himself why he should have any trouble about the matter, and what Edith could feel but happiness in having such a proposal made to her; but when he turned round and met Edith's eye his delusions fled. Surely there was nobody so unfortunate as he was in his children. Instead of their perceiving what was for their own interest, he was met by a perpetual struggle and attempt to put him in the wrong. It was inconceivable. Was it not their interest solely which moved him? and yet they would resist as if he were plotting nothing but wrong. But though these thoughts passed through his mind with a sweep of bitterness, he would not indulge them. He went up to Edith with great urbanity, putting down all feelings less pleasant. "I am glad to find you here," he said.

"Yes, papa; you wanted me, my mother told me."

"I wanted you. As I came along the corridor, I began to ask myself whether I was doing right in wanting you. Perhaps I ought to have let you hear what I am going to say from—some one who might have made it more agreeable, Edith."

"Oh, let me hear what you want, please, from yourself, papa."

He took her hand, which trembled in his hold, and looked down on her with fatherly eyes—eyes which were tender, and admiring, and kind. Could any one doubt that he wished her well? He wished her everything that was best in the world—wealth and title, and rank and importance,—everything we desire for our children. He was not a bad man, desiring the sacrifice of his child's happiness. If he had, perhaps, made something of a mistake about Carry, there was no mistake here.

"Edith, I want to speak to you about Lord Millefleurs. He came here, I believe, on your own invitation——"

At this Edith started with sudden alarm, and her hand trembled still more in her father's easy clasp. She had an indefinite pang of fear, she could not tell why.

"He has been here now for some time. I was glad to ratify your invitation by mine—nothing could have pleased me better. I like his family. His father and I have always thought alike, and the Duchess is a most excellent woman. That your mother and you should have taken him up so much, was very good for him, and quite a pleasure to me."

"I don't know why you should say we took him up very much," said Edith, with some confusion. "He took us up—he came to us wherever we were. And then he was Robin's friend. It was quite natural—there was nothing——" She paused, with a painful eagerness to excuse herself: and yet there was nothing to excuse. This changed the position for the moment, and made everything much more easy for the indulgent father, who was so ready to approve what his child herself had done.

"It is perfectly natural, my dear—everything about it is natural. Lord Millefleurs has been quite consistent since he first saw you. He has explained himself to me in the most honourable way. He wishes—to marry you, Edith. I don't suppose this is any surprise to you?"

Edith was crimson; her temples throbbed with the rush of the blood, which seemed to rise like an angry sea. "If it is so, he has had opportunity enough to tell me so. Why has he taken so unfair an advantage? Why—why has he gone to you?"

"He has behaved like an honourable man. I see no unfair advantage. He has done what was right—what was respectful at once to you and to me."

"Oh, papa,—honourable! respectful!" cried the girl. "What does that mean in our position? Could he have been anything but honourable—to me? You forget what kind of expressions you are using. If he had *that* to say, it is to me he ought to have come. He has taken an unkind—a cruel advantage!" Edith cried.

"This is ridiculous," said her father. "He has done what it is seemly and right to do—in his position and yours. If he had gone to you, as you say, like a village lad to his lass, what advantage could there have been in that? As it is, you have your father's full sanction, which, I hope, you reckon for something, Edith."

"Father," she said, somewhat breathless, collecting herself with a little effort. The wave of hot colour died off from her face. She grew paler and paler as she stood firmly opposite to him, holding fast with her hand the cool marble of the mantelpiece, which felt like a support. "Father, if he had come to me, as he ought to have done, this is what would have happened,—I should have told him at once that it was a mistake, and he would have left us quietly without giving you any trouble. How much better that would have been in every way!"

"I don't understand you, Edith. A mistake? I don't see that there is any mistake."

"That is very likely, papa," she said, with returning spirit, "since it is not you that are concerned. But I see it. I should have told him quietly, and there would have been an end of the matter, if he had not been so formal, so absurd—so old-fashioned—as to appeal to you."

This counterblast took away Lord Lindores's breath. He made a pause for a moment, and stared at her; he had never been so treated before. "Old-fashioned," he repeated, almost with bewilderment. "There is enough of this, Edith. If you wish to take up the *rôle* of the advanced young lady, I must tell you it is not either suitable or becoming. Millefleurs will, no doubt, find an early opportunity of making his own explanations to you, and of course, if you choose to keep him in hot water, it is, I suppose, your right. But don't carry it too far. The connection is one that is perfectly desirable—excellent in every point of view."

"It is a pity, since you think so, that it is impossible," she said in a low tone.

Lord Lindores looked at her, fixing her with his eye. He felt now that he had known it all along—that he had felt sure there was a struggle before him, and that his only policy was to convince her that he was determined from the very first. "There is nothing impossible," he said, "except disobedience and folly. I don't expect these from you. Indeed I can't imagine what motive you can have, except a momentary perverseness, to answer me so. No more of it, Edith. By to-morrow, at least, everything will be settled between you and your lover——"

"Oh, papa, listen! don't mistake me," she cried. "He is not my lover. How can you—how can you use such a word? He can never be anything to me. If he had spoken to me, I could have settled it all in a moment. As it is you he has spoken to, why give him a double mortification? It will be so easy for you to tell him: to tell him—he can never be anything to me."

"Edith, take care what you are saying! He is to be your husband. I am not a man easily balked in my own family."

"We all know that," she cried, with bitterness; "but I am not Carry, papa."

He made a step nearer to her, with a threatening aspect. "What do you mean by that? Carry! What has Carry to do with it? You have a chance poor Carry never had—high rank, wealth,—everything that is desirable: and a man whom the most fantastic could not object in any way to."

There is scarcely any situation in the world into which a gleam of ridicule will not fall. It takes us with the tear in our eye—it took Edith in the nervous excitement of this struggle, the most trying moment which personally she had ever gone through. Millefleurs, with his little plump person, his round eyes, his soft lisp of a voice, seemed to come suddenly before her, and at the height of this half-tragical contention she laughed. It was excitement and high pressure as well as that sudden flash of perverse imagination. She could have cried next moment—but laugh she did, in spite of herself. The sound drove Lord Lindores to fury. "This is beyond bearing," he cried. "It seems that I have been deceived in you altogether. If you cannot feel the honour that has been done you—the compliment that has been paid you—you are unworthy of it, and of the trouble I have taken."

"I suppose," said Edith, irritated too, "these are the right words for a girl to use to any man who is so good as to think she would suit him. I was wrong to laugh, but are not you going too far, papa? I am likely to get more annoyance by it than honour. Please, please let me take my own way."

She had broken down a little when she said this, in natural reaction, and gave him a pitiful look, with a little quiver of her lip. After such a laugh it is so likely that a girl will cry, as after a sudden self-assertion it is to be expected that she will be subdued and humbled. She looked at him with a childlike appeal for pity. And he thought that now he had her securely in his hands.

"My love," he said, "you will regret it all your life if I yield to you now. It is your happiness I am thinking of. I cannot let a girl's folly spoil your career. Besides, it is of the highest importance to everybody,—to Rintoul, even to myself,—that you should marry Millefleurs——"

"I am very sorry, papa; but I shall never—marry Lord Millefleurs——"

"Folly! I shall not allow you to trifle with him, Edith—or with me. You have given him the most evident encouragement—led him on in every way, invited him here——"

Edith grew pale to her very lips. "Papa, have pity on me! I never did so; it was all nothing—the way one talks without meaning it—without thinking——"

"That is all very well on our side, but on the other——I tell you, I will permit no trifling, Edith. He has a right to a favourable answer, and he must have it——"

"Never, never! if I have been wrong, I will ask his pardon——"

"You will accept him in the first place," said Lord Lindores, sternly.

"I will never accept him," Edith said.

Her father, wound up to that pitch of excitement at which a man is no longer master of what he says, took a few steps about the room. "Your sister said the same," he cried, with a short laugh, "and you know what came of that."

It was an admission he had never intended to make,—for he did not always feel proud of his handiwork,—but it was done now, and could not be recalled. Edith withdrew even from the mantelpiece on which she had leant. She clasped her hands together, supporting herself. "I am not Carry," she said, in a low tone, facing him resolutely as he turned back in some alarm at what he had been betrayed into saying. He had become excited, and she calm. He almost threatened her with his hand in the heat of the moment.

"You will obey your parents," he cried.

"No, papa," she said.

He remembered so well, too well, what Carry had done in the same circumstances—she had wept and pleaded. When he demanded obedience from her she had not dared to stand against him. He recollected (too well for his own comfort sometimes) every one of those scenes which brought her to submission. But Edith did not weep, and was not shaken by that final appeal. She was very pale, and looked unusually slight and young and childlike standing there with her hands clasped, her steadfast eyes raised, her little mouth close—so slight a thing, not stately like Carry. He was confounded by a resistance which he had not foreseen, which he could not have believed in, and stood staring at her, not knowing what next to say and do. Matters were at this point when all at once there arose a something outside the room, which not even the solid closed doors and heavy curtains could keep out,—not positive noise or tumult, but something indescribable—a sensation as of some unknown dread event. Ordinarily all was still in the well-ordered house, and my lord's tranquillity as completely assured as if he had been Prime Minister. But this was something that was beyond decorum. Then the door was hastily opened, and Rintoul ghastly, his face grey rather than pale, his hair hanging wildly on his forehead, came into the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

This extraordinary interruption put a stop at once to the struggle between the father and daughter. They both came to a sudden pause, not only in their conversation, but in their thoughts, which were suspended instantly by the breaking in of something more urgent. "What is it? What has happened?" they both cried in a breath; and Edith, after a moment, added, "Carry—

there is something wrong with Carry," scarcely aware what she said.

Rintoul came to the table on which stood a crystal jug of water. He filled himself out a large glass and drank it. He was in a tremor which he attempted to conceal from them, though with no success. Then he said, "There is nothing the matter with Carry; but a dreadful accident has happened,"—and stopped, his mouth being parched, his very articulation difficult.

"What is it? what is it? The children?——"

Rintoul turned his face away from Edith and directed himself towards his father. He made a great effort over himself, as if what he had to say was almost beyond his powers. Then he said with a strange hoarseness of voice, "Torrance—has been killed."

"Torrance!—killed! Good God! Rintoul."

"It is so. Instantaneous, they say. He cannot have suffered much, thank God."

Rintoul was not emotional or used to show very much feeling, but the lines of his face were drawn and his lips quivered as he spoke.

"Killed! But how did it happen? where? Was it accident, or——For heaven's sake tell us all!" cried his father. Edith stood by struck dumb, yet with a host of sudden rising thoughts, or rather images, in her breast. It was to her sister that her mind suddenly reverted, with a perception of everything involved so clear and vivid that her very spirit was confused by the distinctness of her sight.

"Accident," said Rintoul almost with a stammer, stumbling on the word. "He must have been riding home by the Greenlaws road, which was his favourite way. He and his horse were found at the foot of the Scaur. The brute must have reared and lost its footing. The ground was soft with the rain. That's all that any one knows."

"And he is dead? Good God!"

A shiver came over Rintoul. Who would have thought he had so much feeling? and concerning Torrance, whom he had never been able to endure. "It's dreadful," he said in a low tone; "but it's true. One moment never to be recalled, and that big fellow with all his strength——O Lord, it's terrible to think of it. It has taken all the strength out of me."

Edith hurried to him, trembling herself, to clasp his arm in hers and soothe her brother. She was almost too much excited and agitated to be aware that he repulsed her, though unconsciously, but this increased the general impression of pain and horror on her mind. There was so strong a thrill of agitation in him that he could not bear to be touched or even looked at. He put her away, and threw himself down into the nearest chair. A hundred questions were on the lips of both; but he looked as if he had said all that was possible—as if he had no power to add anything. Lord Lindores, after the first pause of horror, of course pursued his inquiries, and they gathered certain details as to the way of finding "the body," and the manner in which horse and man seemed to have fallen. But Rintoul evidently had been too much impressed by the sight to be able to dwell on the subject. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and took again large draughts of water as he brought forth sentence after sentence. "Get me some wine, or brandy, or something—I am done," he cried; but when his father rang the bell, Rintoul recoiled. "Let Edith fetch it; don't let us have any prying servants about here." "There is no reason why we should be afraid of prying servants," said Lord Lindores, with surprise and disapproval. "It is not a matter to be concealed. I suppose there is nothing to conceal?" "Oh no, no," said Rintoul, with a groan —"nothing to be concealed; you can't conceal a dead man," and he shuddered, but added directly, raising himself to meet his father's eye, "it was accident—nothing but accident,—everybody has warned him. I said myself something was sure to happen sooner or later at the Scaur." Edith, who had flown to bring him the wine he asked for, here came back with it, having sent away the officious butler, anxious to hear all about it, who hovered near the door. Her brother took the decanter from her hand without a word of thanks, and poured out the wine lavishly, but with a shaking hand, into the glass from which he had been drinking water. It brought a little colour back into his cheeks. To Edith the emotion he showed was a new revelation. She had never expected from Rintoul so much tenderness of feeling. But Lord Lindores went on with his questions.

"Something sure to happen? Yes—to children or people incapable of taking care of themselves; but Torrance, who knew it all like his own hand! had he—been drinking, poor fellow?"

"Not that I know of; but how can I tell? Nobody knows."

"Some one must have seen him before the accident happened. There must be some one who can tell. Of course everything must be investigated. Where had he been? Why was he not with you, when you went by appointment to see the place? It was surely very extraordinary——"

"He was with us at first," said Rintoul, "but he took offence at some of Millefleurs's criticisms; and then John Erskine——"

"What had John Erskine to do with it?"

"They had some words. I can't remember; something passed. Erskine left early too. Now that I think of it," said Rintoul, suddenly, "Erskine must have gone that way, and perhaps——But no, no; I mistake—they did not meet."

"They had no words," said Edith, eagerly; "there was no quarrel, if that is what you mean. Mr Torrance was annoyed because Lord Millefleurs——But Mr Erskine had nothing to do with it," she added, her colour rising. Lord Lindores paced up and down the room, stopping at every turn to ask another question. Rintoul sat leaning his head upon his hand, his face concealed by it; while Edith, to whom this reference had given animation, stood between them, her senses quickened, her mind alert. But they were both too deeply occupied to notice the change in her which was made by the mention of this name.

"Of course there must be a thorough investigation into all the circumstances," Lord Lindores said.

"Who can do that? I thought there were no coroners in Scotland?" said Rintoul, rousing himself. "I was thinking, indeed, what a good thing for poor Carry to be spared this. Besides, what can investigation do? He went off from among us excited. Very likely, poor fellow, he had been drinking. He rode off in haste, thundering down that dangerous road, as was his custom. Everybody knows it was his custom. It was his way of blowing off steam. Coming back, the road was soft with the rain, and he still excited and in a nervous state. He pushed Black Jess a step too close. She reared, and——I don't know what you can find out more by any investigation." Rintoul wiped his forehead again and poured himself out more wine.

"That may be, but there must be an investigation all the same," said Lord Lindores. "A man of importance like poor Torrance does not disappear like this in a moment without any notice being taken of it. If he had been a ploughman, perhaps——"

Here the door was opened hastily, and Lady Lindores hurried in. "What is this?" she cried; "what is this I hear?—the servants are full of it. Something about Torrance and a bad accident. What does it mean?"

Edith ran to her mother, taking her by the arm, with the instinct of supporting her against the shock; and Lord Lindores gave her the information, not without that almost pleasure in recounting even the most terrible news, which is the instinctive sentiment of those whose hearts are not deeply concerned. Lady Lindores heard it with horror,—with the instant and keen self-question as to whether she had done justice to this man, of whom no one now could ask pardon,—whose wrongs, if he had any, could never be remedied—which, in a generous mind, is the first result of such a tragedy. Out of keen excitement and horror she shed a few tears, the first that in this house at least had been expended on the dead man. A pang of wondering pity was in her heart. The sight of this softer feeling stilled the others. She arrested every other sentiment in a natural pause of terrified compassion. She who had never called him by it in his life, suddenly found his Christian name come to her lips: "Oh, poor Pat! poor Pat! like that—in a moment—with his home close by that he was so proud of, and all his good things—summoned in a moment. O God, have mercy upon him!" she cried.

"It is too late for that," said Lord Lindores, gravely, for the moment ashamed of all other questions. "Short as the time is, and dreadful as it is to think of it, his account must be made by this time. It is a terrible lesson to us all——"

"O God, have mercy upon him! I cannot think it is ever too late for that," cried Lady Lindores through her tears. And there was a pause. She did not, so far as we know, entertain any heterodox ideas about the after state; but nature spoke in her, which is stronger than creeds. And they were all silent, ashamed to have thought of anything else than this. Rintoul still sat with his head hid in his hands. He had not looked at his mother. He did not say anything to help out the narrative which his father, of course, had given minutely. He had made a great effort to get over his personal agitation and the tremor of his nerves, but he was not used to such violent emotions, and it was hard to get them under control.

Then Lady Lindores rose from the chair upon which she had sunk in the first shock. "I must go to Carry at once," she said. "Poor Carry! how must she be feeling? In a moment—without time for a word——"

Now at this there was a slight movement on the part of the two men—even in Rintoul, though he was so much overcome. They thought it was the usual feminine hypocrisy. Carry had never pretended to be a fond or loving wife. The shock was great, but it brought her deliverance. A touch of indignation and of wonder at what they considered that incomprehensible female nature, which one moment brought them back by sheer natural tenderness to a loftier state of feeling, and the next disgusted them with mere conventionalism and make-believe, stirred in their minds. They durst not say anything, for of course it was needful to the world to keep up this fiction, and take it for granted that Carry was heart-broken; but in their hearts they despised the false sentiment, as they thought it. Nobody understood that divine compunction in Lady Lindores's heart—that terrible and aching pity for the unworthy on her own part—that sense of awful severance from a human creature with whom there had been nothing in common, with whom there could be no hope of reunion, which, she felt, must be in her daughter's mind. God help poor Carry! What could she be but glad to be free? Her mother's heart bled for her in this awful satisfaction and misery. Meanwhile her husband rang the bell and ordered the carriage for her, with a sensation not quite unlike contempt, though he was pleased, too, that she should be able to keep up the natural superstitions, and go through all traditional formalities so well. He made a pause, however, when he found Edith hastily preparing to go too.

"There is Lord Millefleurs to be thought of? What am I to do," he said, "with Millefleurs?"

"At such a moment surely everything of the kind must be suspended," said Lady Lindores. "You cannot think that Edith could—go on with this—while her sister——"

Millefleurs himself made his appearance on the stairs while she was speaking. It was a curious scene. The great hall-door was open, the night wind blowing in, making the light waver, and penetrating all the excited group with cold. Lady Lindores, wrapped in a great cloak which covered her from head to foot, stood below looking up, while Edith paused on the lower steps in the act of tying a white shawl about her head. The servants, still more excited, stood about, all anxious to help, by way of seeing everything that was going on. Rintoul stood in the doorway of the library, entirely in shadow,—a dark figure contrasting with the others in the light. To these actors in the drama came forth Millefleurs in his exact evening costume, like a hero of genteel comedy coming in at the height of the *imbroglio*. "I need not say how shocked and distressed I am," he said, from his platform on the landing. "I would go away at once, but that would not help you. Never think of me; but I feel sure you would not do me the injustice to think of me in presence of such a catastrophe."

Lady Lindores waved her hand to him as she hurried out, but he overtook Edith on the stairs. It was impossible that he should not feel that she knew all about it by this time; and after all, though he was so humble-minded, Millefleurs was aware that the heir of a great Duke is not usually kept in suspense. "Lady Edith," he said in an undertone, "should I go away? I will do what you think best."

He had faded entirely out of her mind in the excitement of this new event. "Lord Millefleurs——Oh, I cannot tell," she said; "it will be painful for you in the midst of this horror and mourning——"

"You cannot think that is what I mean," he said anxiously. "If I could be of any use; a cooler person is sometimes of use, don't you know—one that can sympathise and—without being overwhelmed with—feeling."

"We shall not be overwhelmed. Oh, you have seen, you know, that it is not so much grief as——It is Carry we all must think of—not——poor Mr Torrance. I am sorry—I am sorry with all my heart—but he did not belong to us, except by——"

"Marriage—that is not much of a tie, is it?" said little Millefleurs, looking at her with a mixture of half-comic ruefulness and serious anxiety. "But this is not a moment to trouble you. Lady Edith, do you think I may stay?"

At this moment her mother called her from the door, and Edith ran hastily down the steps. She scarcely knew whether she had said anything, or what she had said. It was only "Oh," the English ejaculation which fits into every crisis; but it was not "No," Lord Millefleurs said to himself, and he hastened after her to close the carriage-door, and bid Lady Lindores good-night. As the carriage drove off he turned and found himself in face of Lord Lindores, who had a somewhat anxious look. "I have been asking if I should go or stay," he said; "I know your hospitality, even when you are in trouble——"

"There is no trouble in having you in the house, even in the midst of this calamity; but what did they say to you?" asked Lord Lindores.

"Nothing, I think; but I will stay if you will let me, Lord Lindores, till we can see. And may I hear the details of the accident—if it was an accident."

"You think there is something more in it?" cried Lord Lindores, quickly.

"No; how can I tell? I should like to hear everything. Sometimes a looker-on, who is not so much interested, sees more of the game, don't you know."

"It is a tragic game," said Lord Lindores, shaking his head; "but there is no agrarian crime here, no landlord-killing, no revenge. Poor Torrance had not an enemy, so far as I know."

All this time Rintoul stood motionless in the doorway, concealed by the shadow; but here he seemed piqued to speak. "He had plenty of enemies," he said hastily. "A man of such a temper and manners, how could he help having enemies?"

"De mortuis nil nisi bonum," said his father,—"say no harm of the dead——"

"That is all very well; but it is of more importance to do no injustice to the living," said Rintoul, with a sort of sullen solemnity; and he suddenly gave place to the others and went off in the direction of his own den, a little room in which he smoked and kept his treasures. Lord Lindores took his guest into the library, gravely apologetic. "I have never seen Rintoul so upset; his nerves seem to have received a shock. I don't think he cares to go over the melancholy story again."

"It is very natural," said little Millefleurs. "A man who has been always at home, who has never roughed it in the world, naturally loses his head when he first comes in contact with tragedy, don't you know. I did myself in California the first time I touched actual blood. But that was murder, which is a different sort of thing."

"Very different," said Lord Lindores; and he proceeded to satisfy his guest with an account of all the particulars, to which Millefleurs listened very seriously. He had the Scaur described to him with much minuteness, and how it might be possible that such an accident could happen. Instinctively Lord Lindores made it appear that the wonder was it had not happened before. "I warned poor Torrance repeatedly," he said; although he had in equal good faith expressed his amazement that such a thing could happen to a man who knew the place so well, only a short time before. Millefleurs listened to everything very gravely, giving the profoundest attention to every detail.

The house was full of agitation and excitement, and Lord Lindores sent repeatedly for his son to consult with him over what ought to be done; but Rintoul was not to be found. He had gone out, the servants said; and the general impression was that he had returned to Tinto, though he could only have done that by a long walk through the gloomy night. Millefleurs went out into the grounds while this question was proceeding. He had a great many things to think about. He lit his cigar and wandered about, thoughtfully discussing with himself various questions. Did Edith mean that he should stay? Had he any right to stay in the circumstances of the family? He had a strong desire to do so that was not entirely connected with Edith. To be sure, the suspense in which he was kept, the impossibility of addressing her at such a moment, would have made a passionate lover very restless; but Millefleurs was not the sort of stuff out of which passionate lovers are made. He thought Edith would make him a delightful wife, and that with such a wife he would be a very happy man; but he did not feel that heaven and earth would be changed to him without Edith, and therefore other motives were free to come in. He had something in his mind which for the moment almost obliterated all thoughts of her. He walked up and down in the darkness, turning it over and over in his mind. Vaguely, one way or another, this thought was associated with Edith too. After some time he perceived another red spark in the darkness, and became aware of some one else smoking like himself a thoughtful cigar. He called out to Rintoul and came upon him at the end of an alley. Millefleurs had an internal conviction that Rintoul wished to avoid him, so he went up to him quickly and caught him by the arm.

"It was thought that you had gone back to Tinto," he said, putting his arm familiarly through his. He had to reach up on tiptoe to do it, but this was what pleased Millefleurs.

"What! walking at this time of night? I am not so eager about it," said Rintoul. "Besides, what should I do there? Everything is settled so far as it can be for to-night, and my mother and Edith have gone to Carry: there is no need for me."

"I wish you would tell me all about it, my dear Rintoul."

"Didn't my father tell you?"

"Yes, in his way; but that is different. You want the details from an eyewitness, don't you know. You want to see it through the eyes that have seen it. I have a great curiosity about that kind of thing ever since I have been in California, where it is an incident of everyday life."

"It is not an incident of everyday life here, and I'm sick of it," cried Rintoul. "Don't question me any more—it's too terrible. It must have been instantaneous they say; that is the only comfort about the business—everything else is hideous from beginning to end."

"Ah, from the beginning—that is just what I want to talk to you about," said Millefleurs.

He felt a thrill in the arm he held, and an inclination as if to throw him off, but he was not to be thrown off; he was small but very tenacious, and clung to his hold.

"That is what I want to know. The beginning. Did he meet any one? had he any dispute or altercation in the wood?"

"None that I know of," said Rintoul. He spoke sulkily, almost in an undertone, so that Millefleurs had to concentrate his attention upon the voice, which was interrupted by all the sounds in the air, the rustling of the trees, the sough of the river far away.

"Did you see any one about?" said Millefleurs.

The two men were in the dark,—they could not see each other's faces, yet they stopped and looked at each other, anxiously, suspiciously, each at the red end of the other's cigar, which disclosed a moustache, a shadow above.

"Any one about? I don't think there was any one about," said Rintoul, still more sullenly. "What should put that into your mind? You were not there?"

This was a curious question, but Millefleurs made no note of it, his mind being possessed by an entirely different idea. He said, "No, I was not there. I drove home with your mother, don't you know. To think we should have passed without the least knowing it, the place which so soon was to be the scene of such a tragedy."

"Don't romance about it. It's bad enough as it is. You did not pass the scene. It was on the other road, a long way from yours."

"At which side?"

"The left side," said Rintoul, carelessly. "I wish, if you don't mind, that you would change the subject. My nerves are all wrong. I didn't know I was such a feeble beggar. I'd rather not dwell upon it, if you don't mind."

"The left side?" said Millefleurs, with a sigh—and then there was a pause. "You are quite sure," he added anxiously, "that you did not see any one in the wood?"

Rintoul almost thrust this question away. "I tell you I won't be questioned," he said. Then, composing himself with an effort, "I beg your pardon, Millefleurs—I never liked the man, though he was my brother-in-law; and to see all at once a fellow whom perhaps you had been thinking badly of two minutes before, wishing no good to—to see him lying there stiff and stark——"

"I beg you a thousand pardons, Rintoul," Millefleurs said gravely. And they went in together, saying no more.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Lady Lindores and Edith were carried along through the darkness of the night with that curious sense of rapid unseen movement which has in it a kind of soothing influence upon suspense and mental distress. They spoke to each other in the darkness of Carry—poor Carry! how would she take it? but yet never ventured, even to each other, to express the innermost feeling in their minds on this subject. As they drove along, the gleam of other lamps went rapidly past them close to the gate of Dalrulzian, leading back their thoughts for a moment to other interests. "It is John Erskine's dogcart. Is he going away? is it some one arriving? has he been dining somewhere?" Lady Lindores said, with the unconscious curiosity of the country. Then she said with a little shudder, "I wonder if he can have heard?"—that first question which always suggests itself in the face of a great event. "How strange to think that some one has been peacefully dining out while *that* has been happening—so near!" Edith answered only by pressing her mother's arm in which her own was entwined, as they sat close together for mutual consolation. She had other troubled wandering thoughts aching in her own heart; but of these she said nothing, but watched the lamps turning up the Dalrulzian avenue with a thrill of mingled feeling, half angry that he should not have divined she was in trouble, half glad that he thus proved his ignorance of all that had occurred. Thus unknowing, Carry's mother and sister crossed in the dark another new actor in Carry's history, of whom no one as yet had thought.

Carry was seated in her own room alone. It was her natural refuge at such a moment. A fire had been lighted by the anxious servants—who saw her shiver in the nervous excitement of this great and terrible event—and blazed brightly, throwing ruddy gleams of light through the room, and wavering ghostly shadows upon the wall. The great bed, with its tall canopies and heavy ornaments, shrouded round with satin curtains, looped and festooned with tarnished gold lace and every kind of clumsy grandeur, stood like a sort of catafalque, the object of a thousand airy assaults and attacks from the fantastic light, but always dark,—a funereal object in the midst; while the tall polished wardrobes all round the room gave back reflections like dim mirrors, showing nothing but the light. Two groups of candles on the high mantelpiece, twinkling against the dark wall, were the only other illuminations. Carry sat sunk in a big chair close to the fire. If she could have cried,—if she could have talked and lamented,—if she could have gone to bed—or, failing this, if she had read her Bible,—the maids in the house, who hung about the doors in anxiety and curiosity, would have felt consoled for her. But she did none of these. She only sat there, her slight figure lost in the depths of the chair, still in the white dress which she had worn to receive her guests in the morning. She had not stirred—the women said, gathering round Lady Lindores in whispering eagerness—for hours, and had not even touched the cup of tea they had carried to her. "Oh, my lady, do something to make her cry," the women said. "If she doesn't get it out it'll break her heart." They had forgotten, with the facile emotion which death, and especially a death so sudden, calls forth, that the master had been anything but the most devoted of husbands, or his wife other than the lovingest of wives. This pious superstition is always ready to smooth away the horror of deaths which are a grief to no one. "Your man's your man when a's done, even if he's but an ill ane," was the sentiment of the awe-stricken household. "Ye never ken what he's been to ye till ye lose him." It gave them all a sense of elevation that Lady Caroline should, as they thought, be wrapped in hopeless grief,—it made them think better of her and of themselves. The two ladies went into the ghostly room with something of the same feeling. Lady Lindores felt that she understood it—that she had expected it. Had not her own mind been filled by sudden compunction—the thought that perhaps she had been less tolerant of the dead man than she ought; and how much more must Carry, poor Carry, have felt the awe and pang of an almost remorse to think that he was gone without a word against whom her heart had risen in such rebellion, yet who was of all men the most closely involved in her very being? Lady Lindores comprehended it all; and yet it was a relief to her mind that Carry felt it so, and could thus wear the garb of mourning with reality and truth. She went in with her heart full, with tears in her eyes, the profoundest tender pity for the dead, the deepest sympathy with her child in sorrow. The room was very large, very still, very dark, save for that ruddy twilight, the two little groups of pale lights glimmering high up upon the wall, and no sign of any human presence. "Carry, my darling!" her mother said, wondering and dismayed. Then there was a faint sound, and Carry rose, tall, slim, and white, like a ghost out of the gloom. She had been sitting there for hours, lost in thoughts, in dreams, and visions. She seemed to herself to have so exhausted this event by thinking of it, that it was now years away. She stepped forward and met her mother, tenderly indeed, but with no effusion. "Have you come all the way so late to be with me, mother? How kind, how kind you are! And Edith too——"

"Kind!" cried Lady Lindores, with an almost angry bewilderment. "Did you not know I would come, Carry, my poor child. But you are stunned with this blow——"

"I suppose I was at first. Yes, I knew you would come—at first; but it seems so long since. Sit down, mother; you are cold. You have had such a miserable drive. Come near to the fire——"

"Carry, Carry dear, never mind us; it is you we are all thinking of. You must not sit there and drive yourself distracted thinking."

"Let me take off this shawl from your cap, mamma. Now you look more comfortable. Have you brought your things to stay? I am ringing to have fires lit in your rooms. Oh yes, I want you to stay. I have never been able to endure this house, you know, and those large rooms, and the desert feeling in it. And you will have some tea or something. I must give orders——"

"Carry," cried her mother, arresting her hand on the bell, "Edith and I will see to all that. Don't pay any attention to us. I have come to take care of you, my dearest. Carry, dear, your nerves are all shattered. How could it be otherwise? You must let me get you something,—they say you have taken nothing,—and you must go to bed."

"I don't think my nerves are shattered. I am quite well. There is nothing the matter with me. You forget," she said, with something like a faint laugh, "how often we have said, mamma, how absurd to send and ask after a woman's health when there is nothing the matter with her, when only she has lost——" Here she paused a little, and then said gravely, "Even grief does not affect the health."

"Very often it does not, dear; but, Carry, you must not forget that you have had a terrible shock. Even I, who am not so nearly involved—even I——" Here Lady Lindores, in her excitement and agitation, lost her voice altogether, and sobbed, unable to command herself. "Oh, poor fellow! poor fellow!" she said, with broken tones. "In a moment, Carry, without warning!"

Carry went to her mother's side, and drew her head upon her breast. She was perfectly composed, without a tear. "I have thought of all that," she said; "I cannot think it matters. If God is the Father of us all, we are the same to Him, dead or living. What can it matter to Him that we should make preparations to appear before Him? Oh, all that must be folly, mother. However bad I had been, should I have to prepare to go to you?"

"Carry, Carry, my darling! It is I that should be saying this to you. You are putting too much force upon yourself—it is unnatural; it will be all the more terrible for you after."

Carry stood stooping over her mother, holding Lady Lindores's head against her bosom. She smiled faintly, and shook her head. "Has it not been unnatural altogether?" she said.

To Edith standing behind, this strange scene appeared like a picture—part of the phantasmagoria of which her sister had for years been the centre: her mind leapt back to the discussions which preceded Carry's marriage, the hopeless yielding of the victim, the perplexity and misery of the mother. Now they had changed positions, but the same strange haze of terror and pity, yet almost indignation, was in her own breast. She had been the judge then—in a smaller degree she was the judge now. But this plea stopped her confused and painful thoughts. Has it not been unnatural altogether? Edith's impulse was to escape from a problem which she could not deal with. "I will go and see the children," she said.

"The children—poor children! have you seen them, Carry? do they know?" said Lady Lindores, drying the tears—the only tears that had been shed for Torrance—from her cheeks.

Carry did not make any reply. She went away to the other end of the room and took up a white shawl in which she wrapped herself. "The only thing I feel is cold," she said.

"Ah, my love, that is the commonest feeling. I have felt sometimes as if I could just drag myself to the fire like a wounded animal and care for nothing more."

"But, mother, you were never in any such terrible trouble."

"Not like this—but I have lost children," said Lady Lindores. She had to pause again, her lip quivering. "To be only sorrow, there is no sorrow like that."

She had risen, and they stood together, the fantastic firelight throwing long shadows of them all over the dim and ghastly room. Suddenly Carry flung herself into her mother's arms. "Oh my innocent mother!" she cried. "Oh, mother! you only know such troubles as angels may have. Look at me! look at me! I am like a mad woman. I am keeping myself in, as you say, that I may not go mad—with joy!"

Lady Lindores gave a low terrible cry, and held her daughter in her arm, pressing her desperately to her heart as if to silence her. "No, Carry—no, no," she cried.

"It is true. To think I shall never be subject to all *that* any more—that he can never come in here again—that I am free—that I can be alone. Oh, mother, how can you tell what it is? Never to be alone: never to have a corner in the world where—some one else has not a right to come, a better right than yourself. I don't know how I have borne it. I don't know how I can have lived, disgusted, loathing myself. No, no; sometime else I shall be sorry when I have time to think, when I can forget what it is that has happened to me—but in the meantime I am too happy—too——"

Lady Lindores put her hand upon her daughter's mouth. "No, no, Carry—no, no; I cannot bear it—you must not say it," she cried.

Carry took her mother's hands and kissed them, and then began to sob—the tears pouring from her eyes like rain. "I will not say anything," she cried; "no, no—nothing, mother. I had to tell you to relieve my heart. I have been able to think of nothing else all these hours. I have never had so many hours to myself for years. It is so sweet to sit still and know that no one will burst the door open and come in. Here I can be sacred to myself, and sit and think: and all quiet—all quiet about me." Carry looked up, clasping her hands, with the tears dropping now and then, but a smile quivering upon her mouth and in her eyes. She seemed to have reached that height of passionate emotion—the edge where expression at its highest almost loses itself, and a blank of all meaning seems the next possibility. In her white dress, with her upturned face and the wild gleam of rapture in her eyes, she was like an unearthly creature. But to describe Lady Lindores's anguish and terror and pain would be impossible. She thought her daughter was distraught. Never in her life had she come in contact with feeling so absolute, subdued by no sense of natural fitness, or even by right and wrong. Her only comfort was that Edith had not been present to hear and see this revelation. And the truth was that her own heart, though so panic-stricken and penetrated with so much pity for the dead, understood, too, with a guilty throb, the overwhelming sense of emancipation which drove everything else from Carry's mind. She had feared it would be so. She would not allow herself to think so; but all through the darkness of the night as she drove along, she had been trembling lest she should find Carry not heart-broken but happy, yet had trusted that pity somehow would keep her in the atmosphere of gloom which ought to surround a new-made widow. It hurt Lady Lindores's tender heart that a woman should be glad when her husband died, however unworthy that husband might have been. She did her best now to soothe the excited creature, who took her excitement for happiness.

"We will talk of this no more to-night, Carry; by-and-by you will see how pitiful it all is. You will feel—as I feel. But in the meantime you are worn out. This terrible shock, even though you may think you do not feel it, has thrown you into a fever. You must let me put you to bed."

"Not here," she said with a shudder, looking round the room; "not here—I could not rest here."

"That is natural," Lady Lindores said with a sigh. "You must come with me, Carry."

"Home, mother—home! Oh, if I could!—not even to Lindores,—to one of the old poor places where we were so happy——"

"When we had no home," the mother said, shaking her head. But she, too, got a wistful look in her eyes at the recollection. Those days when they were poor, wandering, of no account; when it mattered little to any one but themselves where they went, what the children might do, what alliances they made,—what halcyon days these were to look back on! In those days this miserable union, which had ended so miserably, could never have been made. Was it worth while to have had so many additional possessions added to them—rank and apparent elevation—for such a result? But she could not permit herself to think, with Carry sitting by, too ready to relapse into those feverish musings which were so terrible. She put her arm round her child and drew her tenderly away. They left the room with the lights against the wall, and the firelight giving it a *faux air* of warmth and inhabitation. Its emptiness was scarcely less tragic, scarcely less significant, than the chill of the other great room—the state chamber—in the other wing, where, with lights burning solemnly about him all night, the master of the house lay dead, unwatched by either love or sorrow. There were gloom and panic, and the shock of a great catastrophe, in the house. There were even honest regrets; for he had not been a bad master, though often a rough one: but nothing more tender. And Carry lay down with her mother's arms round her and slept, and woke in the night, and asked herself what it was; then lay still in a solemn happiness—exhausted, peaceful—feeling as if she desired nothing more. She was delivered: as she lay silent, hidden in the darkness and peace of the night, she went over and over this one certainty, so terrible yet so sweet. "God forgive me! God forgive me!" she said softly to herself, her very breathing hushed with the sense of relief. She had come out of death into life. Was it wrong to be glad? That it was a shame and outrage upon nature was no fault of poor Carry. Sweet tears rolled into her eyes, her jarred and thwarted being came back into harmony. She lay and counted the dark silent hours striking one by one, feeling herself all wrapped in peace and ease, as if she lay in some sacred shrine. To-morrow would bring back the veils and shrouds of outside life—the need of concealment, of self-restraint, almost of hypocrisy—the strain and pain of a new existence to be begun; but to-night—this one blessed night of deliverance—was her own.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was late when John Erskine got home on the afternoon of this eventful day. John Tamson's wife mended his coat for him, and he got himself brushed and put in order; then his excitement calming down, he walked slowly home. He argued with himself as he walked, that to take any further notice of Torrance's violence would be unworthy of himself. The fellow had been drinking, no doubt. He had been stung in his tenderest point—his pride in his fine house and tawdry grandeur,—he had felt himself altogether out of place in the little company, which included his nearest connections. Not much wonder, poor wretch, if he were twisted the wrong way. John forgave him as he grew calmer, and arriving at home, tired out, and somewhat depressed in mind, began at last to feel sorry for Pat Torrance, who never had been framed for the position he held. The first thing he found when he arrived, to his alarm and dismay, was a telegram from Beaufort announcing his arrival that very night. "Obliged to come; cannot help myself," his friend said, apologetic even by telegraph. Nothing could well have been more unfortunate. John felt as if this arrival must put a gulf between him and Carry's family altogether—but it was too late now for any alteration, even if he could have, in the circumstances, deserted his friend. Perhaps, too, in the crisis at which he had arrived, it would be well for him to have some one upon whom he could fall back, some one who had been more unfortunate than himself, to whom he could talk, who would understand without explanation, the extraordinary crisis to which his history had come. It was not his doing, nor Edith's doing,—they had not sought each other: no intention had been in her mind of making a victim of her rural neighbour; no ambitious project in his, of wooing the Earl's daughter. Everything had been innocent, unwitting. A few meetings, the most innocent, simple intercourse—and lo! the woe or weal of two lives was concerned. It seemed hard that so simply, with so little foresight, a man might mar his happiness. John was not a sentimentalist, determining that his whole existence was to be shattered by such a disappointment. He repeated to himself, with a little scorn,—

> "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart."

But the scorn was of the sentiment, and not any protest against the application of it to his own case. The broken tie between Beaufort and Carry was not an example of that superficial poetic deliverance. He himself was not like Beaufort, nor Edith like her sister. She would never marry a man whom she could not love; nor would he allow himself to dally with all the objects of life, and let everything slip past him. But he knew what would happen, he said to himself in the quietness of the silent hours. Life would lose its crown altogether. He would "get on" as if nothing remarkable had befallen him—but the glory and the joy would be over without ever having been his. And if she shared his feelings, there would be the same result on her side,—her life would be lonely like his, the flower of existence would be stolen from her. Only—if it were possible that Edith did share his feelings, then there was still something to be done,—there was a fight for it still before them. He would not give in like Beaufort, nor she take any irremediable step of desperation like Carry. This stirred him a little and restored him to himself; but on the whole, despondency was his prevailing feeling—a sense of impossibility, the sensation as of a blank wall before him, which it was impossible to surmount.

He had a lonely dreary evening. His dinner was served to him by one of the maids, who was frightened and lost her head, Rolls still being absent, to the great alarm of the household. Bauby, who did not remember the time when her brother had thus forsaken his duties, had been so disturbed in her preparations by anxiety, that it had almost happened to John as to King Louis, that he had to wait for his meal. "I canna gie my mind to my denner. Whaur's Tammas?—and who's to take ben the dishes?" Bauby cried. When the housemaid, arrayed in her best cap and apron, and with what she herself called "a red face," blushing like a peony in the unusual responsibility and honour, had managed to fulfil the service of the table, Bauby went out to the kitchen-door and then to the avenue to watch. "Something'll have happened to him," she said, drying her eyes. "Na, na, he's no' the man to forget himself. It's been something he couldna avide. The Lord grant it's no deadly—that's a' I say. We've never had an accident in oor family, no' since my grandfather that tummeled down the Broken Brig and broke himself a' to bits, and walkit wi' a crutch ever aifter." Bauby had got the length of despair by the time the dogcart came up the avenue bringing "the gentleman" from the station, whom Marget the housemaid, once more tying on her best apron, and looking in the glass to see if she had not yet got rid of that "awfu' red face," prepared to attend upon. It was at this moment, when Bauby found it required her whole attention to keep her tears from dropping upon the bird, which was cooked to a turn for Beaufort's supper, that a sudden welcome voice made her jump and almost drop the savoury morsel. "Eh, Tammas! what I've gaen through this nicht!" she cried. "I thought you were drowned in the water, or a' your banes broken." "Hold your peace," said Rolls, with a gloomy countenance; "nothing has happened to me." And he took the tray out of Marget's hands without a word. The women stood aghast to see him so scowling, dark, and uncommunicative, proceeding thus into the presence of his master, without any attention to his dress. "Without your claes!" Bauby said. "Hold your peace," repeated her brother. And he paused as he went out of the kitchen and turned round solemnly, "We have all a hantle mair to think of this night than my claes." The solemnity of this address, it is needless to say, made an enormous impression upon the maids, who were wont to consider Rolls, next to the minister, as one of the greatest lights of the parish. Andrew the gardener came in soon after on some domestic errand, and from him they heard something of what had happened at Tinto. "I'm no' sure what but the maister here is in it," Andrew said. "You gomeril! how can Mr John be in it, and him biding quiet at hame, and no' looking the gait Pat Torrance was on?" "Aweel, I'm saying, I ken naething about it, but that something's happened to Tinto and his muckle mear—and the maister's into it," Andrew replied.

Meanwhile Rolls had carried in the supper. The library where John always sat was cheerful with light and fire. The farther north the traveller goes, the more sure he is, with or without occasion, to find a fire. It scarcely enters into the Italian's idea of comfort at all, though he shivers with cold—but it is indispensable to a Scotsman's, though it may be warm. The night was soft and mild, the windows wide open, but the ruddy glow made everything cheerful, and John Erskine had brightened to meet his visitor: he was sitting cheerfully in the light, asking Beaufort the hundred questions with which a man a little withdrawn from society assails one who has kept within it. Beaufort himself was older and graver: a man with a fine picturesque head, somewhat long; a forehead exceptionally white, from which the hair had begun to wear off a little round the temples; a slightly feeble querulous drop of the lip under his moustache. He was very tall, very slim, with long white hands, which clasped each other in a nervous habitual motion. Neither the one nor the other took any notice of Rolls. They were in full flood of talk about old associations, for they had not met for years. Rolls made his preparations very deliberately, almost rubbing against his master on repeated occasions as he went and came. Three or four times over John drew his chair out of the way, a little surprised, but paying no particular attention. When this happened, however, for the fifth or sixth time, he looked up impatiently. "What are you after?" he cried. Rolls looked at him with a steady meaning gaze, his eyes staring, his mouth rigid—he shook his head slightly, very slowly. "What's the matter?" cried John. Beaufort had seated himself at the table, and had begun his meal. The others were in the shade behind him, between the fireplace and the door.

"There's much the maitter, sir,—much the maitter," said Rolls; "more than will be made up for this many a day."

"What do you mean? What is it? You look as if something had happened with which I had to do," John said, half alarmed, half amused. The only answer Rolls gave was to shake his head once more very gravely as he turned away. His look spoke all that he did not say. Tragedy was in it, and horror, and pity, and reproach. John grew excited in spite of himself. "Hey, here Rolls! *Rolls*, I say! What is the meaning of this?" he cried. Rolls opened the door slowly, solemnly, and disappeared. "Confound the fellow!" cried John, and rose hastily and followed, with a hurried word to Beaufort. "I suppose the mare has fallen lame, or there is a tile off the roof," he said, half laughing. Rolls was standing in the partial gloom outside the door. The hall door was open, and the whole darkness of the night showing beyond. Over their heads hung the lamp, flickering in the night air, throwing its light upon the impenetrable blackness opposite to it in the open doorway, but leaving the two figures in shadow below. Rolls stood as if he expected his master. He left him no time to ask any question, but said at once, "Yon was death, sir," in a low and solemn tone.

"Yon! What was death? I don't understand you," John cried, in wonder and alarm. "Quick, quick! tell me what you mean."

"It's but ower easy to tell;—yon was death. He's never stirred. Horse and man one heap, and no' a breath or a tremble in it. It's easy—easy to tell."

"Good God! Rolls, what do you mean? Not—not the Scaur,—not——"

"That's what I mean," Rolls replied almost sternly. "A bonnie morning's work. Just Tinto, poor fellow, with all his faults, and, maybe, the drink in him that made it easy. Dead—dead."

There was a sort of guttural sob in the old man's voice. His heart was wrung, not for Tinto, but with a deeper and closer horror. But John neither thought nor understood this. He fell back a step and leaned against the wall in horror and bewilderment. "Good God!" he repeated with pale lips, with that instinctive appeal which we make without knowing it in the face of every mystery. Under any circumstances, the suddenness and terribleness of the event would have appalled him; but now, at this moment, with Beaufort under his roof!—he could only gasp for breath—he could not speak. And he was not aware how eagerly Rolls was noticing every look and gesture, and how his agitation struck the old servant to the heart. He asked a few further questions in profound horror and dismay, then went back to his friend with a ghastly countenance, shaken to the bottom of his heart. The very consciousness that behind this sudden and terrible death stood life, added to the effect. He went back to tell Beaufort of it. That was indeed his first intention, but second thoughts presented to him the embarrassing nature of such a communication at the very moment of his friend's arrival. Beaufort did not notice—being occupied with his supper—the pallor and agitation which had produced so great an effect upon old Rolls. But after a while, as John said nothing, he turned half round and said, "I hope nothing serious has happened to the mare——"

"The mare——Oh yes, it was something very serious—not to be made a jest of. A fatal accident has happened—to one of my neighbours. It is appalling in any case to hear of anything so sudden; but what makes it worse is, that I spent some part of to-day in his company. It is not above four or five hours since I parted with him. We had even a little altercation," said John, with a slight shudder. "There's a bitter lesson for you! To quarrel with a man without a thought of any harm, and a little while after to hear that he is dead, with an unkind thought of you in his heart, and you with hard thoughts of him!"

Beaufort answered gravely and sympathetically as became such an announcement. "Was he a man you liked? Was he a friend?"

"No: neither a friend nor a man I liked, but young and strong; such a frame of a man!—worth you and me put together; and to think that in a moment——"

"How did it happen?" Beaufort asked.

"I scarcely asked. He must have fallen, he and his horse, down a precipice—the Scaur,—a place he had often been cautioned against, I believe. Good heavens! to think of it! I thought he must have gone over as we spoke."

And John got up and walked about the room in his excitement. This interrupted altogether the lively flow of conversation with which they had begun the evening. There were one or two attempts made to resume it. But Erskine relapsed in a few moments either into exclamations of dismay, or into restless and uncomfortable silence of thought. The fact was, not only that Torrance's sudden death had startled his imagination and awoke some compunctions in his mind, as in that of Lady Lindores, but that it opened to him a whole confusing sea of speculations and possibilities. It was extraordinary that on the very day which should see this happen, Beaufort had arrived. And what would Lady Caroline now say—she who, with such self-betraying emotion, had entreated John to keep his friend away? What might happen now were they to meet? John shrank from the suggestion as from an impiety, and yet it would come back. It was evident to Beaufort that his friend was out of sorts and profoundly agitated. He withdrew early to his room, pleading that he was tired, to leave John to himself. It did not concern him (Beaufort) to be sure, but it must, he felt, touch Erskine more than he was willing to show. And it was a relief to John to be alone. His mind, left to itself, pursued the question, not so much of the dead as of the living. He did not call back Rolls to question him on the accident as he had intended to do; for it was Carry he thought of, not poor Torrance, after the first moment. What would Carry do? What would she think when she found, in the first moment of her freedom, Beaufort so near? The idea overwhelmed him. There seemed a certain indelicacy and precipitancy in the thought. He had risen in his restlessness and opened the window, as he had been in the habit of doing, to breathe the freshness of the night air, when Rolls came in, pale, and with a harassed stealthy look. He came up to his master, and seeing that he was not observed, touched him on the arm. "If you are going out, sir, to take a walk—or that," he said, with quivering lips, "I've brought you a coat and some haps——"

John looked at him with surprise. The old man was grey and ghastly; his lip quivered. He had a dark coat carefully folded over his arm, several comforters and a plaid. There was a tremor in his whole figure, and his eyes had a wild look of inquiry and fear.

"Take a walk! Why should I take a walk at this time of night?"

"Oh, I'm no' saying: gentlemen has strange fancies. I'm not one to pry. I'll put the haps here, in case you should want them. You'll find a drop brandy in your flask, and a few sandwiches in the pocket," he added in an undertone.

"Sandwiches! You must be taking leave of your senses. Where do you suppose I should want to go?"

"I would rather not know, sir," said Rolls, solemnly turning away. "What good would it do me to know? I'll not listen nor look. I have nothing ado with it; but oh, if you'll take my advice, go—go out of harm's way."

"I believe you are mad, Rolls."

"I have plenty to make me sae, at the least of it," Rolls said, and putting down the coat ostentatiously on a chair, he hobbled out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him. John could hear his steps going stealthily up-stairs to the window in the gallery above, where they seemed to pause, and the window was carefully opened. A wild bewilderment seized upon his mind. Of what was it that the old servant was afraid?

CHAPTER XXXI.

Next day the country-side far and near thought and talked of nothing but the fatal accident at Tinto, which was such a public event as moved everybody. There was no figure in the district more widely known than that of Pat Torrance on his black mare, a powerful horse and powerful man, looking as if they could defy every power of nature; and it thrilled every village far and near, every lone farm-steading and cluster of cottages for miles round, to be told that Black Jess and her master had both been ended by one false step, and that Pat Torrance, strong and rich and potent as he was, had died the death of a dog, unaided, unseen. The news ran from village to village like the fiery cross—everywhere expanding into new details and a deeper and deeper horror of description. First the bare fact, then all these additional circumstances, making it more and more visibly evident to every excited listener, filled the air. Each new passer-by was like a new edition of a newspaper, and had heard something more. How the two bodies had been found, horse and man; how Tinto had been warned over and over again of the danger of the Scaur, and would listen to no advice on the subject, but insisted on leaving it as it was, either for the sake of the view (though it was little he was heeding about views), or for the brag, which was more likely; and how he was got up with much trouble, and carried in dead to his own house, which he had left in all his pride an hour or two before. What ground for reflection upon the vicissitudes of life was here! There was not a group of two or three people anywhere but one at least would shake the head and lift up the voice of wisdom, bidding the others note how in the midst of life we were in death. And when this first horror was exhausted, there ensued the brief summing up of character and life, the rapid history in which our neighbours epitomise us as soon as we are ended. There were no illusions on the subject of wild Pat Torrance; but on the whole he fared well in the hands of the rude country-folk, whose taste was not fine enough to be offended by his roughnesses. In spite of all his vices and extravagances, he had a certain good-fellowship with his inferiors in position, a rough familiarity of address which passed for kindness, and conciliated the common mind. On every side the wild incidents of his youth were recalled, not unkindly. "Eh, poor Tinto, poor fallow! I mind when he was a young lad——" the commentators began on every side. And the women concluded that perhaps if he had gotten a wife more like himself, things might have been different. The rural imagination accepted him as he was, with many a sage reflection, but little censure on the whole—winding up the story of his feats and frolics, his stormy, wild career, with a big rustic sigh for the ploughboy-gentleman, the rude Laird who was so near to them. The tragedy was as complete and typical as the primitive historian could desire. And the man who would take no warning, but kept the dangerous spot unguarded that he might get his death on it, was as broad an example of human rashness and blindness as could have been selected. Wild Pat Torrance, poor fallow! It was just the end which everybody might have expected, it was allowed on all hands.

But presently there arose a chill whisper, like the first creeping upward of an east wind, bringing greyness and blight over earth and sky. Who can say how this atmospheric influence rises, which one moment is not, and the next has covered the country with an ungenial chill? It was the same with this moral cloud, which came, nobody knew from whence, nor how, rising in a moment. The origin of it could not be brought home to any individual, but there it was. After all, how could it be that Black Jess, used to every step of the way, went over the Scaur? In a moment the tide of popular comment changed, and those who had pointed out the awful justice of fate by which Pat Torrance had been made to bring about his own fate by his obstinacy, began to say that so bold a rider never could have lost his life on so well-known a road—without foul play. Accident! how could it be accident, without some human hand to help? It was not till the second morning that this development of the tragedy came; and it took the whole of that day to establish the connection—which flashed upon the general mind like lightning at last—between John Erskine's torn sleeve and dishevelled appearance and the fate of Torrance. John Tamson swore with angry oaths afterwards that it was not from him the tale came; but others had seen young Dalrulzian, flushed and muddy, coming from the gate of Tinto on that eventful afternoon; and when the community began to think it over and compare notes, nothing could be more natural than the conclusion to which they came. If the original news had flown over the country like the war-signal of the old clans, this was like the spreading of a sheet of flame—it burst out at point after point after the merest touch of contact. Young Dalrulzian was little known. The country knew no stories of his youth to endear him. He had been brought up far away. He was an Englishman, almost an alien. And Tinto, it was well known, was rough of speech, and "couldna bide" the dainty and delicate. What if they met in the wood; what if there had been a struggle—if the weaker man who had no chance against the stronger had seized Black Jess by the bridle, and driven the high-spirited animal frantic? The groups who had been recalling all the old stories of Tinto, now changed like magic into little committees of accusation, with their heads close together, framing their indictment. The question was given against John Erskine all over the country before the ending of the second day.

There is no coroner's inquest in Scotland. When a death is attended by doubtful circumstances, the procedure is slower and more elaborate, and private individuals are reluctant to move in a matter so painful. But yet the atmosphere of suspicion and popular condemnation stole into Dalrulzian as it had crept over the whole country. It conveyed itself to the supposed criminal himself in a subtle sense of something wrong. He had not a notion what it was—neither did he know at first that it was he who was the object disapproved of; but it was impossible not to feel that something was wrong. The aspect of Rolls himself, conjoined with his extraordinary behaviour on the night of Torrance's death, was remarkable enough to excite alarm. The old servant seemed to have grown ten years older in a single night. His face was furrowed with deep lines, his shoulders bowed, his step tottering. The pathos and earnestness of the looks which he bent upon his young master were indescribable. The air, half critical, half paternal, with which he had been wont to regard him, was gone. He no longer interfered in every arrangement with that sense of superior wisdom which had amused John from the moment of his arrival. All the humour of the situation was over. Intense gravity, almost solemnity, was in the countenance of Rolls; he was constantly on the watch, as if he expected unwelcome visitors. Beaufort, who was not given to mirth, was roused out of his gravity by the melancholy aspect of Methusaleh, as he called him. "One would think your servants expected you to be carried off to prison for high treason," he said, laughing—for Rolls was not the only one in the house who regarded John with these alarmed and solemn eyes. Bauby, who on ordinary occasions had nothing but a broad smile and look of maternal admiration for her young master, was continually visible, gazing at him from unexpected corners with her apron at her eyes. When he asked her if she wanted anything with him, she would murmur, "Oh, Mr John!" and cry. The other maids supporting her behind, fled from his presence. The gardener regarded him with a sort of stern inquiry when he passed carrying his basket of vegetables to the house. John was disturbed, as a man of sympathetic nature cannot help being disturbed, by this curious atmosphere of discomfort. He could not tell what it was.

Beaufort was not an inspiriting companion for a man thus perplexed and confounded. To find himself in the district where Carry lived, to be in her neighbourhood, yet separated from her as by walls of iron, impressed his languid mind with a deeper shade of that sentimental consciousness which was habitual to him. Her name had not yet been mentioned between the friends; but Beaufort walked about the country roads in a constant state of expectation, feeling that every carriage he heard approaching might reveal to him the face which he longed yet feared to see. And for the first three or four days this was all the entertainment which John provided for his friend. He was full of embarrassment as to the situation altogether. Lady Lindores and Edith were, he had heard, at Tinto, where he could not disturb them; and he felt no inclination to make his appearance at Lindores in their absence. Torrance's death and Beaufort's presence seemed, indeed, to place impossible barriers between him and them. It would have been sufficiently uncomfortable, he had felt, to produce his friend there in the lifetime of Carry's husband; but to present him now, when so unexpectedly, so tragically, Carry was once more free, became an impossibility. In every way John felt himself paralysed. The air affected him, he could not tell how. He took his companion out walking all over the country, and drove him to long distances in his dogcart, but introduced him to no one, nor ever went to any other house. And nobody called during this curious interval. The two men lived like hermits, and talked of their old comrades and associations, but never of the new. John even answered Beaufort's question about Tinto, which was one of the first points in the landscape which attracted his curiosity, without telling him of the tragedy which had happened there. "It belongs to the Torrances," he had said abruptly, and no more. It did not seem possible to tell Beaufort that her husband was dead. Troublesome as his coming was at any time, it seemed almost an immodest intrusion now; and John was disturbed and harassed by it. His mind was sufficiently troubled and uneasy on his own account; and this seemed like an odious repetition, intensification of his own circumstances. Two unfortunate lovers together, with the two ladies of their choice so separated from them, though so near; and now this utterly bewildering and distracting new element brought into the dilemma, throwing a wild and feverish gleam of impious possibility on what had been so impossible before. He could not speak of it: he could not breathe Edith's name or Carry's into the too sympathetic, anxious ear of his friend. He held him at arm's-length, and talked of Dick and Tom and Harry, the comrades of the past, but never of what was so much more deeply interesting and important to both of them now.

"Look here, Erskine," said Beaufort; "I thought you were seeing a great deal of—your neighbours: and that Millefleurs would have come to me before now. I shall have to send him word I am here."

"To be sure. I had forgotten Millefleurs," said John. "You forget I only knew of your coming a few hours before you arrived."

"But I thought—people in the country see so much of each other generally."

"They have been—engaged—with family matters," said John.

"Do you mean to say it is all settled?—and that Millefleurs is to marry——"

"I know nothing about marrying," cried John, harshly; and then, recollecting himself, he added, in a subdued tone, "There can be nothing of that sort going on at present. It is death, not marriage, that occupies them now."

Beaufort opened his languid eyes and looked with curiosity in his friend's face. "Is it so? Yet Millefleurs stays on. That looks as if very intimate relations had been established, Erskine."

"Does it? I don't know what relations have been established," John said, with visible impatience. And he got up and went out of the room abruptly, breaking off all further discussion. Beaufort sent a note to his pupil that evening. It was the fourth or fifth day after his arrival. "I made sure I should have seen you, or I would have let you know my whereabouts sooner," he wrote. He was himself oppressed by the atmosphere round him, without knowing why. He had expected a genial Scotch house, full of company and life, with something of that exaggeration of fancy which had made Dalrulzian so wonderfully disappointing to John himself—a house where, amid the movement of lively society, his own embarrassing position would have been softened, and he might even have met his former love in the crowd without special notice or more pain than was inevitable. But he seemed to have dropped instead into a hermitage, almost into a tomb.

Millefleurs made his appearance next morning, very grave too, as everybody seemed in this serious country, and with none of his usual chirruping confidence. "I never guessed you were here," he said; "everything of course, at Lindores, is wrapped in gloom."

"There has been a death——" said Beaufort.

"A death!—yes. Has not Erskine told you? A tragedy: nothing so terrible has happened here for ages. You've heard, Erskine," he said, turning round suddenly upon John, who was in the background, "that there are suspicions of foul play."

John came forward into the light; there was embarrassment and annoyance in his face. "I have said nothing to Beaufort about it—he did not know the man—why should I? What did you say there were suspicions of?"

Millefleurs looked him full in the face, with a curious direct look, and answered, with a certain sternness, oddly inappropriate to his cast of countenance, "Foul play."

John was startled. He looked up with a movement of surprise, then returned Millefleurs's gaze with a mingled expression of astonishment and displeasure. "Foul play!" he said; "impossible!"—then added, "Why do you look at me so?"

Millefleurs did not make any reply. He turned to Beaufort, who stood by puzzled, looking on. "I ought not to stay," he said; "but Lord Lindores seems to wish it, and there are some things to be settled; and I am very much interested besides. There is no coroner in Scotland, I hear. How will the investigation be managed?" he said, turning to John again.

"Lord Millefleurs," said John, who was not unwilling, in his general sense of antagonism and annoyance, to pick a quarrel, "your look at me requires some explanation. What does it mean?"

There was a moment's silence, and they stood opposite to each other, little Millefleurs's plump person, with all its curves, drawn up into an attitude of dignity, his chubby countenance set, while John looked down upon him with an angry contempt, merging towards ridicule. The group was like that of an indignant master and schoolboy; but it was evident that the schoolboy meant defiance.

"It means—just such an interpretation as you choose to give it," said Millefleurs.

"For heaven's sake," said Beaufort, "no more of this! Millefleurs, are you out of your senses? Erskine, you must see this is folly. Don't make up a quarrel out of nothing."

John made a distinct effort to control himself. "To me it appears nothing," he said; "I cannot even guess at any meaning that may be in it; but Millefleurs means something, Beaufort, as you can very easily see."

At this moment Rolls put his head in at the door. "It's Sir James Montgomery come to see you. I have showed him into the drawing-room, for it's on business," the old man said. He was standing behind the door when John came out, and his master could not help remarking that he was trembling in every limb. "The Lord help us a'! you'll be cautious, sir," Rolls said.

John, in his perplexity and gathering wonder, seized him by the arm. "In God's name, Rolls, what do you mean?"

"Swear none, sir," said the old servant—"swear none; but oh, be cautious, for the love of God!"

John Erskine walked into the room in which Sir James awaited him, with a sense of wonder and dismay which almost reached the length of stupefaction. What did they all mean? He had not a clue, not the faintest thread of guidance. Nothing had in his own thoughts connected him even with the tragedy at Tinto. He had been doubly touched and impressed by it in consequence of the fact that he had seen the unfortunate Torrance so short a time before; but that he could, by the wildest imagination, be associated with the circumstances of his death, did not occur to him for a moment. The idea did not penetrate his mind even now, but he felt that there was some shadow which he could not penetrate lying upon him. A blinding veil seemed thrown over his faculties. There was a meaning in it, but what the meaning was he could not tell. He went in to his new visitor with a confusion which he could not shake off, hoping, perhaps, that some sort of enlightenment might be got through him. Sir James was standing against one of the windows, against the light, with his hat in his hands. His whole attitude told of embarrassment and distress. He made no movement as if intending to sit down—did not step forward heartily, as his custom was, to enfold John's hand in his own with cheerful cordiality, but stood there against the light, smoothing his hat round and round in his hand. It petrified John to see his old friend so. He went up as usual with outstretched hand, but Sir James only touched the tip of his fingers with an embarrassed bow. Instead of his usual genial aspect, he half-averted his face, and kept his eyes on his hat, even when he spoke.

"Mr Erskine," he said, with hesitation, "I came to see you. I mean, I wanted to have some little conversation with you, if you have no objections—about—about this sad affair."

"What sad affair?" John was bewildered, but still more angry than bewildered. What was the meaning of it all? Was the entire world in a conspiracy against him?

"Sir," said the old general, giving him one look of reproof, "such events are not so common in our quiet country-side that there should be any doubt as to what I mean."

"Unless what you mean is to drive me distracted"—cried John. "What is it? First Millefleurs, then you! In heaven's name, what do you mean? What have I done, that your aspect is changed—that you speak to me like a stranger, like a culprit, like——Speak out, by all means! What is this sad affair? In what way have I wronged any man? Why should my friends turn upon me, and call me Sir, and Mr Erskine? What have I done?"

"I wish to judge no man," said Sir James; "I wish to act in the spirit of charity. It was the opinion, not only of myself—for I have not that much confidence in my own judgment—but the opinion of two or three gentlemen, well-judging men, that if I were to make an appeal to you in the matter, to implore you in confidence—that is, if there is any explanation that can be given. We are all inclined to that view. I may seem harsh, because my heart is just sick to think of it; but we are all inclined to believe that an explanation would be possible. Of course, it is needless to say that if there is no explanation, neither the law permits, nor would we wish to lead, any one to criminate himself."

"Sir James," said John, "you have made me a strange speech. There is a great deal of offence in it; but I do not wish to notice the offence. Speak out! I know no dreadful event that has happened in the country but poor Torrance's death. Do you mean to tell me that you suspect *me* of having any hand in that?"

Sir James looked up at him from the hat which he was pressing unconsciously in his hands. His countenance was full of distress, every line moving, his eyes moist and agitated. "My poor lad!" he said, "God knows, we're all ready to make allowances for a moment's passion! A man that has been hurried by impulse into a sudden step—that has consequences he never dreamt of,—he will sometimes try to hide it, and make it look far worse—far worse! Openness is the only salvation in such a case. It was thought that you might confide in me, an old man that has ever been friendly to you. For God's sake, John Erskine, speak out!"

"What do you suppose I can have to say?" said John, impressed, in spite of himself and all his instinctive resistance, by the anxious countenance and pleading tones of the kind old man who had been charged with such an office. He was so much startled and awed by the apparent consent of so many to attribute something to him—something which he began dimly to divine without even guessing how far public opinion had gone—that the colour went out of his cheeks, and his breath came quick with agitation. Such signs of excitement may be read in many ways. To Sir James they looked like remorseful consciousness and alarm.

"We are all very willing to believe," he said, slowly, "that you took the beast by the bridle, perhaps in self-defence. He was an incarnate devil when he was roused—poor fellow! He would have ridden a man down in his temper. You did that, meaning nothing but to hold him off—and the brute reared. If you had raised an alarm then and there, and told the circumstances, little blame, if any, could have been laid on you. Silence was your worst plan—your worst plan! That's the reason why I have come to you. You took fright instead, and hurried away without a word, but not without tokens on you of your scuffle. If you would open your heart now, and disclose all the circumstances, it might not be too late."

John stood gazing speechless, receiving into his mind this extraordinary revelation with an almost stupefying sense of how far the imagination had gone. What was it his countrymen thought him guilty of? Was it murder—*murder*? The light seemed to fail from his eyes for a moment; his very heart grew sick. He had time to run through all the situation while the old man laboured slowly through this speech, hesitating often, pausing for the most lenient words, anxiously endeavouring to work upon the feelings of the supposed culprit. With horror and a sudden panic, he perceived how all the circumstances fitted into this delusion, and that it was no mere piece of folly, but a supposition which might well seem justified. He remembered everything in the overpowering light thus poured upon the scene: his torn coat, his excitement—nay, more, the strong possibility that everything might have happened just as his neighbours had imagined it to have happened. And yet it had not been so; but how was he to prove his innocence? For a moment darkness seemed to close around him. Sir James's voice became confused with a ringing in his ears; his very senses seemed to grow confused, and failed him. He heard the gasp in his own throat to get breath when silence ensued—a silence which fell blank around him, and which he maintained unconsciously, with a blind stare at his accuser's most gentle, most pitying countenance. How like it was to the scare and terror of blood-guiltiness suddenly brought to discovery!

But gradually this sickness and blankness cleared off around him like a cloud, and he began to realise his position. "Sit down," he said, hoarsely, "and I will tell you every particular I know."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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