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**AT HIS GATES.**

**A Novel.**

**BY MRS OLIPHANT,**

**AUTHOR OF 'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,' ETC., ETC.**

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:  
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## AT HIS GATES.

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### CHAPTER I.

Helen had still another incident before her, however, ere she left St Mary's Road. It was late in the afternoon when she went back. To go back at all, to enter the dismantled place, and have that new dreary picture thrust into her mind instead of the old image of home, was painful enough, and Norah's cheeks were pale, and even to Helen the air and the movement conveyed a certain relief. They went into the quieter part of the park and walked for an hour or two saying little. Now and then poor Norah would be beguiled into a little monologue, to which her mother lent a half attention—but that was all. It was easier to be in motion than to keep still, and it was less miserable to look at the trees, the turf, the blue sky, than at the walls of a room which was full of associations of happiness. They did not get home until the carriages were beginning to roll into the park for the final round before dinner. And when they reached their own house, there stood a smart cabriolet before it, the horse held by a little tiger. Within the gate two gentlemen met them coming down the steps. One of them was a youth of eighteen or nineteen, who looked at Helen with a wondering awe-stricken glance. The other was—Mr Golden. Norah had closed the garden door heedlessly after her. They were thus shut in, the four together confronting each other, unable to escape. Helen could not believe her eyes. Her heart began to beat, her pale cheeks to flush, a kind of mist of excitement came before her vision. Mr Golden, too, was not without a certain perturbation. He had not expected to see any one. He took off his hat, and cleared his voice, and made an effort to seem at his ease.

'I had just called,' he said, 'to express—to inquire—I did not know things had been so far advanced. I would not intrude—for the world.'

'Oh!' cried Helen, facing him, standing between him and the door, 'how dare you come here?'

'Dare, Mrs Drummond? I—I don't understand—'

'You do understand,' she said, 'better—far better than any one else does. And how dare you come to look at your handiwork? A man may be what you are, and yet have a little shame. Oh, you robber of the dead! if I had been anything but a woman, you would not have ventured to look me in the face.'

He did not venture to look her in the face then; he looked at his companion instead, opening his eyes, and nodding his head slightly, as if to imply that she was crazed. 'It is only a woman who can insult a man with impunity,' he said, 'but I hope I am able to make allowance for your excited feelings. It is natural for a lady to blame some one, I suppose. Rivers, let us go.'

'Not till I have spoken,' she cried in her excitement. 'This is but a boy, and he ought to know whom he is with. Oh, how is it that I cannot strike you down and trample upon you? If I were to call that policeman he would not take you, I suppose. You liar and thief! don't dare to answer me. What, at my own door; at the door of the man whose good name you have stolen, whom you have slandered in his grave—oh my God! who has not even a grave because you drove him mad!—' she cried, her eyes blazing, her cheeks glowing, all the silent beauty of her face growing splendid in her passion.

The young man gazed at her as at an apparition, his lips falling apart, his face paling. He had never heard such a voice, never seen such an outburst of outraged human feeling before.

'Mrs Drummond, this is madness. I—I can make allowance for—for excitement—'

'Be silent, sir,' cried Helen, in her fury. 'Who do you suppose cares what you think? And how dare you open your mouth before me? It is I who have a right to speak. And I wish there were a hundred to hear instead of one. This man had absconded till he heard my husband was dead. Then he came back and assumed innocence, and laid the blame on him who—could not reply. I don't know who you are; but you are young, and you should have a heart. There is not a liar in England—not a thing so vile as this man. He has plundered the dead of his good name. Now go, sir. I have said what I had to say.'

'Mrs Drummond, sometime you will have to answer—sometime you will repent of this,' cried Golden, losing his presence of mind.

'I shall never repent it, not if you could kill me for it,' cried Helen. 'Go; you make the place you

stand on vile. Take him away from my sight. I have said what I had to say.'

Mr Golden made an effort to recover himself. He struck his young companion on the shoulder with an attempt at jocularly.

'Come, Rivers,' he said, 'come along, we are dismissed. Don't you see we are no longer wanted here?'

But the lad did not answer the appeal. He stayed behind with his eyes still fixed upon Helen.

'Please, don't blame me,' he said. 'Tell me if I can do anything. I—did not know——'

'Thank you,' she said faintly. Her excitement had failed her all at once. She had put her arms round Norah, and was leaning upon her, haggard and pale as if she were dying. 'Thank you,' she repeated, with a motion of her hand towards the door.

The youth stole out with a sore heart. He stood for a moment irresolute on the pavement. The cab was his and not Golden's; but that personage had got into it, and was calling to him to follow.

'Thanks,' said young Rivers, with the impetuosity of his years. 'I shall not trouble you. Go on pray. I prefer to walk.'

And he turned upon his heel, and went rapidly away. He was gone before the other could realise it; and it was with feelings that it would be impossible to describe, with a consciousness that seemed both bodily and mental of having been beaten and wounded all over, with a singing in his ears, and a bewildered sense of punishment, that Golden picked up the reins and drove away. It was only a few sharp words from a woman's tongue, a thing which a man must steel himself to bear when his operations are of a kind which involve the ruin of families. But Helen had given her blow far more skilfully, far more effectively, than she was aware of. She had clutched at her first chance of striking, without any calculation of results; and the youth she had appealed to in her excitement might have been any nameless lad for what she knew. It was Mr Golden's hard fate that he was not a nameless lad. He was Cyril Rivers, Lord Rivers's eldest son. The manager drove on a little way, slowly, and in great perturbation. And then he drew up the horse, and sprang to the ground.

'You had better go home,' he said to the little groom.

And then, still with that sense of bodily suffering as well as mental, he made his way through Kensington Gardens to the drive. He was a man of fashion, too, as well as a man of business—if he ever could hold up his head again.

Of course he did hold up his head, and in an hour after was ready to have made very good fun of the 'scolding' he had received, and the impression it had made on his young companion.

'I don't wonder,' he said; 'though her rage was all against me, I could not help admiring her. You never can tell what a woman is till you see her in a passion. She was splendid. Her friends ought to advise her to go on the stage.'

'Why should she go on the stage?' said some one standing by.

'Because she is left a beggar. She has not a penny, I suppose.'

'It is lucky that you have suffered so little when so many people are beggared, Golden,' said one of his fine friends.

This little winged shaft went right into the wound made by Helen's fiery lance, and so far as sensation went (which was nothing) Mr Golden had not a happy time that night.

As for Helen, she went in, prostrated by her own vehemence, and threw herself down on her bed, and hid her face from the light. After the first excitement was over shame seized upon her. She had descended from her proper place. She had flown into this outburst of passion and rage before her child. She had lowered herself in Norah's eyes, as she thought—though the child would not take her arm from her neck, nor her lips from her cheek, but clung to her sobbing, 'Oh, poor mamma! poor mamma!' with sympathetic passion. All this fiery storm through which she had passed had developed Norah. She had gained three or four years in a day. At one bound, from the child who was a piece of still life in the family, deeply beloved, but not needed, by the two who were each other's companions, she had become, all at once, her mother's only stay, her partizan, her supporter, her comrade-in-arms. It is impossible to over-estimate the difference this makes in a child's, and especially in a girl's, life. It made of her an independent, thinking, acting creature, all in a moment. For years everything had been said before her, under the supposition that Norah, absorbed in her book, heard nothing. But she had heard a thousand things. She knew all now without any need of explanation, as well as so young a mind could understand. And she began to grope in her mind towards further knowledge, to put things together which even her mother had not thought of.

'Do you know who the boy was, mamma?' she whispered, after she had sat a long time on the bed, silently consoling the sufferer. 'Oh, I am so glad you spoke, he will never forget it. Now one more knows it besides you and me.'

'There are others who know, dear,' said Helen, who had still poor Stephen's magazine in her hand.

'Yes,' said Norah, 'Dr Maurice and the people who wrote to the papers; but, mamma, nobody like you and me. Whatever they say we know. I am little, and I suppose I shall always be little; but that does not matter. I shall soon be grown up, and able to help. And, mamma, this shall be my work as well as yours—I shall never stop till it is done—never, all my life!'

'Oh, my darling!' cried Helen, clasping her child in her arms. It was not that she received the vow as the child meant it, or even desired that in Norah's opening life there should be nothing of more importance than this early self-devotion; but the sympathy was sweet to her beyond describing, the more that the little creature, who had played and chattered by her side, had suddenly become her friend. In the midst of her sorrow and pain, and even of the prostration and sensitive visionary shame with which this encounter had filled her, she had one sudden throb of pleasure. She was not alone any more.

It was Helen who fell asleep that evening worn out with emotion, and weariness, and suffering. And then Norah rose up softly, and made a pilgrimage by herself all over the deserted house. She went through the conservatory, where, of all the beautiful things poor Robert had loved to see, there remained nothing but the moonlight which filled its emptiness; and into the studio, where she sat down on the floor beside the easel, and clasped her arms round it and cried. She was beginning to weary of the atmosphere of grief, beginning to long for life and sunshine, but yet she clung to the easel and indulged in one childish passion of sobs and tears. 'Oh, papa!' That was all Norah said to herself. But the recollection of all he had been, and of all that had been done to him, surged over the child, and filled her with that sense of the intolerable which afflicts the weak. She could not bear it, yet she had to bear it; just as her mother, just as poor Haldane had to bear—struggling vainly against a power greater than theirs, acquiescing when life and strength ran low, sometimes for a moment divinely consenting, accepting the will of God. But it is seldom that even the experienced soul gets so far as that.

Next morning Mrs Drummond and her daughter went to Dura. Their arrival at the station was very different from that of Mr Burton. No eager porters rushed at them as they stepped out of the railway carriage; the station-master moved to the other side; they landed, and were left on the platform by themselves to count their boxes while the train swept on. It was the first time it had ever happened so to Helen. Her husband had always either been with her, or waiting for her, wherever she travelled. And she was weary with yesterday's agitation, and with all that had so lately happened. Norah came forward and took everything in hand. It was she who spoke to the porter, and set the procession in order.

'Cab? Bless you, miss! there ain't but one in the place, and it's gone on a 'xursion,' he said, 'but I'll get a wheelbarrow and take 'em down. It ain't more than ten minutes' walk.'

'I know the way,' said Helen; and she took her child's hand and walked on into the familiar place. She had not been there since her marriage; but oh! how well she knew it! She put her crape veil over her face to hide her from curious eyes; and it threw a black mist at the same time over the cheerful village. It seemed to Helen as if she was walking in a dream. She knew everything, every stone on the road, the names above the shops, the forms of the trees. There was one great elm, lopsided, which had lost a huge branch (how well she remembered!) by a thunderstorm when she was a child; was it all a dream? Everything looked like a dream except Norah; but Norah was real. As for the child, there was in her heart a lively thrill of pleasure at sight of all this novelty which she could not quite subdue. She had no veil of crape over her eyes, and the red houses all lichened over, the glimpses of fields and trees, the rural aspect of the road, the vision of the common in the distance, all filled her with a suppressed delight. It was wrong, Norah knew; she called herself back now and then and sighed, and asked herself how she could be so devoid of feeling; but yet the reaction would come. She began to talk in spite of herself.

'I think some one might have come to meet us at the station,' she said. 'Ned might have come. He is a boy, and can go anywhere. I am sure, mamma, we would have gone to make them feel a little at home. Where is the Gatehouse? What is that place over there? Why there are shops—a draper's and a confectioner's—and a library! I am very glad there is a library. Mamma, I think I shall like it; is that the common far away yonder? Do you remember any of the people? I should like to know some girls if you will let me. There is little Clara, of course, who is my cousin. Do you think we shall live here always, mamma?'

Norah did not ask nor, indeed, look for any answer to this string of questions. She made a momentary pause of courtesy to leave room for a reply, should any come; but Helen's thoughts were full of the past, and as she made no answer Norah resumed the strain.

'It looks very cheerful here, mamma; though it is a village, it does not look dull. I like the red tiles on the cottages and all this red-brick; perhaps it is a little hot-looking now, but in winter it will be so comfortable. Shall we be able to get our things here without going to town? That seems quite a good shop. I wonder what Mrs Burton and Clara do? But then they are so rich, and we are—poor. Shall I be able to have any lessons, mamma? Can I go on with my music? I wonder if Clara has a governess. She will think it very strange that you should teach me. But I am very glad; I like you better than twenty governesses. Mamma, will it make any difference between Clara and me, them being so rich and us so poor?'

'Oh, Norah, I cannot tell you. Don't ask so many questions,' said Helen.

Norah was wounded; she did not give up her mother's hand, but she loosed her hold of it to show her feelings. She had been very sympathetic, very quiet, and respectful of the grief which in its

intensity was beyond her; and now she seemed to herself to have a right to a little sympathy in return. She could understand but dimly what was in her mother's mind; she did not know the associations of which Dura was full; and it was hard to be thus stopped short in that spring of renovating life. As she resigned herself to silence, a feeling of injury came over her; and here, just before her eyes, suddenly appeared a picture of life so different from hers. She saw a band of children gathered about the gate of a house, which stood at a short distance from the road, surrounded by shrubberies and distinguished by one great splendid cedar which stretched its glorious branches over the high garden wall behind, and made a point in the landscape. A lady was driving a little pony-carriage through the open gate, while the children stood watching and waving their hands to her. 'Good-bye, mamma,' 'Don't be long,' 'And mind you bring back Clara with you,' they were calling to her. With a wistful sense of envy Norah gazed and wondered who they were, and if she should ever know them. 'Why are people so different?' she asked herself. She had nobody in the world but her mother, lost behind that crape veil, lost in her own thoughts, who told her not to ask questions, while those other little girls had a smiling mamma in a pretty pony-carriage, who was taking one to drive with her, and was to bring Clara back to see them. Which Clara? Was it the Clara who belonged to Norah, her own cousin, to whom she had a better right than any one? Norah's heart sank as she realized this. No doubt Clara must have many friends; she could not stand in need of Norah as Norah did of her. She would be a stranger, an interloper, a new little girl whom nobody knew, whom nobody perhaps would care to know. Tears came to the child's eyes. She had been a woman last night rising to the height of the tragedy in which her little life was involved; but now Nature had regained its sway, and she was only twelve years old. It was while her mind was occupied with these thoughts that her mother interrupted them, suddenly pressing her hand.

'Norah, this is our house, where we are to live,' said Helen. Her voice faltered, she held the child's hand as if for support. And now they were at their own door.

Norah gazed at it with a certain dismay. She, too, like Mr Haldane, had her theory about a house in the country. It must be like Southlees, she thought, though without the river; or perhaps, as they had grown poor, it might be something a little better than the lodge at Southlees, a little cottage; but she had never dreamed of anything like this tall red-brick house which twinkled at her with all its windows. She was awed and chilled, and a little frightened, as she crossed the road. Susan was standing at the open door parleying with the porter about their boxes, which she declined to admit till 'the family' came. The one fear which possessed Susan's life, the fear of being 'put upon,' was strong in her at this moment. But she set the balance straight for Norah, by making a sudden curtsy, which tempted the child so sorely to laughter, that her eyes began to shine and her heart to rise once more. She ran up the white steps eagerly before her mother. 'Oh, mamma, I am first. I can say welcome to you,' she said.

But the sight of the drawing-room, into which Susan ushered them, solemnly closing the door after them, struck a moment's chill to Norah's heart. It seemed so strange to be thus shut in, as if it was not their own house but a prison. It was afternoon, and the sunshine had all gone from that side of the road, and the graceful, old-fashioned room looked dim and ghostly to eyes which had just come out of the light. The windows all draped with brown and grey, the old-fashioned slim grand piano in the corner ('I shall have my music,' said Norah), the black japanned screen with its funny little pictures, the high carved mantelpiece with that square mirror which nobody could see into, puzzled the child, at once attracting and repelling her. There was another round, convex mirror like a shield, on the side wall, but even that did not enable Norah to see herself, it only made a little twinkling picture of her in a vast perspective of drawing-room. Helen had seated herself as soon as the door was shut, and there was she, too, in the picture like a lady come to call. What a strange, dim, ghostly place it was! The bumping of the boxes as they went up-stairs was a comfort to Norah. It was a sound of life breaking the terrible silence. She asked herself what would happen when it was over. Should they fall under some charm and sleep there, like the enchanted princess, for a hundred years? And to think that all this was within reach of that lady in the pony-carriage, and of her children who waved their hands to her!—so near, yet in a different world.

'Mayn't we go and see the house, mamma?' Norah whispered, standing close to her mother's side. 'Shouldn't you like to see where we are to sleep? Shouldn't you like to get out of this room? It frightens me so; it feels like a prison. Oh, mamma! perhaps it would not look so strange—and so—dull—and so—funny,' cried Norah, feeling disposed to cry, 'if you would take your bonnet off.'

Just at this moment there was a sound in the road which stirred the whole village into life, and roused Norah. She ran to the window to see what it was. It was an event which happened every evening, which all the children in Dura ran to see, though they were so familiar with it. It was Mr Burton driving his high-stepping bays home from the station. He had come by the express made on purpose for him and such as him, which arrived half-an-hour later than the train by which the Drummonds had come. Norah climbed up on her knees on a chair to see over the little old-fashioned blinds. There was some one seated by Mr Burton in the dog-cart, some one who looked at the Gatehouse, as Mr Burton did, while they dashed past. At the sight of him Norah started, and from a little fantastical child became a woman all at once again. It was the young man who the day before had been with Mr Golden at St Mary's Road, he who had heard her father's vindication, and had believed it, and 'was on our side,' Norah felt, against all the world.

## CHAPTER II.

There is always a little excitement in a village over a new inhabitant, and the Drummonds were not common strangers to be speculated vaguely about. There were many people in Dura who remembered Helen in her beauty and youth. And next morning, when it became known that she had arrived at the Gatehouse, the whole place burst into gossip on the subject. Even the new people, the City people who lived in the white villas near the station, were moved by it. For poor Drummond's story was known everywhere, and his miserable fate, and the discussion in the newspapers. Even here, in the quietness of the country, people took sides, and public opinion was by no means so unanimous as poor Helen had supposed. The papers had accepted her husband's guilt as certain, but opinion was very much divided on the subject among people who had means of knowing. 'Burton ought to have warned that poor fellow,' one of the City gentlemen said to another at the station, going up by the early train. 'I would not trust a simpleton in the hands of a smart man like Golden.'

'Do you think he was a simpleton?' said the other.

'In business, yes——' said the first speaker.

'How could he be otherwise? But, by Jove, sir, what a splendid painter! I never saw anything I liked better than that picture of his in the last Exhibition. Poor fellow! And to put him in Golden's hands, a man well known to be up to every dodge. I wonder what Burton could be thinking of. I wonder he can look that poor lady in the face.'

'I should just like to find out how much Burton himself knew about it,' said the other, nodding his head.

'And so should I,' the first speaker said significantly, as they took their place in the train.

Thus it will be seen that the world, which Helen thought of so bitterly as all against her, was by no means so clear on the subject. At the breakfast-table in the Rectory the conversation took a still more friendly tone.

'I hear that poor Mrs Drummond has come to the Gatehouse,' said Mrs Dalton. 'I almost think I saw her yesterday—a tall woman, in a crape veil, with a little girl about Mary's size. I shall make a point of calling the first time I go out. Oh, George, what a sad, sad story! I hope she will let me be of some use to her.'

'I don't see that you can be of much use,' said her husband. 'She has the Burtons, of course, to fall back upon. How strange to think of Helen Burton coming back here! I could not have supposed it possible. So proud a girl! And how that man at Dura could ask her! I suppose he feels the sweetness of revenge in it. Everybody knew she refused him.'

'Oh George, hush! the children,' cried Mrs Dalton under her breath.

'Psha! everybody knows. What a difference it would have made to her, though! It is strange she should have chosen to come and live in sight of his splendour.'

'Oh, do you think she cares about his splendour? Poor soul!' said kind Mrs Dalton, with tears in her eyes. 'She must have very different thoughts in her mind. Most likely she was glad of any shelter where she could hide her head, after all the newspapers and the publicity. Oh, George! it must be doubly hard upon her if she was proud.'

'Probably it was her pride that made her husband such a fool,' said the rector. 'You women have a great deal to answer for. If she drove him into that thirst for money-making—a thing he could know nothing about——You are all fond of money—'

'For money's worth, George,' said Mrs Dalton humbly. She could not deny the accusation. For her own part she would have done anything for money—she with her eight children, and Charlie's education so dreadfully on her mind.

'Oh, I don't say you are miserly,' said the rector, who was a literary man of superior mind, and hated to be bothered by family cares, which incapacitated him for thought; 'but when a woman wants more than her husband can give her, what is the unhappy man to do? *Ne sutor ultra crepidam*. Which means, Mary——'

'I have heard it before,' said his wife meekly. 'I think I know what it means.'

'Then you see what comes of it,' said Mr Dalton. 'I don't believe a word that is in the papers. I seldom do. He went and got himself involved and bamboozled. How was he to know what he was doing? I don't blame poor Drummond, but I am not so sure it was not her fault.'

At the great house the talk was different; there was no discussion of the rights or wrongs of the question. Mr Burton, indeed, preferred not to speak of Mr Drummond; and young Mr Rivers, who had come down with him on the previous night, had got no opening to report the scene of which he had been a spectator. They were early people, and though they had entertained a large party the night before, their breakfast was earlier than that at the Rectory. They were all out on the lawn, visitors, children, dogs, and all, while Mr Dalton drank his coffee. Ned was busily employed training the Skye to jump over a stick, an exercise which was not much to Shaggy's taste; while the big pointer (who was only in his babyhood, though he was so big, and was imbecile, as

puppies are) looked on, and made foolish springs and vaults about his clever brother. Malta, in his blue ribbon, kept close by Mrs Burton's side, and looked on at the performance with the contemptuous toleration of a superior being; and Clara, also decked with blue ribbons, hung by her mother too.

'You had better come with me and see Helen, said the head of the house. 'I told you she arrived last night.'

'Now!' said Mrs Burton, with some surprise. She had her gardening gloves on and a basket in her hand for flowers. These she would have laid down at once, had it been only a walk to the station which was in question; but this was a different affair.

'Yes; why not now?' said her husband with that roll of wealth and comfort in his voice. 'We are relations, we need not stand upon ceremony. You mean to call on her some time, I suppose.'

'Oh, certainly, I shall call; but not at this hour, Mr Burton. I have only seen her once. Familiarity would be impertinence in me.'

'Pshaw, nonsense! one of your fantastic notions,' he said. 'I have seen her more than once, and I can't afford to stand on ceremony. Come along. I am going there now.'

'Then I think you should go immediately,' said Mrs Burton, looking at her watch, 'or you will be too late for the train. Clara, papa will not want us this morning; we can go for some flowers. You will be back by the usual train? I will pick you up at the station, if you like, for I have some calls to make to-day.'

'As you please,' said her husband; 'but I can't understand why you should cross me, Clara, about my cousin. You don't mean to say,' he added with a laugh, 'that you have any—feeling on the subject? That you are—ever so little—piqued about poor Helen? I shouldn't like to use the other word.'

Clara Burton looked at her husband very calmly. She was not offended. It was human nature; men were known to possess this kind of vanity, though it was so strange. 'I am not at all piqued,' she said; 'but I like to be civil. I don't suppose Mrs Drummond and I will be moved to rush into each other's arms all at once, and I don't wish to look as if I paid her less respect because she is poor. If you are going there, you ought to go immediately. You will be late for the train.'

'Confound your composure!' Mr Burton said to himself, as he went down the avenue.

It would have pleased him had his wife been a little discomposed. But, after a while, he took comfort, saying to himself that Clara was a consummate little actress, but that she could not take *him* in. Of course, she was nettled by the presence of his old love, and by his haste to visit her; but she was proud, and would not show it. He felt a double triumph in the sense that these two women were both affected, and endured, for his sweet sake, a certain amount of pain. He set out his chest more than ever, and held up his head. Now was his moment of triumph over the woman who had once rejected him. Had he been able to induce her to come to Dura while she was still prosperous, the triumph would have been sweeter, for it would have been unmingled with any tinge of regretful or remorseful feeling; but as it was it was sweet. For the first time she would see him in his full importance, in all his state and splendour, she would see him from the depths of her own humiliation, and the force of a contrast greater than he had desired, more complete even than he had dreamed, must already have flashed upon her. Yes, now she would see what she had lost—what a mistake she had made. He meant to be very kind; he would have given her anything she chose to ask for, if she but showed the least sign of penitence, of clearer perception, of being aware of what she had lost. There was nothing which her cousin would not have done for Helen; but he could not resign his own delightful consciousness of triumph. Under this genial influence, he was overflowing with good-nature and kindness.

'What! come out for a little sunshine, old John,' he said to the old man at the lodge, who was seated basking in the warmth on the bench at his door. 'Good for the rheumatics, ain't it, a day like this? I envy you, old fellow, with nothing to do but sit by your door in the sun and sniff your flowers; you are better off than I am, I can tell you.'

'Ay, ay! master, it's fine for me; but you wouldn't think much on't yourself, if you had it,' said old John.

Mr Burton went on laughing and waving his hand, amused with the old man's impudence.

'If I had it myself,' he said, with a smile, 'I!—' The thought tickled him. It was hard to believe that he himself, a man in the prime of life, growing richer every day, was made of the same clay as old John; and yet of course it was so, he admitted good humouredly. His mind was full of his own benevolence and kind-heartedness as he pursued his way to visit his cousin. What quantities of people were dependent upon his will and pleasure—upon his succour and help! his servants, so many that he could scarcely count them; the clerks in his office; the governess who taught Clara, and who in her turn supported her mother and sisters; and then there was old Stephenson in the village, in his decay, who had once been in Mr Burton's office; and his old nurse; and the poor Joneses and Robinsons, whose boys he had taken in as errand boys. He ran over this list with such a pleasant sense of his goodness, that his face shone in the morning sunshine. And at the head of all, first of his pensioners, chief of his dependents—Helen! Mr Burton laughed half aloud, and furtively rubbed his hands. Yes, yes, by this time there could be no doubt she must have found out her mistake.

Helen had got up that morning with the determination to put grief away from the foreground of her life, and resume such occupations as remained to her. Norah's books had been got out, and her music, and some work—small matters which made a difference in the ghostly drawing-room already, and brought it back to life. Helen was standing by the table arranging some flowers when Mr Burton came in. Norah had gathered them almost before the dew was off them, and stood by her mother watching her as she grouped them together.

'I wish I could arrange flowers as you do, mamma,' Norah was saying admiringly. 'How nice it must be to be able to do everything one tries! They will not come right when *I* do it. You are like the fairy that touched the feathers with her wand, and they all came together as they ought. I wonder how you do it. And you never break anything or spoil anything; but if I only *look* at a vase it breaks.'

Norah was saying this with a rueful look when Mr Burton's smart summons came to the door; and the next minute he had come in, bringing so much air with him into the room, and motion, and sense of importance. Helen put the flowers aside hastily and gave him her hand.

'So you are making use of the garden,' he said, taking note of everything with an eye of proprietorship; 'quite right, quite right. I hope you will make yourselves quite at home. It is a funny old house, but it is a good style of a place. You need not be ashamed to receive any one here. And I have no doubt you will find everybody very civil, Helen. I have let the people in Dura know you are my cousin. That, though I say it that shouldn't, is a very good passport here.'

'I hope you will not take any trouble about us,' said Helen hastily. 'All I want is to be quiet. I do not care for civilities.'

'But you prefer them to incivilities, I hope,' said Mr Burton. 'My wife thinks I am wrong to come in this unceremonious way to call. I wanted her to come with me, but she would not. You ladies have your own ways of acting. But I felt that you would be mortified if you saw me pass the door.'

'Oh no. I should not have been mortified.'

'I will take care you sha'n't,' he said, the roll in his voice sounding more full of protection and benevolence than ever. 'I have not much time now. But, my dear Helen, remember that I am always at your service—always. I have mentioned you to all the nicest people. And we hope very soon to see you at the House. I should not have brought you here, I assure you, without intending to be a friend to you in every way. You may rely upon me.'

'You are very kind,' was all Helen could say.

'I want to be kind. You cannot please me better than by asking me for what you want. Tell me always when your mother wants anything, Norah. There now, I won't say any more; you understand me, Helen. I have a few things in my power, and one of them is to make you comfortable. When you have time to see about you you will perceive that things have gone very well with me: not that I intend to boast; but Providence, no doubt, has been very kind. My wife will call this afternoon, and should you like a drive or anything, I am sure Clara—'

'Please don't trouble. I would rather be quiet. You forget,' said Helen, with a momentary sharpness in her voice, 'that Providence, which has been so kind to you, has been hard upon us.'

'My dear Helen! you are too good and pious, I am sure, not to know that we ought not to repine.'

'I don't think I repine, and I am sure you mean to be kind; but oh! if you would take pity on me, and let me alone—'

It was all she could do to keep from tears. But she would not weep before him. Her jealousy of him and distrust were all coming back. Instinctively she felt the triumph in his voice.

'Poor Helen!' said Mr Burton, 'poor girl! I will not trouble you longer just now. You shall not be bothered. Good-bye; trust to me, and I will take care of you, my poor dear!'

It was ludicrous, it was pitiable; she scorned herself for the impression it made upon her; but how could she help it? She felt that she hated Reginald Burton, as he stood before her in all his wealth and comfort, patronising and soothing her. When he was gone, she rushed up to her room, that Norah might not see her weakness, to weep a few hot, burning tears, and to overcome the wild, unreasonable anger that swelled in her heart. It was his moment of triumph. Perhaps Helen felt it all the more because, deep down in her heart, she had a consciousness that she too had once triumphed over him, and rejoiced to feel that she could humble him. This was a hard punishment for such an old girlish offence; but still it felt like a punishment, and added a sting to everything he did and said. And whether it was at that moment or at a later period, she herself could not have told, but a sudden gleam came across her of some words which she had once read somewhere—'Burton and Golden have done it.' Whence came these words? had she dreamt them? had she read them somewhere? They came before her as if they had been written upon the wall. Burton and Golden! Was it true? What could it mean?

Mrs Burton called in the afternoon. She had Clara with her, and what was still more remarkable, young Mr Rivers, who was staying in the house, but who up to this time had made no mention of the scene he had witnessed. Perhaps it was for lack of an opportunity, perhaps because he did not know how far it would be safe to mention Helen—whom he heard spoken of as a relative, yet not with the feeling which moved his own mind when he thought of her. Cyril Rivers was but a



big boy, though he began to think himself a man, and Helen had moved him to that sudden fantastic violence of admiration with which an older woman often momentarily inspires a boy. He was eager to go with Mrs Burton to call. He would walk down with her, he said, and continue his walk after the carriage had picked her up; and in his heart he said to himself that he must see that woman again. He was full of awe and enthusiasm at the thought of her. She was to him like the heroine of a tragedy, of a story more striking, more affecting than any tragedy he had ever heard of; for this was real, and she was a true woman expressing her natural sentiments, forgiving nothing. It seemed to bring the youth, who was all thrilling with natural romance, within that charmed inner circle of emotion and passion which is, though it is seldom visible, the centre and heart of life.

But Helen bore a very different aspect when she waited to receive Mrs Burton's call from that which she bore at the door of St Mary's Road, confronting Golden. Her flush of colour and glow of energy and vehemence were gone. She was seated, pale and silent, by the table near the window, with her dead white cap encircling her face, and some needlework in her hand. It was not the same Mrs Drummond, was young Rivers' first disappointed thought. And when she invited the party to sit down, and began to talk about the weather and the country round, he was so bewildered that he longed to steal away. The two ladies sat opposite to each other, and said the sort of things which all ladies say when they call or are called upon. Helen's tone was low, and her voice fell; but these and her black dress were the only things that made it apparent that anything had happened to her. It was only when this little artificial conversation flagged and a pause occurred that the real state of affairs became even slightly visible. The momentary silence fell heavy upon people who had so much on their minds; and while they all sat motionless, the little mirror on the wall made a picture of them in little, which looked like a caricature, full of humorous perception and significance. Mrs Burton had been hesitating as to what she should say. Helen was a study to her, of which she had as yet made nothing; and perhaps it was as much from curiosity as any other feeling that she at last introduced a subject more interesting than the weather or the landscape. It was after a second pause still more serious than the first.

'It must be very strange to you coming back to Dura after all that has happened. It must be—hard upon you,' she said.

'Yes; it is hard,' Helen could not trust herself to many words.

'If there is anything in which I can be of use,' Mrs Burton began, 'will you let me know? If there is anything that can make it less painful for you. I should be very glad to be of any use.'

Mrs Drummond made no reply; she gave a little bow, and went on with the needlework she held in her hands, but not as if she cared for that. She was not like what he had thought, but yet young Rivers got up with a certain tremulous awe and approached her. She had not recognised him. She turned her eyes upon him wondering what he could have to do with her. Her heart was steeled to encounter all those words of routine which she knew would have to be said—but who was this boy?

'I think I will go now,' he said hastily to Mrs Burton; and then he lowered his voice. 'May I say just one word? If I can ever do anything to set things right, will you let me know? I shall never forget what you said—on Tuesday.'

'On Tuesday?' Helen repeated, in her great surprise looking at him. She ran over Tuesday's proceedings in her mind; at first in vain, and then a little flush came over her face. 'Ah,' she said, 'it was you who came with—Mr Golden. I remember now.'

'But I shall never be with him again,' said the youth with energy, which brought the responsive blood to his cheeks. 'Of that you may be sure. I am Cyril Rivers. I am not much good now, but I might be—afterwards. Will you remember me? Will you let me serve you if ever I can?'

'Thanks,' said Helen, putting out her hand, with a sudden softness in her voice.

The lad was young, romantic, chivalrous. She was to him like some majestic dethroned queen in her sorrow and wronged estate. He stooped down, and touched her white fingers with his lips, and then, without looking round, turned, and went away. His impulsive generous words, his fanciful pledge of eagerness to help her, went to Helen's heart. She had not expected this, and it surprised and touched her. She was not conscious for a moment of her visitor's steady, investigating glance.

'What a romantic boy!' said Mrs Burton, with a smile.

'Yes,' said Helen, and she called herself back with an effort. 'But romance sometimes does one good. It is a surprise at least.'

'At that age it does not matter much. I did not know you knew the Riverses,' said Mrs Burton. 'This is the eldest son, to be sure; but since the late misfortune they are quite poor. They have not much in their power.'

She said this with a charitable motive. It seemed to her as if Helen must mean something by it. Everybody appeared to mean something in the eyes of this philosopher. And she was a little moved by the misfortunes of the woman beside her. She thought it was kind to warn her not to waste her efforts. Helen, on her side, did not know in the least what Mrs Burton meant; did not suppose she meant anything indeed, and sat patient, accepting this speech with the others as an effort to make conversation, not ungrateful to Mrs Burton, but wondering when she would go

away.

Meanwhile Cyril Rivers hastened out full of emotion. He took the wrong turn in going out, and before he knew, found himself in the garden, where the two girls were 'making acquaintance,' as Mrs Burton had bidden them do. Clara was big and fair, with her father's full form, and a beautiful complexion, the greatest possible contrast to little Norah, with her light figure, and faint rose tints. But Norah at this moment was flushed and angry, looking as her mother had done that memorable evening at St Mary's Road.

'Oh, do come here, Mr Rivers,' said Clara, 'Norah is so cross. I only said what papa says so often—that it would be wretched to live in the country without a carriage or a pony or anything. Don't you think so too?'

Norah flushed more deeply than ever. 'I am not cross. We did not come to live in the country for pleasure, and what does it matter to us about carriages and ponies? We are poor.'

'And so am I,' said the boy, with that instinctive adoption of 'our side' which Norah had attributed to him. He thought how pretty she was as she lifted her brown eyes. What a pretty child! and he was approaching twenty, a man, and his heart yearned over the helpless and sorrowful. 'I shall have to sell my horses and go afoot; but I don't think I shall be wretched. Everybody cannot be rich like Mr Burton, you know.'

'But you are always Lord Rivers's son,' said Clara. 'You can have what you like everywhere. I think it is very cross of Norah not to care.'

And Mr Burton's daughter, foiled in her first attempt to secure her own cousin's envy and admiration, looked as if she would like to cry. Young Rivers laughed as he went away at her discomfiture. As he turned to find the right way of exit, he looked back upon them with an unconscious comparison. He did not know or think what was Norah Drummond's descent. He took her unconsciously as the type of a higher class impoverished but not fallen, beside that small representative of the *nouveaux riches*. And all his sympathies were on the side of the former. He pulled a little white rosebud from a tree as he passed, and put it in his coat with a meaning which was partly real and partly fantastic. They were poor, they were injured, and wronged, and in trouble. He put their colours, as it were, in his helmet. Foolish boy, full of romance and nonsense! one day or other in their cause he felt he might couch his lance.

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### CHAPTER III.

The next day after Mrs Burton's carriage had been seen at Helen's door a great many people called on Mrs Drummond—all 'the nicest people'—some who had known her or known about her in the old days, some who came because she was Mr Burton's cousin, and some who took that means of showing their sympathy. The door was besieged; and Susan, half-flattered by the importance of her position, half-alarmed lest this might be a commencement of the system of putting upon which she dreaded, brought in the cards, gingerly holding them in a hand which she had wrapped up in her apron, and giving a little sketch of the persons represented. There was the doctor's wife, and the major's lady, and Mrs Ashurst from the Row, and 'them London folks,' all of whom were sensible enough to make their advances solely in this way. Mrs Dalton was the only person admitted. Helen was too well brought up, she had too much sense of the proprieties of her position, to shut her door against the clergyman's wife—who brought her husband's card, and explained that he would have come too but for the fear of intruding too early.

'But I hope you will let us see you,' the kind woman added. 'We are such near neighbours. My eldest little girl is the same age as yours. I think we should understand each other. And I have such a busy life—to be able to run across and talk things over now and then would be such a comfort to me.'

'You mean it would be a comfort to me,' said Helen, 'the sight of a kind face.'

'And Norah will come and see my Mary. They can take their walks together, and amuse each other. It is such a pleasure to me,' said Mrs Dalton, 'to look across at these windows, and think that you are here.' She had said so much with the amiable power of make-believe, not exactly deception, which an affectionate temper and her position as clergy-woman made natural to her—when she caught Helen's eye, and nature suddenly had the mastery. 'Oh, Mrs Drummond, how I babble! I am so sorry, so sorry!' she said, and her eyes ran over with tears, though Helen did not weep. It is not easy to repel such a visitor. They grew friends at that first interview, while Norah stood by and made her observations too.

'May I go and see Mary?' she asked, when Mrs Dalton had gone. 'I think I shall like her better than Clara Burton. How funny it must be to have so many brothers and sisters, mamma; and I who never had either a brother or a sister! I should like to have had just one—a little sister with blue eyes. But, then, if you had been very fond of her, fonder than of me, I should not have liked that. Perhaps, on the whole, a brother would have been the best. A boy is a change—they are useless, and yet they are nice—for a long walk, for instance. I wish I had had a big brother, older than me—quite old—almost grown up. How funny it would have been! I wonder what we should have called him. If he had been as big as—Mr Rivers, for instance—that would have been nice for

you too.'

Helen smiled, and let the child run on. It was the music to which her life was set. Norah's monologue accompanied everything. Sometimes, indeed, an answer was necessary, which interrupted the strain, but generally a word, a smile, or a monosyllable was enough. She went on weaving her big brother out of her imagination; it was more delightful than speculating about Mary Dalton.

'I am sure it would have been nice for you too,' she said. 'He would have given you his arm when you were tired, and looked after the luggage, and locked all the doors at nights. The only thing is, it would have been a great expense. When people are poor, I suppose they can't afford to have boys. They want so many things. But yet he would have been nice all the same. I hope he would have had a pretty name; not so short as Ned, and not so common as Charlie. Charlie is the eldest of the Daltons—such a big boy. Oh, I wonder what our boy's name would have been? Do you like Oswald, mamma, or Eustace? Eustace sounds like a priest or something dreadfully wise. I don't like solemn boys. So long as he was big and strong, and not too clever. But oh, dear, dear, what is the use of talking? We never can have a big boy, I suppose? I must be content with other girls' brothers. I shall never have one of my very own.'

'The less you have to do with other girls' brothers the better, Norah,' said Helen, beguiled into a smile.

'I do not care for them, I am sure,' said Norah, with dignity; 'though I don't dislike gentlemen, mamma—quite old gentlemen, like Dr Maurice and Mr Haldane, are very nice. And I should like to have had—Mr Rivers, for instance—for a big brother. I rather think, too, I like Ned Burton better than Clara. It is more natural to hear a boy talk of ponies and things. She never thinks of anything else—dogs, and horses, and carriages, and the fine things she has. It is not polite to talk of such things to people who have not got them. I told her I did not care for ponies, nor grapes, nor hot-house flowers; and that I would rather live in London than at the House. And, oh, so many—stories, mamma! Is it wrong to tell a little fib when you don't mean any harm? Just a little one, when people boast and make themselves disagreeable—and when you don't mean any harm?'

'It is always wrong to tell fibs; and I don't know the difference between big ones and little ones,' said Helen.

'Oh, mamma, but I do! A big story is—for instance. If I were to say Susan had stolen your watch, that would be a wicked lie. But when I say I don't care for grapes, and would not like to have a pony, it isn't quite true, but then it makes Clara be quiet, and does nobody any harm. I am sure there is a great difference. It would be very nice to have a pony, you know. Only think, mamma, to go cantering away across the common and on the turf! But I would not give in to say that I should like to be Clara, or that she was better off than me!'

Norah's casuistry silenced her mother. She shook her head, but she did not say anything. Something of the same feeling was, indeed, in her own mind. She, too, would have liked to be contemptuous of the luxuries which her neighbours dangled before her eyes. And Norah resumed her monologue. The mother only partially heard it, waking up now and then to give the necessary response, but carrying on all the time her own separate thread of cogitation, which would not shape itself into words. The old parlour, with its brown-grey curtains and all its spindle-legged furniture, enclosed and seemed to watch the human creatures who disturbed the silence. A room which has been long unoccupied, and which is too large for its new inhabitants, has often this spectator look. The pictures looked down from the walls and watched; up in the little round mirror two people in a miniature interior, who were in reality reflections of the two below, but looked quite different, glanced down upon them, and watched also. The sky looked in through the five windows, and the lime-trees in front kept tapping with their branches against the panes to show that they were looking on. All the rest were clandestine, but the lime-trees were honest in their scrutiny. And in the midst of it the mother and daughter led their subdued lives. Norah's voice ran through all like a brook or a bird. Helen was mostly silent, saying little. They had a roof to shelter them, enough of daily bread, the kindness of strangers outside, the rude but sympathetic kindness of Susan within. This was more, a great deal more, than often falls to the lot of human wrecks after a great shipwreck. Norah after a little while accepted it as the natural rule of life, and forgot every other; and Helen was silent, though she did not forget. The silence of the house, however, by times oppressed the child. She lay awake in the great bed-room up-stairs, afraid to go to sleep till her mother should come; and even in the daylight there were moments when Norah was afraid of the ghostly drawing-room, and could not but feel that weird aged women, the Miss Pagets, whom her mother had known, or some of the old Harcourts, were watching her from behind the doors, or from the shade of the curtains. There was a deep china closet beside the fireplace with one particular knot in the wood-work which fascinated Norah, and made her feel that some mysterious eye was gazing at her from within. But all these fancies dispersed the moment Mrs Drummond appeared. There was protection in the soft rustle of her gown, the distant sound of her voice. And so the routine of life—a new routine, but soon firmly established, supporting them as upon props of use and wont, began again. There were the lessons in the morning, and Norah's music, and a long walk in the afternoon; and they went to bed early, glad to be done with life and another day. Or at least Helen was glad to be done with it—not Norah, to whom it was the opening of the story, and to whom once more the sunshine began to look as sweet as ever, and each new morning was a delight.

A few weeks after their arrival the Haldanes followed them. Miss Jane had written beforehand begging for information about the house and the journey; and it was only then that Helen

learned, with a mortification she could scarcely overcome, that the Gatehouse was to be their refuge too. This fact so changed the character of her cousin's kindness to her, that her pride was with difficulty subdued to silence; but she had sufficient self-control to say nothing—pride itself coming to her aid.

'Perhaps you would be so good as to send me a line with a few particulars,' Miss Jane wrote. 'I should like to know for myself and mother if there is a good minister of our denomination, and if you would mention the price of meat, and how much you are giving for the best butter, I should be very much obliged. I should like to know if there is a good room on the ground-floor that would do for Stephen, and if we could have a Bath-chair to bring him down from the station, for I am very distrustful of cabs. Also about a charwoman, which is very important. I am active myself and always look after the washing, so that one strong handy woman to come from six in the morning till two would do all I should require.

Mrs Drummond made an effort and answered all these questions, and even walked to the station to see them arrive. It was a mournful sight enough. She stood and looked on with her heart aching, and saw the man whom she had known so different lifted out of the carriage and put into the invalid chair. She saw the look of dumb anguish and humiliation in his eyes which showed how he felt this public exposure of his weakness. He was very patient; he smiled and thanked the people who moved him: yet Helen, with her perceptions quickened by her own suffering, felt the intolerable pain in the other's soul, and went away hurriedly, not to afflict him further by her presence. What had he done? How had this man sinned more than others? All the idlers that lounged about and watched him, were they better or dearer to God than he was? Mrs Drummond was half a Pagan, though she did not know it. She hurried away with a miserable sense that it was past bearing. But Stephen set his lips tight and bore it. He bore the looks of the village people who came out to their doors to look at him as he passed. As for his mother and sister, they scarcely remarked his silence. They were so happy that everything had gone off so well, that he had borne it so easily.

'I don't think he looks a bit the worse,' said Miss Jane.

They were the tenderest, the most patient of nurses, but they had accepted his illness long ago as a matter of course. From the moment he was placed in the chair, and so off their mind, as it were, the luggage came into the ascendant and took his place. They had a wonderful amount of parcels, mostly done up in brown paper. Mrs Haldane herself carried her pet canary in its cage, tied up in a blue-and-white handkerchief. She was more anxious about this for the moment than about her son. The procession was one which caught everybody's eye. First two wheelbarrows with the luggage, the first of which was occupied by Stephen's bed and chair, the other piled up with boxes, among the rest two portmanteaus of his own, on which he could still read, on old labels which he had preserved with pride, the names of Naples, Florence, and Rome. Had he been actually there, he who was now little more than a piece of luggage himself? Miss Jane divided her attentions between her brother and the second wheelbarrow, on which the brown-paper parcels were tumbling and nodding, ready to fall. His mother walked on the other side, holding fast by the parcel in the blue-and-white handkerchief. Mrs Burton, who was passing in her carriage, stopped to look after them. She, too, had known Stephen in better days. She did not ask passionate questions as Helen was doing; but she felt the shock in her way, and only comforted herself by thinking that the feelings get blunted in such unfortunate cases, and that no doubt other people felt more for him than he felt for himself.

But notwithstanding the callousness which use had brought, there was no indifference to Stephen's comfort in the minds of his attendants. Everything was arranged for him that evening as if he had been surrounded by a crowd of servants. When Helen went to see him he was seated by the window with flowers upon his table and all his papers arranged upon it. The flowers were not very choice; they were of Miss Jane's selection, and marigolds and plummy variegated grass looked beautiful in her eyes. Yet nothing but love could have put everything in its place so soon, and metamorphosed all at once the dining-room of the Gatehouse into Stephen's room, where everything bore a reference to him and was arranged for his special comfort. Perhaps they did not always feel for him, or even see what room there was for feeling. But this they could do—and in it they never failed.

'Does not he look comfortable?' Miss Jane said with triumph. 'You would think to see him he had never budged from his chair. And he got through the journey very well. If you but knew how frightened I was when we set out!'

Stephen looked at Mrs Drummond with a smile. There were some lines about his mouth and a quiver in his upper lip which spoke to her more clearly than to his sister. Helen had not been in the way of going out of herself to sympathise with others; and it seemed to her as if she had suddenly got a new pair of eyes, an additional sense. While they were all talking she saw what the journey had really cost him in his smile.

'It is strange to see the world again after so long,' he said, 'and to realise that once one walked about it quite carelessly like other people, without thinking what a thing it was.'

'But, Stephen, I am sure you don't repine,' said his mother, 'you know whose will it is, and you would not have it different? That is such a comfort whatever we may have to suffer.'

'You would not have it different!'

Helen looked at him almost with tears in her eyes.

'That is a great deal to say, mother,' he answered with a suppressed sigh; while she still went on asking herself passionately what had he done? what had he done?

'I think the charwoman will suit very well,' said Miss Jane. 'She seems clean, and that is the great thing. I am very well satisfied with everything I have seen as yet. The kitchen garden is beautiful. I suppose as there is no division, we are to have it between us—that and the fruit? I have been thinking a few fowls would be very nice if you have no objection. They cost little to keep, and to have your own eggs is a great luxury. And meat seems reasonable. I am very well satisfied with all I have seen.'

'If we only knew about the chapel,' said Mrs Haldane. 'So much of your comfort depends on your minister. If he is a nice man he will be company for Stephen. That is what I am most afraid of—that he will be dull in the country. There was always some one coming in about the magazine or some society or other when we were in town. I am afraid, Stephen, you will feel quite lost here.'

'Not for want of the visitors, mother,' he said; 'especially if Mrs Drummond will spare me Norah. She is better than any minister—not meaning any slight to my brethren,' he added, in a half-apologetic, half-laughing tone. He could laugh still, which was a thing Helen found it very difficult to understand.

'Norah is very nice, and I like dearly to see her,' said his mother; 'but, Stephen, I don't like to hear you talk like that. Mrs Drummond is not to know that it is all your nonsense. You were always such a one for a joke.'

'My jokes have not been very brilliant lately,' he said, with a smile. Mrs Haldane rose at that moment to help her daughter with something she was moving to the other end of the room, and Stephen, seizing the opportunity, turned quickly round upon Helen, who was sitting by him. 'You are very sorry for me,' he said, with a mixture of gratitude and impatience. 'Don't! it is better not!'

'How can I help it?' cried Helen. 'And why is it better not?'

'Because I cannot bear it,' he said, almost sternly.

This passed in a moment, while the unconscious women at the other end had altered the position of a table. Never man had more tender nurses than these two; but they had ceased to be sorry for him in look or word. They had accepted their own fate and his; his helplessness was to them like the daylight or the dark, a thing inevitable, the course of nature; and the matter-of-fact way in which they had learned to treat it made his life supportable. But it was difficult for a stranger to realise such a fact.

'I never told you that we were disappointed about letting the house,' said Miss Jane. 'A great many people came, but no one who was satisfactory. It is a great loss. I have left a person in it to try for a few months longer. People are very unprincipled, coming out of mere curiosity, and turning over your blankets and counterpanes without a thought.'

Here the conversation came to a pause, and Helen rose. She was standing saying her farewells and making such offers of assistance as she could, when the daily event with which she had grown familiar took place.

'There is some one coming,' said Stephen, from the window. 'It ought to be the queen by the commotion it makes: but it is only Burton.'

And Mrs Haldane and Miss Jane both rushed forward to see. Helen withdrew out of sight with a secret bitterness which she could not have put into words. Mr Burton was driving home from the station in all his usual importance. His horses were groomed to perfection, the mountings of his harness sparkled in the sun. He half drew up as he passed, making his bays prance and express their disapprobation, while he took off his hat to the new arrivals. It was such a salutation as a jocund monarch might have tossed at a humble worshipper, mock ceremony and conscious condescension. The women looking out never thought of that. They ran from one window to another to watch him entering the avenue, they talked to each other of his fine horses, the neat groom beside him, and how polite he was. Stephen had been looking on, too, with keen interest. A smile was on his face, but the lines above his eyes were contracted, and the eyes themselves gleamed with a sudden fire which startled Helen.

'I wonder what he thinks of it all,' he said to her under his breath, 'if he thinks at all. I wonder if he is comfortable when he reflects who are living at his gates?'

The words were said so low that she had to stoop to hear; and with a wondering thrill of half-comprehension she looked at him. What did he mean? From whence came that tone which was almost fierce in its self-restraint? It seemed to kindle a smouldering fire in her, of the nature of which she was not quite aware. 'Burton and Golden' suddenly flashed across her thoughts again. Where was it she had seen the names linked together? What did it mean? and what did Stephen mean? She felt as if she had almost found out something, which quickened her pulse and made her heart beat—almost. But the last point of enlightenment was yet to come.

'Now he has turned in at the gate,' said Miss Jane. 'Well, for my part, I am glad to have seen him; and to think that a man could do all that by his own exertions! If he had been a nobleman I should not have thought half so much of it. I suppose, now, that could not be seen anywhere but in England? You may smile, Stephen, and think me very vulgar-minded; but I do think it is a very

wonderful sight.'

And thus the second household settled down, and became a part of the landscape which the family at Dura surveyed with complaisant proprietorship, and through which Mr Burton drove every afternoon, calling admiring spectators to all the windows. The rich man had never enjoyed the commotion he made so much as he did now when he could see at the Gatehouse those faces looking out. There was scarcely an evening but Miss Jane or her mother would stand up to see him, gazing with unconscious worship at this representative of wealth and strength, and that practical power which sways the world; while Norah would clamber up on a chair behind the blinds at the other end, and look out with her big brown eyes full of serious observation. He thought Norah wondered and worshipped too, not being able to understand the language of her eyes. And sometimes he would see, or think he saw, her mother behind her. When he did so he went home in high good-humour, and was more jocular than usual; for nothing gave him such a sense of his own greatness, his prosperity, and superiority to common flesh and blood, as the homage, or supposed homage, paid to him by those lookers-on at the windows of the Gatehouse.

Mr Burton's satisfaction came to a climax when his father-in-law came to pay his next visit, which happened not very long after the arrival of the Haldanes. Mr Baldwin, as we have said, was a Dissenter, and something like a lay bishop in his denomination. He was very rich, and lived very plainly at Clapham with his two sisters, Mrs Everett and Miss Louisa. They were all very good people in their way. There was not a man in England who subscribed to more societies or presided at a greater number of meetings. He spent half his income in this way; he 'promoted' charities as his son-in-law promoted joint-stock companies; and prided himself on the simplicity of his living and his tastes, notwithstanding his wealth. When he and his sisters came to pay a visit at Dura they walked from the station, leaving their servants and their boxes to follow in a fly. 'We have the use of our limbs, I am thankful to Providence,' one of the sisters would say; 'why should we have a carriage for a little bit of road like that?' They walked in a little procession, the gentleman in advance, like a triumphant cock in front of his harem, the two ladies a little behind. Mr Baldwin wore his hat on the back of his head, and a white tie, like one of his favourite ministers; he had a round, chubby face, without any whiskers, and a complexion almost as clear as little Clara's. The two ladies were like him, except that Mrs Everett, who was a widow, was large and stout, and Miss Louisa pale and thin. They walked along with a natural feeling of benevolent supremacy, making their remarks on everybody and everything with distinct voices. When they got to the Gatehouse they paused and inspected it, though the windows were all open.

'I think Reginald was wrong to give such a house as this to those poor people,' said the married sister in front of the door. 'It is a handsome house. He might have found some little cottage for them, and let this to a family.'

'But, Martha, he gave what he had, and it is that that is always accepted,' said Miss Louisa.

The brother drowned her plaintive little voice with a more decided reply—

'I am very glad Haldane has such good quarters. As for the lady, I suppose she was not to blame; but when a man flies in the face of Providence I would not reward him by providing for his wife and family. I agree with Martha. It is a waste of the gifts of God to give this house to poor people who cannot enjoy it; but still Burton is right on the whole. If you cannot do better with your property, why should not you use it to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness? I approve of his charity on the whole.'

Inside the recipients of the charity sat and heard all through the open windows. But what then? Mr Baldwin and his sisters were not responsible for that. They went on to the avenue making the same candid and audible remarks all along the road. It was not necessary that they should exercise self-restraint. They were in the dominions of their relation. They were absolute over all foolish sentiment and false pride. They said it loud out, frankly, whatever they might have to say. The arrival of these visitors always made a certain commotion at Dura. It moved Mr Burton a great deal more than it did his wife. Indeed, if there was anything which vexed him in her exemplary behaviour, it was that she would not make temporarily the changes which he thought were 'only respectful' to suit the tastes of her father and aunts. 'You know your father likes only plain roast and boiled,' he would say to her, half-indignantly, adding, with a laugh, 'and minister sauce.' This last was one of his favourite jokes, though it did not strike his wife as particularly brilliant. But the minister sauce was the only thing which Mrs Burton provided for her father. She held fast by her *menu*, though he disapproved of it. She dressed herself tranquilly for dinner, though her aunts held up their hands, and asked her solemnly if she knew what all this extravagance must come to? In these matters Clara would not give way; but she asked the minister of the chapel in the village to dinner, and it was in the presence of this functionary that Mr Baldwin filled up the measure of his son-in-law's content.

'I see you have been very generous to poor Haldane,' he said. 'I am very much obliged to you, Burton. He is my own man; I should have been compelled to do something for him if you had not taken him up; and my hands are always so full! You will find I do not forget it. But it was a great waste to put him into such a handsome house.'

'I am delighted to have pleased you,' said Mr Burton. 'It was an empty house; and I have put my cousin, Mrs Drummond, in the other end, whom I was obliged to take care of. It was the cheapest way of doing it. I am most happy to think I have relieved you, even of so little as that.'

'Oh yes, you have relieved me,' said Mr Baldwin. 'I sha'n't forget it. It will be an encouragement

to Mr Truston and to many of the brethren to see that a sick friend is never abandoned. I don't mean to say that you want any inducement—but, still, when you can see that even in the case of failing strength——'

'Oh yes. I am sure it is most encouraging,' the poor minister faltered.

Encouraging to think of Stephen Haldane, who was thus provided for! The two rich men went on with their talk over their wine, while some confused speculation as to the ways of Providence went through the head of their companion. He was young, and he felt ill at ease, and he did not like to interfere much. Had it been Mr Dalton he would have been less easily silenced. Thus Mr Burton found his benevolence in one particular at least attended with the most perfect success.

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## CHAPTER IV.

And everything settled down, and Nature resumed her common round. This is what Nature does in all circumstances. There never was so bad a storm but next morning the thrifty mother took heart and set to work again as best she could to make amends for it. It is only when the storm affects human hearts and lives that this cheerful, pathetic effort to get the better of it becomes terrible; for the mending in such cases is so often but superficial, the cure impossible. Other trees grow up to fill the gap made by the one blown down; but not other loves or other hopes. Yet gradually the tempest calms, the wreck is swept away, and some things that are new are always better than some things that were old, even though the old can never be replaced while life goes on.

Of all the dwellers in the Gatehouse, it was poor Haldane who felt this the most. The reality of this life in the country was very different from the anticipation. The fresh air which his mother had hoped to have for Stephen—the cottage garden which they had all dreamt of (even he himself by moments), where he could be wheeled in his chair to sit under the apple-tree and smell the flowers—had vanished from their list of possibilities. All the fresh air he could have was from the open window by which his chair was placed. But not even the garden and the apple-tree would have done so much for him as the varieties of the country road. Instead of the garden walls at Victoria Villas, the strip of dusty grass, the chance sight of a neighbour's child at play, or (more likely) of a neighbour's clothes hung out to dry, he had a genuine rural highroad, with all its sights. He saw the carts passing with rural produce, full of big baskets of vegetables for the London market; he saw the great waggons of odorous hay, with a man asleep on the top, half-buried in the warm and fragrant mass, or cracking his whip on the path, and shouting drowsy, inarticulate calls to the horses, who took their own way, and did not mind him; he saw the carriages gleam past with the great people, whom by degrees he got to know; and then the Rectory children were always about, and Mrs Dalton in her pony-chaise, and the people coming and going from the village. There were two of the village folk in particular who brought a positive pleasure into his life—not a pair of lovers, or any pretty group, but only Clippings, the tailor, and Brown, the shoemaker, who strolled down the road in the evening to smoke their pipes and talk politics as far as the Rectory gate. Clippings, who lived 'up town,' was always decorous in his shabby coat; but Brown, whose shop was 'at the corner,' came in his shirt-sleeves, with his apron turned up obliquely to one side. They would stop just opposite his window when they got hot in their discussion. Sometimes it was the parish they talked of, sometimes the affairs of the state, and it was in Stephen's mind sometimes to invite them to cross the road, and to have his say in the matter. They were not men of education or intelligence perhaps; but they *were* men, living the natural human life from which he had been torn, and it did him good to watch them. After a while they began to look over at him and take off their hats, half with village obsequiousness to a possible customer, half with natural feeling for a soul in prison; and he gave them a nod in return.

But this vulgar fancy of his was not quite approved of within. 'If you are so friendly with these men, Stephen, you will have them coming over, and poisoning the whole house with tobacco,' Mrs Haldane said, with an expressive sniff. 'I think I smell it even now.' But his mother was not aware that the scent of the tobacco was like an air of paradise to poor Stephen, who had loved it well enough when he was his own master, though it had become impossible now.

Mrs Haldane, however, did not say a word against Mr Dalton's cigar, which he very often smoked under Stephen's window in those summer mornings, lounging across in his study coat. It must be remembered that Stephen was not a Dissenting minister *pur et simple*, but a man whose name had been heard in the literary world, especially in that literary world which Mr Dalton, as a 'thoughtful' and 'liberal' clergyman, chiefly affected. The rector felt that it was kind to go and talk to poor Haldane, but he was not so overwhelmingly superior as he might have been under other circumstances. He did not set him down at once at a distance of a hundred miles, as he did Mr Truston, the minister of the chapel at Dura, by the mere suavity of his 'good morning.' On the contrary, they had a great deal of talk. Mr Dalton was a man who piqued himself on his Radicalism, except when he happened to come in contact with Radicals, and he was very great in education, though he left the parish schools chiefly to his wife. When anything had happened which was more than ordinarily interesting in public affairs, he would stride across with gaiety to the encounter: 'I told you your friend Bright was not liberal-minded enough to see that distinction,' he would say; or, 'Gladstone has gone off on another search after truth;' and then the

battle would go on, while Stephen sat inside and his interlocutor paced the white flags in front of the Gatehouse up and down under the windows with that fragrant cigar. Sometimes Mary would come flying over from the Rectory: 'Papa, papa, you are wanted. There are some papers to sign, and mamma can't do it, she says.' '*Pazienza!*' the rector would answer, for he had travelled too.

And then on the Saturday there were other diversions for Stephen. Old Ann from the farm of Dura Den would whip up her old white pony and stop her cart under his window. She had her grandson with her, a chubby lad of twelve, in a smock-frock, beautifully worked about the shoulders, with cheeks as red as the big poppies in the nosegay which his grandmother made a point of bringing every Saturday to the poor sick gentleman.

'And how do you do, sir, this fine fresh morning?' she would shout to him. 'I hope as I sees you better. Sammy, give me the flowers. It's old-fashioned, master, but its sweet; and I just wish I see you able to come and fetch 'em for yourself.'

'Thank you, Ann; but I fear that's past hoping for,' Stephen would say with a smile.

The same colloquy passed between them every week, but they did not tire of it, and the little cart with its mixture of colours, the red carrots, and white cauliflowers, and many-tinted greens, was a pleasant sight to him. He did not object even to the pungent odour of the celery, which often communicated itself to his bouquet. The white pony, and the red and white and green of the vegetables, and Old Ann with a small face, like a russet winter apple, under her deep bonnet, and her little red shawl, trimly tied in round her waist by the great, many-pocketed apron; and Sammy trudging behind, with boots like buckets, with a basket of crimson cabbage for pickles on his arm, and his puffy, peony cheeks, made up a homely picture which delighted the recluse. It was an event for him when the Saturday came round, and he began (he said) to be fond of the smell of celery, and to think double poppies very handsome, showy flowers to put into a nosegay. Miss Jane took an interest in Ann too, but it was of a different kind. She would go out to the door, and have long discussions with her on various subjects quite as interesting as the rector's battles with Stephen—whether the butter was rising, and what was the cheapest for her poultry; for Ann's butter and her poultry were the best in Dura, and when she knew you, and felt that you were to be depended upon, she was not dear, Miss Jane always said.

There was also another visitor, who came once a week, not to Stephen's window, but to make a call in all proper state. This was Mr Truston, the minister of the chapel, who was, like Stephen, a *protégé* of Mr Baldwin, but had not either done so much credit or given so much trouble to the denomination as Haldane had. Mr Truston was aware how his new acquaintance was spoken of by the community, and his mind was much divided between veneration for Stephen's powers and a desire to be faithful with his brother. If he could be the humble instrument of setting him quite right with the denomination and preserving the efficiency of the magazine, he felt that he would not have lived in vain. But it was a dreadful trial to his modesty to assume an admonitory position to one whom he respected so much. He confided his difficulties to Mrs Wigginton, the wife of the draper at Dura, who was a leading member of the congregation, and a very thoughtful woman; and she had given him a great deal of encouragement, and put his duty before him in the clearest light.

'The thing is to keep him to fundamental principles,' Mrs Wigginton said. 'I would excuse a great deal if he preserved these. *We* may be superior to distinctions, and know that there is good both in church and chapel. But that will not do for the common mass. And we must support the denomination, Mr Truston. It has its faults—but, whatever its faults may be, we must stand by our flag.'

'Ah, I wish you would take him in hand,' said the minister with a sigh; but, all the same, such inspiration as this did not go for nothing. He began to call on the Haldanes every week; and when he had screwed up his courage he meant to be very faithful with Stephen; but a man cannot begin that process all at once.

Thus the Haldanes settled down in the Gatehouse; and their settling down affected Helen with that unintentional example and encouragement, which people convey to each other without meaning it. They were all very poor, but Miss Jane, who had never been very rich, and who had been trained to live on the smallest sum imaginable, made no hardship of her poverty, and communicated a certain cheerfulness about it even to her neighbour, whose mind and training were so very different. Miss Jane took it as she had learned to take (though not till after many struggles) her brother's illness, as a matter of course. She was aware that there were rich people in the world. She saw them even, the Burtons, for instance, who passed her every day, and whose life was full of luxury; but this did not move her, any more than the sight of a great beauty would have moved her to impatience of her own plain and homely face. The wealth, like the beauty, was exceptional. The homeliness and the poverty were the natural rule. And Helen saw that the lines of pain were softened in Stephen's face, and that he had begun to feel something like pleasure in those alleviations of his loneliness which have been described. All this produced a soothing, quieting influence upon her. She was hushed, as a child is who is not satisfied, whose cry is ready to burst forth at any moment, but upon whom the very atmosphere, the stillness of the air, has produced a certain calm. The wrong which had burnt her heart like a fire was not extinguished; it burned low, not for want of fuel, but because the air was soft and humid, and kept down the flame. And she herself was subdued. She was weary of suffering, and the routine of the new life acted upon her like an opiate, and the sense that all this was accepted as ordinary and natural by others, kept her down. And then Norah had cast away those bonds which oppress a child—the bonds of conventional quiet, which remain when natural grief has passed away in the order of



things. Norah had begun to sing about the house, to dance when she should have walked, to wake up like the flowers, to live like the birds, spending her days in a chatter and flutter of life and gladness. All this calmed down and suppressed the feelings which had swayed Helen after her husband's death. Though her old sense of suspicion in respect to her cousin had succeeded the momentary relenting which his kindness had produced in her, even that was suppressed in the artificial calm. She blamed herself for shrinking from his presence, for disliking his friendliness; she even made an effort to go to his house, to overcome what she said to herself was her mean envy of his prosperity. She made friends with his wife, as far as two women so different could make friends, and tried to believe that Reginald Burton himself had never meant but well. It was in October, when she had first begun fully to realise the strange quietness that had come upon her, that it was suddenly broken up, never in that same fashion to return again.

There were visitors at the time at Dura House, visitors of importance, great county people, potentates whom, it was said, Mrs Burton was specially bent on conciliating in order to open the way into Parliament—a glory upon which her heart was set—to her husband. Mr Burton had himself taken a holiday from business, and on this particular day had gone up, after a long interval, 'to see,' he said, with that cheerful, important laugh of his, 'how things were going on.' That evening, however, Dura village was disappointed of its usual amusement. The phaeton with the bays went slowly past, driven by the groom, with a certain consternation in every line of the horses, and in every splendid tail and high-stepping hoof.

'Has not your master come?' Mrs Burton asked, when she met this forlorn equipage in the avenue. Such a thing had been known; sometimes business was so urgent that Mr Burton had lost his train, or waited for one that went later. But that which had happened this evening had never happened before.

'He is walking, ma'am,' said the groom, with gloomy signification. It gave even Mrs Burton a start, though she was usually so self-possessed; and as for the groom, he spread it about through the house that there had been 'a smash' in the City. Nothing else could account for so extraordinary a step.

Mr Burton walked, and his countenance was clouded. There was a shade on it, which the people about Dura, stupefied in the first instance by seeing him afoot at that hour, interpreted as the groom did. They thought 'something must have happened.' The Bank of England must have faltered on its throne; half the merchants, at home and abroad, must have fallen to the dust, like Dagon. Some one of weak mind, who suggested that the ministry might be out, was snubbed by everybody with a contempt proportioned to his foolishness. Would Mr Burton look like that for any merely political misfortune? But no one ventured even to suggest that Burton & Co. themselves might have sustained some blow. Such treason might be in men's thoughts, but no one dared to hint at an event which more than a revolution or a lost empire would have convulsed Dura. There are some things which it is impious even to speculate about.

Mr Burton went direct to the Gatehouse. He had not his usual condescending word to Susan, nor did he remember to wave his hand to Stephen as he passed the window. He went straight into the drawing-room, where Helen and Norah were sitting. They had just come in from their walk, and were going to have tea; and such a visit at this hour startled them. There was something more than gloom on his face; there was suppressed anger, and he had the look of a man who had come to speak his mind. He shook hands in the slightest, most hasty way, not caring evidently to waste time in salutations, and he did not take the chair that was offered to him. He kept standing, looking first at Helen and then at Norah, with glances which he seemed to expect would be understood; but as Norah had been present at every discussion in the house all her life, it did not occur to her to go away, nor to her mother to send her. At last he was obliged to speak plainly.

'I am anxious to talk to you by yourself,' he said. 'I have something very important to say. Norah, perhaps, would run out to the garden, or somewhere—for half an hour, I should not ask for more.'

'Norah!' said Helen, with surprise. 'But she has heard everything that any one can have to say to me. She knows as much as I do. You may say anything before Norah.'

'By—!' said Mr Burton. He did not put any word in the vacant place. He swore by Blank, as we do in books, contenting himself with the 'By—!' 'I don't mean to speak of my affairs before Norah,' he said, walking to the window and looking out. 'Send her away.'

He waited there with his back turned to the two, who gazed at each other amazed.

'Go up-stairs till I send for you, Norah,' said Helen, with a trembling voice. It must be some new pain, some new terror, something about Norah's father. She put her hand on her heart to keep it still. This was how her calm was broken all in a moment. She put her child away with the other hand. And Norah, astonished, indignant, choking with sudden rage and mortification, flew out of the room and rushed up-stairs. The sound of her hurried, angry retreat seemed to ring through all the house. And it was not till her foot was heard overhead that her mother found breath to speak. 'What is it?—tell me! There can be nothing now so very hard to bear.'

'I don't know what you mean about hard to bear,' said Mr Burton, turning pettishly round and seating himself on a chair in front of her. 'Helen, I have done all I could to be kind to you. You will say it has not cost me very much, but it has cost me more than you think. I have put myself to a great deal of trouble, and—'

'Is this all you have to tell me?' she asked faintly, still holding her hand upon her heart.

'All!' he repeated; and then, changing his tone suddenly, 'do you know anything about this new folly Maurice has taken in hand? Don't prevaricate, Helen; answer me yes or no.'

'I do not know what you mean,' she said, and paused for breath. Her fright, and the strange assault that had been made upon her, confused her mind. Then gradually with Maurice's name came a sudden gleam of light.

'That is a pretence,' he said. 'I can see in your face that you understand. You that I have been, so to speak, nourishing in my bosom—you—Helen! There is still time to think better of it. Have you given your consent to it? Has he got your name?'

'If it is anything Dr Maurice is doing,' she said, 'yes, he has got my consent, and more than my consent.'

'Good heavens, why? Are you in your senses? I thought it was some idiotic woman's notion. What good can it possibly do to rake up that business all over again? What the deuce do you mean by it? What can it ever be to you?'

'What is it to you?' she said.

'To me!' She was looking at him, and his voice fell. He had begun loudly, as if with the intention of declaring that to him it was less than nothing; but he was caught by her look, and only grew confused, and stammered out again, 'To me!'

'Yes,' said Helen. 'You are not a Director. You have said you were a loser only, you had no responsibility. Then what does it matter to you?'

Mr Burton turned away his head; he stamped his foot slightly on the floor in impatience. 'What is the use?' he said, as if to himself, 'you might teach an elephant to fly sooner than make a woman understand about business. Without being anything to me, it might be something to my friends.'

'Is that man—that—Golden—is he your friend?'

'Of course he is,' said Mr Burton roughly, with a certain defiance. 'You are prejudiced against him unjustly. But he is my friend, and a very good fellow too.'

'Then it is better not to say any more,' said Helen rising, trembling in every limb. 'It is best not to say any more. Oh don't venture to name his name to me! If I had not been a woman, I should have—not killed him. That would have been too good. Innocent men are killed, and you others look on, and never lift a finger. I would have pursued him till his last breath—crushed him—made him feel what he has done. And I will—if I have the power!'

She stood up confronting her cousin, trembling, yet glowing with that passion which the name of her husband's slanderer always roused within her. She was almost as tall as Burton was, and he felt as if she towered over him, and was cowed by the strength of her emotion. He rose too, but he shrank back a step, not knowing how to meet the spirit he had roused.

'These are nice Christian sentiments,' he said, with an attempt at a sneer; but in his heart the man was afraid.

'I ask nobody what kind of sentiments they are,' she cried. 'If he had wronged me only, I would have forgiven him. But no man shall say his name before me—no man! I may not have the power; my friends may not have the power; but it is that, and not the will, which will fail if we fail. I will never give up trying to punish him, never in my life!'

'Then you will be acting like a fool,' Mr Burton said; but he changed his tone, and took a great deal of trouble to persuade her to take her seat again, and discuss the matter calmly with him.

Norah stood up-stairs by the window, watching till he should go. The child's heart was bursting with rage and pain. She had never been sent away before; she had heard everything, had been always present whatever was going on. Her father, Dr Maurice, Mr Haldane, every one of them had spoken in her presence all that they had to say. And she remembered words that no one else remembered, scraps of talk which she could put together. She did so with a violent exercise of her memory as she stood there drumming on the window, and wondering when he would go. 'He thinks I am only a child,' she said to herself, in the fiery commotion of her spirits, and thought of a hundred things she could do to prove the contrary. She would go to Dr Maurice; she would let 'everybody' know. He was no friend; he was a conspirator against them—one of those who killed her father. Every moment that passed inflamed Norah more. She stood at the window and watched, thinking would he never be gone, thinking, oh why could not she make herself grow—make herself a woman! What her mother had done was nothing to what Norah felt herself capable of doing. Every vein in her body, and every nerve had begun to thrill and tremble before she heard the sound down-stairs of the door opening, and saw him go hastily away.

This was what he said when he opened the door of the sitting-room down-stairs—

'You will do what you please, of course. I have found out before now what it is to struggle with an unreasonable woman. Do what you like. Drag your husband's name through the dirt again. Throw all sorts of new light on his motives. That is what you will do. People might have forgotten it; but after what you are going to do, they will never forget. And that is all you will have for your pains—you may be sure you can do nothing to us.'

'Us?' said Helen. 'You told me you were not concerned.'

And then Mr Burton changed colour and lost his temper.

'You drive a man wild,' he cried. 'You make me that I don't know what I am saying. Of course you know what I mean, though you pretend you don't. I mean my friends. And you know that; and you know how much you owe to me, and yet the answer I get is—this!'

He slammed the door after him like an angry maid-servant; he strode hastily away to his own house, with a face which of itself gave a new paralytic seizure to old John at the lodge. He filled everybody with consternation in his own house. And Helen stood still after he had left her, half exultant, half stupefied. *Us!* Had she found his cunning manœuvres out?

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## CHAPTER V.

Dr Maurice came down next day. He was a man of very quiet manners, and yet he was unable to conceal a certain excitement. He walked into the Gatehouse with an air of abstraction, as if he did not quite know what he was about.

'I have come to talk about business,' he said, but he did not send Norah away. Probably had he not been so glad to see her once more, it would have surprised him to see the child whom he had never beheld apart from a book, standing up by her mother's chair, watching his face, taking in every word. Norah's *rôle* had changed since those old days. She had no independent standing then; now she was her mother's companion, champion, supporter. This changes as nothing else can do a child's life.

'Our case is to be heard for the first time,' he said. 'I believe they are all very much startled. Golden was brought before the magistrate yesterday; he has been admitted to bail, of course. If I could have had the satisfaction of thinking that rascal was even one night in prison! But that was too much to hope for. Mrs Drummond, can you guess who was his bail?'

Helen shook her head, not understanding quite what he meant; but all the same she knew what his answer would be. He brought it out with a certain triumph—

'Why, Burton—your precious cousin! I knew it would be so. As sure as that sun is shining, Burton is at the bottom of it all. I have seen it from the first.'

'Dr Maurice,' said Helen, 'where have I seen, where have I read, "Burton and Golden have done it"? The words seem to haunt me. It cannot be fancy.'

Dr Maurice took out his pocket-book. He took a folded paper from an inner pocket, and held it to her without a word. Poor Helen, in the composure which she had attained so painfully, began to shake and tremble; the sight of it moved her beyond her self-control. She could not weep, but her strained nerves quivered, her teeth chattered, her frame was convulsed by the shock. 'Ah!' she cried, as people do when they receive a blow; and yet now she remembered it all—every word; it seemed to be written on her heart.

The physician was alarmed. Human emotion has many ways of showing itself, but none more alarming than this. He put the letter hastily away again, and plunged into wild talk about the way she was living, the house, and the neighbourhood.

'You are taking too little exercise. You are shutting yourself up too much,' he said, with something of that petulance which so often veils pity. He was not going to encourage her to break down by being sorry for her; the other way, he thought, was the best. And then he himself was on the very borders of emotion too, the sight of these words had brought poor Robert so keenly to his mind. And they had brought to his mind also his own hardships. Norah in her new place was very bewildering to him. He had noted her closely while her mother was speaking, and with wonder and trouble had seen a woman look at him through the girl's brown eyes—a woman, a new creature, an independent being, whom he did not know, whom he would have to treat upon a different footing. This discovery, which he had not made at the first glance, filled him with dismay and trouble. He had lost the child whom he loved.

'Norah, come and show me the house,' he said, with a certain despair; and he went away, leaving Helen to recover herself. That was better than going back upon the past, recalling to both the most painful moments of their life.

He took Norah's hand, and walked through the open door into the garden, which was the first outlet he saw.

'Come and tell me all about it,' he said. 'Norah, what have you been doing to yourself? Have you grown up in these three months? You are not the little girl I used to know.'

'Oh, Dr Maurice, do you think I have grown?' cried Norah, with her whole heart in the demand.

And it would be impossible to describe what a comfort this eager question was to him. He laughed, and looked down upon her, and began to feel comfortable again.

'Do you know, I am afraid you have not grown,' he said, putting his other hand fondly on her brown hair. 'Are you vexed, Norah? For my part, I like you best as you are.'

'Well, it cannot be helped,' said Norah, with resignation. 'I did not think I had; but for a moment I had just a little hope, you looked so funny at me. Oh, Dr Maurice, I do so wish I was grown up!—for many things. First, there is Mr Burton, who comes and bullies mamma. I hate that man. I remember at home, in the old days, when you used to be talking, and nobody thought I paid any attention——'

'What do you remember, Norah?'

'Oh, heaps of things. I can scarcely tell you. They would look at each other—I mean Mr Golden and he. They would say things to each other. Oh, I don't remember what the words were; how should I remember the words? but things—just as you might look at me, and give a little nod, if we had something that was a secret from mamma. I know they had secrets, these two. If I were grown up, and could speak, I would tell him so. Dr Maurice, can't we punish them? I cannot imagine,' cried Norah passionately, 'what God can be thinking of to let them alone, and let them be happy, after all they have done to—poor papa!'

'Norah, these are strange things for you to be thinking of,' said Dr Maurice, once more disturbed by a development which he was not acquainted with.

'Oh, no. If you knew how we live, you would not think them strange. I am little; but what does that matter? There is mamma on one side, and there is Mr Haldane. How different we all used to be! Dr Maurice, I remember when poor Mr Haldane used to take me up, and set me on his shoulder; and look at him now! Oh, how can any one see him, and bear it? But it does no good to cry.'

'But, Norah, that is not Mr Burton's fault.'

'No, not that; but, oh, it is God's fault,' said Norah, sinking her voice to a whisper, and ending with a burst of passionate tears.

'Hush, hush, hush!' He took her hand into both of his, and soothed her. Thoughts like these might float through a man's mind involuntarily, getting no utterance; but it horrified him to hear them from the lips of a child. Was she a child? Dr Maurice said to himself once more, with an inward groan, that his little Norah, his dream-child of the fairy tales, was gone, and he should find her no more.

'And then it rather vexes one to be so little,' she said, suddenly drying her eyes, 'because of Clara. Clara is not twelve yet, and she is much bigger than I am. She can reach to these roses—look—while I can't get near them; and they are the only roses we have now. But, after all, though it may be nice to be tall, it doesn't matter very much, do you think, for a woman? So mamma says; and girls are just as often little as tall—in books.'

'For my part, I am fond of little women,' said Dr Maurice, and this time he laughed within himself. She kept him between the two, changing from childhood to womanhood without knowing it. 'But tell me, who is Clara? I want to know about your new friends here.'

'Clara is Clara Burton, and very like him,' said Norah. 'I thought I should be fond of her at first, because she is my cousin; but I am not fond of her. Ned is her brother. I like him better. He is a horsey, doggy sort of boy; but then he has always lived in the country, and he knows no better. One can't blame him for that, do you think?'

'Oh, no,' said Dr Maurice, with great seriousness; 'one can't blame him for that.' The man's heart grew glad over the child's talk. He could have listened to her running on about her friends for ever.

'And then there was—some one else,' said Norah, instinctively drawing herself up; 'not exactly a boy; a—gentleman. We saw him in town, and then we saw him here; first with that horrible man, Mr Golden, and another day with the Burtons. But you are not to think badly of him for that. He was—on our side.'

'Who is this mysterious personage, I wonder?' said Dr Maurice smilingly; but this time it was not a laugh or a groan, but a little shivering sensation of pain that ran through him, he could not tell why.

'He was more like Fortunatus than any one,' said Norah. 'But he could not be like Fortunatus in everything, for he said he was poor, like us—though that might be only, as I say it myself, to spite Clara. Well, he was grown up—taller than you are, Dr Maurice—with nice curling sort of hair, all in little twists and rings, and beautiful eyes. They flashed up so when mamma spoke. Mamma was very, very angry talking to that horrible man at our own very door. Fancy, he had dared to go and call and leave his horrid card. I tore it into twenty pieces, and stamped upon it. It was silly, I suppose; but to think he should dare to call—at our own very house——'

'I am getting dreadfully confused, Norah, between the beautiful eyes and the horrible man. I don't know what I am about. Which was which?'

'Oh, Dr Maurice, how could you ask such a question? Are there two such men in the world? It was *that* Mr Golden whom I hate; and Mr Rivers—Cyril Rivers—was with him, not knowing—but he says he will never go with him again. I saw it in his eyes in a moment; he is on our side.'

'You are young to read eyes in this way. I do not think I quite like it, Norah,' said Dr Maurice, in a tone which she recognised at once.

'Why, you are angry. But how can I help it?' said Norah, growing a woman again. 'If you were like me, Dr Maurice—if you felt your mamma had only you—if you knew there was nobody else to stand by her, nobody to help her, and you so little! I am obliged to think; I cannot help myself. When I grow up, I shall have so much to do; and how can I know whether people are on our side or against us, except by looking at their eyes?'

'Norah, my little Norah!' cried the man pitifully, 'don't leave your innocence for such fancies as these. Your mother has friends to think for her and you—many friends; I myself, for example. As long as I am alive, do you require to go and look for people to be on your side? Why, child, you forget *me*.'

Norah looked at him searchingly, penetrating, as he thought, to the bottom of his heart.

'I did not forget you, Dr Maurice. You are fond of me and of—poor papa. But I have to think of *her*. I don't think you love *her*. And she has the most to bear.'

Dr Maurice did not make any reply. He did not love Helen; he even shrank from the idea with a certain prudish sense of delicacy—an old bachelor's bashfulness. Love Mrs Drummond! Why, it was out of the question. The idea disconcerted him. He had been quite pained and affected a moment before at the thought that his little Norah—the child that he was so fond of—should want other champions. But now he was disconcerted, and in front of the grave little face looking up at him, he did not even dare to smile. Norah, however, was as ready to raise him up as she had been to cast him down.

'Do you think Cyril is a pretty name, Dr Maurice?' she asked. 'I think it sounds at first a little weak—too pretty for a boy. So is Cecil. I like a rough, round sort of name—Ned, for instance. You never could mistake Ned. One changes one's mind about names, don't you think? I used to be all for Gerald and Cyrils and pretty sounds like that; now I like the others best. Clara is pretty for a girl; but everybody thinks I must be Irish, because I'm called Norah. Why was I called Norah, do you know? Charlie Dalton calls me Norah Creina.'

'Here is some one quite fresh. Who is Charlie Dalton?' said Dr Maurice, relieved.

'Oh, one of the Rectory boys. There are so many of them! What I never can understand,' cried Norah suddenly, 'is the difference among people. Mr Dalton has eight children, and mamma has only one; now why? To be sure, it would have been very expensive to have had Charlie and all the rest on so little money as we have now. I suppose we could not have done it. And, to be sure, God must have known that, and arranged it on purpose,' the child said, stopping short with a puzzled look. 'Oh, Dr Maurice, when He knew it all, and could have helped it if He pleased, why did He let them kill poor papa?'

'I do not know,' said Dr Maurice under his breath.

It was a relief to him when, a few minutes after, Helen appeared at the garden door, having in the mean time overcome her own feelings. They were all in a state of repression, the one hiding from the other all that was strongest in them for the moment. Such a thing is easily done at twelve years old. Norah ran along the garden path to meet her mother, throwing off the shadow in a moment. But for the others it was not so easy. They met, and they talked of the garden, what a nice old-fashioned garden it was, full of flowers such as one rarely sees now-a-days. And Dr Maurice told Norah the names of some of them, and asked if the trees bore well, and commented upon the aspect, and how well those pears ought to do upon that warm wall. These are the disguises with which people hide themselves when that within does not bear speaking of. There was a great deal more to be told still, and business to be discussed; but first these perverse hearts had to be stilled somehow in their irregular beating, and the tears which were too near the surface got rid of, and the wistful, questioning thoughts silenced.

After a while Dr Maurice went to pay Stephen Haldane a visit. He, too, was concerned in the business which brought the doctor here. The two men went into it with more understanding than Helen could have had. She wanted only that Golden should be punished, and her husband's name vindicated—a thing which it seemed to her so easy to do. But they knew that proof was wanted—proof which was not forthcoming. Dr Maurice told Haldane what Helen gave him no opportunity to tell her—that the lawyers were not sanguine. The books which had disappeared were the only evidence upon which Golden's guilt and Drummond's innocence could be either proved or disproved. And all the people about the office, from the lowest to the highest, had been summoned to tell what they knew about those books. Nobody, it appeared, had seen them removed; nobody had seen the painter carry them away; there was this negative evidence in his favour, if no other. But there was nothing to prove that Golden had done it, or any other person involved, and, so far as this was concerned, obscurity reigned over the whole matter—an obscurity not pierced as yet by any ray of light.

'At all events, we shall fight it out,' said Dr Maurice. 'The only thing to be risked now is a little money more or less, and that, I suppose, a man ought to be willing to risk for the sake of justice—myself especially, who have neither chick nor child.'

He said this in so dreary a way that poor Stephen smiled. The man who was removed from any such delights—who could never improve his own position in any way, nor procure for himself any of the joys of life, looked at the man who thus announced himself with a mixture of gentle ridicule and pity.

'That at least must be your own fault,' he said; and then he thought of himself, and sighed.

No one knew what dreams might have been in Stephen Haldane's mind before he became the wreck he was. Probably no one ever would know. He smiled at the other, but for himself he could not restrain a sigh.

'I don't see how it can be said to be my own fault,' said Dr Maurice with whimsical petulance. 'There are preliminary steps, of course, which one might take—but not necessarily with success—not by any means certainly with success. I tell you what, though, Haldane,' he added hastily, after a pause, 'I'd like to adopt Norah Drummond. That is what I should like to do. I'd be very good to her; she should have everything she could set her face to. To start a strange child from the beginning, even if it were one's own, is always like putting into a lottery. A baby is no better than a speculation. How do you know what it may turn out? whereas a creature like Norah—Ah, that is what I should like, to adopt such a child as that!'

'To adopt—Norah?' Stephen grew pale. 'What! to take her from her mother! to carry away the one little gleam of light!'

'She would be a gleam of light to me too,' said Dr Maurice, 'and I could do her justice. I could provide for her. Her mother, if she cared for the child's interest, ought not to stand in the way. There! you need not look so horror-stricken. I don't mean to attempt it. I only say that is what I should like to do.'

But the proposal, even when so lightly made, took away Stephen's breath. He did not recover himself for some time. He muttered, 'Adopt—Norah!' under his breath, while his friend talked on other subjects. He could not forget it. He even made Dr Maurice a little speech when he rose to go away. He put out his hand and grasped the other's arm in the earnestness of his interest.

'Look here, Maurice,' he said, 'wealth has its temptations as well as poverty; because you have plenty of money, if you think you could make such a proposition——'

'What proposition?'

'To take Norah from her mother. If you were to tempt Mrs Drummond for the child's sake to give up the child, by promising to provide for her, or whatever you might say—if you were to do that, God forgive you, Maurice—I know I never could!'

'Of course I shall not do it,' said Maurice hastily. And he went away with the feeling in his mind that this man, too, was his rival, and his successful rival. The child was as good as Stephen's child, though so far removed from himself. Dr Maurice was so far wrong that it was Helen Stephen was thinking of, and not Norah. The child would be a loss to him; but the loss of her mother would be so much greater that the very thought of it oppressed his soul. He had grown to be Helen's friend in the truest sense; he had felt her sympathy to be almost too touching to him, almost too sweet; and he could not bear the possibility of seeing her deprived of her one solace. He sat alone after Maurice had gone away (for his mother and sister had left them to have their conversation unfettered by listeners), and pondered over the possible fate of the mother and child. The child would grow up; in a very few years she would be a woman; she would marry, in all likelihood, and go away, and belong to them no more; and Helen would be left to bear her lot alone. She would be left in the middle of her days to carry her burden as she might, deserted by every love that had once belonged to her. What a lot would that be!—worse, even, than his own, who, amid all his pains, had two hearts devoted to him never to be disjoined from him but by death. Poor Stephen, you would have supposed, was himself in the lowest depths of human suffering and solitude; but yet he looked down upon a lower still, and his heart bled for Helen, who, it might be, would have to descend into that abyss in all the fulness of her life and strength. What a sin would that man's be, he thought, who arbitrarily, unnaturally, should try to hasten on that separation by a single day!

Dr Maurice went back to the other side of the house, and had his talk out quietly with Mrs Drummond; he told her what he had told Haldane, while Norah looked at him over her mother's chair, and listened to every word. To her he said that it was the lawyers' opinion that they might do good even though they proved nothing—they would stir up public opinion; they might open the way for further information. And with this, perhaps, it might be necessary to be content.

'There is one way in which something might be possible,' he said. 'All the people about the office have been found and called as witnesses, except one. That was the night-porter, who might be an important witness; but I hear he lives in the country, and has been lost sight of. He might know something; without that we have no proof whatever. I for my own part should as soon think the sun had come out of the skies, but Drummond, for some reason we know nothing of, might have taken those books——'

'Are you forsaking him too?' cried Helen in her haste.

'I am not in the least forsaking him,' said Dr Maurice; 'but how can we tell what had been said to him—what last resource he had been driven to? If we could find that porter there might be something done. He would know when they were taken away.'

Helen made no answer; she did not take the interest she might have done in the evidence. She said softly, as if repeating to herself—

'Burton and Golden, Burton and Golden!' Could it be? What communication could they have had?

how could they have been together? This thought confused her, and yet she believed in it as if it were gospel. She turned it over and over like a strange weapon of which she did not know the use.

'Yes, something may come out of that. We may discover some connection between them when everything is raked up in this way. Norah thinks so too. Norah feels that they are linked together somehow. Will you come with me to the station, Norah, and see me away?'

'We are both going,' said Helen. And they put on their bonnets and walked to the railway with him through the early twilight. The lights were shining out in the village windows as they passed, and in the shops, which made an illumination here and there. The train was coming from town—men coming from their work, ladies returning, who had been shopping in London, meeting their children, who went to carry home the parcels in pleasant groups. The road was full of a dozen little domestic scenes, such as are to be seen only in the neighbourhood of London. A certain envy was in the thoughts of all three as they passed on. Norah looked at the boys and girls with a little sigh, wondering how it would feel to have brothers and sisters, to be one of a merry happy family. And Helen looked at them with a different feeling, remembering the time when she, too, had gone to meet her own people who were coming home. As for Dr Maurice, of course it was his own fault. He had chosen to have nobody belonging to him, to shut himself off from the comfort of wife and child. Yet he was more impatient of all the cheerful groups than either of the others.

'Talk of the country being quiet! it is more noisy than town,' he said; he had just been quietly pushed off the pavement by a girl like Norah, who was running to meet her father. That should have been nothing to him, surely, but he felt injured. 'I wish you would come with me and keep my house for me, Norah,' he said, with a vain harping on his one string; and Norah laughed with gay freedom at the thought.

'Good night, Dr Maurice; come back soon,' she said, waving her hand to him, then turned away with her mother, and did not even look back. He was quite sure about this, as he settled himself in the corner of the carriage. So fond as he was of the child; so much as he would have liked to have done for her! And she never so much as looked back!

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## CHAPTER VI.

When Helen and Norah emerged again out of the lights of the little railway station to the darkness glimmering with a few lamps of the road outside, Mr Burton's phaeton was standing at the gate. The air was touched with the first frost, there was a soft haze over the distances, the lamps shone with a twinkling glow, and the breath of the horses was faintly visible in the sharpened air. Mr Burton was standing talking to some one on the pathway accompanied by his son Ned, who though he was but a year older than Norah was nearly as tall as his father. Helen's last interview with her cousin had been pleasant enough to tempt her to linger now for any greeting, and her heart was sore and wroth against him. She put her veil down over her face, and hurried past. But Mr Burton had seen her, and long before this he had repented of his rudeness of last night. Had it been successful, had he succeeded in bullying and frightening her, he would have been perfectly satisfied with himself; but he had not succeeded, and he was sorry for the cruelty which had been in vain. It was so much power wasted, and his wisest course now was to ignore and disown what he had done. He stopped short in his conversation, and made a step after her.

'Ah, Helen!' he cried, 'you out this cold evening! Wait a moment, I will take you with me. I am going to pass your door.'

'Thanks,' said Helen, 'I think we prefer to walk.' And she was going resolutely on; but she was not to be allowed so easily to make her escape.

'One moment. I have something to say to you. If you will not drive with me, I will walk with you,' said Mr Burton, in his most genial mood. 'Good evening, Tait, we can finish our talk to-morrow. Well, and where have you been, you two ladies?—seeing some one off by the train? Ned, see if you can't amuse your cousin Norah while I talk to her mother. Helen, when you and I were that age I think we found more to say.'

'I do not think we were great friends—at that age,' said Helen.

She had meant to say at any age; but the gravity of her thoughts made such light utterances of her anger impossible. When people are going to serious war with each other, they may denounce and vituperate, but they rarely gibe.

'No; I suppose it was at a later period we were friends,' Mr Burton said, with a laugh. 'How strangely circumstances alter! I am afraid I made myself rather disagreeable last night. When a man is bilious, he is not accountable for his actions; and I had been worried in town; but it was too bad to go and put it out on you; what I really wanted to ask last night was if the house was quite in order for the winter? But something brought on the other subject, and I lost my temper like an idiot. I hope you won't think any more of it. And it is really important to know if the house is in order—if you are prepared to run the risk of frost, and all that. I was speaking to Tait, the carpenter, this moment. I think I shall send him just to look over the house.'

Helen made no reply; this talk about nothing, this pretence of ease and familiarity, was an insult to her. And Norah clung close to her arm, enclosing it with both hands, calling her mother's attention to every new sentence with a closer pressure. They went on for a few minutes before Mr Burton could invent anything more to say, and Ned stalked at Norah's other side with all a boy's helplessness. He certainly was not in a condition to help his father out.

'Ned has been up to town with me to-day,' said Mr Burton, still more cheerfully. 'It will be a loss, but we must make up our minds to send him to school. It is a disadvantage to him being so tall; everybody thinks he is fifteen at least. It is handy for you that Norah is so small. You can make a baby of her for three or four years yet.'

Here Norah squeezed her mother's arm so tight that Helen winced with the pain, yet took a kind of forlorn amusement too from the fury of the child's indignation.

'Norah is no baby,' she said, 'happily for me; Norah is my best companion and comfort.'

'Ah, yes; she is in your confidence; that is charming,' said Mr Burton; 'quite like a story-book; whereas Ned, the great blockhead, cares for nothing but his dogs and nonsense. But he shall be packed off to Eton directly. The house is so full at present, my wife has been regretting we have seen nothing of you, Helen. I suppose it is too early to ask you to come to us under present circumstances? But after a while, I hope, when we are alone—And Norah must come before Ned goes away. There is to be a children's party. What did your mother settle about that, Ned?'

'Don't know,' growled Ned at Norah's other side.

'Don't know! Well you ought to know, since it's in your honour. Clara will send you word, Helen. Now, I suppose, I must be off, or I shall not have time to dress. Why, by Jove, there goes the bell already!' cried Mr Burton.

He looked round, and the bays, which had been impatiently following at a foot-pace, held in with difficulty by the groom, stopped at the sign he made, while the sonorous dinner-bell, which rang twice every evening through all seasons, sounded its first summons through the darkness. There was something very awe-inspiring in the sound of that bell. That, as much as anything, impressed the village and neighbourhood with a sense of the importance of the master of Dura. The old Harcourts had used it only on very great occasions; but the Burtons used it every evening. All the cooks in Dura village guided themselves by its sound. 'Lord, bless us! there's the bell a-going at the great house, and my chickens not put down to roast yet,' Mrs Witherspoon at the Rectory would say, giving herself such 'a turn' as she did not get over all the evening. Mr Burton, too, got 'a turn' when he heard it.

He cried, 'Good night, Helen! Ned, come along,' and jumped into his phaeton.

'I'll walk,' shouted Ned.

And then there was a jingle, a flash, a dart, and the two bays flew, as if something had stung them, along the frosty road.

'It will be a long walk for you up that dark avenue,' said Helen, when the boy, with his hands in his pockets, stood by them at the door of the Gatehouse, hesitating with the awkwardness natural to his kind.

'Oh, I don't mind,' said Ned.

'Will you come in—and have some tea?'

Never was an invitation more reluctantly given. When his mother heard of it, it flashed through her mind that Mrs Drummond had constructed the first parallel, and that already the siege of Ned, the heir of Dura, had begun; but Helen had no such idea. And Norah squeezed her arm with a force of indignation which once more, though she was not merry, made her mother smile.

'Mamma, how could you?' Norah cried, when the boy had come in, and had been left by the bright little fire in the drawing-room to watch the flickering of the lights while his entertainers took off their bonnets; 'how could you? It is I who will have to talk to him and amuse him. It was selfish of you, mamma!'

And Ned sat by the drawing-room fire alone, repenting himself that he had been seduced, in his big boots, with mud on his stockings, into this unknown place. It was not actually unknown to him; he had broken the old china cups and thumped upon the piano, and done his best to put his fingers through the old curtains more than once while the place was empty. But he did not understand the change that had passed upon it now. He sat by the fire confused; wondering how he had ever had the courage to come in; wondering if Mrs Drummond would think him dirty, and what Norah would say. He would not have to put himself into velvet and silk stockings and show himself in the drawing-room at home, that was a comfort. But what unknown mazes of conversation, what awful abysses of self-betrayal might there be before him here! Norah came in first, which at once frightened and relieved him. And the room was pretty—the old homely neutral-tinted room, with the lively gleam of firelight lighting it up, and all the darkness made rosy in the corners, which was so different from the drawing room at the great house, with its gilding and grandeur, its masses of flowers and floods of light. Ned's head felt very much confused by the difference; but the strangeness awed him in spite of himself.

'I am always frightened in this room,' said Norah, drawing the biggest chair into the circle of the



firelight, and putting herself into it like a little queen. She was so small that her one foot which hung down did not reach the floor; the other, I am sorry to say, so regardless was Norah of decorum, was tucked under her in the big chair.

'What a funny girl you are! Why?'

'Do you see that cupboard?' said Norah. 'I know there is an old woman who lives there, and spins and spins, and keeps looking at me, till I daren't breathe. Oh, I think sometimes if I look up it will turn me to stone, that eye of hers. If you weren't here I shouldn't dare to say it; I am most frightened for her in the day, when the light comes in at all the windows, and all the pictures and things say, 'What's that little girl doing here?' And then the mirror up on the wall—There's two people in it I know, now. You will say its you and me; but it isn't you and me. It's our ghosts, perhaps, sitting so still, and looking at each other and never saying a word.'

Ned felt a shiver run over him as he listened. He thought of the dark avenue which he had to go through all by himself, and wished he had driven with his father instead. And there where he was sitting he just caught that curious little round mirror, and there were two people in it—never moving, never speaking, just as Norah said.

'There is always a feeling as if somebody were by in this house,' Norah went on, 'somebody you can't see. Oh, it is quite true. You can't go anywhere, up or down, but they always keep looking and looking at you. I bear it as long as I can, and then I get up and run away. I should not mind so much if I could see them, or if they were like the ladies that walk about and rustle with long silk trains going over the floor, as they do in some old houses. But the ones here are so still; they just look at you for hours and hours together, till you get into such a dreadful fright, and feel you can't bear it any longer and rush away.'

Just then there was the sound of a little fall of ashes from the fire which made Ned start; and then he laughed hoarsely, frightened, but defiant.

'You are making it all up out of your own head to frighten a fellow,' he said.

'To frighten—a fellow!' said Norah, with gentle but ineffable contempt. 'What have I to do with—fellows? It frightens *me*.'

And she gave a little shudder in her big chair, and shook her head, waving her brown hair about her shoulders. Perhaps the colour in her hair would not have showed so much but for the black frock with its little white frill that came to the throat; and the firelight found out Norah's eyes, and kindled two lamps in them. She was all made up of blackness and brightness, a shadow child, not much of her apparent except the pale face and the two lights in her eyes—unless, indeed, it were that one leg, hanging down from under the black frock, with a white stocking on it, and a varnished, fire-reflecting shoe.

Never in Ned's life had he experienced anything like this before; the delicious thrill of visionary terror made the actual pleasantness of the warm corner he sat in all the pleasanter; he had thought himself past the age to have stories told to him; but nothing like Norah's visions had ever come in his way. No happiness, however, is perfect in this world. The dark avenue would come across him by moments with a thrill of terror. But the old woman could not sit and spin, that was certain, in the dark, windy, lonely avenue; there would be no mirror there to reflect his passing figure; and he would run; and if the dogs were about they would come to meet him; so the boy took courage and permitted himself to enjoy this moment, which was a novelty in his life. Then Mrs Drummond came in with her black dress like Norah's, and the long white streamers to her cap, which looked like wings, he thought. Her sorrowful look, her soft voice, that air about her of something subdued and stilled, which had not always been so, impressed the boy's imagination. Ned was an honest, single-hearted boy, and he looked with awe upon any suffering which he could understand. He explained afterwards that Helen looked as if she were very sorry about something. 'Awfully sorry—but not bothering,' he said, and the look of self-control impressed him, though he could not tell why. Altogether it was so different from home; so much more attractive to the imagination. There was no dimness, no shadows, at the great house. There nobody ever sat in the firelight, nor 'took things into their heads;' and here everything was so shadowy, so soft, so variable; the firelight gleaming suddenly out now and then, the air so full of mystery. Everything that is strange is attractive to the young fancy to begin with; and there was more than simple novelty here.

Helen brought the lamp in her hand and set it down on the table, which to some extent disturbed his picture; and then she came and sat down by the children, while Susan—old Susan, who was a landmark to Ned, keeping him to reality in the midst of all this wonderfulness—brought in and arranged the tea.

'Are you sure they will not be anxious?' said Helen. 'I am afraid your mother will be unhappy about you when she finds you don't come.'

'Oh, she'll never find out,' said Ned. 'Unhappy! I don't suppose mamma would be unhappy for that; but I'll get home before they come out from dinner. I sha'n't dress though, it would be absurd, at nine o'clock.'

'It will be a dark walk for you up the avenue,' said Helen kindly; and when she said this Ned shrank into his corner and shivered slightly. She added, 'You are not afraid?'

'Oh no—I should hope not!' said Ned.

'I should be afraid,' said Norah tranquilly; 'the wind in the trees always makes me feel strange. It sounds so moaning and dreary, as if it were complaining. We don't do it any harm that it should complain. It is like something that is in prison and wants to get out. Do you know any stories about forest spirits? I don't like them very much; they are always dwarfs, or trolls, or something grim—funny little men, hairy all over, that sit under the trees with their long arms, and dart out when you pass.'

Ned gave another suppressed shiver in his corner, and Helen came to his aid.

'Norah has read nothing but fairy tales all her life,' she said; 'but I dare say you know a great deal more than she does, and don't care for such foolish things. You are going to Eton? I was once there when all the boats were out, and there were fireworks at night. It was so pretty. I dare say when you are there you will get into the boats.'

'I shall try,' said Ned, lighting up. 'I mean to be very good at athletics if I can. It does not matter if I work very hard, for I am going into papa's business, where I sha'n't want it. I am not going to Eton to work, but to get among a good set, and to do what other people do.'

'Ah!' said Helen, with a smile. She took but a languid interest in Ned, and she was scarcely sorry that Mr. Burton's son showed no likelihood of distinguishing himself. She accepted it quite quietly, without any interest in the matter, which somehow troubled Ned, he could not have told why.

'At least, they say you're not obliged to work,' he said, a little abashed. 'I shall do as much as I can at that too.'

And then there was a momentary silence, broken only by the ring of the teacups as Susan put them down. Ned had a feeling that no very profound interest was shown in his prospect and intentions, but he was used to that. He sat quite quiet, feeling very shy, and sadly troubled to find that Susan had placed the lamp where it threw its strongest light upon himself. He drew his muddy boots and stockings as much as he could under his chair, and hoped Mrs Drummond would not notice them; how foolish he had been to come, making an exhibition of himself! and yet it was very pleasant, too.

'Now you must come to the table and have some tea,' said Helen, placing a chair for him with her own hand. Ned knew it was a gentleman's duty to do this for a lady, but he was so confused he did not feel capable of behaving like anything but a loutish boy; he turned everything he could think of as a pleasant subject of conversation over in his mind, with the idea of doing what he could to make himself agreeable; but nothing would come that he could produce. He sat and got through a great deal of bread and butter while he cudgelled his brains in this way. There was not much conversation. Helen was more silent than usual, having so much to think of; and Norah was amused by the unusual specimen of humanity before her, and distracted from the monologue with which she generally filled up all vacant places. At last Ned's efforts resolved themselves into speech.

'Oh, Mrs Drummond, please, should you like to have a dog?' he said.

'I knew he was a doggy sort of a boy,' Norah said to herself, throwing a certain serious pity into her contemplation of him. But yet the offer was very interesting, and suggested various excitements to come.

'What kind of a dog?' said Helen, with a smile.

'Oh, we have two or three different kinds. I was thinking, perhaps, a nice little Skye—like Shaggy, but smaller. Or if you would like a retriever, or one of old Dinah's pups.'

'Thanks,' said Helen. 'I don't know what we should do with it, Ned; but it is very kind of you.'

'Oh, no,' said the boy with a violent blush. 'It would be a companion for—*her*, you know. It is so nice to have a dog to play with. Why, Shaggy does everything but talk. He knows every word I say. You might have Shaggy himself, if you like, while I am away.'

'Oh, what a nice boy you are!' said Norah. 'I should like it, Ned. Mamma does not want anything to play with; but I do. Give it to me! I should take such care of him! And then when you came home for the holidays, I should promise to take him to the station to meet you. I love Shaggy—he is such fun. He can't see out of his eyes; and he does so frisk and jump, and make an object of himself. I never knew you were such a nice boy! Give him to me.'

And then the two fell into the most animated discussion, while Helen sat silent and looked on. She forgot that the boy was her enemy's son. He was her cousin's son; some drops of blood-kindred to her ran in his veins. He was an honest, simple boy. Mrs Drummond brightened upon him, according to her nature. She was not violently fond of children, but she could not shut her heart against an ingenuous, open face. She scarcely interfered with the conversation that followed, except to subdue the wild generosity with which Ned proposed to send everything he could think of to Norah. 'There are some books about dogs, that will tell you just what to do. I'll tell John to bring them down. And there's—Are you very fond of books? You must have read thousands and thousands, I am sure.'

'Not so many as that,' Norah said modestly. 'But I have got through—some.'

'I could lend you—I am sure I could lend you—Papa has got a great big library; I forget how many

volumes. They are about everything that books were ever written about. We never read them, except mamma, sometimes; but if you would like them——'

'You must not give her anything more,' said Helen; 'and even the dog must only come if your people are willing. You are too young to make presents.'

'I am not so very young,' cried Ned, who had found his voice. 'I am near fourteen. When Cyril Rivers was my age, he was captain of fourth form;—he told me himself. But then he is very clever—much cleverer than me. Norah! if I should only be able to send Shaggy's puppy, not Shaggy himself, shall you mind?'

'Are you sure you will not be afraid to walk up the avenue alone?' said Mrs Drummond, rising from the table. 'I fear it will be so very dark; and we have no one to send with you, Ned.'

'Oh, I don't want any one,' said the boy; and he stumbled up to his feet, and put out his hand to say good night, feeling himself dismissed. Norah went to the door with him to let him out. 'Oh, I wish I could go too,' said Norah; 'it is so lonely walking in the dark; but then I should have to get back. Oh, I do so wish you could stay. Don't you think you could stay? There are hundreds of rooms we don't use. Well, then, good night. I will tell you what I shall do. I shall stand at the door here and watch. If you should be frightened, you can shout, and I will shout back; and then you will always know that I am here. It is such a comfort when one is frightened to know there is some one there.'

'I shan't be frightened,' said Ned boldly. And he walked with the utmost valour and the steadiest step to the Hall gates, feeling Norah's eyes upon him. Then he stopped to shout—'Good night; all right!'

'Good night!' rang through the air in Norah's treble. And then, it must be allowed, when he heard the door of the Gatehouse shut, and saw by the darkness of the lodge windows that old John and his daughter had gone to bed, that Ned's heart failed him a little. A wild recollection crossed his mind of the dwarfs, with their long arms, under the trees; and of the old woman spinning, spinning, with eyes that fixed upon you for hours together; and then, with his heart beating, he made one plunge into the gloom, under the overarching trees.

This is how Ned and Norah, knowing nothing about it, made, as they each described the process afterwards, 'real friends.' The bond was cemented by the gift of Shaggy's puppy some days after, and it was made permanent and eternal by the fact that very soon afterwards Ned went away to school.

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## CHAPTER VII.

Meanwhile the great case of Rivers's bank came before the law courts and the public. It was important enough—for there was no war in those days—to be announced in big capitals on the placards of all the newspapers. *The Great Bank Case—Arrest of the Directors—Strange Disclosures in the City*—were the headings in the bills, repeated from day to day, and from week to week, as the case went on. It was of course doubly attractive from the fact that it was founded upon a tragedy, and that every writer in the papers who referred to it at all was at liberty to bring in a discussion of the motives and intentions of 'the unhappy man' who had introduced 'a watery grave' into the question. A watery grave may not be pleasant for the occupant of it, but it is a very fine thing for the press. The number of times it appeared in the public prints at this period defies reckoning. In some offices the words were kept permanently in type. The *Daily Semaphore* was never tired of discussing what the feelings of the wretched man must have been when he stole down to the river just as all the world was going to rest, and plunged himself and his shame, and the books of the company, under the turbid waters. The *Daily Semaphore* held this view of the matter very strongly, and people said that Mr Golden belonged to the same club as its editor, and that the two were intimate, which of course was a perfectly natural reason for its partisanship. Other journals, however, held different opinions. The weekly reviews, less addicted to fine writing, leaned to the side of the unfortunate painter. Their animadversions were chiefly upon the folly of a man interfering with business who knew nothing about it. When would it come to be understood, they said, that every profession required a training for itself, and that to dabble in the stocks without knowing how, was as bad, or at least as foolish, and more ruinous than to dabble in paint without knowing how. There was a great deal about the sutor, who should stick to his last, in these discussions of the subject; but, except in this particular, neither the *Sword* nor the *Looker-on* had a stone to throw at poor Drummond. Peace to his ashes, they said, he was a good painter. 'During his lifetime we thought it our duty to point out the imperfections which lessened the effect of his generally most conscientious and meritorious work. It is the vocation of a critic, and happy is he who can say he has never exceeded the legitimate bounds of criticism, never given utterance to a hasty word, or inflicted unnecessary pain. Certain we are, for our own part, that our aim has always been to temper judgment with charity; and now that a gap has been made in so melancholy a manner in the ranks of the Academy, we may venture to say that no man better deserved his elevation to the first rank of his profession than Robert Drummond; no man we have ever known worked harder, or threw himself more entirely into his work. His feeling for art was always perfect. Now and then he might fail to express with sufficient force the idea he intended to illustrate; but for harmony of conception, true sense of beauty, and

tender appreciation of English sentiment and atmosphere, he has been surpassed by no painter of our modern school. We understand that an exhibition of his collected works is in contemplation, a plan which has been lately adopted with great success in so many cases. We do not doubt that a great many of our readers will avail themselves at once of the opportunity of forming a comprehensive judgment of the productions of a most meritorious artist, as well as of paying their tribute of sympathy to the, we firmly believe undeserved, misfortunes of an honest and honourable man.'

It was thus the *Looker-on* expressed its sentiments. The *Sword* did not attempt to take up the same tone of melancholy superiority and noble-mindedness—qualities not in its way; but it made its stand after its own fashion against the ruthless judgments of the public. 'No one can respect the British public more than we do,' said that organ of the higher intellect; 'its instincts are so unerring, and its good taste so unimpeachable, that, as a matter of course, we all bow to a decision more infallible than that of the Holiest Father that ever sat in Papal See. But after we have rendered this enlightened homage, and torn our victim to pieces, an occasional compunction will make itself audible within the most experienced bosom. After all, there is such a thing as probability to be taken into account. Truth, as we all know, is stranger than fiction; but yet the cases are so few in which fact outrages every likelihood that we are justified in looking very closely into the matter before we give an authoritative assent. So far as our personal knowledge goes, we should say that a painter is as much afraid of the money market as a woman is (or rather used to be) of a revolver, and that the dramatic completeness of the finale which the lively commercial imagination has accepted as that of poor Drummond, quite surpasses the homelier and milder invention of the daughters of art. A dramatic author, imbued with the true modern spirit of his art, might indeed find an irresistible attraction in the "situation" of the drowning director, tossing the books of a joint-stock company before him into the abyss, and sardonically going down into Hades with the proofs of his guilt. But though the situation is fine, we doubt if even the dramatist would personally avail himself of it, for dramatists have a way of being tame and respectable like their neighbours. In our days your only emulator of the piratical and highway heroes of the past is the commercial man *pur sang*, who has not an idea in his head unconnected with business. It is he who convulses society with those witticisms and clevernesses of swindling which charm everybody; and it is he who gives us now and then the example of such a tragical conclusion as used to belong only to poetry. It is no longer the Bohemian, it is the Philistine, smug, clean, decorous, sometimes pious, who is the criminal of the nineteenth century.'

This article made a great sensation in many circles. There were people who thought it was almost a personal libel, and that Golden would be justified in 'taking steps' against the paper, for who could that smug, clean, decorous Philistine be but he? But the manager was better advised. He was the hero of the day to all readers and writers. He was kept under examination for a whole week, badgered by counsel, snubbed by the judge, stared at by an audience which was not generally favourable; but yet he held his own. He was courageous, if nothing else. All that could be done to him in the way of cross-examination never made him falter in his story. Other pieces of information damaging to his character were produced by the researches of the attorneys. It was found that the fate of all the speculations in which he had been involved was suspiciously similar, and that notwithstanding those business talents which everybody allowed to be of the highest order, ruin and bankruptcy had followed at his heels wherever he went. The counsel for the prosecution paid him unbounded compliments on his ability, mingled with sarcastic condolence on this strange and unfailing current of misfortune. He led the witness into a survey of his past life with deadly accuracy and distinctness, damning him before all the world, as history only can damn. 'It is unfortunate that this should have happened to you again after your previous disappointments,' he said. 'Yes, it was unfortunate,' said the unhappy man. But he held such head against the torrent of facts thus brought up, that the sympathy of many people ran strongly in his favour for the moment. 'Hang it all! which of us could stand this turn-up of everything that ever happened to him?' some said. Golden confronted it all with the audacity of a man who knew everything that could be said against him; and he held steadily by his story. He admitted that Drummond had done nothing in the business, and indeed knew next to nothing about it until that day in autumn, when, in the absence of all other officials, he had himself had recourse to him. 'But the more inexperienced a man may be, the more impetuous he is—in business; when once he begins,' said the manager. And that there was truth in this, nobody could deny. But gradually as the trial went on, certain mists cleared off and other mists descended. The story about poor Drummond and the books waned from the popular mind; it was dropped out of the leading articles in the *Semaphore*. If they had not gone into the river with the painter, where were they? Who had removed them? Were they destroyed, or only hidden somewhere, to be found by the miraculous energy of the police? This question began to be the question which everybody discussed after a while; for by this time, though proof was as far off as ever, and nobody knew who was the guilty party, there had already fallen a certain silence, a something like respect, over that 'watery grave.'

And something more followed, which Helen Drummond scarcely understood, and which was never conveyed in words to the readers of the newspapers—a subtle, unexpressed sentiment, which had no evidence to back it but only that strange thrill of certainty which moves men's minds in spite of themselves. 'I would just like to know what state Rivers's was in before it became a joint-stock company,' was the most distinct expression of opinion any one was guilty of in public; and the persons to whom this speech was addressed would shake their heads in reply. The consequence was one which nobody could have distinctly accounted for, and which no one ventured to speak of plainly. A something, a breath, a mist, an intangible shadow, gathered over

the names of the former partners who had managed the whole business, and transferred it to the new company. These were Mr Burton and another, who has nothing to do with this history. In what condition had they handed it over? What induced them to dispose of such a flourishing business? And why was it that both had got so easily out of it with less loss than many a private shareholder? These were very curious questions, and took an immense hold on the public mind, though they were not discussed in the newspapers; for there are many things which move the public mind deeply, which it would not answer to put in the newspapers. As for Lord Rivers, he was a heavy loser, and nobody suspected for a moment that he knew anything about it. The City men were sorry for him as a victim; but round the names of Mr Burton and his colleague there grew that indefinable shadow. Not a word could be said openly against them; but everybody thought the more. They were flourishing, men in great business—keeping up great houses, wearing all the appearance of prosperity. No righteous critic turned his back upon them. At Kirk and at market they were as much applauded, as warmly received, to all outward appearance, as ever. But a cold breath of distrust had come round them, like an atmosphere. The first prick of the canker had come to this flower.

This was the unrecorded, undisclosed result of the inquiry, with which Helen Drummond, and the Haldanes, and all uninstructed, were so deeply dissatisfied. It had ended in nothing, they said. The managers and directors were acquitted, there being no proof against them. No authoritative contradiction had been or could be given to the theory of Robert Drummond's guilt. The *Semaphore* was still free to produce that 'watery grave' any time it was in want of a phrase to round a paragraph. Their hearts had been wrung with the details of the terrible story all over again, and—nothing had come of it. 'I told you it would be so,' Mr Burton said, who knew so much better. 'It would have been much more sensible had you persuaded Maurice to leave it alone.' But Maurice had a different tale to tell when he came to make his report to his anxious clients. He bewildered them with the air of triumph he put on. 'But nothing is proved,' said Helen sadly. 'No, nothing is proved,' he said; 'but everything is imputed.' She shook her head, and went to her room, and knelt down before the Dives, and offered up to it, meaning no harm, what a devout Catholic would call an *acte de reparation*—an offering of mournful love and indignation—and, giving that, would not be comforted. 'They cannot understand you, but I understand you, Robert,' she said, in that agony of compunction and tenderness with which a true woman tries to make up to the dead for the neglect and coldness of the living. This was how Helen, in her ignorance, looked upon it. But Stephen Haldane understood better when he heard the tale. Golden, at least, would never hold up his head again—or, at least, if ever, not for long years, till the story had died out of men's minds. And the reputation of the others had gone down as by a breath. No one could tell what it was; but it existed—the first shadow, the beginning of suspicion. 'I am satisfied,' Dr Maurice said, with a stern smile of triumph. The man had thrown himself entirely into the conflict, and took pleasure in that sweet savour of revenge.

'But Mrs Drummond?' said Stephen, whose mind was moved by softer thoughts.

'That woman cannot understand,' said Dr Maurice. 'Oh, I don't mean any slight to your goddess, your heroine. I may say she is not my heroine, I suppose? She can't understand. Why, Drummond is clear with everybody whose opinion is worth having. We have proved nothing, of course. I knew we could prove nothing. But he is as clear as you or I—with all people who are worth caring for. She expected me to bring her a diploma, I suppose, under the Queen's hand and seal.'

'I did not expect that,' said Haldane; 'but I did look for something more definite, I allow.'

'More definite! It is a little hard to deal with people so exigent,' said Dr Maurice, discomfited in the midst of his enthusiasm. 'Did you see that article in the *Looker-on*? The Drummond exhibition is just about to open; and that, I am confident, will be an answer in full. I believe the public will take that opportunity of proving what they think.'

And so far Maurice turned out to be right. The public did show its enthusiasm—for two days. The first was a private view, and everybody went. The rooms were crowded, and there were notices in all the papers. The next day there was also a very fair attendance; and then the demonstration on the part of the public stopped. Poor Drummond was dead. He had been a good but not a great painter. His story had occupied quite as much attention as the world had to give him—perhaps more. He and his concerns—his bankruptcy, his suicide, and his pictures—had become a bore. Society wanted to hear no more of him. The exhibition continued open for several weeks, not producing nearly enough to pay its expenses, and then it was closed; and Drummond's story came to an end, and was heard of no more.

This is the one thing which excited people, wound up to a high pitch by personal misfortune or suffering, so seldom understand. They are prepared to encounter scurrility, opposition, even the hatred or the enmity of others; but they are not prepared for the certain fact that one time or other, most likely very soon, the world will get tired of them; it is their worst danger. This was what happened now to the Drummonds; but fortunately at Dura, in the depths of the silent country, it was but imperfectly that Helen knew. She was not aware how generally public opinion acquitted her husband, which was hard; and she did not know that the world was tired of him, which was well for her. He was done with, and put aside like a tale that is told; but she still went on planning in her own mind a wider vindication for him, an acquittal which this time it should be impossible to gainsay.

And quietness fell upon them, and the months began to flow on, and then the years, with no incident to disturb the calm. When all the excitement of the trial was over, and everything done that could be done, then the calm reign of routine began. There were times, no doubt, in which

Helen chafed and fretted at it; but yet routine is a great support and comfort to the worn and weary. It supplies a kind of dull motive to keep life going when no greater motives exist. The day commenced always with Norah's lessons. Helen was not an intellectual woman, nor did she feel herself consciously the better for such education as she had herself received; but such as she had received she transmitted conscientiously to Norah. She heard her read every morning a little English and a little French. She made her write a succession of copies, and do exercises in the latter language, and she gave her an hour's music. I fear none of this was done with very much spirit; but yet it was done conscientiously every morning of their lives except Sunday, when they went to church. She did it because it was right, because it was necessary, and her duty; but not with any strong sense of the elevated character of her employment, or expectation of any vast results from it. It had not produced very great results in herself. Her mind had worked busily enough all her life, but she did not believe that her music, or her French, or anything else she had learnt, had done her much good. Therefore she proceeded very calmly, almost coldly, with the same process, with Norah. It was necessary—it had to be done just as vaccination had to be done when the child was a baby; that was about all.

Then after the lessons they had their homely dinner, which Susan did not always cook to perfection; and then they took their walk; and in the evening there were lessons to be learned and needlework to do. When the child went to bed, her mother read—not anything to improve her mind. She was not bent upon improvement, unfortunately; indeed, it did not occur to her. She read, for the most part, novels from the circulating library. The reader, perhaps, is doing the same thing at this moment, and yet, most likely, he will condemn, or even despise, poor Helen. She had one or two books besides, books of poetry, though she was not poetically disposed in any way. She had 'In Memoriam' by her, which she did not read (does any one who has ever lived in the valley of the shadow of death read 'In Memoriam?'), but pored over night and day, thinking in it, scarcely knowing that her own mind had not spoken first in these words. And then there was Mr Browning's poem of 'Andrea,' the painter who had a wife. Helen would sit over her fire and watch it dying out at her feet, and ponder on Andrea's fate—wondering whether, perhaps, a woman might do badly for her husband, and yet be a spotless woman, no Lucrezia; whether she might sap the strength out of him with gentle words, and even while she loved him do him harm? Out of such a question as this she was glad to escape to her novel, the first that might come to hand.

And so many people in Helen's state of mind read novels—people who fly into the world of fiction as a frightened child flies into a lighted room, to escape the ghosts that are in the dark passages and echoing chambers—that it is strange so little provision is made for them, and that the love-story keeps uppermost in spite of all. Yet perhaps the love-story is the safest. The world-worn sufferer is often glad to forget all that reminds him of his own trouble, and even when he is not touched by the fond afflictions of the young people, finds a little pleasure in smiling at them in the exuberance of their misery. They think it is so terrible, poor babies, to be 'crossed in love.' The fact that they cannot have their own way is so astounding to them, something to rouse earth and heaven. Helen ran over a hundred tales of this description with a grave face, thankful to be interested in the small miseries which were to her own as the water spilt from a pitcher is to the sea. To be sure, there were a great many elevating and improving books which Helen might have had if she pleased, but nobody had ever suggested to her that it was necessary she should improve her mind.

And thus the time went on, and Mrs Drummond dropped, as it were, into the background, into the shade and quietness of life. She was still young, and this decadence was premature. She felt it creeping upon her, but she took no pains to stop the process. So long as Norah was safe there was nothing beside for which she was called upon to exert herself; and thus with all her powers subdued, and the stream of life kept low, she lived on, voluntarily suppressing herself, as so many women do. And in the mean time new combinations were preparing, new personages coming upon the scene. While the older people stood aside, the younger ones put on their singing garments, and came forward with their flowery wreaths, with the sunshine upon their heads, to perform their romance, like the others before them. And so it happened that life had stolen imperceptibly away, so noiseless and soft that no one knew of its going, until all at once there came a day when its progress could be no longer ignored. This was the day when Norah Drummond, eighteen years old, all decked and dressed by her mother's hands, spotless and radiant as the rose in her hair, with her heart full of hopes, and her eyes full of light, and no cloud upon her from all the tragic mists through which her youth had passed, went up the long avenue at Dura to the House which was brilliant with lamps and gay with music, to make her first appearance, as she thought, in the world. Norah's heart was beating, her gay spirit dancing already before she reached the door.

'Oh, I wonder, mamma, I wonder,' she said, 'what will happen? will anything happen to-night?' What could happen to her by her mother's side, among her old friends? She did not know; she went to meet it gaily. But Norah found it impossible to believe that this first triumphant evening, this moment of glory and delight, could pass away like the other evenings; that there should not be something in it, something unknown, sweet, and yet terrible, which should affect all her life.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

A girl's first ball! What words more full of ecstasy could be breathed in this dull world! A vague, overwhelming vision of delight before she goes into it—all brightness, and poetry, and music, and flowers, and kind, admiring faces; everything converging towards herself as a centre, not with any selfish sense of exclusive enjoyment, but sweetly, spontaneously, as to the natural queen. A hundred unexpected, inexpressible emotions go to make up this image of paradise. There is the first glow and triumph of power which is at once a surprise to her and a joy. The feeling that she has come to the kingdom, that she herself has become the fair woman whose sway she has read of all her life; the consciousness, at last, that it is real, that womanhood is supreme in her person, and that the world bows down before her in her whiteness and brightness, in her shamefacedness and innocent confidence, in her empire of youth. She is the Una whose look can tame the lion; she is the princess before whose glance the whole world yields; and yet at the same time, being its queen, is she not the world's sweet handmaid, to scatter flowers in its path, and dance and sing to make it glad? All these thoughts are in the girl's mind, especially if she be a fanciful girl—though, perhaps, she does not find words to express any of them; and this it is which throws such a charm to her upon the pleasure-making, which to us looks sometimes so stale and so poor.

And it is only after a long interval—unless her case be an exceptionally hard one—that she gets disenchanted. When she goes into the fairy palace, she finds it all that she thought; all, with the lively delight of personal enjoyment added, and that flattery of admiring looks, of unspoken homage, not to the ideal princess, or representative woman, but to *her*, which is so sweet and so new. Thus Norah Drummond entered the ball-room at Dura House, floating in, as it were, upon the rays of light that surrounded her—the new woman, the latest successor of Eve in the garden, unexacting queen of the fresh world she had entered into, fearing no rivals—nay, reigning in the persons of her rivals as well as in her own. And when she had thus made her entrance in an abstract triumph, waking suddenly to individual consciousness, remembering that she was still Norah, and that people were looking at her, wondering at her, admiring her—her, and not another—she laughed as a child laughs for nothing, for delight, as she stood by her mother's side. It was too beautiful and wonderful to be shy of it.

'Pinch me, mamma, and it will all pass away like the other dreams,' she whispered, holding fast by her mother's arm. But the curious thing, the amazing thing, was, that it continued, and warmed her and dazzled her, and lighted her up, and did not pass away.

'Norah, come! you are to dance this dance with me,' cried Ned, rushing up. He had seen them come in, though he was at the other end of the room; he had watched for them since the first note of the music struck; he had neglected the duty to which he had been specially appropriated, the duty of looking after and amusing and taking care of the two fair daughters of the Marchioness, who was as good as Lady Patroness of Mrs Burton's ball. To keep up the proper contrast, I am aware that Lady Edith and Lady Florizel should have been young women of a certain age, uninviting, and highly aristocratic, while Norah Drummond had all the beauty and sweetness, as well as poverty and lowliness, to recommend her; but this, I am sorry to confess, was not the case. The Ladies Merewether were very pretty girls, as pretty as Norah; they were not 'stuck-up,' but as pleasant and as sweet as English girls need be—indeed, except that they were not Norah, I know no fault they had in Ned's eyes. But they were not Norah, and he forsook his post. Nobody noticed the fact much except Mrs Burton. As for Lady Florizel, she had the most unfeigned good-humoured contempt for Ned. He was a mere boy, she said; she had no objection to dance with him, or chatter to him; but she had in her reach two hundred as good, or better than him, and she preferred men to boys, she did not hesitate to say. So that when Ned appeared by Norah's side, Lady Florizel, taking her place with her partner, smiled upon him as he passed, and asked audibly, 'Oh, who was that pretty girl with Mr Burton? oh, how pretty she was! Couldn't anybody tell her?' Lady Florizel was not offended. But Mrs Burton saw, and was wroth.

Many changes had happened in those six years. At the time of the trial and after it there had been many doubts and speculations in Helen's mind as to what she should do. Suspecting her cousin as she did, and with Robert's judgment against him, as recorded in that last mournful letter, how was she to go on accepting a shelter from her cousin, living at his very gates in a sort of dependence upon him? But she had nowhere else to go, for one thing, and the shade of additional doubt which had been thrown upon Burton by the trial, was not of a kind to impress her mind; nothing had been brought forward against him, no one had said openly that he was to blame, and Helen was discouraged when it all ended in nothing as she thought, and had not energy enough to uproot herself from the peaceful corner she had taken refuge in. Where could she go? Then she had the Haldanes to keep her to this spot, which now seemed the only spot in the world where pity and friendship were to be found. Stephen, whom she contemplated with a certain reverence in his great suffering and patience, was the better for her presence and that of Norah, and their kind eyes and the voices that bade her welcome whenever she crossed their threshold was a comfort to her. She kept herself apart from the Burtons for a long time, having next to no intercourse with them, and so she would have done still had the matter been in her hands. But the matter was no longer in her hands. The children had grown up, all of them together. They had grown into those habits which fathers and mothers cannot cross, which insensibly affect even their own feelings and relations. Clara Burton and Norah Drummond were cousins still, though so great a gulf of feeling lay between their two houses. Both of them had been, as it were, brought up with the Daltons at the Rectory. They were all children together, all boys and girls together. Insensibly the links multiplied, the connection grew stronger. When Ned Burton was at Dura there was never a day in his life that he did not spend, or attempt to spend, part of it in the Gatehouse. And Clara ran in and out—she and Mary Dalton; they were all about

the same age; at this moment they ranged from twenty to seventeen, a group of companions more intimate than anything but youth and this long and close association could have made them. They were like brothers and sisters, Mrs Dalton said anxiously, veiling from herself the fact that some of them perhaps had begun to feel and think as brothers and sisters do not feel. Charlie Dalton, for instance, who was the eldest of all—one-and-twenty—instead of falling in love with Norah, who was as poor as himself—a thing which would have been simple madness, of course, but not so bad as what had happened—had seen fit to go and bestow his heart upon Clara Burton, whose father dreamed of nothing less than a duke for her, and who had not as much heart as would lie on a sixpence, the rector's wife said indignantly; and Heaven knows how many other complications were foreshadowing through those family intimacies, and the brother and sister condition which had been so delightful while it lasted. Mrs Drummond and Mrs Dalton went together on this particular evening watching from a distance over their respective children. Helen's face was calm, for Norah was in no trouble; but the rector's wife had a pucker on her brow. She could see her Charlie watching so wistfully the movements of Clara Burton through the crowd, hanging about her, stealing to her side whenever he could, following her everywhere with his eyes. Charlie was especially dear to his mother, as the eldest boy of a large family, when he is a good boy, so often is. She had been able to talk to him many a day about her domestic troubles when she could not speak to his father. She had felt herself strengthened by his sympathy and support, that backing up which is so good for everybody, and it broke her heart to see her boy breaking his for *that* girl. What could he see in her? the mother thought. If it had been Norah Drummond! and then she tried to talk to her friend at her side. They had come to be very fast friends; they had leant upon each other by turns, corners, as it were, of the burdens which each had to bear, and Mrs Dalton knew Mrs Drummond could guess what the sigh meant which she could not restrain.

'How nice Norah is looking,' she said, 'and how happy! I think she has changed so much since she was a child. She used to have such a dreamy look; but now there is no *arrière pensée*, she goes into everything with all her heart.'

'Yes,' said Helen; but she did not go on talking of Norah, she understood the give and take of sympathy. 'I like Mary's dress so much. She and Katie look so fresh, and simple, and sweet. But they are not such novices as Norah; you know it is her first ball.'

'Poor children, how excited it makes them! but dressing them is a dreadful business,' said Mrs Dalton, with her anxious look still following her Charlie among all the changing groups. 'I need not disguise it from you, dear, who know all about us. It was sometimes hard enough before, and now what with evening dresses! And when they come to a dance like this they want something pretty and fresh. You will feel it by-and-by even with Norah. I am sure if it were not for the cheap shops, where you can buy tarlatan for so little, and making them up ourselves at home, I never could do it. And you know, whatever sacrifices one makes, one cannot refuse a little pleasure to one's children. Poor things, it is all they are likely to have.'

'At least they are getting the good of it,' said Helen. Norah's dress was the first task of this kind that had been put upon her, and she had been forced to make her sacrifices to dress the child who had grown a woman; but Helen, too, knew that she could not buy many ball dresses off her hundred a year. And it was so strange to think such thoughts in this lavish extravagant house, where every magnificence that could be thought of adorned mother and daughter, and the room and the walls. Mrs Dalton answered to the thought before it had been expressed.

'It *is* curious,' she said, 'there is Clara Burton, who might dress in cloth of gold if she liked—but our girls look just as well. What a thing it is to be rich!—for the Burtons you know are—' Here Mrs Dalton stopped abruptly, remembering that if the Burtons were nobodies, so was also the friend at her side. She herself was connected with the old Harcourts, and had a right to speak.

'Now, ladies, I know what you are doing,' said Mr Burton, suddenly coming up to them; 'you are saying all sorts of sweet things to each other about your children, and privately you are thinking that there is nobody in the room fit to be seen except your own. Oh don't look so caught! I know, because I am doing the same thing myself.'

Doing the same thing himself—comparing his child to my Norah—to my Mary, the ladies inwardly replied; but no such answer was made aloud. 'We were saying how they all enjoy themselves,' said Mrs Dalton, 'that was all.'

Mr Burton laughed that little laugh of mockery which men of vulgar minds indulge in when they talk to women, and which is as much as to say, you can't take me in with your pretences, *I* see through you. He had grown stouter, but he did not look so vigorous as of old. He was fleshy, there was a furtive look in his eye. When he glanced round him at the brilliant party, and all the splendour of which he was the owner, it was not with the complacency of old. He looked as if at any moment something disagreeable, something to be avoided, might appear before him, and had acquired a way of stretching out his neck as if to see who was coming behind. The thing in the room about which he was most complacent was Clara. She had grown up, straight, and large, and tall in stature, like our Anglo-Saxon queen with masses of white rosy flesh and gold-coloured hair. The solid splendid white arm, laden with bracelets, which leaned on her partner's shoulder, was a beauty not possessed by any of the slight girls whose mothers were watching her as she moved past them. Clara's arm would have made two of Norah's. Her size and fulness and colour dazzled everybody. She was a full-blown Rubens beauty, of the class which has superseded the gattler, pensive, unobtrusive heroine in these days. 'I don't pretend to say anything but what I think,' said Mr Burton, 'and I do feel that *that* is a girl to be proud of. Don't dance too much, Clary, you have



got to ride with me to-morrow.' She gave him a smile and a nod as she whirled past. The man who was dancing with her was dark, a perfect contrast to her brilliant beauty. 'They make a capital couple,' Mr Burton said with a suppressed laugh. 'I suppose a prophet, if we had one, would see a good many combinations coming on in an evening like this. Why, by Jove, here's Ned.'

And it was Ned, bringing Norah back to her mother. 'I thought you had been dancing with one of——' said his father, pointing with his thumb across his shoulder. 'Have you no manners, boy? Norah, I am sure, will excuse you when she knows you are engaged—people that are stopping in the house.'

'Oh, of course I will excuse him,' said Norah. 'I did not want him at all. I would rather sit quiet a little and see everybody. And Charlie has promised to dance with me. I suppose it was not wrong to ask Charlie, was it? He might as well have me as any one, don't you think, mamma?'

'If you take to inviting gentlemen, Norah, I shall expect you to ask me,' said Mr Burton, who was always jocular to girls. Norah looked at him with her bright observant eyes. She always looked at him, he thought, in that way. He was half afraid of her, though she was so young. He had even tried to conciliate her, but he had not succeeded. She shook her head without making any reply, and just then something happened which made a change in all the circumstances. It was the approach of the man with whom Clara had been dancing; a man with the air of a hero of romance; bearded, with very fine dark eyes and hair that curled high like a crest upon his head. Norah gave a little start as he approached, and blushed. 'It is the hero,' she said to herself. He looked as if he had just walked out of a novel with every sign of his character legibly set forth. But though it may be very well to gibe at beautiful dark eyes and handsome features, it is difficult to remain unmoved by their influence. Norah owned with that sudden flush of colour a certain curiosity, to say the least of it. Mr Burton frowned, and so did his son and daughter simultaneously, as if by touching of a spring.

'I am afraid you don't remember me, Mrs Drummond,' the stranger said; 'but I recollect you so very well that I hope you will let me introduce myself—Cyril Rivers. It is a long time since we met.'

'Oh, I remember!' cried impulsive Norah, and then was silent, blushing more deeply than ever. To ask Charlie Dalton to dance with her was one thing, but meeting the hero was entirely different. It took away her breath.

And two minutes after she was dancing with him. It was this he had come to her mother for—not asking any one to introduce him. He was no longer a boy, but a man travelled and experienced, who knew, or thought he knew, society and the world. But he had not yet dismissed from his mind that past episode—an episode which had been fixed and deepened in his memory by the trial and all the discussions in the newspapers. To say that he had continued to think about the Drummonds would have been foolish; but when he came back to Dura to visit the Burtons, they were the first people who recurred to his mind. As his host drove him past the Gatehouse on the night of his arrival, he had asked about them. And Mr Burton remembered this now, and did not like it. He stood and looked after the pair as they went away arm-in-arm. Norah did not answer as Clara did as a complete foil and counter to Mr Rivers's dark handsomeness. It was a mistake altogether. It was Clara who should have been with him, who was his natural companion. Mr Burton reflected that nothing but kindness could have induced him to invite his cousin's penniless girl to the great ball at which Clara made her *début* in the world as well as Norah. He felt as he stood and looked on that it was a mistake to have done it. People so poor and so lowly ought not to be encouraged to set themselves up as equals of the richer classes. He said to himself that his system had been wrong. Different classes had different duties, he felt sure. His own was to get as much of the good things of this world, as much luxury and honour, as he could have for his money. Helen's was to subsist on a hundred a year; and to expect of her that she could anyhow manage to buy ball dresses, and put her child in competition with his! It was wrong; there was no other word. Mr Burton left his neighbours, and went off with a dissatisfied countenance to another part of the room. It was his own fault.

'I should have known you anywhere,' said Mr Rivers in the pause of the waltzing. 'You were only a child when I saw you last, but I should have known you anywhere.'

'Should you? How very strange! What a good memory you must have!' said Norah. 'Though, indeed, as soon as you said who you were, I remembered you.'

'But nobody told me who you were,' he said, 'when I saw you just now, dancing with that young fellow, the son of the house.'

'Did you see us then?'

'Yes, and your mother sitting by that stand of flowers. You are half yourself as I remember you, and half her.'

'What a good memory you must have!' said Norah, very incredulous; and then they floated away again to the soft dreamy music, he supporting her, guiding her through the moving crowd as Norah had never dreamt of being guided. She had felt she was on her own responsibility when dancing with Ned and Charlie; with, indeed, a little share of responsibility on account of her partners too. But Mr Rivers danced beautifully, and Norah felt like a cloud, like a leaf lightly carried by the breeze. She was carried along without any trouble to herself. When they had

stopped, instead of feeling out of breath, she stopped only from courtesy's sake, to let the others go on.

'How well you dance, Mr Rivers!' she cried. 'I never liked a waltz so much before. The boys are so different. One never feels sure where one is going. I like it now.'

'Then you must let me have as many waltzes as you can,' he said, 'and I shall like it, too. Who are the boys? You have not any—brothers? Boys are not to be trusted for waltzing; they are too energetic—too much determined to have everything their own way.'

'Oh, the boys! they are chiefly Ned and—Charlie Dalton. They are the ones I always dance with,' said Norah. 'And oh, by-the-bye, I was engaged to Charlie for this dance.'

'How clever of me to carry you off before Mr Charlie came!' said the hero. 'But it is his own fault if he was not up in time.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Norah, with a blush. 'The fact is—he did not ask me; I asked him. I never was at a ball before, and I don't know many people, and of course I wanted to dance. I asked him to take me if he was not engaged, so if he found any one he liked better, he was not to be blamed if he forgot. Why do you laugh? Was it a silly thing to do?'

'I don't know Charlie,' said Mr Rivers; 'but I should punch his head with pleasure. What has he done that he should have you asking him to dance?'

And then that came again which was not dancing, as Norah understood it, an occasion which had always called for considerable exertion, but a very dream of delightful movement, like flying, like—she could not tell what. By this time she was a little ashamed about Charlie; and the waltz put it out of Mr Rivers's mind.

'Do you think I may call to-morrow?' he said, when they stopped again. 'Will your mother let me? There are so many things I should like to talk over with her. You are too young, of course, to remember anything about a certain horrid bank.'

'Ah, no, I am not too young,' said Norah, and the smiles with which she had been looking up at him suddenly vanished from her face.

'I beg your pardon. I had forgotten that it was of more importance to you than to any one. I want to talk to your mother about that. Do you think I may come? Look here; is this Charlie? He is just the sort of youth whom a young lady might ask to dance with her. And good heavens, how he waltzes! I don't wonder that you felt it a painful exercise. Are Miss Burton and her guests friends?'

'We are all great friends,' said Norah, half-displeased. And Clara Burton as she passed gave her an angry look. 'Why Clara is cross,' she said pathetically. 'What can I have done?'

Mr Rivers laughed. Norah did not like the laugh; it seemed a little like Mr Burton's. There was a certain conscious superiority and sense of having found some one out in it, which she did not either like or understand.

'You seem to know something I don't know,' she said, with prompt indignation. 'Perhaps why Clara is cross; but you don't know Clara. You don't know any of us, Mr Rivers, and you oughtn't to look as if you had found us out. How could you find out all about us, who have known each other from babies, in one night?'

'I beg your pardon,' he said, with an immediate change of tone. 'It is one of the bad habits of society that nobody can depend on another, and everybody likes to grin at his neighbours. Forgive me; I forgot I was in a purer air.'

'Oh, it was not that,' said Norah, a little confused. He seemed to say things (she thought) which meant nothing, as if there was a great deal in them. She was glad to be taken back to her mother, and deposited under her shelter; but she was not permitted to rest there. Ned came and glowered at her reproachfully, as she sat down, and other candidates for her hand arrived so fast that the child was half intoxicated with pleasure and flattery. 'What do they want *me* for?' she wondered within herself. She was so much in request that Ned did not get another dance till the very end of the evening; and even Mr Rivers was balked in at least one of the waltzes he had engaged her for. He drew back with a smile, seeing it was Mr Burton himself who was exerting himself to find partners for Norah. But Norah was all smiles; she danced the whole evening, coming little by little into her partner's way. Pleased to be so popular, delighted with everybody's 'kindness' to her, and dazzled with this first opening glimpse of 'the world.'

'If this is the world, I like it,' she said to her mother as they drove home. 'It is delightful; it is beautiful; it is so kind! Oh, mamma, is it wrong to feel so? I never was so happy in my life.'

'No, my darling, it is not wrong,' Helen said, kissing her. She was not insensible to her child's triumph.

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## CHAPTER IX.

'It is vanity, my dear, vanity. You must not set your mind upon it,' said Mrs Haldane.

'Oh, but it was delightful,' said Norah, 'it was wonderful! if you had been there yourself you would have liked it as much as I did. Everybody looked so nice, and everybody *was* so nice, Mrs Haldane. A thing that makes every one kind and pleasant and smiling must be good, don't you think so? We were all as amiable, as charming, as fascinating as ever we could be.'

'And whom did you dance with?' said Miss Jane.

'I danced with everybody. It is quite true. You cannot think how kind the people were. When we went in first,' said Norah, with a laugh and a blush, 'I saw so many strange faces, I was afraid I should have no dancing at all; so I whispered to Charlie Dalton, 'Do take me out for the next dance, Charlie!' and he nodded to say yes. I suppose it was dreadfully wrong and ignorant; but I did so want to have a good dance!'

'Well, then, that is one,' said practical Miss Jane, beginning to count on her fingers.

'Oh, no! it is not one at all. Mr Rivers came and asked me, and I forgot all about Charlie. He forgot too, I suppose; for I did not dance with him the whole evening. And then there was Ned, and young Mr Howard, and Captain Douglas, and Mrs Dalton's brother, and—I told you, everybody; and, to be very grand, Lord Merewether himself at the end.'

'Lord Merewether!' Miss Jane was deeply impressed, and held the finger on which she had counted this potentate for a full minute. 'Then, Norah, my dear, you had the very best of the great county folks.'

'Yes,' said Norah, 'it was very nice; only he was a little—stupid. And then Ned again, and Mr Rivers; Mr Rivers was always coming; mamma made me say I was engaged. It did not turn out to be a fib, for some gentleman always came to ask me; but one always shows it in one's face when one says a thing that is not quite true.'

'Oh, Norah!' said Mrs Haldane, 'is not that just what I told you? Do you think anything can be good or right for a young girl in a Christian land that makes you say what is not quite true? There may be no harm in the dancing by itself, though in my day we were of a different way of thinking; but to tell—lies—'

'Not lies, mother,' said Stephen. 'When Norah told Mr Rivers she was engaged, he understood, of course, that she did not want to dance with him.'

'Well,' said Norah slowly, 'I don't know. To tell the very, very truth, I did want very much to dance with him. He dances like an angel—at least, I don't know how an angel dances—Oh, please don't look so shocked, Mrs Haldane; I did not mean any harm. He is just simply delightful to dance with. But mamma thought something—I don't know what. It is etiquette, you know; a girl must not dance very often with one man.'

'And who is this Mr Rivers?' said Stephen. 'Is he as delightful in other ways?'

'Don't you remember?' said Norah. 'It is so funny nobody seems to remember but me. When we came here first, he was here too, and mamma and I met him one day at our old home in London. Mr Stephen, I am sure I have told you; the boy, I used to call him, that was on our side.'

'Ah, I remember now,' said Stephen; 'and he seems to be on your side still, from what you say. But who is he, Norah, and what is he, and why did he want to dance so often with you?'

'As for that,' said Norah, laughing, 'I suppose he liked me too; there was not any other reason. He is so handsome!—just exactly like the hero in a novel. The moment I saw him I said to myself, "Here is the hero." He is almost too handsome: dark, with hair that curls all over his head, and the most beautiful dark eyes. You never saw such beautiful eyes! Oh, I am not speaking because I like him. I think I should almost like him better if he was not quite so—don't you know? If I were writing a novel, I should take him for the hero. I should make everybody fall in love with him—all the ladies, one after another. When one sees a man like that in real life,' said Norah, with gravity, 'it puts one directly on one's guard.'

'Are you on your guard, Norah?' said Stephen, with a smile. The incipient fun in his eyes was, however, softened by a tenderer alarm, a wistful curiosity. The child! Since poor Drummond used to call her so, regarding her as the child *par excellence*—the type and crown of childhood—this was the name that had seemed most appropriate to Norah. And it meant so much—not only Robert's child, who was gone, and had left her to the love of his friends, but the very embodiment of youth and innocence—the fresh, new life, to be made something better of than any of the older lives had been. Should she, too, fall just into the common snare—just into the vulgar pitfalls, as everybody did? The thought disturbed her self-appointed guardian—her father's friend.

'Me!' said Norah, and her colour rose, and she laughed, with a light in her eyes which had not been there before. It was not the glance of rising excitement, as Stephen feared, but only a merry glow of youthful temerity—that daring which loves to anticipate danger. 'Oh, what fun it would be! But no, Mr Stephen; oh, no! that was not what I meant in the least. I am not that sort of girl. Mr Rivers,' she added, with a certain solemnity, 'had something to do with that bank, you know. I don't know what he had to do with it. He is Lord Rivers's son, and it is to talk over that that he is coming to see mamma.'

'Oh, to talk over that!' said Stephen, half amused.

'Yes, to talk it over,' said Norah, with great gravity; and then she made a sudden leap from the subject. 'The Merewethers are all staying at the great house—the Marchioness herself, and Lord Merewether, and the girls; I think they are very nice girls. But, oh! Miss Jane, I must tell you one thing; she had on her diamonds. I never saw diamonds before. They are like light. They change, and they glimmer, and they make little rainbows. I never saw anything so beautiful! They are like a quantity of dewdrops when the sun is shining—only you never could get dewdrops to keep still in one place.'

'And I suppose they are worth a mint of money,' said Miss Jane, with a sigh of admiration. 'I have never seen them but in the shops, Norah; but I don't think I should like to wear as much as would keep half-a-dozen poor families round my neck.'

Norah paused doubtfully, not feeling equal to this question.

'I suppose they belong to the family, and she dare not sell them, and then, perhaps—Would God have made diamonds if He did not mean people to wear them?' she asked, with hesitation. 'Oh, do you know, I think I should like so much to wear them, if they were mine!'

'Ah, my dear,' said old Mrs Haldane, 'see how vanity comes into the mind. Yesterday you had never thought of diamonds; now you would like—you know you would like—to have them; and from that to trying to get them is but a step, Norah, but a step—if you don't mind.'

'I could only try to get them by stealing them,' said Norah; 'and, after all, I don't care so much as that. Besides, girls don't wear diamonds. But I'll tell you what I should like. I should like to take those lovely things of the Marchioness's, and put them upon mamma.'

'There, I told you!' said the old lady. 'Norah, don't go to these places any more. You have begun to covet them in your heart.'

'Oh, how beautiful mamma would look in them!' cried Norah. 'Mr Stephen, is it vanity to admire one's mother? I suppose it must be really; for if there is anything in the world that belongs to you, of course it is your mother. I think mamma is beautiful: even in her black silk, made square, and not so fresh as it once was, she was the most beautiful in the room—I don't mean pretty, like us girls. And if I could have put her into black velvet instead, with lovely lace, like Mrs Burton's, and the Marchioness's diamonds—oh!' cried Norah, expanding in her proud imagination, 'she would have been like a queen!'

'Oh, Norah, Norah!' cried Mrs Haldane, shaking her head.

'And so she would,' said Stephen. 'Norah is quite right.'

He spoke low, and there was a melancholy tone in his voice. He was thinking sadly how she had been buried like himself in the middle of her days—shut out from all those triumphs and glories which are pleasant to a woman. A less human-hearted man in Stephen Haldane's position would no doubt have pronounced it happy for Helen that she was thus preserved from vanity and vain-glory. But he had learned to feel for all the deprivations of life. This was what he was really thinking, but not what he was supposed to think. Miss Jane gave a glance of her eye at him from her sewing, half-indignant, half-sorrowful. She had fancied something of the sort often, she said to herself. Stephen, poor Stephen! who could never have a wife, or any other love different from her own. She thought that the other woman whom she had admitted in all the confidence of friendship had stolen from him her brother's heart.

'Well, and if she had,' said Miss Jane, with some sharpness, 'what good would that have done her? I never heard that to be like a queen made anybody the happier yet.'

'I was not thinking of what made her happier,' said Norah, coming behind Miss Jane's chair, and stealing an arm round her neck, 'but of what would make *me* happier. Shouldn't you like to have everything that was nice for Mrs Haldane and Mr Stephen, even if they didn't want it? Oh, I know you would! and so should I.'

'You coaxing child! you would make one swear black was white! What has that to do with lace and diamonds?' said Miss Jane; but she was vanquished, and had no more to say.

'Mary and Katie were in white tarletane,' said Norah. 'They looked so pretty! Clara looked very much the same. You can't have much better than fresh white tarletane, you know; only she had the most beautiful silk underneath, and heaps of ornaments. She is so big she can stand a great deal of decoration; but it would not have done for any of us little things. How anxious I used to be to grow big!' Norah went on. 'Now, on the whole, I think it is best not; one does not take up so much room; one does not require so much stuff for a dress; one can do without a great many things. If I had been as big as Clara, now, for instance, I never could have done with those little bits of bracelets and mamma's one string of pearls.'

'So you see good comes from evil,' said Stephen, with a smile.

'Oh, Stephen, don't talk so to encourage the child! With your upbringing, Norah, and with all the advantages you have had, to give up your mind to such follies! If I were your poor mamma—'

'She is saying nothing wrong, mother,' said Miss Jane. 'It *is* a great gain to Norah, you know, that she is little, and can get a pretty dress out of twelve yards of stuff, when Clara Burton takes twenty. That is thrift, and not vanity. I am very glad you are little, Norah; big women are always in the way. That Clara Burton, for instance—if she were in a small house she would fill it all up;

there would not be room for any one else. What does Mr Rivers see in her, I wonder? She is not half so nice as some people I know.'

'Mr Rivers?' said Norah.

'Yes, my dear. They say it is almost a settled thing between the two families. She will have quantities of money, and he will be Lord Rivers when his father dies. They say that is why he is here.'

It did not matter anything to Norah. She did not care; why should she? Her very admiration of him had been linked with a gibe. He was too handsome; he was a man out of a book. Nevertheless, she looked at Miss Jane for a moment aghast. 'The boy that was on our side!' she said to herself.

'Who are *they*, and what do they know about it?' said Stephen. 'People don't make such arrangements now-a-days. If this were intended, you may be sure nothing at all would be said.'

Stephen made this little speech partly out of a real regard for Norah's cheerfulness, which he thought was affected, and partly to rouse her to self-defence.

'But it would be quite nice,' said Norah, recovering her dismay. 'Oh, how funny it would be to think of one of us being married! It should be Clara the first; she is the youngest, but she is the biggest, and she was always the one who would be first, you know. She is very, very handsome, Miss Jane. You never were fond of Clara; that is why you don't see it. It would be the very thing!' cried Norah, clapping her hands. 'She is not one of the girls that would go and make him vain, falling in love with him. She will keep him in his right place; she will not let him be the hero in the novel. The only thing is, I am a little disappointed—though it is very foolish and stupid; for of course all that is over long ago, and Clara is like my sister; and if Mr Burton was wicked, I hope he has repented. But still, you know, I have always thought of Mr Rivers as one that was on our side.'

'Hush, child!' cried Miss Jane. 'Don't be the one to keep up old quarrels. That is all over now, and we have no sides.'

'So I suppose,' said Norah; 'but I feel a little as if he were a deserter. I wonder if Clara likes him. I wonder if—It is all so very funny! One of us girls! But I must go now to mamma. Mr Stephen, I will come back in the evening, and tell you what mamma thinks, and if Mr Rivers had anything to tell her—that is, if he comes to-day.'

And Norah ran away unceremoniously, without leave-taking. She was the child of both the households. Sometimes she went and came a dozen times in a day, carrying always a little stream of youth, and life, and freshness into the stagnant places. Stephen laid down his book with a smile at the sight of her; he took it up now with a little sigh. He had sat there all these six years, a motionless, solemn figure, swept aside from the life of man, and Norah's comings and goings had been as sweet to him as if she had been his own child. Now he feared that a new chapter of life was opening, and it moved him vaguely, with an expectation which was mingled with pain; for any change must bring pain to him. To others there would be alternations—threads twisted of dark and bright, of good and evil; but to him in his chair by the window, no change, he felt, could bring anything but harm.

'Oh, mamma,' said Norah, rushing into the drawing-room at the other side of the house, 'fancy what I have just heard! They say it is all but settled that Clara is to marry Mr Rivers. They say that is why he is here.'

'It is very likely, dear,' said Helen. 'I thought something of that kind must be intended from what I saw last night.'

'What did you see, mamma? How odd I should never have thought of it! I feel a little disappointed,' said Norah; 'because, you know, I always made up my mind that he was on our side.'

'We don't want him on our side,' said Mrs Drummond, with a decision which surprised her daughter. 'And, Norah, I am glad you have spoken to me. Be sure you don't forget this when you meet Mr Rivers: he is very agreeable, and he seems very friendly; but you must take care never to say anything, or to let him say anything, that you would not wish Clara to hear.'

Norah paused, and looked at her mother with considerable bewilderment. 'How very strange of you to say this, mamma! How very disagreeable—never to say anything, nor let him say anything! But I should hate to have Clara, or any one, listening to all I say. I will not talk to him at all. I will close my lips up tight, and never say a word. I suppose that will be best.'

'Not to-day, however,' said Mrs Drummond; 'for I see him coming, Norah. You must be as you always are—neither opening your mouth too much, nor closing it up too tight.'

'I hate the *juste milieu*,' said naughty Norah; but at that moment the door-bell rang, and, before she could speak again, Mr Rivers was shown in, looking more like the hero of a novel than ever. He was tall, slender, well-proportioned. He had those curls about his temples which go to a girl's heart. He had the most ingratiating nose, the beautifullest eyes. 'For one thing,' said Norah to herself savagely, 'Clara will not go and fall in love with him and make him vain!' Clara had too great an opinion of herself; she was not likely to be any man's worshipper. There was consolation

in that.

'It is a long time since we met,' Mr Rivers said; 'but you must pardon me for thrusting myself upon you all at once, Mrs Drummond. I have never forgotten what passed when I saw you last. I doubt whether I ought to speak of it after all these years.'

'Perhaps it is better not,' said Helen.

'Perhaps; but I should like to say one thing—just one thing. I do not know if you thought my father to blame. He is a quiet man; he never makes any public appearance; he was a sufferer only. He had nothing to do with the bank. He was one of those who were wronged, not of those who did the wrong.'

'I have always known that,' said Mrs Drummond; and then there was a pause. ('He is on our side still,' Norah thought to herself; but her mother changed the subject abruptly.) 'The children have all grown up since you were here. Time has made more change upon them than upon you.'

'Do you think so?' said the hero. 'I am not sure. Time has made a great deal of difference in me. I am not half so sure of the satisfactoriness of life and the good qualities of the world as I used to be. I suppose it is a sign that age is coming on; whereas these young people, these fairy princes and princesses, who were babies when I was here——'

At this point Norah was seized with one of those irrestrainable, seductive laughs which lead the spirit astray. 'Oh, I beg your pardon,' she said; 'but I was puzzled to think how poor dear Ned could be a fairy prince! He is such a dear fellow, and I am so fond of him; but Prince Charmant, mamma!'

'If he is a dear fellow, and you are fond of him, I should think it did not matter much whether he looked like Prince Charmant or not,' said Mr Rivers; and then he added, with a smile—'There are other kinds of princes besides Charmant. Riquet, with the tuft, for instance; and he with the long nose——'

Now Ned, poor fellow, had a long nose. He had not grown up handsome, and Norah was strongly conscious of the fact. She felt that she had been the first to laugh at him, and yet she hated this stranger for following her example. She grew very red, and drew herself up with the air of an offended queen.

'They all got *charmant* at the last,' she said stiffly; 'that is better than beginning by being *charmant*, and turning out very disagreeable in the end.'

Mrs Drummond gave her daughter a warning glance. 'It was a pretty party last night,' she said; 'I hope you liked it. We thought it very grand; we have so little gaiety here.'

'Was it gaiety?' said the young man. 'I suppose it was; but a ball is always rather a solemn affair to me, especially when you are staying in the house. The horror that comes over you lest you have danced with some one you ought not to have danced with, or left some one whom you ought. I broke away for a little while last night when I saw you, and went in for simple pleasure—but duty always drags one back at the end.'

'Duty at a ball! Why it is all pleasure,' cried Norah. 'It may be foolish and frivolous, or it may even be—wrong; but I never was so happy in my life.'

Then the hero of romance turned upon her, and smiled. 'You told me it was your first ball,' he said; 'and that, I suppose, would naturally make it look like Paradise.'

'It was very nice,' said Norah. His smile and his look drove her back into the shelter of commonplace. Somehow when he looked at her, her energy seemed to turn into exaggeration, and her natural fervour into pretence. Then she plunged into the heart of a new subject with all a child's temerity. 'Don't you think Clara is very handsome?' she said.

Mr Rivers did not shrink from a reply. 'She is very handsome—if she knew how to dress.'

'Dress! why, she had the loveliest dress——'

'It was all white and puffy—like yours,' he said. 'Fancy that girl having no more perception than to dress herself like you! What has she to do with shadows, and clouds, and mystery? She should be in heavy silks or satins, like the Juno she is.'

Norah did not quite make out what this meant; whether it was the highest admiration or a covert sneer. She took it for granted it must be the former. 'Yes; I know she is like a Juno,' she said, somewhat doubtfully; adding, with a slightly faltering tone, 'and she is very nice too.'

'She is your cousin, Norah,' said Mrs Drummond quietly; and then the child grew redder than ever, and felt herself put on her defence.

'I did not mean to gossip, mamma. I don't know what Mr Rivers likes to talk about. When any one is quite a stranger, how can you tell, unless you are very, very clever, what to talk about? And then I have been with Mr Stephen, telling them all about the ball. It is in my head. I can't think of anything else. How pretty the Merewether girls are! Oh, I beg your pardon. I did not mean to go back to the same subject. But I had to tell *them* everything—what people were there, and whom I danced with, and——'

'Mr Stephen always encourages your chatter,' said Helen, with a smile.

'What a sensible man Mr Stephen must be! May I know who he is?' said young Rivers; and thus a new topic presented itself. Stephen Haldane's name and his story brought up an unintentional reference to the misfortunes which linked the two households together, and which had given Cyril Rivers a certain hold upon them. When this chance was afforded him, he told them, very simply and shortly, what sacrifices his father had made; how he had mortgaged some of his property, and sold some, and was living very quietly now, in retirement, till his children were all educated. 'I am sent out into the world, to see how it looks after the waters have abated,' he said, laughing. 'I have got to find out how the land lies, and if there is any green showing above the flood; but I don't know whether I am most likely to turn out the raven or the dove.'

'Oh, I should like to find an olive leaf for you to fly back with,' said Norah, obeying her first impulse, in her foolish way. Mrs Drummond looked at him very gravely, without any of her daughter's enthusiasm.

'Mr Rivers must find the olive leaf in some warmer corner,' she said. 'They don't grow in our garden, Norah. We have none to give.'

'That is true,' said the heedless girl; 'but, if the olive would do, Mr Rivers, there is one in the conservatory at the great house—a poor, little, wee, stunted thing; but there is one, I know.'

Did she mean it? or was it mere innocence, heedlessness? It was not wonderful if Cyril Rivers was puzzled, for even Mrs Drummond could not make quite sure.

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## CHAPTER X.

It was natural that there should be nothing talked about that morning throughout Dura except the ball. All the young people were late of getting up, and they were all full of the one subject—how this one and that one looked; how Charlie haunted Clara all the evening; how young Mr Nicholas, the curate, whom decorum kept from waltzing, stood mournfully and gazed at Mary Dalton through all the round dances. Things were getting very serious between Mary and Mr Nicholas; though waltzing was such a temptation to her, poor child, and though she had plenty of partners, she sat still half the evening out of pity for the curate's wistful eyes; and yet he had been ungrateful all the same, and reproachful on the way home. Katie Dalton, to her own great comfort, was still quite loverless and hampered by nobody's looks. 'I would not put up with it,' she said to her sister; 'because a man chooses to make himself disagreeable, can you not be allowed to enjoy yourself? It is not so often we have a dance. I should let him know very plainly, if it were me.'

'Oh, Katie dear,' said her sister, 'you don't know what you would do if it were you.'

'Well, then, I am very glad it isn't me. I hate parsons!' cried Katie. This was but a specimen of the commotion made by the ball. The sudden incursion of quantities of new people into the limited little society in which everybody had appropriated a companion to his or herself was at the first outset as disagreeable as it was bewildering. The Dura boys and girls had each a sore point somewhere. They had each some reproaches to make, if not audibly, yet in their hearts. Norah and Katie, who were quite fancy-free, were the only ones who had received no wound. At the moment when Mr Rivers sat in the drawing-room at the Gatehouse, Ned and Clara Burton were walking down the avenue together, discussing the same subject. They were both of them somewhat sulky; and both with the same person. It was Norah who had affronted both the brother and sister; and to Clara, at least, the affront was doubly bitter, from her consciousness of the fact that, but for the kindness, nay, charity, of the Burtons, Norah never could have come into such a scene of splendour at all. Clara was her father's child, and this was a thing which she never forgot.

'I have never been so fond of Norah Drummond as the rest of you were,' she said. 'I think she is a heartless little thing. I am sure what she and her mother want is to be revenged on us because we are so much better off. I am sure papa thinks so. It is the shabbiest, the most wretched thing in the world, to hate people because they are better off.'

'Trust to you girls for imputing bad motives,' said Ned. He was very sulky, and rather unhappy, and consequently ready to quarrel with his best friend. In his heart he had no such bad opinion of 'girls;' but at this moment he felt that nothing was too disagreeable to be said.

'We girls know better what we are about a great deal than you do,' said Clara. 'We see through things. Now that you begin to have your eyes opened about Norah Drummond, I may speak. She is a dreadful little flirt. I have seen it before, though you never did. Why, I have seen her even with Mr Nicholas; and she asked Charlie Dalton to dance with her last night—*asked* him! Would any girl do that who had a respect for herself, or cared for what people think?'

'Did Charlie tell you?' said Ned with deeper wrath and wretchedness still. 'She never asked me,' he said to himself; though he would have been ready to dance himself half dead in her service had she but taken the trouble to ask.

'I heard her,' said Clara; 'and then, as soon as something better came, she forgot all about

Charlie. She made Cyril Rivers dance with her, claiming acquaintance because she met him once when we were all little. Ned, I would never think of that girl more, if I were you. In the first place, you know it never could come to anything. Papa would not allow it—a girl without a penny, without any position even, and all that dreadful story about her father!

'The less we say of that dreadful story the better,' said Ned.

'Why? We have nothing to do with it—except that papa has been so very kind. I don't think it is wise to have poor relations near,' said Clara. 'You are obliged to take some notice of them; and they always hate you, and try to come in your way. I know mamma was quite wild to see you, the very first thing—before you had danced with Lady Florizel, or any one—taking Norah out.'

'Mamma is too sensible to think anything about it,' said Ned.

'You may suppose so, but I know to the contrary. Mamma was very anxious you should be attentive to Lady Florizel. We are rich, but we have not any connections to speak of; only rich people, like poor grandpapa. I don't mean to say I am not very fond of grandpapa; but the exhibition he always makes of himself at those meetings and things, and the way he throws his money away—money that he ought to be saving up for us. Papa says so, Ned! Why should you look so fierce at me?'

'Because it is odious to hear you,' said Ned. 'You have no right to repeat what papa says—if papa does say such things. I hope my grandfather will do exactly what he likes with his money. I am sure he has the best right.'

'Oh, that is all very well,' said Clara. 'I never had college debts to be paid. It suits you to be so independent, but it is chiefly you that the rest of us are thinking of. You know we have no connections, Ned. Grandpapa and his Dissenters are enough to make one ill. If he had only been philanthropic, one would not have minded so much; but fancy having, every month or two, Mr Truston from the chapel to dinner! So you are bound to make a high marriage when you marry.'

'I wish, Clara, you would talk of things you understand. I marry—is it likely?' said Ned.

'Very likely—if you ask Lady Florizel. Papa would not ask you to go into the business, or anything. Oh, I know! He does not say much about his plans, but he cannot hide a great deal from me. But you spoil it all, Ned,' said Clara severely. 'You put everything wrong, and make your own people your enemies. Instead of seeing how nice and how sweet and how charming the right young lady is, you go and throw yourself away on Norah Drummond—who leaves you in the lurch the moment she sees some one else better worth her pains.'

'And who might that be?' asked Ned. He tried to laugh, poor fellow, but his laugh and his voice were both unsteady. There was truth in it all; that was what made him so tremulous with anger and suppressed passion.

'As if you could not see for yourself,' said Clara, herself flushing with indignation. 'Why, Cyril Rivers, of course. No doubt they had decided he was the best man to pitch upon. Lord Merewether was too grand; they could not venture upon him—and the Marchioness was there to take care of her son. But poor Cyril had nobody to take care of him. I saw Mrs Drummond look at him in her languid way. She has some magnetism about her, that woman. I have seen her look at people before, and gradually something drew them that they had to go and talk to her. That was how it was last night. Of course, Norah thought no more of you. She had bigger game. She knew very well, if things changed, and Cyril Rivers escaped from her, that, so far as you were concerned, she had only to hold out a finger.'

'You don't seem to make very much of me,' said Ned with an angry blush.

'No, I should not make much of—any boy,' said Clara calmly. 'What could you do? You would fall into the net directly. You are such a simpleton, such a baby, that, of course, Norah would not need even to take any trouble. If she only held up her finger—'

'That is what you mean to do to Charlie, I suppose?' said Ned, with concentrated brotherly malice; and then it was Clara's turn to flash crimson, not so much with shame as with anger. Her complexion was so beautiful, her white so white, and her red so rosy, that the deeper colour which flushed all over her face in a moment seemed to dye the wavy, downy, velvety surface. Her blue eyes flashed out, deepening in colour like the sea under the wind.

'What does it matter to you what I mean to do?' she cried, and turned her back upon him in her wrath, and went back again up the avenue without a word of warning. Ned, in his surprise, stood and looked after her. She was like a Juno, as Mr Rivers had said. She was the youngest of the whole band; but yet the great scale on which she was formed, her imperious manner and looks, gave her a certain command among them. The others were pretty girls; but Clara was splendid, and a woman. She had to be judged on a different standard. Poor Ned's heart was very sore; he was very angry, and wounded, and unhappy; and yet he recognised the difference as he stood and looked after his sister. It was natural that she should make up her mind to marry whosoever pleased her—and break a heart as she would cast away a flower. There was nothing out of character in the superior tone she had taken with her elder brother. On the contrary, it was natural to her; and as for Norah, poor little Norah, what would befall her should she come in the way of this queen? Ned went upon his own way down the village with a hankering in his heart which all Clara's worldly wisdom and all his wounded pride could not quite subdue. Norah had been unkind to him. She had danced with him but twice all that long evening. She had danced



with everybody but him. He had seen her—was it a dozen times?—with Rivers—confound him! And then he wondered whether there was any truth in Clara's theory about Rivers. Had Mrs Drummond herself fallen into that way of matchmaking which was natural to mothers? He breathed a little more freely when he presumed that it must be she, and she only, who was to blame, not Norah. He strolled on with his hands in his pockets, thinking if, perhaps, he could meet her, or see her at a window, or persuade Katie Dalton to fetch her; there was always a hundred chances of an accidental meeting in Dura. But he could not with his own sore heart and wounded temper go to the Gatehouse.

Just as Ned reached the lodge going out, Mr Rivers entered the gates coming back. He had a condescending, friendly way of accosting Ned which the young fellow could not bear.

'Ah, going into the village?' he said. 'I am glad to be able to assure you that nobody has suffered from last night.'

'I didn't suppose they had. I am going to the post,' said Ned, surly as a young bear.

'Don't let me detain you, in that case. The post is too important to wait for anything,' Rivers said, stepping aside.

Ned looked at him, and would have liked to knock him down. He thought what an effeminate puppy the fellow was, what a curled darling—the sort of thing that girls admire and think very fine, and all men despise. In short, the feelings with which a washed-out young woman contemplates the creature who is recognised as 'a gentleman's beauty' were a trifle to those which governed Ned. Such feelings, it would appear, must be natural. Ned despised the man for being handsome, and the women for thinking him so, with a virulence which no neglected maiden ever surpassed.

'Do you want me, Burton?' Mr Rivers said pleasantly, seeing that the other did not pass on.

'Oh, good heavens, no! not the least in the world,' cried boorish Ned, and went on without another word.

'Country lout!' the hero said quietly, with a smile to himself. If he could but have heard the comments upon him which were passing through the mind of Ned!

Clara, for her part, went home with her mind full of angry thoughts. She had no personal feeling about Cyril Rivers. If she liked any one it was poor Charlie, who was her slave. But Clara knew with precocious worldly wisdom that *that* would never come to anything. It might be all very well for the moment. It was pleasant enough to have him hanging about, watching her every look, attentive to her lightest word. But it never could come to anything. The highest prosperity which the future could bring to Charlie would be advancement in the public office where he was now a junior clerk. And that was no lot for her to share: she, Mr Burton's daughter, might (her father said) pick and choose among the most eligible men in England. Mr Burton was in the habit of speaking in this unguarded way. Clara was his favourite in the family, his chosen companion, his almost confidante. He was proud of her beauty and 'style,' and fond of thinking that, in mind at least, she resembled himself. It was he who had settled that Cyril Rivers should be invited to Dura, and should, as a natural consequence, offer all that remained to the Riverses to Clara. The idea of this alliance pleased his mind, though the Riverses were not so rich as they used to be. 'They are still very well off, and the title must be taken into consideration,' he had said to his wife. And when Clara returned home she found her parents sitting together in the library, which was not very common, and discussing their children's prospects, which was less common still. It was October, and there was a fire over which Mrs Burton was sitting. She was a chilly woman at all times. She had not blood enough, nor life enough physically, to keep her warm, and she had been up late, and was tired and not disposed to be on her best company behaviour in the big drawing-room on the chance that the Marchioness might come down-stairs. Mrs Burton was not quite so placid as she once had been. As her children had grown up there had been complications to encounter more trying to the temper than the naughtiness of their childhood; and it sometimes happened that all the advantages to be gained from a succession of fine visitors would be neutralized, or partially neutralized, by the reluctance of the mistress of the house to devote her personal attention to them. Or so, at least, Mr Burton thought. His wife, on the other hand, was of opinion that it was best to leave the visitors sometimes to themselves; and this was what she had done to-day. She had established herself over the library fire with a book after luncheon, leaving the Marchioness and the young ladies to drive or to repose as they pleased. And this piece of self-will had procured her a reprimand, as forcible as Mr Burton dared to deliver, when he came in and found her there.

'You are throwing away our chances, Clara,' he said. 'You are setting the worst example to the children. If the Marchioness had not been resting in her own rooms——'

'The Marchioness is very well, Mr Burton,' said his wife. 'You may be sure I know what I am doing so far as she is concerned. She does not want me to follow her about and make a fuss, as some people do.'

'I have always told you,' said Mr Burton, 'that I wished the utmost civility to be shown to people of her rank in my house. Why, Clara, what can you be thinking of? With all the ambitious ideas you have in your head for Ned——'

'My ambition is very easily satisfied,' she said, 'if you will let the boy follow his own inclinations.'

He has no turn for business; all that he would do in business would be to lose what you have made.'

'If he makes a good match—if he marries into the Merewether family—I should not say another word about business,' said Mr Burton. Looking at him in daylight, it was still more easy to perceive the change that had come over him. His clothes, those well-made, light-coloured clothes which had once been a model of everything that clothes should be, had begun to look almost shabby, though they were in themselves as glossy and as spotless as ever. Anxiety was written in the lines about his eyes. 'Should the children do well, Clara—should they do as we wish them—I should be tempted myself to get out of the business, when I have an opportunity,' he said. 'It is wearing work, especially when one has nobody to help, nobody to sympathize;' and the man who had been always the incarnation of prosperity, needing no props of external support, puffed out from his bosom a real sigh.

Mrs Burton took no notice; she was perfectly calm and unmoved, either unaware that her husband had displayed anything like emotion, or indifferent to it.

'I cannot say that I have ever been fond of these matchmaking schemes,' she said, 'and Ned is only a boy; but there is one thing that must be taken into consideration, whatever you may do in this matter; that is Norah Drummond. If she thinks differently, you may as well give up the conflict.'

'Norah Drummond!' said Mr Burton, grinding his teeth. 'By Jove! they talk about a man's pleasant sins being against him; but there is nothing so bad in that way as his unpleasant virtues, I can tell you. If all the annoyance I have had through these two women could be reckoned up—'

'I do not know what annoyance you may have had yourself,' said Mrs Burton, in her cold, judicial way. 'I have seen nothing to complain of. But now I confess it begins to be unpleasant. She has more influence over Ned than any of us. He danced with her last night before any one else. He is always there, or meeting her at other places. I have observed it for some time. But you have done nothing to stop it, Mr Burton. Sometimes I have thought you approved, from the way you have allowed things to go on.'

'I approve!' he cried, with something like horror.

'How was I to know? I do not say it is of very much importance. Ned, of course, will follow his own taste, not ours.'

'But, by Jove, he sha'n't!' cried Mr Burton. 'By Jove, he shall take himself out of this, and make his own way, if I hear any more nonsense. What! after all I have done to set them up in the world—after all I have gone through!'

He was affected, whatever was the cause. There was something like agitation about him. He was changed altogether from the confident man of former times. His wife looked at him with a little surprise, and came to this conclusion quite suddenly. She had not noticed it when he was among other people, playing his part of host with an offensive hospitality which often annoyed her, and which the Marchioness, for example, scarcely hesitated to show her contempt of. But now, when there was no one present, when he was free to look as he pleased, Mrs Burton found out all at once that her husband was changed. Was it merely that he was older, tired with last night's dissipation, not so able to defy late hours, and supper and champagne, as he had once done? She was not a woman to rest in so superficial a view of affairs; but for the moment these were the questions she asked herself, as she looked at him with calm yet undeniable surprise.

'You seem to be excited, Mr Burton,' she said.

'Excited!' he cried; 'and good reason, too; with you sitting there as cold as a little fish, never thinking of the interests of your family, talking of Ned thwarting me as if it was nothing! If I were excited it would be little wonder, I think.'

'I have no desire that Ned should thwart you,' she said; 'on the contrary, it is my own wish. He will never make a good man of business. A marriage with one of the Merewethers, or a girl in that position, with your money, Mr Burton, would be the best thing for him. He might get into Parliament, and do all that I once hoped for you; but what I hoped is neither here nor there.'

Mrs Burton was only human, though she was so philosophical; and this was a stroke in her own defence.

'See that Ned does it, then,' he said. 'Perhaps it was what I hoped too; but business has swallowed me up, instead of leaving me more free. You ought to make it your duty to see that Ned does what we both wish. What is there to stand in the way?'

'Not much,' said Mrs Burton, shrugging her shoulders. 'Norah Drummond—not a very large person—that is all.'

'Confound Norah Drummond! A man is always a fool when he thinks of other people. I am finding that out too late. But you may compose yourself about Ned,' added the father, with irony. 'That little thing has other fish to fry. She is poking herself into Clara's way, confound her! That sentimental ass, Rivers, who is unfit to touch my child's hand—'

'I heard of that too,' said Mrs Burton, in a low voice.

'I should think you did hear of it; but you never interfered, so far as I could see. He would have danced with her all night, if I had not taken it into my own hands. The ass! a poor little chit like that, when he might have had Clary! But, however, understand me, Clara, this is a woman's business. I want these children settled and put out in life. Ned may be rather young, but many a young fellow in his position is married at one-and-twenty. And, by Jove, I can't go on bearing this infernal strain! I should give it up if it was not for them.'

'Is there anything going wrong, Mr Burton?' asked his wife.

'What should be going wrong? I am tired of working and never getting any sympathy. I want a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law who will do us credit—but, above all, a son-in-law. And I don't see any obstacle in the way which you cannot overcome, if you choose.'

'I wonder,' said Mrs Burton, 'can I overcome Norah Drummond?—and her mother? They are the obstacles in the way.'

'Thanks to my confounded good-heartedness,' said her husband.

And it was at this moment Clara came in and joined their deliberations. Little more, however, was said, and she was sent away to seek out Lady Florizel, and do her duty to the young visitors as the daughter of the house should. Mr Burton went off himself to see if the Marchioness had made herself visible, and do his best to overwhelm her with fussy hospitality. But Mrs Burton sat still on the library fire and warmed her cold little feet, and set her mind to work out the problem. It was like a game of chess, with two skilfully-arrayed, scientific lines of attack all brought to nothing by a cunning little knight, of double movement-power, in the centre of the board. Either of the schemes on which her husband had set his heart, or both—and one of them was dear to herself also if she would have acknowledged it—might be brought to a satisfactory issue, if this little Norah, this penniless child, this poor little waif, who had grown up at their gates, could but be put out of the way. Was the part of Nemesis, so unlike her childish appearance and character, reserved for Norah? or was the mother using her child as the instrument of a deep, and patient, and long-prepared vengeance? It was the latter view of the question which was most congenial to Mrs Burton's mind; but whether it was that or fate, the greatest combinations which the family at the great house had yet ventured on, the things most concerning their comfort and happiness, were suddenly stopped short by this little figure. It was Norah Drummond, only Norah, who was the lion in the way.

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## CHAPTER XI.

Ned Burton went to the post, as he had said. He had to pass the Gatehouse on his way; and his business was not of so important a description that he should make any haste about it, or tire himself with walking. He loitered along, looking into the windows, sore at heart and wistful. There was no one, to be sure, at Mrs Drummond's end of the Gatehouse. He tried to get a glimpse at the interior through the chinks of the little green Venetian blinds which veiled the lower panes; but they were turned the wrong way, and he could not see anything. He had made up his mind he should be sure to see Norah, for no particular reason except that he wanted so much to see her. But no Norah was visible. At the other end of the house, however, Stephen Haldane's window was open as usual, and he himself sat within, looking almost eagerly for that interview with the outside world which his open window permitted. The summer was over, with all its delights, and soon the window would have to be closed, and Stephen's chair removed into winter quarters. What a deprivation this was to him no one knew;—but just at the fall of the year, when the transparent lime-leaves had turned into yellow silk instead of green, and littered the flags under the window, Stephen looked out more eagerly than he was wont for some one to talk to him. It was his farewell, in a measure, to life. And Ned was but too glad to stop and lean against the outer sill, keeping always an eye upon the door, and Mrs Drummond's windows. He was not handsome. He had a large nose—too large for the rest of his face—which his aunt, Mrs Everest, sometimes comforted him by suggesting was a sign of character and energy, but which Ned had been used to hear all his friends laugh at. The young community at Dura had brought themselves up in all the frankness of family relations, and were wont to laugh freely at Ned's nose, as they laughed at Katie's large teeth, and as, while they were children, they had laughed at Clara's red hair. On that last particular they were undeceived now, and gloried in it, as fashion required; but Katie's teeth and Ned's nose were still amusing to everybody concerned. Poor boy! he had not any feature which was so good as to redeem this imperfection. He had 'nice' eyes, a tolerable mouth, and was well-grown and strong; but nobody could say he was handsome. And then, though he was a gentleman in thought and heart, he was a gentleman of twenty, whose real refinement had not yet had time to work out to the surface, and soften away the early asperities. This was why he looked boorish and loutish in the presence of Cyril Rivers, who had not only the easy confidence which springs from good looks, but that inevitable surface suavity which can only be attained by intercourse with the world.

'You are not shooting to-day,' said Stephen, from within.

'No; we were all late this morning. I don't know why we should be such muffs,' said Ned. 'Merewether had to go off to town to get his leave extended; and Rivers is too fine a gentleman, I suppose, to take much trouble. That's not fair, though. I did not mean it. He is a very good shot.'

'Who is he?' said Stephen. 'I have been hearing a great deal about him this morning.'

'Oh, have you?' Ned looked yellow as the lime leaves which came tumbling about his head, and his nose was all that was visible under the hat, which somehow, in his agitation, he pulled over his brows. 'He is a man about town, I suppose. He is member for somewhere or other—his father's borough. He is an æsthetic sort of politician, diplomatist, whatever you like to call it: a man who plays at setting all the world right.'

'But who does not please Ned Burton, I am afraid,' said Stephen, with a smile. 'I hear you all enjoyed yourselves very much last night.'

'Did we?' said Ned. 'The girls did. I suppose they don't think of much else. But as one grows older, one sees the absurdity of things. To think of a man, a rational being, putting his brains in his pocket, and giving himself up to the cultivation of his legs! Oh, yes; we all did our fetish worship, and adored the great god Society, and longed to offer up a few human sacrifices; though there are enough, I suppose, without any exertion of ours,' said Ned, leaning both his arms on the window. He heaved such a sigh, that the leaves fluttered and whirled before the mighty breath. And Stephen Haldane suppressed a laugh, though he was not very gay. It was hardly possible to help being amused by this juvenile despair. And yet, poor Stephen going back into those old memories, which looked a thousand years off, could not but recollect, with a smile and a sigh, similar hours and moments, in which he too had sounded the very depths of tragedy and endured all the tortures of despair.

'My poor boy,' he said, with a tone which was half comic, half pathetic, 'I feel for you. Did you ever hear of *ces beaux jours quand j'étais si malheureux*?'

Ned looked up in a blaze of sudden resentment.

'I did not think I had said anything funny—though it is always pleasant to have amused you, Mr Haldane,' he said, with desperate politeness. 'I am going to the post-office. I rather think I shall have to be postman, and carry out the bags to-day. Good morning. I ought not to have stood so long keeping you from your book.'

But Stephen's laugh was very low and tender when the young fellow went on, walking at the rate of six miles an hour. Poor Ned! There was not so much to laugh at, for he had serious difficulties in his way—difficulties of which he tried to remind himself as he turned up the village street, by way of making himself a little more unhappy. But the attempt did not succeed. The fact was that his real troubles counted for nothing in the mixture of misery and anger which filled his youthful bosom. The shadow which filled the air with blackness, and made life intolerable, was—Norah. She had slighted him, wounded him, preferred some one else. In presence of this terrible sorrow, all the doubts about his future career, the serious question about the business, the discussions of which he had been the subject, faded into insignificance. It seemed to Ned even that he would gladly consent to go into the business at half an hour's notice if only that half hour would procure him the chance of making himself more miserable still by an interview with Norah. What a fool he was, poor boy! how wretched he was! and what poor creatures those people are who are never wretched and never fools!

Ned Burton lounged about into half the shops in the village in his unhappiness. He bought an ugly little mongrel from a lying porter at the station, who swore to its purity of blood. Ned, in an ordinary way, knew a great deal more about this subject than the porter did, but it gained him a little time, and Norah might, for anything he knew, become visible in the mean time. He went into Wigginton's and bought a rose-coloured ribbon for his straw hat. It was quite unsuitable; but Norah wore rose-coloured ribbons, and it was a forlorn profession of allegiance, though nobody would ever know it. He went to the confectioner's, and bought a bag of cakes, with which he fed half a dozen gaping children outside. In short, he visited as many tradespeople as Mother Hubbard did. But it was all in vain. No Norah passed by; no one like her went into any of the shops. When he passed the Gatehouse once more, the windows were all vacant still. Then Ned took a desperate resolution, and went and paid a visit at the Rectory. He sat with Mrs Dalton in the drawing room, and then he strolled round the garden with the girls. When things had come to this pass, Providence befriended him, and sent a special messenger, in the shape of Mr Nicholas, to take up Mary's attention. As soon as he was alone with her sister, Ned seized the opportunity.

'Katie,' he said, breathless, 'you might do me such a favour.'

'Might I?' said friendly Katie; 'then of course I will, Ned.'

'You are always the nicest and the kindest! Katie, I have something to say to Norah Drummond; something I—have to tell her—by herself. I can't go to the house, for it is something—a kind of a secret.'

'I'll run and fetch her. I know what you have got to say to her,' said Katie, laughing. 'Oh, how funny you are! Why didn't you say it right out, you silly boy.'

'It is not what you mean at all,' said Ned, with great gravity.

But Katie laughed, and ran across the road.

And this was how the interview came about. Norah came over to the Rectory in all innocence, fearing nothing. She said, 'Oh, Ned is here too!' as if nothing had happened. Indeed, she was not aware that anything had happened—only that a game at croquet would be the best way of

spending the listless afternoon after the dissipation of the previous night. They sat down on a bench behind that clump of laurel which hid a portion of the lawn from the windows of the Rectory. Mary and Mr Nicholas were walking up and down, round and round. The red geraniums were still bright in the borders, with all manner of asters, and salvias, like scarlet velvet. The autumn leaves were dropping singly, now one, now another, without any sound; the air was very still and soft, the sun shining through a pleasant haze. A sheaf of great, splendid, but dusty gladiolus, stood up against the dark green laurel. They were like Clara in her full and brilliant beauty—not like little Norah in her gray frock, sitting quite still and happy, thinking of nothing, on the warm bench in the sunshine, with her hands folded in her lap, waiting for Katie to come back with the croquet mallets, and altogether unconscious of the dark looks Ned was casting upon her from under his hard brows.

'I suppose Katie will come when she is ready,' he said, in reply to some question. 'She is not always at your word and beck, like me.'

'Are you at my word and beck?' she said, looking round upon him with some surprise. 'How funny you look, Ned! Is anything the matter? Are you—going away?'

'I often think I had best go away,' said Ned, in Byronic melancholy. 'That would be better than staying here and having every desire of my heart trampled on. It seems hard to leave you; and I am such a fool—I always stay on, thinking anything is better than banishment. But after being crushed to the earth, and having all my wishes disregarded, and all my feelings trampled on——'

'Oh, Ned! what can you mean? Who has done it? Is it that dreadful business again?'

'Business!' said Ned, with what he would have described as the hollow laugh of despair. 'That seemed bad enough when I had nothing worse to bear. But now I would embrace business; I would clasp it in my arms. Business! No! That affected only my inclinations; but this goes to my heart.'

'Ned,' said Norah, growing pale, 'you must be over-tired. That is it. You shoot all day—and then the ball last night. Poor boy! you are taking fancies in your head. You don't know what you are saying. You have been over-tired.'

Upon which Ned shook his head, and laughed again, this time 'wildly.' He was very miserable, poor fellow, and yet it cannot be said that he was quite indifferent to the effect he produced. It gave him a certain satisfaction in the midst of his despair.

'If you were to ask yourself, Norah, what is the matter, instead of suggesting so far less than the reality—so much less——' he began.

Then Norah took courage.

'Is that all!' she said. 'Oh, what a fright you gave me! Is it only something I have done without knowing it? You ridiculous, silly boy! Why can't you tell me plainly what it is, without all this nonsense? You know it is nonsense,' Norah continued, warming as she went on. 'What can I have done? Besides, however disagreeable I might have been, what right have you to mind? Nobody else minds. I am not a slave, never to be allowed to make myself unpleasant. There! I will be disagreeable if I like! I am not to be always bound to do what is pleasant to you.'

'If you take me up in this spirit, Norah——'

'Yes, I mean to take you up in this spirit. You have no right to feel everything like a ridiculous sensitive plant. Why should you? If I were a sensitive plant I might have some cause. I am little, I am friendless, I am very poor; I have nothing in the world but mamma. But for you to set up to have feelings, Ned! you, a boy! that can go where you like, and do what you like, and have heaps of money, and everybody bowing down before you! It is because you have nothing really to vex you, that you are obliged to invent things. Oh, you wicked, ungrateful boy, to pretend that you are unhappy! Look at Mr Stephen, and look at mamma!'

'But, Norah,' said Ned hurriedly; 'Norah dear! listen to me only one moment.'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' she said. 'I won't listen to you. I have plenty of things to bother me, and you have nothing. You never had to think whether you could spend this or that—whether you could have a new coat, or go a journey, or anything; and you go and make troubles because you have not got any.' Here she made a pause, turning her head away, so that poor Ned was more miserable than ever. And then all at once she turned and looked up kindly at him. 'What was it I did, Ned?'

This sudden revolution overwhelmed him altogether. He felt the water leap to his eyes. He was so young. And then he laughed unsteadily.

'What a girl you are, Norah!' he said.

'Was I cross last night? What did I do? I didn't mean it, I am sure. I came over quite innocently, never thinking Katie was bringing me to be scolded. It was not friendly of Katie. She ought to have told me. But, Ned, what was it? Tell me what I did.'

'Norah, things must not go on like this. I cannot do it. It may be as much as my life is worth,' said the youth. 'Look at those two over there; they may quarrel sometimes——'

'They quarrel every day of their lives,' said Norah, breathless, in a parenthesis.

'But they know that they belong to each other,' said Ned; 'they know that right or wrong nobody will part them. But, Norah, think how different I am. You may not mind, but it kills me. Once you said you loved me—a little.'

'I love—everybody; we, all of us, love each other,' said Norah, in a subdued voice.

'But that is not what I want. I love you very differently from that, Norah; you know I do. I want you to belong to me as Mary belongs to Nicholas. Next year I will be of age, and something must be settled for me, Norah. How do you think I can face all this talking and all this advising if I don't know what you are going to do? Give me your hand, Norah; give it me into mine; it is not the first time. Now, am I to keep it always? Tell me yes or no.'

'Oh! you hurt me—a little, Ned!'

'I cannot help it,' he said; 'not so much, not half so much, as you hurt me. Oh, Norah, put yourself in my place! Think, only think, how I can bear to see you talking to other people, smiling at them, looking up as you look at me. Is it possible, Norah? And perhaps I may have to go away to fight with the world, and make my own career. And would you send me away all in the dark without knowing? Oh, Norah, it would be cruel; it would not be like you.'

'Please, please, Ned! Mary and Mr Nicholas are coming. Let go my hand.'

'Not until you give me some sort of answer,' said Ned. 'I have loved you since ever I remember—since I was a boy, frightened to speak to you. You have always laughed and gibed; but I never minded. I love you more than all the world, Norah! I can't help thinking it would be so easy for you to love me, if you only would try. You have known me since we were children. You have always had me to order about, to do whatever you liked with.'

'Wait till they have passed,' said Norah in a whisper, drawing her hand out of his.

And then the elder pair, who were engaged, and had a right to walk about together, and hold long private conferences, and quarrel and make friends, passed slowly, suspending their talk also out of regard for the others.

'Are you waiting for Katie?' Mary said. 'She is so tiresome; always finding something unexpected to do.'

'Oh, I am talking to Ned. We are in no hurry,' Norah replied.

And then those full-grown lovers, the pair who had developed into actuality, whom Ned envied, and who had been having a very sharp little quarrel, passed on.

Ned was very much in earnest, poor fellow. His face was quite worn and full of lines. There was a strain and tremulous tension about him which showed how high his excitement was.

'It isn't as if this was new to you, Norah,' he cried piteously. 'You have known it ever so long. And I cannot help thinking you might love me so easily, if you would, Norah, you are so used to me—if you only would!'

Norah was very sympathetic, and his emotion moved her much. She cast down her eyes; she could not bear to look at him, and she nearly cried.

'Oh, Ned,' she said, 'I do love you. I am very fond of you; but how can I tell if it is in that way? How can you tell? We are just like brother and sister. We have never known anybody else all our lives.'

'I have,' said Ned, 'I have known hundreds. And there is no girl in all the world but one, and that is you. Oh, Norah, that is you!'

'But I have never seen any one,' said Norah again. She spoke so very softly that he could scarcely hear. 'I have never seen any one,' she repeated, heaving a gentle sigh—a sigh which was half regret for Ned and half for herself. 'Dear Ned, I do love you. But how could I tell until I saw——?'

'Ah!' he cried, and let her hand drop in his youthful impatience and mortification. 'If that is all your answer, Norah, the best thing for me is to rush away. Why should I stay here any longer? There will be nothing to live for, nothing to hope for!'

'Oh, don't talk nonsense, Ned!'

'It is not nonsense,' said Ned, rising up. 'Norah, if you hear I am gone you will know why it is. If you hear of anything happening to me, I hope you will be sorry. Oh, Norah, Norah!' he cried, the tears forcing themselves to his eyes, 'is it all to end like this?'

He was so young. His despair was real, though it might be too tragical in its outward form. He was capable of going away, as he said, and making himself hugely uncomfortable, and for a time intensely unhappy; and yet perhaps being all the better for it in the end. But Norah, who was not much wiser than himself, was driven to her wit's end by this adjuration, and did not know what to say.

'Ned, don't be so sorry,' she said, taking his hand in her turn. 'Oh, dear Ned, I do love you; but your people would be very angry, and we are so young. We must not think of such things yet. Oh, I am sure I did not mean to make you unhappy. Don't cry. I could not bear to see you crying, Ned!'

'I am not crying,' he said roughly. He had to be rough, he had been so near it. And just at this moment Katie came smiling up with the mallets over her shoulders. He could not come down from that elevation of feeling into this. 'I am afraid I must go now,' he said, almost turning his back upon them. 'I am going to the—to the station now. Merewether is coming by this train.'

'Oh, Ned, how unkind of you, when everything is ready for a game!' cried Katie. But Norah said nothing as he strode away, giving a nod at them over his shoulder. He had not been boorish while he was pleading his own cause; but he had not the heart to be civil when it was over. Cæsars of twenty do not pull their cloaks gracefully about them when they are going to die.

Then Norah suddenly turned upon her companion, and metaphorically gagged and bound her.

'How tiresome it was of you to be so long!' she cried. 'Here we have been waiting and waiting, till Ned's time was up; and so is mine. I must go back to mamma.'

'Why, I have not been gone ten minutes!' cried indignant Katie.

But Norah, too, waved her hand, and moved majestically away. She could scarcely keep from crying. Her heart was full, something was quivering in her throat. It was not so much her own emotion as the reflection of his. Poor Ned! how hard it was that he should be so miserable! She wanted to get safely to her own room, that she might think it over! She walked across the road as if she had been in a dream. She did not hear Mr Stephen call to her in her abstraction. She went in enveloped, as it were, in a cloud of sad and curious fancies, wondering—Was it all over? Would he never say any more about it? Would he go away, and never be heard of more? Would it—and the very thought of this thrilled through Norah's veins, and chilled her heart—would it do him harm? Would he die?

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## CHAPTER XII.

Mrs Burton had taken a very serious piece of work in hand. No wonder that she lingered over the fire in the library, or in her drawing-room, or wherever she could find a fire, in those early chills of October, to warm her little cold toes, and to make up her plan of warfare. She was a chilly little woman, as I have said. She had not much except a mind to keep her warm, and mind is not a thing which preserves the caloric thoroughly unless it is comforted by the close vicinity of other organs. Mrs Burton had no body to speak of; and, so far as has been seen, not very much heart. Her mind had to fulfil all the functions usually performed by these other properties, and to keep her warm besides; so that it was not wonderful if she sat over the fire.

It was not to be expected, however, that the Marchioness would always be so obliging as to remain in her room till three o'clock; and consequently Mrs Burton's thinking had to be done at odd moments when the cares of her household could be lawfully laid aside. She was rather in bondage to her distinguished guest; and as she was a little republican, a natural democrat at heart, the bondage was hard to her. She was a great deal cleverer than the Marchioness of Upshire; her mind went at railroad speed, while that great lady jogged along at the gentlest pace. Where the heart is predominant, or even a good, honest, placid body, there is tolerance for stupidity; but poor intellect is always intolerant. Mrs Burton chafed at her noble companion, and suffered tortures inwardly; but she was very civil, so far as outward appearance went, and did her duty as hostess in a way which left nothing to be desired.

But it took all her powers to master the problem before her. She had an adversary to overcome; an adversary whom she did not despise, but whom everybody at the first glance would have thought too slight a creature to merit so much as a thought. Mrs Burton knew better. She looked at Norah Drummond not in her simple and evident shape as a little girl of eighteen, the daughter of a poor mother, who lived upon a hundred pounds a year. This was what Norah was; and yet she was a great deal more. She was the commander of a little compact army, of which the two chief warriors, love and nature, were not much known to Mrs Burton; but which was reinforced by youth, and supreme perverseness and self-will, powers with which she was perfectly acquainted. Ned's love his mother might perhaps have laughed at; but Ned's obstinacy, his determination to have his own way, were opponents at which she could not laugh; and they were arrayed against her. So was the capricious fancy, the perverse individuality of Cyril Rivers, who was a man accustomed to be courted, and not over-likely to fall into an arrangement made for him by his family. Mrs Burton pondered much upon all these things. She found out that her guest was seen at the Gatehouse almost every day, and she saw from her son's aspect that he too knew it, and was beginning to hate his rival. Then there arose a little conflict in her mind as to which of her two children she should make herself the champion of. A mother, it may be thought, would incline most to the daughter's side; but Mrs Burton was not an emotional mother. She was not scheming how she could save her children pain. The idea of suffering on their part did not much affect her—at least, suffering of a sentimental kind. She formed her plan at last with a cold-blooded regard to their advantage, founded on the most careful consideration. There was no particular feeling in it one way or another. She had no desire to injure Norah, or even Norah's mother, more than was inevitable. She had not even any harsh or revengeful feelings towards them. To confound their projects was necessary to the success of her own—that was all; but towards themselves she meant no harm. With an equal impartiality she decided that her operations should be on Ned's side. If she could be said to have a favourite, it was Ned. Clara was

self-seeking and self-willed to a degree which was disagreeable to Mrs Burton. Such strenuous sentiments were vulgar and coarse to the more intellectually constituted nature. And Clara had so much flesh and blood, while her mother had so little, that this, too, weakened the sympathy between them. The mother, who was all mind, could not help having a certain involuntary unexpressed contempt for the daughter whose overwhelming physique carried her perpetually into a different world. But what was vulgar in Clara was allowable in Ned; and then Ned had talent in his way, and had taken his degree already, and somewhat distinguished himself, though he was careful, as he himself said, to 'put his brains in his pocket,' and refrain from all exhibition of them when he got home. Then, it would not have flattered Mrs Burton's vanity at all to see her daughter the Hon. Mrs., or even Lady Rivers; but it was a real object with her to see her son in Parliament. She had tried hard to thrust her husband into a seat, with a little swell of impatience and ardour in her heart, to have thus an opportunity of exercising her own powers in the direction of the State. It was a thing she could have done, and she would have given half her life to have it in her power. But this had turned out an impossible enterprise, and now all her wishes were set upon Ned. With the Merewethers' influence, in addition to their own, Ned, almost as soon as he had come of age, might be a legislator. With the talents he had derived from her, and which she would stimulate and inspire, he might be of service to his country. It was not an ungenerous aspiration; it was rather, on the contrary, as noble a wish as mere intellect could form. And to attain this it was necessary that Ned should gain his father's favour by bringing a splendid connection to the house of Dura; and that, on the other hand, he should obtain that influence which was his shortest way to the coveted position. What did it matter if a temporary heart-break were the price he had to pay, or even a temporary humiliation in the shape of giving up his own will? His mother decided for him that such a price was a very small matter to pay. She made up her mind accordingly that he should pay it at once, and in its most unquestionable form. That Clara should be humbled, too, and exposed to tortures of wounded pride and mortification, was a pity; but there was no other way.

This, then, was Mrs Burton's plan: to encourage young Rivers, the suitor whom her husband had chosen for her daughter, to devote himself to Norah; to throw him continually in the girl's way; to make him display his admiration, and if possible his devotion to her; to delude Norah into satisfaction, even response, to the assiduities of her new suitor; and by these means to disgust and detach Ned from the object of his youthful affection. It was a bold scheme, and at the same time it promised to be an easy one. As to what might follow in respect to Clara, the risk would have to be run; but it did not seem a very great risk. In the first place, Clara's 'feelings' (a word at which her mother smiled) were not engaged; and in the second place, Cyril Rivers, though he might be foolish enough, was not such a fool as to throw his handsome self away upon a penniless girl without connections or anything to recommend her. There was very little fear that it would ever come to that. He might fall in love with Norah, might flatter and woo, and even break (Mrs Burton smiled again, the risk seemed so infinitesimal) the girl's heart; but he was not likely, as a man of the world, to commit himself. And if after her end was served it might be thought expedient still that he should marry Clara, why a flirtation of this kind could make very little difference; it might put a stop to Mr Burton's ideas at the moment, but it need not affect them in the future. She made this plan, with her toes warming at the library fire, and she did not confide it to any one. Such schemes sound a great deal worse when they are put into words than they feel in the recesses of the bosom that gave them birth. She felt very well satisfied when she had thus settled what to do. It seemed the minimum of pain for the maximum of advantage; and then it was a kind of pain which Mrs Burton could not but contemplate with a certain mockery, and which she could but faintly realize.

At luncheon that day it turned out, as she supposed, that Mr Rivers was not one of the shooting party. He had been writing letters, he said; he was going to call at the Rectory in the afternoon to see Mr Dalton. In short, he had an appointment. Mr Dalton was a member of the Anthropological Society, to which he also belonged.

'I wonder if I might ask you to do something for me,' said Mrs Burton. 'It is just to leave a note at the Gatehouse. You know the Gatehouse? Mrs Drummond's, just opposite the Rectory.'

'Certainly. I know Mrs Drummond,' said Rivers. He answered very promptly, feeling that there was a covert attack intended, and that this was meant to remind him of the allegiance he owed elsewhere. His reply had thus quite an unnecessary degree of promptitude and explanatoriness. 'I have known her for many years. In fact, I called there yesterday.' He felt it was expedient for his own independence to assert his freedom of action at once.

'Then you won't mind leaving my note,' said Mrs Burton. 'We are getting up a picnic for Wednesday, you know; and I should like Norah to be with us. She has rather a dull life at home, poor child.'

'That is the pretty girl you were dancing with, Mr Rivers,' said Lady Florizel, 'with dark hair and hundreds of little flounces. I should have said she was too little for so many flounces, if she had consulted me.'

'That is the mistake girls always make,' said the Marchioness, 'especially girls who are not in society. They follow the fashion without ever thinking whether it suits them or not.'

'But, under correction, I think it did suit her,' said Mr Rivers. 'Do not let us call them flounces—call them clouds, or lines of soft white mist. I am not sufficiently learned in *chiffons* to speak.'

'Oh, but you are delightful on *chiffons*!' said Lady Florizel. 'Men always are when they know just



a little. Sometimes, you know, one can actually derive an idea from you; and then you make the most delicious mistakes. Clara, let us make him talk *chiffons*; it is the greatest fun in the world.'

'I have more confidence in my maid,' said Clara. She was not in the habit of controlling herself or hiding her emotions. She contracted her white forehead, which was not very high by nature, with a force which brought the frizzy golden fringe of hair over her very eyebrows—and pouted with her red lips. 'Besides, Mr Rivers has something better to do,' she said, getting up from the table.

She was the first to get up—a thing which filled the Marchioness with consternation. Clara was a girl of the nineteenth century, feeling that her youth, and her bloom, and riotous, luxurious beauty made her queen of the more gently toned, gently mannered company. She broke up the party with that pout and frown.

Rivers went away with the note in his pocket, believing devoutly that it had been intended for a snare for him, a way of interfering with his freedom. 'Let her wait at least till I am in her toils, which will not be just yet,' he said to himself while he went down the avenue; while Clara pursued her mother, who had gone to put on her bonnet to accompany the Marchioness on her drive, up-stairs.

'How could you, mamma?' she cried. 'Oh, how could you? It is because you think nothing of me; you don't care for me. To ask the Drummonds at all was bad enough; but to send Cyril Rivers to ask them. It seems too bad even for you.'

'Clara, what is Cyril Rivers to you?'

'To me?' Clara faltered, stopped short, was silent, gazing at her mother with blue, wide-open eyes, which astonishment made round. Even to a dauntless girl, accustomed to speak her mind, the question was a hard one. She could not answer, 'Papa means him to marry me. He is my property; no one has any right to him but me,' as she might have done had she spoken at all. It requires a very great deal of hardihood to put such sentiments into speech, and Clara, with all her confidence, was not quite bold enough. She gazed at her mother, with angry blue eyes, speaking with them what she could not say in words; but all she could do audibly was to murmur again, 'To me!'

'Yes, to you. I don't know what right you have to interfere. If you consider that you have any just right, state it to me; and if I find it reasonable I will tell you what I am doing; but, otherwise, not a word. In the circumstances composure and patience are the best things for you. I am acting, and I shall act, towards Mr Rivers according to principles of my own, and a system of my own; and I don't mean to be interfered with, Clara. You understand that.'

'I shall speak to papa,' said Clara, in her anger. 'I shall just tell it all to papa.'

'Do, my dear,' said her mother calmly, and put on her bonnet. It was clear that now, at least, there was not another word to be said.

Clara went away in her anger to Lady Florizel for sympathy.

'Mamma has made up her mind to ask those people,' she said. 'And I hate them. They are low people—people that ought not to be asked to meet you.'

'Oh, as for us, never mind! They will not hurt us,' said Lady Florizel shrugging her shoulders; 'but I thought you told me you were great friends with the people in the village before the ball.'

'That is the worst of all,' said Clara. 'We are great friends. They were all the company I ever had before I came out. But now, when I don't require them any longer, they have grown disagreeable; and yet there is the old habit existing all the same.'

'Poor Clara!' said her new companion, 'what a bore for you! Village companions are so apt to be a bore. But I am sure if you were to talk to your mamma she would find some way of getting rid of them. That would be the best.'

'Why, it is she that is asking them,' said Clara.

And it became more and more apparent that her injury was past help; for in the face of her mother's invitation what could even papa do?

Mr Rivers carried the note with much fidelity to its destination. 'I should not have ventured to come,' he said when he went in and met Mrs Drummond's look of suspicion, 'but for *this*. And I hope it will find favour in your eyes. I suppose I am to wait and take an answer? And it will be a favourable answer, I hope.'

Helen and her child had been talking of him before he appeared, and Norah had been a little agitated, half-pleasurably, half-painfully, by her mother's warning.

'I do not like him to come so often,' Mrs Drummond had said. 'Whether he means anything or not, I would much rather he did not come.'

'Mean, mamma! What could he mean, except to talk to you a little? I am sure he does not mean anything,' Norah had cried, with the premature confidence of her age.

And then he had made his appearance, and with the knowledge of that brief discussion in her mind she was embarrassed, and felt as if he must read all about it in her eyes.

'May I tell you what it is, Miss Drummond?' he asked, turning to her, while her mother opened the note, and sinking his voice. 'It is a picnic to the old tower of Dura. I suppose you know all about it. It is to be on Wednesday, and I hope you will come.'

'Oh, a picnic!' said Norah, with a flush of joyful anticipation. 'I never was at a real grown-up picnic. I should like it so much, if mamma thinks we may.'

'But perhaps you could influence mamma.'

'No, no. I don't think it. I would rather not bother her,' said Norah, with a little hesitation, feeling all her embarrassment return. 'Of course she must know best.'

'Oh, of course,' said Mr Rivers. He smiled as he looked at her, and Norah, giving a wistful, furtive glance at him, was suddenly seized with spontaneous wonder as to what he meant—a question not arising from what her mother had said, but from herself. The thought sprung up in her mind unawares, bringing with it a blush. What could he mean? Why did he come so often? Why did he wish that she should have this new pleasure? What could it matter to him? There would be plenty of people at the picnic—young people, nice people, pretty people, people all dressed in purple and fine linen—who would be much more like him than Norah. And why should he care? A delicious doubt, a delicious suspicion came into her thoughts. Could it be possible? Might it really, really—? She shut some little trap-door down upon it resolutely in her mind, and would not look at, would not consider that suggestion; but it ran through all her veins when she cast it out of her thoughts. Could it be possible? And this was not Ned Burton, a boy whom she had known all her life, but the hero of romance himself—he who looked as if he had walked out of a book. It flattered her—she could not tell why. She cast down her eyes, for he had been looking at her all the time, and it seemed to her as if he must be able to tell her thoughts.

But he did not. He took up the cotton with which she was working, and wound and unwound it upon his fingers.

'I have to run over to the Rectory,' he said. 'Perhaps I had better do that now, and come back to get my answer. Perhaps then I might have a cup of tea? This room is the very sort of room to drink tea in. The first dish of tea must have been made here.'

'It is not so old as that.'

'Oh, it is as old as we like to believe it,' said Mr Rivers. 'Don't disturb Mrs Drummond. I will go away now, and in half an hour I shall come back.' And he let himself out like a child of the house, assuming a familiarity to which he had not any right.

Norah sat quite tremulous, yet perfectly quiet, after he was gone, wondering, and trying to stop herself from wondering—feeling somehow that this must be that power of which she had read, which made the strongest and best of men subject to a girl—and feeling that it was not possible, seeing the girl was 'only *me*.'

'It is another invitation,' Mrs Drummond said, with a little sigh. 'You must decide about it, Norah. It will be a pleasure to you, and it seems hard you should not have a little pleasure. But, on the other hand, my dear, after all you told me about Ned, and how Mr Rivers—'

'There is nothing about Mr Rivers, mamma.'

'Perhaps not, perhaps not, dear. I do not say there is—anything, Norah; but still it is not comfortable that he should come so often. There is the note. I will not say yes or no, my darling. You shall decide whether we shall go or stay.'

Norah read the note over with glowing eyes. The blood came hot to her face. It seemed to open up before her a day out of Paradise. The children had made picnics among themselves often enough to Dura Tower. They had gone in the height of the summer for a long day; the boys walking, the girls packed into Mrs Dalton's pony-carriage, or the little donkey-chair, which lived in the village. Bread and butter, and fruit, and hard-boiled eggs, and bottles of milk was what they used to take with them; and they would come home laden with garlands of the lush woodbine, with honeysuckles in sheaves, and basketfuls of those fragile wild-flowers which never survive the plucking, but which children cannot resist. These old days rose before her with all their sweetness. But this was different;—one of the Dura carriages to take them up; a few hours among the woods, and luncheon out of doors, if it was warm enough; 'to show the Marchioness and the young ladies what little antiquities we have.' Perhaps the grandeur and the glory of the society would make up for the absence of the brilliant summer, and the freedom of the childish party; but yet—She looked up shyly at her mother with cheeks that were crimson upon her dark eyelashes.

'I suppose, mamma, it would be selfish of me to want to go?'

'That means you do want to go, Norah,' said Helen, shaking her head softly, with a half-reproachful smile.

'Is it wrong?' said Norah, stealing behind her mother's chair with a coaxing arm round her neck. 'I never saw anything like it. I *should* like, just this once. Our old little parties were such baby affairs, mamma. That donkey-chair, what fun it was! And oh! do you remember how it always ran away, and that time when little Jenny fell asleep? But this will be grand—something to see. And you will like the drive; it is such a pretty drive; and the woods will be lovely. I never was there in

October before.'

'You coaxing child, as Miss Jane says; you want to go.'

'Yes, please, mamma.'

And Norah dropt a little curtsey demurely, like the child she was no longer. And yet as she stood there in her gray frock, she was so very like a child that Helen had to rub her eyes and ask herself what was this wonderful difference. Yesterday or so Norah had trudged along among the boys, taking her share, pushing them about, carrying her own basket in all the *bon camaraderie* of childhood. Now she was the princess, drawing their wistful looks after her, breaking poor Ned's heart, attracting the other hero out of his natural sphere. How was it? The mother sighed a little, wondering, and smiled, with a sense that the world, which had so long neglected her, was offering to her, to herself, not to Norah, the sweetest, strangest flatteries. She was anxious as to how it might all end, and sometimes was unhappy; and yet she was pleased—what mother ever was otherwise?—'to see her bairn respected like the lave.'

And then Mr Rivers came back for his cup of tea. What did he want, haunting the old house? He came back for the answer, he said; and called himself Mrs Burton's man, and the penny-post, and made very merry over the whole transaction. But in all this he made it very apparent that any excuse for coming was sweet to him. And Norah laughed at the joke, and cast down her pretty eyes, and her colour went and came like the wind. What did he mean? Did he mean anything? Or was it for mere amusement that on every pretext possible he came to the Gatehouse?

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## CHAPTER XIII.

There was, however, another point to be considered before Wednesday, and that was the question of dress, which convulses a poor household when unusual festivities are in progress. Mrs Drummond's black silk was, as Mrs Dalton said, 'always nice.' It had lasted from Helen's prosperous days till now; it had changed its form half-a-dozen times, and now, thanks to the beneficent fashion which prevailed, short walking dresses had 'come out quite fresh,' as Norah declared in triumph. But Norah did not possess that *toilette fraîche* which is indispensable for a young lady at a picnic. Her gray frock was very pretty at home; but amid all the shining garments of the great young ladies, their perfect ribbons, and hats, and boots, and gloves, all those wonderful accessories which poor people cannot hope for, how could she look anything but a poor little Cinderella? 'My dress would do, mamma—it is not the dress,' Norah said, looking at herself in dismay in the old-fashioned long glass in its ebony frame, as they discussed this matter; 'and all that I have is well enough; good enough, you know, very nice for common wear. Short dresses are a blessing, but then they show one's boots; and the cuffs, and the collars, and the ribbons! Perhaps we ought not to have said we would go.'

'That is what I feared,' said Helen. 'It is hard you should not have a little amusement when it comes in your way; and then there are other things to think of; but to live among people who are richer, much richer than one is one's self—'

'What are the other things that have to be thought of?' said Norah, with that sudden fantastic jealousy of ulterior motives which affects the young.

'My dear Norah, I am not mercenary. I would not sacrifice your happiness for any worldly motive. I would not even suggest—But, my darling, you must see people—you must have it in your power at least to meet those whom—you must go into the world.'

Norah gazed at her mother with dilated eyes. They had come down into the drawing-room after their inspection of the poor boots and gloves that suggested Cinderella. And the child was standing against the light, against the old brown-gray curtains, which threatened to crumble into dust any day, and yet held out miraculously. The round mirror made a little picture of her standing there alone, like an old miniature in dim enamel. But Norah was not dim in herself at that moment—her brown eyes were dilated and shining—her cheeks mantled with the overwhelming blush of mingled indignation and shame. 'To meet—people!—oh! mamma, mamma, how can you!—is it all true, then, what people say?'

'Yes,' said Helen, gravely, 'or at least it is half true. I am ashamed, and yet I should not be ashamed. I want you to meet those who can appreciate you, who may love you, Norah, and make your life happy. Why should you look at me so indignantly? it is my duty. But I do not wish to speak of it to you.'

'Then I am going—to be inspected—to be offered in the market—to be—oh! mamma, I would rather die!'

'You are going for nothing of the kind. I shall have to put away my companion and friend who was such a comfort to me; and send you back into the place of a silly, impatient child.'

'So I am,' said Norah, throwing herself at her mother's feet, and hiding her tears and burning cheeks in Helen's gown. 'So I am. Oh, mamma, can't I work or do something? is there nothing, nothing in the world for a girl, but *that*?'

'Hush, my darling, hush!' said Helen, and it was upon this group that some one came in suddenly, whose indignation was prompt at the sight, and unhesitating. It was Dr Maurice, who had come down from London, as he did periodically to see the child, whom he considered as his ward; and who instinctively, seeing tears, made up his mind that Norah had been suffering cruelty, and that the mother was in fault.

'What is the matter?' he said. 'Norah crying! I have not seen her cry before since she was a baby—there must be a good cause.'

'She is growing a woman,' said her mother, 'and learning something about life, poor child; but fortunately this time the cause is not very grave.'

Norah sprang to her feet and dried her tears. She had divined long ere now that her old friend loved her a great deal better than he loved her mother. And Norah was ready to take up arms for her mother, à *outrance*, night or day.

'No, it was not very much,' she said, all glowing with tears, and blushes, and excitement; 'it was something you will laugh at—you will think it so like a silly woman. You know you hate us all, Dr Maurice, and that is what you will say.'

'Yes, I hate you all,' said the doctor, looking at her with eyes that softened and brightened unconsciously, and a voice that sounded caressing in spite of himself.

'I know it,' said Norah. 'Well, then, Dr Maurice, this is what I was crying about. We are going to a picnic with the Burtons, and the Marchioness of Upshire, and all kinds of fine people, and I was crying because I have not got a pretty dress.'

Dr Maurice gave a short laugh, and then he turned away his head, and his eyes glistened under their heavy brows. 'Poor child!' he said with a tremble in his voice—if it had been any one else probably he would have sneered, as Norah said, at the frivolity of woman's nature; but because it was Norah his heart melted within him, and the water came to his eyes.

'When is it going to come off?' he said.

'Oh, to-day—at one o'clock they were to call for us. Dear doctor,' said Norah, looking up at him laughing, yet with the tears still on her eyelashes, 'won't you say that, after all, I look very nice in my gray frock?'

'Go away, child,' he said, almost angrily, 'go and dress yourself and let me look at you after. I want to speak to your mamma.'

When she heard this, Helen was afraid. She believed in Dr Maurice because he had been substantially kind, and because he was her husband's friend; but she did not like him, and she had that fear of him which came from the conviction that he disliked and distrusted her.

'Why is this?' he said, as Norah went away. 'Mrs Drummond, I thought you knew that I look upon Norah as if she was my own. She should not want anything if you would let me know—I think you ought for Norah's sake to get over any feeling—and put pride aside.'

'It is not so easy,' said Helen, with a smile. 'Pride, if you call it so, sticks very close. You are very, very kind——'

'I am not kind—I don't mean to be; but I look upon Norah as if she were my own.'

'She is not your own, Dr Maurice,' said Helen with spirit. 'I cannot put a feeling in the place of a right. Nothing in the world would make me appeal to a stranger for finery for my child. We can live with what we have of our own.'

'Pride, pride!' said the doctor hastily. 'I don't mean to give offence; but I am not a stranger—I have known the child from her cradle. Why shouldn't you be so yielding—so kind if you will—as to tell me when she wants a dress? My little Norah! she has been a delight to me all my life. If I had my will, she should rustle with the best.'

Helen was angry, but she was moved. A man who loved her child could scarcely shut her heart even by disliking herself. She put out her hand to the surly critic who had never trusted her—'Thanks,' she said, 'many thanks. I accept your love for Norah; but I could not accept anything else. Why, you must know that! My child, Robert's child, appealing to your charity! Dr Maurice, I am not ungrateful, but surely Cinderella's frock is better than that.'

The doctor was silent, he could not reply. 'Poor little Cinderella!' he said; but just then there appeared a vision at the door, which took away his breath. Men are poor creatures where a woman's dress is concerned. To Dr Maurice, who knew no better, Norah's pretty rose-coloured ribbons, the little end of rose-coloured feather, which relieved the black in her hat, and the fresh little pair of gray gloves, which she had indulged in, made Cinderella at once, without more ado, into the fairy princess. 'Why, good heavens, child, what would you have more?' he said, almost with offence. He had been taken in, he thought, and betrayed into an unnecessary warmth of sympathy. It is true that, after a little, even Dr Maurice saw points which might be improved: but he could not look upon Norah's toilette with the instructed eyes which Clara Burton and Lady Florizel turned upon it; and it was the other girls, the Marchioness, the ladies who knew, not a mere man, ignorant as a baby, whom Norah feared.

However, it was grand to see the carriage glide up to the door, and the ladies get into it. Mrs

Ashurst and her niece were in it already, two highly respectable persons with claims to belong to the county. The Rectory people were not asked, and Katie stood at the window and watched with somewhat wistful looks, waving her hand as they drove away. And Dr Maurice put them into the carriage, and stood on the steps with his hat off watching them too. There was a splendour about it certainly, whether it was delightful or not. Norah thought of the donkey-chaise loaden with children, and for a moment sighed; she had worn brown holland in those days—but now brown holland all embroidered and decorated was a great deal too expensive—far more costly than her gray—and she had not cared what she wore then, which was far better; whilst now she felt that Miss Ashurst was looking at her, and saw that her cuffs were rather coarse in texture and her feather nothing but a tip. Neither was the drive very lively in the society of these respectable ladies, the younger of whom was older than Norah's mother. But when the carriage approached the end of the pilgrimage, Norah's sky began to brighten. All the others had already arrived, and on a green knoll in front of the old tower the luncheon was being arranged. It was a prettier, gayer sight than the old parties with the donkey chaise. Lady Florizel and her sister were standing at one of the windows in the tower with Ned Burton, looking down; but among the trees near the gate Cyril Rivers was waiting on the outskirts of a group, looking round with evident anxiety, waiting to open the carriage door and hand the ladies out. 'I am so glad you have come,' he whispered into Norah's ear. His very face brightened up at the sight of them. There is no girl living who could withstand such delicate flattery, and that not from any nobody, not from an old friend and faithful slave like Ned Burton, but from the hero, the prince of romance. Norah's heart grew light in spite of herself; she might be indifferently dressed, she might even look as she felt, a poor relation: but this distinction all the same was hers—the prince had found Cinderella out, and none of the others could get a word from him. He took them to Mrs Burton, who was doing the honours of the old tower to the Marchioness, and who received them very graciously, giving thanks to some heathenish deity of her own for the success of her plans; and then he found a shady spot for them where they could command everything. 'I suppose you do not care to go over the tower,' he said. 'I know it as well as my A B C,' said Norah; and then he placed them under the great ash-tree and took up his own position by Mrs Drummond's side.

Mrs Burton gave thanks to her gods for her success. She looked up and saw Ned's eyes peering out of the window above as if he were about to swoop down upon her. 'What are you doing, Ned,' she said in momentary alarm.

'Getting this for Lady Florizel,' he said, holding out a tuft of wild flowers from the old wall. And Mrs Burton thanked that fetish, whoever he was. But she did not see that between the line of Ned's hat and his nose, were a pair of eyes glancing fiercely down upon the ash-tree. If lightning could have come out of mortal eyes, that tree would have shrivelled up and borne no more foliage. The spell was beginning to work. Perhaps Cyril Rivers would not have so committed himself had he not believed that the Burtons had made some scheme to detach him from Norah's side, and to slight and scorn her. He thought they had attempted to make him privy to a plot against her comfort and honour, and that she had been asked here on purpose to be insulted by that impertinence of society which women cannot struggle against. This was the conclusion he came to, and all that was chivalrous and kind was stirred within him. If everybody else neglected them, he at least would show that a man's proper place was by the side of the weak. And then the weak who had to be succoured was so pretty, so charming, so sweet! A man's generous impulses are immensely strengthened in such cases. Miss Ashurst, who was as well-born as anybody there, and as well dressed, was really neglected by the whole company: but Mr Rivers did not feel himself impelled to her side by his desire to succour those who were in need.

'Look there, papa,' said Clara Burton, going to her father and thrusting her hand through his arm, 'only look there!'

'Rivers!' said Mr Burton, gazing through the branches, 'with that girl again!'

'And whose fault is it? Mamma's! It is all mamma. I told you; she actually sent him there—sent him to their house!'

'I will soon put a stop to all that; don't be disturbed, Clara,' said her father, and he went off with great vehemence to where his wife was standing. He put his hand on her arm and drew her away from the Marchioness. 'One moment—a thousand pardons,' he said, bowing to the great lady, and then turned to his wife with the air of a suppressed volcano. 'Clara, what on earth do you mean? there's Rivers with those Drummonds again!'

'He has been with them ever since they came, Mr Burton; probably he will drive home with them. He seems to have made himself their attendant for the day.'

'But, good Lord, Clara! what do you mean? Do you mean to drive your daughter out of her senses—don't you intend to interfere?'

'I am acting for the best,' said Mrs Burton, 'and it will be at your peril if you meddle. Take it in hand if you please; but if the work is to be mine I must do it my own way.'

'But, Clara, for heaven's sake——'

'I have no time for any more, Mr Burton. I must be allowed to work, if I work at all, in my own way.'

And with this poor satisfaction Mr Burton had to be content. He went away fuming and secretly smarting with indignation, through the groups of people who were his own guests, gathered

together to make him merry. A mixture of rage and bewilderment filled his bosom. He could no more bear to have his Clara crossed than Mrs Drummond could bear to cross Norah; and his wife's silence was far beyond his comprehension. Clara met him as he came up, with a fluctuating colour, now pale, now crimson, and her white low forehead almost lost under the fringe of hair. She clasped his arm energetically with both hands. 'Tell me, papa! what has she got to say?'

'Well, Clary, we must not interfere. Your mother has her own way of acting; she says it is all right. There are dozens more that would be glad of a look from you, Clary. For to-day we are not to interfere.'

Clara, who was not in the habit of disguising her feelings, tossed his arm from her, pulling away her hands; she was half wild with injured pride and self-will. She went up to the group under the tree with anger in her step and in her eye.

'Oh Norah!' she said, 'I did not know you were coming. Good morning, Mrs Drummond. Mr Rivers, I thought you were altogether lost. You disappeared the moment we set you down. I suppose you had something more agreeable in hand.'

'I had nothing in hand, Miss Burton, except like everybody else—to amuse myself, I suppose.'

'And you have found a charming way of doing that, I am sure,' said poor jealous, foolish Clara; her face was flushed, her voice slightly elevated. She could not bear it; if it had been one of the Ladies Merewether, or even one of the Daltons from the Rectory—but Norah! It was more than she could put up with. Mrs Drummond, who was decorous, the very soul of good order and propriety, rose up instinctively to cover this little outbreak. 'Let us walk about a little,' she said. Let us hide this unwomanly self-betrayal, was what she meant.

Norah, too, was wounded and ashamed, though without feeling herself involved. Clara was 'in a temper,' Norah thought. They all knew that Clara in a temper was to be avoided. She was sorry Mr Rivers should see it. 'Oh Clara! isn't it strange to be here with everything so different,' she said. 'Don't you remember our pranks on the grass when we were children? and your pony which we all envied so much? How odd it is in some ways to be grown up!'

Clara took no notice of this conciliatory speech, but Mr Rivers did. 'I hope it is not less pleasant,' he said.

'I don't know—we walk about now, instead of running races and playing games. Do you remember, Clara—'

'I have not time to talk over all that old nonsense,' said Clara. 'The Marchioness is calling me;' and she turned sharply off and joined her mother, who was with that great lady. She was quite pale with anger and dismay. She walked up to Mrs Burton and looked her in the face. It was *her* doing! and then she drew back a step, and stood behind, doing all she could to make her vexation visible. She wanted to punish her mother. The others had all dispersed into groups; but Clara stood alone, determined to be unhappy. Mrs Burton, however, was not punished at all; her scheme had succeeded. Her daughter's temper could not last above an hour or two; and her son was safe. He was walking about with Lady Florizel, 'paying her,' as Miss Ashurst said, 'every attention,' under her satisfied eyes.

The picnic ran its course like other picnics. It was very delightful to some, and very wretched—a day to date from, as the unhappiest ever known—to others. Cyril Rivers did not, as Mrs Burton had predicted, leave the Drummonds all day. Had he suspected that this was the very result she aimed at, and that Ned's lowering brows and unhappy looks were the very things the party had been given for, the chances are that he would have resisted the temptation which was stealing over him; but he did not know this, and he did not resist. He thought they were laying vulgar visible claim to him, before he had made up his mind one way or another; and this was a thing his pride refused to allow; while at the same time Norah was very sweet. She was a 'rosebud set about with wilful thorns;' she would not agree with him, nor yield in argument; she was not a shadowless beauty all in broad blaze of sunshine and complacency, like Clara; there were clouds and shadows about her, and a veil of soft mystery, spontaneous movements of fancy, wayward digression out of one thing into another. Mrs Drummond, who was the spectator at the banquet, grew alarmed. She tried to separate them, to lead Norah away among the other people. But she was balked in that by every means. The other people were chiefly county people, too grand for the Drummonds, who were civil to the handsome mother and pretty daughter, but not anxious for their further acquaintance. Wherever they turned Mr Rivers met them. He was not cold, nor slow to see when Helen wanted to seat herself, when she wanted to move about. At last, when the afternoon was beginning to wane, and the elder ladies to think of their shawls, some of the younger ones proposed a dance on the green. Mrs Drummond was left sitting by herself, while Norah went to dance with Mr Rivers, and it was then for the first time that Mr Burton came up to her. She could not but suppose that he had been taking too much wine.

'Well, Helen,' he said, in his loud voice, 'this is an unusual sort of scene for you—like it? I don't suppose you know many people, though; but that little girl of yours is going too fast; mind my word, she is going too fast.'

'I think, Mr Burton, you mistake—'

'No, I don't mistake;—going too fast—trying to lead Cyril Rivers off his feet as she did my Ned. What am I talking of? No, not Ned; Ned has more sense—some other of the lads. But Cyril Rivers,

mind you, ain't such a fool as he looks.'

He went on, but Helen did not hear him. Suddenly the whole situation glanced upon her. If a flash of lightning had illuminated everything it could not have been more clear. It was not a good light or a friendly that blazed over that scene, which was confused by so many shades of good and evil feeling. Helen's whole spirit had been moved in her by the tone and words of her cousin in respect to her child. He had touched her daughter—and a woman is as a tigress when a finger is laid upon her cub, people say.

I don't know if this was any excuse for her; but certainly, all in a moment, something appeared within her reach which made her heart beat. Revenge! Whatever his degree of guilt had been, this man had been her husband's evil angel; he had put him in the way which had led him to his destruction—with how much or how little guilt who could say? And Helen looked over the bright scene—the dancers on the grass, the groups standing round, the autumn trees dressed out in all their beauty, like their human brethren—and suddenly saw, or thought she saw, that she had the happiness of her adversary's home in her hand. Little Norah, all unaware of her tragic task, was the Nemesis who was to accomplish their overthrow. There was Ned, heart-broken, but defiant—Ned whom she had seen watching all day, miserable as youth only is; and Clara, furious, making a show of herself in her passion. Was it the sin of the father that was being visited on the children? Helen's heart gave one loud, angry throb; the time of her temptation had come. She did not use the word revenge; all that was brought before her in the sudden tumult of her thoughts was punishment—retribution for sin.

While this terrible suggestion flashed into Helen's mind and took sudden possession of it, another idea had begun to germinate in another bosom, which was to bear fruit also. Dr Maurice went to see the Haldanes, and had a great deal of conversation with them. This conversation ran chiefly upon the one subject on which they were both so much interested—'the child.' From them he learnt that Norah had 'come out,' that she had made a great *succès*, that everybody (to wit the Daltons) were raving of her prettiness and sprightliness, and how much admired she was; and that since the ball Cyril Rivers had 'never been out of the house.'

'Find out what sort of fellow he is, Maurice,' said Stephen Haldane; 'it would be hard to see our little Norah throw herself away. I thought it would have been Ned.'

'Ned! Ned? Burton's son—a mere City fellow! Good heavens! has it come to that?' said Dr Maurice.

He left the Gatehouse, and walked slowly to the station, and went home just about the time when the dance began on the green. 'The child wants some one to take care of her,' he said over and over again to himself. When he got home he went over all his house, and looked at it with a half comic, half puzzled look. The idea perhaps had gleamed across his mind before; it was an idea he did not half like. It would be a trouble to him—more trouble than anybody could imagine. But still if such a sacrifice should be necessary—for Norah's sake.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

The thought of revenge which had thus entered Helen's mind might have died out of it naturally, or it might have been overcome by better thoughts. All the passion and conflict of her life had died into stillness; six years had come and gone since the great storm had passed over her, which had changed her existence, and though that had not come to any satisfactory conclusion, but only raged itself out, leaving germs that might grow into tumultuous life again—so long an interval of quiet had buried these germs very deep. She had grown tranquil in spite of herself; the calm routine of her life had taken hold upon her, and she had made that change which is so imperceptible while in progress, so real and all-influencing when once accomplished—the change which steals away the individuality of existence, and introduces that life by proxy, to which we all—or at least to which, all women—must come. Insensibly, without knowing it, Helen had grafted herself into her child. She had lived for Norah, and now she lived in Norah, regarding the events of the world and the days as they passed solely in reference to the new creature who had a new career to weave out of them. This change has a wonderful effect upon the mind and being. Her sphere of interests was altered, her hopes and wishes were altered, her very modes of thought. The gravity of her nature gave way before this potent influence. Had she been in the way of it, Helen, who had lived through her own youth with a certain serious dignity, accepting her pleasures as a necessity rather than entering into them with enthusiasm, would have acquired for herself, no doubt, the character of a frivolous woman, fond of balls and gaiety, all because of the gayer temper of her child. She felt with Norah that thrill of wonder about Cyril Rivers; her own heart began to beat a little quicker when she heard him coming; a reflection of Norah's blush passed over her. She had to make an effort now and then not to be altogether carried away by this strange entry she had made into another nature; for Norah was not like her mother in nature; training and constant association had made them alike, and it was quite possible that Norah in later life might become Helen, as Helen for the moment had become Norah. But this wondrous double life that ebbs and flows from one heart to another as from one vessel to another—the same blood, the same soul—is not very explicable in words. It was only when Helen sat, as she did at the moment we are now describing, all by herself over her little fire, and felt the silence round her, and realized her own individuality separate from the rest of the world, that the

old strain of her thoughts came back to her, and for half an hour at a time she became herself once more.

It was a month after the day of the picnic. The guests at Dura had departed, or rather had been succeeded by new ones, of whom the Drummonds knew nothing. A breach had been made between the great house and the village—a breach which the Daltons murmured and wondered at, but which no one attributed distinctly to its true cause. That cause, Mrs Drummond knew very well, was Norah. They had been invited once more to Dura after the picnic, and Mr Rivers once more had constituted himself their attendant. By this time all other motives except one had ceased to influence the young man. He had ceased to think of the Burtons' claims or of Clara's fury—things which, no doubt, had at first made the pursuit of Norah piquant and attractive to him. What he thought of now was Norah herself. He had no intention of committing himself—no thought of compromising his future by a foolish match; but he fell in love—he could not help it. It is a thing which men of the best principles, men incapable of ruining themselves by an absurd marriage, will nevertheless do from time to time. How he should get out of it he did not know, and when he ventured to think at all, he was very sorry for himself for the fatality which made Norah impossible. But impossible or not, this was what had happened to him; he had fallen in love. The sensation itself was sweet; and Clara's perpetual angry pout, her flash of wrath when he approached Norah, her impatient exclamation at the sound of her name, amused him immensely, and at the same time flattered his vanity. So did Ned's lowering brows and unhappy looks. Mr Rivers was tickled with his own position, flattered and amused by the effect his erratic proceedings had produced. And he had fallen in love. I am sorry to say that Mrs Drummond encouraged him on that evening which she and her daughter spent at Dura after the picnic. She waved him, as it were, in the faces of the Burtons like a flag of triumph. She took pleasure in Ned's misery, though she liked Ned—and in Clara's wrath. They had scorned her child; but her child was able to turn all their plans to confusion, and break up their most skilful combinations. Norah was the queen of the moment, and the others were crushed under her little foot. She was able to make Ned's life a burden to him and destroy Clara's prospects. I am very sorry to have to say this of Helen; but I have never set her up as possessing the highest type of character, and it was true.

She was heartily sorry for it afterwards, however, it must be added. When she got home she felt ashamed, but rather for having done something that did not come up to her own ideal of womanly or lady-like behaviour, than for the pain she had helped to inflict. Even while she was sorry for having 'encouraged' (women are so conscious of all that word means) Mr Rivers, she was not sorry for Ned's despair, which rather amused her—nor for Clara's fury, which made her so angry that she would have liked to whip Clara. She was only ashamed of the deed; she did not dislike the results. Norah, as so often happens, did not know half, nor nearly half, of what it all meant. She was flattered by Mr Rivers's attention; she admired him, she liked him. He was the hero, and he had taken her for his heroine. The thought entranced her girlish fancy, and seduced her into a thousand dreams. She wondered would he 'speak' to her, and what should she answer him? She framed pictures to herself of how he should be brought to the very verge of that 'speaking,' and then by chance prevented and sent away, and longing and anxious, while Norah herself would get a respite. She imagined the most touching scenes—how somebody unknown would be found to watch over her, to bring wonderful good fortune to her, to be at hand when she was in any danger, to save her life, and perform all kinds of wonders; and how at last, suddenly turning upon this anonymous guardian angel, she should find that it was he. Everything that a true knight had ever done for his lady she dreamt of having done for her, and a sweet exultation, a grateful sense of her own humility and yet grandeur would fill her foolish little mind. But still, even in her fancy, Norah held as far off as possible the inevitable response. No lady, of course, could accept such devotion without sooner or later bestowing the reward; but the devotion, and not the reward, was the thing it pleased her to contemplate. It surrounded with a halo of glory not only herself, the recipient, but even in a higher degree the man who was capable of bestowing such exquisite, and delicate, and generous service. Such are the fantastic fancies of a girl when she finds herself wafted into the land of old romance by the astounding, delicious, incomprehensible discovery that some one has fallen in love with her. She was not in the very least in love with him.

All this is a long way from the November evening when Helen sat over her fire, and became for the periodical half-hour herself, and not simply Norah's mother. Thinking it all over, she blushed a little over her own conduct. Mr Rivers had left Dura, but he kept writing to her on one absurd pretext after another. Mrs Drummond had answered very briefly one of these notes, and she was taking herself to task for it now. Was she right to 'encourage' Cyril Rivers? It had punished the Burtons, and she was not sorry for that. But was such a mode of revenge permissible? Was it consistent with her own dignity, or such a thing as ought to be? Susan had not yet brought in the lamp, and she was sitting in the ruddy darkness, scarcely illuminated, yet made rosy by the brilliant not-flaming redness of the fire. Norah even now would have been frightened to sit so in that haunted room; but it was not haunted to Helen. It was a clear, moonlight evening out of doors, and the thin long lines of window at the other end of the room let in each a strip of dark wintry blue between the brown-gray curtains. This cold light, and the ruddy, suppressed glow of the fire, balanced each other, holding each their own half of the room like two armies, of which the red one made continual sorties upon the realm of the other, and the blue one stood fast without a movement. It was a curious little interior, but Helen did not see it. She sat, as thoughtful people so often sit, with her eyes fixed upon the red glow of the embers. In a variation of the same attitude, half visible as the light rose and fell, like a spell-bound woman, her image shone in the round mirror.



Norah was at the Rectory spending the evening, and Norah's mother had changed into Helen herself, and not another. How many old thoughts came and went through her mind it is needless to say; but they resolved themselves into this, that she had sacrificed her own dignity, that what she was doing was not the thing she ought to do. What was the punishment of the Burtons to her? Why should she like to give a heart-ache to a boy and girl who had done her no harm? It was to get at their father, and give him a stab through their means; but was that a kind of warfare for a woman—a lady? Helen started in the dark, though no one could see her. She had a high, almost fantastic, sense of honour and generosity, yet in this she was sacrificing both.

I do not know what impulse it was which made her, when the fire began to burn low and wanted refreshment, go to the window and look out—no reason in particular—because it was a beautiful night. She stood looking out on the moonlight, on the silent country road, and the lively lights which shone in the Rectory windows opposite. She had rung for the lamp; she was going to have her woman's meal, her cup of tea, in the solitude which was not grievous, for to be sure it would last but an hour or two. On the table there was a basket full of work, some dress-making for Norah, and a novel, for still Helen loved the novels which took her into other lives. All these placid details gave an air of profoundest peace to the scene, and the white, clear moonlight shone outside, and the stars, sharpened and brightened by frost, fluttered, as if they had wings or a heart that throbbed, out of the blue of the sky; when suddenly the place became clamorous, the silence fled, the echoes carried circles of sound all over the unseen country. Mr Burton was coming home. A slight smile came upon Helen's face. All this ostentation and noise of wealth did not irritate her as it used to do. The phaeton came dashing along, and paused a moment at the corner, where Williams's shop threw out a stream of illumination. Some one else sat by Mr Burton's side—some one who suddenly, as they passed, turned his face full into the light.

In a moment Helen's heart had begun to beat like an engine suddenly set in motion; the blood mounted up into her ears, to her heart, like its moving wheels and piston. She clenched her hand, and a sudden demon seemed to wake up and come into existence all in a moment. It was the man whom she believed to be her husband's murderer—the destroyer of her own happiness and of Robert's good name. She stood as if spell-bound while they drove past the window, laughing and talking. Nay, there was even a half pause, and Mr Burton made some explanation, and pointed to the Gatehouse, not seeing the secret spectator. She heard the sound of their voices—the laugh; and clenched her hands tighter, and through her mind there passed words which a woman should not say.

It was then that Susan came into the room with the lamp. When she had set it down on the table, and turned round to close the window, it startled her to see where Helen was standing. Susan uttered an exclamation; it gave her 'a turn;' and she had a still greater turn when she perceived the change in Mrs Drummond's face. But for the moment she did not say anything. It was only when she had arranged the tea and put everything ready that she ventured to look again, and encountered Helen's eyes, which were fixed, and did not see her.

'Lord bless us!' said Susan, 'if something has happened, 'm, don't look dreadful like that, but say it out.'

Helen woke up at the sound of her voice. She tried to smile and clear her countenance.

'Nothing has happened,' she said; and it startled her to find how hoarse she was. 'I was thinking only about old times.'

'That comes o' Miss Norah being out to tea,' said Susan. 'I'd think of old times fast enough if I could do any good. But what's the use? Thinking and thinking only moiders a body's brain. I've give it up for my part.'

'It is the wisest way,' said Helen, trying to smile.

'Shall I ask Miss Jane to come and stay with you a bit? or shall I run for Miss Norah?' asked Susan, who was practical-minded, and felt that something ought to be done.

'Never mind, Susan. It is very kind of you to think of me. It will pass over directly,' said Helen; and she was so decided and imperative that Susan was forced to yield.

When she was gone, Mrs Drummond rose and walked about the room with hasty, tremulous steps. She was not sick nor sorry, as the woman thought, but burning with wild indignation, sudden rage. Her better feelings were overwhelmed by the tide of passion that rushed into her mind. 'Golden and Burton! Golden and Burton!' When she had last repeated these words she had felt herself powerless, helpless, unable to inflict any punishment upon them, compelled to subside into silence, knowing that neither her voice nor anything she could do would reach them. It was different now, she said to herself, with fierce satisfaction. Now she had indeed something in her power; now she could indeed reach the very heart of one of them. Her cheek glowed, her eyes blazed in her solitude. She would do it. She would abstract Mr Rivers from them utterly, and she would break the heart of their boy. She seemed to hold it in her hand, and crush it, as she pursued these thoughts. This was the horrible effect produced upon a reasonable woman by the appearance of a man who had wronged her. It is not easy to bear the seeming prosperity of the wicked. He had taken from Helen all, except Norah, that made life worth having, and he himself had appeared to her full of jovial talk and laughter, going to visit at Dura, evidently a favoured guest. The difficulty was one which David felt even more deeply, and has argued with himself upon in many a strain which religion has made familiar to us as the air we breathe. In the Psalms it is never said that it is wrong to chafe at the prosperity of evil-doers, but only that that

prosperity is short-lived, and that ruin is coming. When Helen suddenly saw her enemy, the wicked man *par excellence*, the incarnation of wrong and cruelty, flourishing like the green bay-tree, gay and confident as he had always been, it was not wonderful if she took the Old Testament rather than the New for her guide. The only strange thing was, that with the curious inconsistency of human nature, she grasped the weapon that she had suddenly found at her side, to strike, not him, but his companion. Golden and Burton! Once more they had become one to her; her enemies—the incarnation of murder, slander, and wrong!

'Mamma, Ned has walked across with me,' said Norah, running in all fresh from the outer air, with a red hood over her brown hair. 'May I ask him to come in? He looks so unhappy, mamma.'

'I don't see that we have anything to do with his unhappiness,' said Helen; but already he was standing at the door, looking in very wistfully. Norah was rather wistful too; her heart was relenting over her old vassal; and now there was no Mr Rivers in the way to take possession of her, and come between her and the looks of others.

Ned came in with very doubtful step, not knowing whether to be frightened or glad. He was not afraid of Mrs Drummond; she had never been unkind to him, and there seemed a possibility now that his misery might be over, and that Norah might relent. But it was a shock to Ned to find that she did not offer him her hand, but only bowed stiffly, and began to speak to her daughter.

'You are early to-night,' she said. 'I did not expect you so soon.'

'Oh, mamma, soon! Why, it is eleven; and you have the tea-things still on the table. Mamma, I shall never be able to go anywhere, if you behave so. You have not had any tea.'

'I have not wanted it. I did not observe that it was there,' said Helen, seating herself on her former seat by the fire. In doing this, she turned her back upon Ned, who, startled and wounded, did not know what to do. Norah was alarmed too. She made a sign to him to sit down, and then went to her mother, taking her hand,

'Mamma, you are not well,' she said.

'I am quite well. I fear, however, I shall not be good company for—Mr Burton to-night.'

'Mamma! Why it is only Ned!'

'He is Mr Burton's son,' said Helen, trembling with emotion. 'Norah, do you remember the man who murdered your father, and tried to disgrace him—Golden—*that* man? Well, I have just seen him drive up with Mr Burton to Dura. They paused, and pointed out this house to each other—the place where their victims were living. You may understand why I am not fit company for—Mr Burton to-night.'

'Oh, my poor, dear mother! have you had this to bear, with no one to support you? I will never go out and leave you again.'

'The sight of his face is like a curse to me,' said Helen, scarcely knowing what she said. 'I have had as much as I can bear for one night.'

'Yes, dear mamma, so you have,' said soothing Norah. And then behind her mother's back she made an imperative sign to poor Ned, whispering, 'Go away; go away!'

He stumbled up to his feet, poor fellow! so dreadfully disappointed that he could scarcely find voice enough to speak. But yet his instinct was to strike one blow in self-defence.

'Mrs Drummond,' he said, clearing his voice, 'I don't know much about Mr Golden; but if he is such a man as you say, my father must be deceived; and I have nothing at all to do with it. Is it fair to punish me?'

'Oh, your father!' said Helen, facing suddenly round upon him, with a flush on her face, and the tremulous movement of passion in all her frame. If she had not been so agitated, she would not have spoken so, let us hope, to the man's son. 'Your father is not deceived. I don't say you know. But you are his son.'

'Good evening, Norah!' said Ned; he crushed his hat between his hands, and went straight out without another word. What a change from the hopeful spirit in which he had crossed the threshold two minutes before! But like many a man who makes an abrupt retreat, Ned found he fared the worse for his impetuosity when he had got outside. He might have stayed and asked some questions about it, fathomed it somehow, tried to discover what was the meaning of it. He walked up the avenue, upon which the moon was shining bright, so confused and troubled that he could not tell certainly which was the cloud floating along at a break-neck pace before the wind and which the true shadows, themselves immovable, which his rapid progress made almost as wildly fugitive. He thought he had been on the eve of renewed happiness, and lo! now he found himself pushed further off than ever; repulsed, he could not tell how. A tide of wild fancy rushed through his mind, carrying a hundred thoughts upon it as the wind carried the cloud. Sometimes it was the image of Mrs Drummond which was uppermost, sometimes a wondering puzzled question about his father, sometimes the name of Golden. He remembered dimly the trial and the comments upon the latter, and how his own young mind had glowed half with indignation, half with sympathy. He was better able to judge now; but Helen's language sounded violent and exaggerated to him. 'The man who murdered your father'—'the sight of his face is like a curse.' What language was this for any one in their senses to use?

A stormy night with a full moon is perhaps the most dramatic spectacle in nature. The world was flooded with light as Ned, a dark speck in all that whiteness, came out into the open lawns amid which his father's house stood. The wind was driving the clouds across the clear blue at such a desperate pace as might become the pursued and terrified stragglers of a great army; and the army itself, piled up in dark confused masses in the north, loomed behind the house of Dura, which was inundated by the white radiance. These angry forces were turning to bay, heaping themselves in a threatening mass, glooming in silent opposition to all the splendour and glory of the light. Ned's heart was so sick and sore that he gazed at this sight with unusual force of fancy, wondering if it could mean anything? The moon and the wind were doing all they could to disperse these vapours; they were driven back upon each other, heaped up in masses, pursued off the face of the sky, which over Ned's head was blue and clear as a summer noon. But yet the clouds gathered, held together, stood, as it were, at bay. Did it mean anything? Was that storm about to burst over the house, which stood so tranquilly, whitened over by the moon, below. This was what Ned asked himself (though he was not usually imaginative) as he went in with an ache in his heart to his father's house.

## END OF VOL. II.

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[The end of *At His Gates, Volume 2* by Margaret Oliphant]

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