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Title: Averil

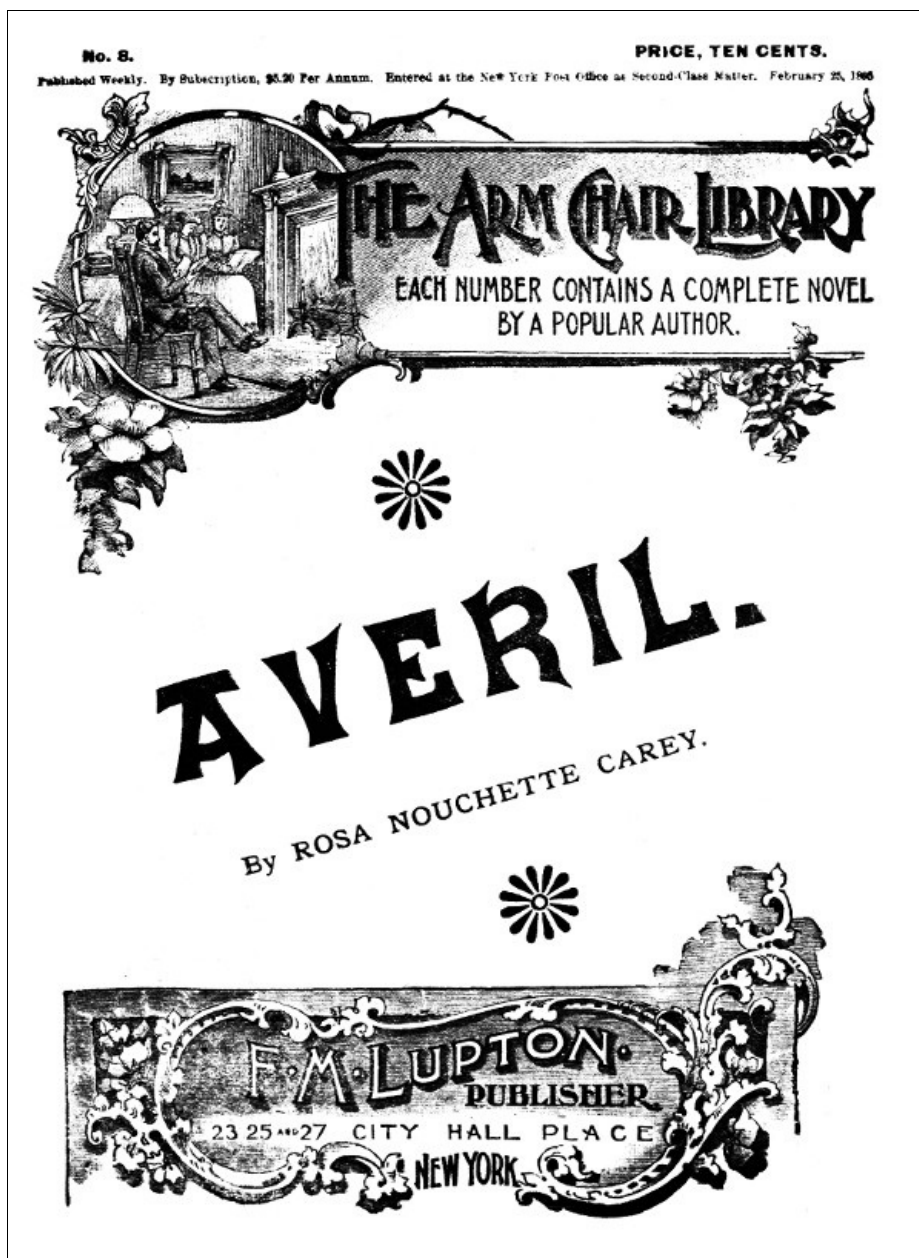
Author: Rosa Nouchette Carey

Release date: February 10, 2015 [EBook #48228]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Chris Whitehead, Demian Katz and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (Images courtesy of the Digital Library@Villanova University (<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/>))

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Averil.

By ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY.

CHAPTER I.

A WET DAY IN LINCOLN'S INN.

MR. HARLAND was one of those enviable persons who invariably take a cheerful view of everything; in the favorite parlance of the day, he was an optimist. A good digestion, an easy-going temperament, and a conscious void of offense toward his fellow-creatures, all contributed to furnish him with a fine flow of spirits. In this way he was a philosopher, and would discourse for a good half hour at a time on the folly of a man who permitted himself to be disturbed by any atmospheric changes; he thought it derogatory to the dignity of a human being to be depressed by a trifle more or less of fog. No man delighted more than he did in the sunshine—a spring day moved him to exuberant animation; but, on the other hand, no pressure of London smoke, no damp, clinging fog, no scarifying east wind, no wearisome succession of wet days, ever evoked an impatient expression or brought him down to the dull level on which other people find themselves.

This made him a delightful companion, and when Mrs. Harland (who certainly matched her husband in good humor) once averred herself a fortunate woman, none of her friends contradicted her.

Mr. Harland had just reached his chambers in Lincoln's Inn one morning, and as he divested himself of his wet overcoat he hummed a little air in an undertone.

The surroundings would have looked dreary enough to any other person. It was difficult to recognize that May had actually arrived; the air had a February chill in it; and the heavy, leaden sky and ceaseless downpour of steady rain made the few passers-by shiver; now and then a lawyer's clerk hurried along, uttering a sort of dumb protest in his raised shoulders and turned-up collar. In that quiet spot the drip of the water from the roofs was distinctly audible, alternating with the splash of the rain on the stone flags of the court. Mr. Harland glanced at the letters lying on his table, then he walked up to the fire-place, and spread his white, well-shaped hands over the cheerful blaze.

"My housekeeper is a jewel!" he muttered. "She is worth her weight in gold, that woman; she seems to know by instinct when to light a fire. Bless me, how it is raining! Well, people tell me I am an oddly constituted person, but I believe in my heart that I thoroughly enjoy a wet day; one is sure of a quiet morning; no fussy clients, to bore one and take up one's valuable time; not that I object to clients," with a chuckle. "Halloo! come in!" as a modest rap sounded at the door. "Well, Carruthers, what is it? No one can be possibly wanting me this morning," as a solemn-faced young man stood hesitating on the threshold.

"The young lady said she was in no hurry, sir; would not disturb you for the world. It is Miss Willmot."

"Miss Willmot!" and Mr. Harland dropped his eye-glasses, and then picked them up in a hurry. "Show her in, show her in at once, Carruthers; and mind, I am engaged; I am not to be interrupted on any account. To think of that delicate little creature venturing out on such a day! What do you mean by it, what do you mean by it, Miss Averil?" advancing with outstretched hands and a beaming face, as a little figure appeared in the doorway.

"Don't scold me," returned the girl, in a sweet, plaintive voice. "I am not so imprudent as you think. I took a cab, and drove all the way, so I am not wet at all; no, indeed I am not," as Mr. Harland inspected her carefully, touching her dress and mantle, as though to convince himself of the truth of her words; but he only shook his head, and drew an easy-chair close to the fire.

"Sit down and warm yourself," he said, with a good-humored peremptoriness. "You are not the sort to brave damp with impunity. You are a hot-house plant, that is what you are, Averil; but you have no one to look after you, and so you just go on your willful way."

"You speak as though you were not pleased to see me," with a slight pout; "but I know better, do I not, Mr. Harland!" laying a thin little hand on his arm.

The lawyer rubbed up his gray hair with a comical gesture. "I am always pleased to see you, my dear," he said at last, in a fatherly sort of way, for he had daughters of his own, and there was a very real friendship between him and this girl, whom he had known from her cradle. "But all the same, I am vexed with you for coming. If you wanted me, why did you not wire, and I would have been with you before the day was out? You know it was an understood thing between us that you are to send for me if you are in any perplexity."

"Yes, I know; but if I send for you, one or other of them would be sure to find it out, and then curiosity would be excited; it is so much nicer to talk to you here. I do love these quiet rooms, and

that gray old court." And Averil looked dreamily out of the window as she spoke.

No one who had seen Averil Willmot for the first time would have guessed her age; in reality she was seven-and-twenty, but her diminutive stature, which scarcely equaled that of a well-grown child of twelve, often made people think her much younger; and her face, in spite of the cast of melancholy that was always perceptible, was singularly youthful. At first sight Averil was certainly not prepossessing; her stunted growth and small, sallow face had little to recommend them; without being actually deformed, she had rounded shoulders and sunken chest, the result of some spinal mischief in early years. Her features were scarcely redeemed from plainness; only a sweet, sensitive mouth, and dark, thoughtful eyes prevented positive ugliness; but those who knew Averil best cared little for her looks, though it was just possible that a sense of her physical defects had something to do with the vibrating melancholy that was so often heard in her voice.

"You might have a quiet place of your own to-morrow if you liked," observed Mr. Harland, as Averil uttered her little speech. "I am a tolerably cheerful person, as you know, and take most things with equanimity; but it always rubs me up the wrong way when I see people making martyrs of themselves for insufficient reasons, and spoiling their own lives. Granted that you owe a certain amount of duty to your step-mother and her children—and I am the last man in the world to deny that duty, having step-children of my own—still, is there a ghost of a necessity for you all living together, like an ill-assorted clan?"

"My dear old friend," laughed Averil, and she had a pretty, child-like laugh, though it was not often heard, "how often are we to argue on that point? The ghost of my necessity, as you call it, is Lottie, and she is substantial enough, poor child. If I were to consent to break up our mixed household, what would become of poor Lottie?"

"Take her with you, of course. Mrs. Willmot would only be too glad to get rid of an incumbrance. What does she care about her husband's niece? Try it, Averil; the burden of all these gay young people is too heavy for your shoulders."

"I have tried," she replied, sadly. "Mr. Harland, indeed I have not been so unmindful of your advice as you think. I have made more than one attempt to put things on a different footing, but all my efforts have been in vain. Mrs. Willmot refuses to part with Lottie, though I have offered to provide for her; but the answer is always the same, that Lottie is her husband's legacy to her, that on no consideration would she part with such a sacred charge!"

A keen, sarcastic look shot from the lawyer's eyes. He muttered under his breath, "Humbug!" but he prudently forbore to put his thoughts into words.

"Miss Lottie never lived with you in your father's lifetime," he observed, presently; "at least, I never saw her there."

"No; she was at school at Stoke Newington. The people boarded her in return for her help with the little ones. She was very young then; she is only eighteen now. I am afraid they taught her very little. I used to tell father so, but he disliked so much to interfere."

"And now the sacred charge is at Kensington. My dear, that step-mother of yours is a clever woman—you remember I always told you—a very clever woman; she knows where she is comfortable."

"I have not come here through the rain to talk about my step-mother," returned Averil, in a reproachful tone, "but to show you a letter I have just received. Mr. Harland, you know all my father's affairs; can you tell me anything about a cousin of his, Felicia Ramsay?"

"Is that her married name? Willmot once told me, when I was dining with him, that he had been engaged to his cousin, Felicia Graham. It is so long ago that I can not recollect what moved him to such confidence. Stop; I have it. I remember I made the remark that a man seldom marries his first love (you know, even old fogies will sentimentalize sometimes), and he replied (you know his dry way)—'I was engaged to my cousin before I married Averil's mother, but the fates in the shape of a shrewish old uncle, forbade the bans.' And then he sighed, and somehow we changed the conversation."

Averil flushed; her dark, sensitive face showed signs of emotion. "Poor father! but he loved my mother dearly, Mr. Harland. Still, I am glad to know this; it makes me understand things better. Now, will you read my letter (you will see it is addressed to my father), and tell me what you think of the writer?"

The lawyer put on his *pince-nez* and looked attentively at the somewhat cramped, girlish handwriting, then he turned to the signature, Annette Ramsay; after which he carefully perused it, while Averil sat watching him with her hands folded in her lap.

"DEAR SIR AND GOOD COUSIN," it began, "will you have patience with me while I tell you my sad story? For many years my father has been dead, and now the dear mother has followed him; and in all this wide world I have no one but old Clotilde to care for me. My cousin, it is terrible for a girl to be so so lonely. If I were Catholic I could take refuge with the good sisters in the Convent of the Sacred Heart; but always I do remember my mother's teaching and our good pastor. For my own part I was not aware that my English cousin existed; but one day, when my mother was unusually suffering, she called me to her bedside—'Annette,' she said, quite seriously, 'thou must write to my cousin, Leonard Willmot, when I am gone. If only I had strength to write to him myself! Ask him, in the name of Felicia Ramsay, to show kindness to her only child. Throw thyself on his protection. Leonard was always of a generous nature; his heart is

large enough to shelter the unfortunate.' My cousin, those were the words of my mother, and she wept much as she uttered them. As I was writing this, our good pastor entered. I showed him the beginning of my letter. 'Tell your cousin more of your life and circumstances,' he urged. 'Represent to him exactly your situation.' Well, I will try to obey; but figure to yourself my difficulty, in thus writing to a stranger.

"While my father lived, my life was as joyous as the bees and birds. What was there that I lacked? My mother loved me; she taught me everything—to read, to sew, to speak English and French. During my father's long absences (he was a sea captain) we worked well, we sufficed to each other; when my father came home we made holiday, and fêted him. One day he did not come. By and by we heard the sad news—in a great storm he had perished. My cousin, those were bitter days! I was just fourteen; until then I had been a child, but my mother's trouble made a woman of me. Alas! never did my mother recover the shock; in silence she suffered, but she suffered greatly. 'Look you, my child,' she would say, 'we must not repine; it is the will of God. Your father was a brave man; he was a Christian. We know that he gave his life for others; it was he who saved the ship, and but for the fall of the mast he would be living now. Oh! if only he had thought of himself and of his wife and child; but they must all go first, even the little cabin-boy, and so he stayed too long.'

"Perhaps it was natural, but she was never weary of telling that story as we sat at work. My father's death had left us poor; my mother mended lace, she taught me to do the same. We lived on still in the old French town where my father had placed us, and where I had been born. He had never been rich, and it was easier to live there than in England; his mother had settled there, and one or two of his people, but they had all dropped away; soon there were none whom we could *tutoyer*, only Clotilde, who kept the house.

"I have always believed that my mother worked too hard; she had too few comforts, and my father's death preyed on her spirits. She drooped more every day—her eyes grew too dim for the lace-work. By and by she had no strength to speak; only when she looked at me the tears rolled down her cheeks; then I knew she feared to leave me alone in the great world, and it was not easy to comfort her. Our good pastor was with us then; it was he who closed her eyes, and read the service over her; presently he will leave us, for his new work is in England. It is he who has promised to direct this letter when he reaches London.

"My cousin, what is there that I need to say more? I work hard, that I may feed and clothe myself, but Clotilde is old—every one who loves me dies: perhaps she will die too, and then what will become of me?

"My cousin, I recommend myself to you,

"With affectionate respect,

"ANNETTE RAMSAY.

"*Rue St. Joseph, Dinan.*"

"Well?" as Mr. Harland laid down the letter—"well, my good friend?"

"You want my opinion, Averil? To my mind it is a good letter; there is a genuine ring in it; the girl states her case very fairly. It is a little un-English, perhaps, but what of that? If Willmot had lived he would have held out a helping hand, no doubt. Yes, the matter is worthy of investigation; and if you care to assist her—"

But here Averil placed her hand on his arm.

"You have said enough. I see the letter has not displeased you; it seems to be a beautiful and touching letter. I could not help crying over it. Mr. Harland, I am going to ask you a very great favor—it is the greatest I have ever asked of my old friend; but there is no one I can trust but you. Will you go over to Dinan and see this girl? Will you tell her that her mother's cousin is dead, and that I am her sole relative? Tell her also," still more impressively, "that my home is hers—that I am ready to welcome her as a sister; and bring her to me, the sooner the better. Mr. Harland, will you do this, or shall I go myself and fetch my cousin?"

Mr. Harland looked perplexed; he fidgeted on his seat and played with his eye-glasses.

"My dear, this is very sudden; it is not wise to make up your mind so quickly. We have only this letter; how can we know what the girl is like? Let me go first. I can easily make friends with her without compromising you in the least. You are too impulsive, Averil! Your generosity runs away with you. You are overburdened already, and yet you would take more responsibilities on yourself."

Averil smiled, but she was evidently bent on having her own way.

"Mr. Harland, it is your duty to protest, and I expected this remonstrance; but, on the other hand it is my duty to befriend my cousin. What does it matter what she is like? It is enough for me that she is unhappy and desolate. Do you think I do not know what it is to be lonely?" And here her voice broke a little. "Perhaps I shall care for her, and she will be a comfort to me. Poor thing! was it not touching of her to say there were none for her to *tutoyer*? I like her quaint way of expressing herself. Now, will you be good, and help me in this?"

"And you have really made up your mind to have the girl?" rather gruffly.

"Yes, I intend to offer my cousin a home," was Averil's quiet reply; and after a little more grumbling on the lawyer's part, some definite arrangements were made, and half an hour later Averil was jolting homeward through the wet, crowded streets; but, tired as she was, there was a quiet, peaceful expression on her face, as though some duty were fulfilled. "I think father would approve of what I am doing," she said to herself; "he did so like helping people: no man ever had a kinder heart." But Averil sighed as she uttered this little panegyric. Alas! Leonard Willmot's daughter knew well that it had been sheer kindness of heart, unbalanced by wisdom, that had led him to marry the gay widow, Mrs. Seymour. He had been touched by her seeming desolation, and the helplessness that had appealed to his chivalrous nature; and, as Averil knew, this marriage had not added to his happiness.

CHAPTER II.

LA RUE ST. JOSEPH.

ONE afternoon, about a fortnight after Averil Willmot had paid her visit to Lincoln's Inn, Mr. Harland stood on the deck of the small steamer in the gay port of Dinan, looking with amused eyes on the motley group collected on the quay. It was a lovely June day, and he had thoroughly enjoyed his little pleasure trip—for such he insisted on regarding it. He had earned a holiday, he had told Averil, and he had always longed to explore the Rance—it was such a beautiful river. It was his habit to combine pleasure with business, and he went to see Dinan, as well as interview Annette Ramsay.

"How I wish I had brought Louie with me," he thought, regretfully, as he looked at the bright scene before him; the blue river, the green-wooded heights, the yellow and brown houses that lined the quay. Some pigeons were fluttering in the sunshine; a black goat with a collar round its neck was butting viciously at a yellow mongrel dog; a knot of *gendarmes, ouvriers* in blue blouses, and soldiers with red shoulder-knots were drinking in front of a shabby little *auberge*; some barefooted boys were sailing an old wooden tub in the river; a small, brown-faced girl, in a borderless cap, scolded them from the bank—the boys laughed merrily. "Chut! no one minds Babette. Where is the mast, Pierre?" Mr. Harland heard one of them say.

"Business first, pleasure afterward—is not that the correct thing?" thought Mr. Harland, as he climbed to the roof of a rickety little omnibus. "First I will go to the Rue St. Joseph, afterward I will dine, and reconnoitre the place. Perhaps it would be as well to secure my bed at the hotel, and deposit my portmanteau; the *cocher* will direct me;" and Mr. Harland, who had a tolerable knowledge of French, was soon engaged in a lively conversation with the black-mustached individual who occupied the box.

La Rue St. Joseph was only a few hundred yards from the hotel; it was in a narrow, winding street leading out of one of the principal thoroughfares. He had no difficulty in finding the house; it was a high, narrow house, wedged in between two picturesque-looking buildings, with overhanging gables and broad latticed windows, and looked dull and sunless; its neighbors' gables seemed to overshadow it. As Mr. Harland rang the bell, a little, wiry-looking old woman, with snow-white hair tucked under her coif, and a pair of black, bead-like eyes, confronted him.

"What did monsieur desire?"

"Monsieur desired to know if Mademoiselle Ramsay were within."

"*Mais oui, certainement*; mademoiselle was always within. Mademoiselle was forever at her lace-work. Would monsieur intrust her with his name? Doubtless he was the English cousin to whom mademoiselle had confided her troubles. Monsieur must pardon the seeming indiscretion, but it was not curiosity that had prompted such a question."

"Madame, I grieve to tell you that Mr. Willmot is dead," began Mr. Harland; but Clotilde, uttering a faint shriek, burst into voluble lamentations which effectually prevented him from finishing his sentence.

"What disappointment! what chagrin! Mademoiselle would be inconsolable! She had raised her hopes so high, she had built her faith on this unknown cousin. How many times had she said to her, 'Clotilde, *ma bonne amie*, I have a presentiment that something pleasant is going to happen; in the morning I wake and think, now my cousin has his letter; he is considering how he can best help me. The English take long to make up their minds; they do nothing in a hurry.' And now *la petite* will hear she has no cousin; it is *triste* inconceivable: but doubtless good will come out of evil."

"Madame," interposed Mr. Harland, as soon as he could make himself heard, "will you permit me to put two or three questions?"

"With all the pleasure in life. Monsieur must follow her within. Gaston's wife was at the market, buying herbs for the *pot au feu*; no one would interrupt them." And Clotilde, still talking volubly, ushered him into a dark little kitchen, with a red-brick floor, and a few glittering brass utensils on the shelves. A yellow jug of blue and white flowers stood on the closed stove; there were plants in the narrow window, some strings of onions dangled from the ceiling. Clotilde dusted a chair, and then folded her arms, and looked curiously at her visitor.

"I want you to tell me first how long you have known Mrs. Ramsay and her daughter."

"How long?"—and here Clotilde's beady eyes traveled to the ceiling—"six, seven years; *tenez*, it must be seven years since the English madame took her rooms. Oh, she remembered it well; that day she was a trifle out of humor, she must confess that. Jean had put her out of all patience with his grumbling. Men, even the best of them, were so inconsiderate. I was standing at the door, monsieur, just turning the heel of my stocking, and I saw Madame with her long crape veil, and a thin slip of a girl with black ribbons in her hat. 'You have rooms to let, madame?' she began. *Hélas*, the little black dog was on my shoulders, and my answer was not as civil as usual, for I was still thinking of Jean's grumbles. 'Oh, as to that, the rooms were there; no one could deny the fact; but there were better to be had at Madame Dubois's, lower down; folks were hard to please nowadays.' But she interrupted me very gently: 'May we see your rooms? We could not afford very grand ones.' 'Madame might please herself; I had no objection.' I fear I was by no means gracious, for it had entered into my head all of a sudden that I was tired of lodgers; but in the end madame managed to conciliate me. The rooms did not please them much, for I heard madame say, in a low voice, 'They are not dear, of course; but then they are small and dark, almost oppressively so. I fear, Annette, that you will find them very dull.' 'But it would be better to be dull and keep out of debt, *chère maman*,' replied the girl; 'we are too poor to consider trifles.' Ah, mademoiselle was always one to make light of difficulties; so the rooms were taken, after all. That was seven years ago, and now madame was in the cemetery."

"Was she ill long?"

"Yes, some months; but mademoiselle ever affirmed that she had changed for the worse from the hour she had received news of her husband's death. Grief does not always kill quickly, but all the same it was heart sorrow, and too much work, that led to her illness. Ah, she suffered much; but it was the death-bed of a saint—such resignation, such sweetness, no complaints, no impatience. If she had only been Catholic! but it was not for me to perplex myself with such questions; doubtless *le bon Dieu* took care of all that."

"But she grieved much at leaving her daughter?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur; but such grief in a mother is no sin. Sometimes she would say to me, poor angel, 'Clotilde, my good friend, be kind to Annette when I am gone. She will be all alone, my poor child; but I must try and trust her to her Heavenly Father.' Many times she would say some such words as these. It was edifying to listen to her; if one could only assure one's self of such faith!"

"And Miss Ramsay has been with you ever since her mother's death?"

"Truly; where would *la petite* go? At least she is safe with me. It is a *triste* life for so young a creature—always that everlasting lace-work from morning to evening; no variety—hardly a gleam of sunshine. 'Oh, I am so tired!' she would say sometimes, when she comes down to the kitchen of an evening. 'Is it not sad, Clotilde, to be so young and yet so tired? I thought it was only the old whose limbs ache, who have such dull, weary feelings.' '*Chut, mon enfant*,' I would reply; 'it is only the work and the stooping;' and I would coax her to take a turn in the Promenade des Petits Fosses, or down by the river. 'It is for want of the sunshine,' I would say, in a scolding voice; 'the young need sunshine.' Then she would laugh, and put on her hat, and when she came back there would be a tinge of color in her face; for look you, my monsieur, the rooms are dark, and that makes the *petite* have such pale cheeks."

Mr. Harland listened with much interest to this artless recital. He had gleaned the few facts that he needed, and now he begged Clotilde to show him to Mademoiselle's apartment. She complied with his request willingly. As she opened the door, and preceded him up the steep staircase, he could hear a sweet, though perfectly untrained voice singing an old Huguenot hymn that he remembered. The solemn measure, the soft girlish voice, affected him oddly. The next moment Clotilde's shrill voice broke on the melody.

"Mademoiselle, an English monsieur desires to speak with thee."

"At last—thank God!" responded a clear voice. "My cousin, you are welcome!" And a slim, dark-eyed girl glided out of the shadows to meet him.

The room was so dark that for a moment Mr. Harland could not see her features plainly, but he took her outstretched hands and pressed them kindly, half drawing her to the one small window, that the evening light might fall on her face.

"Oh, you find it dark?" she said, quickly. "Strangers always do; but I am used to it. If I sit here," pointing to a tall wooden chair beside her, "I can see perfectly; it is when one is unaccustomed that one finds it oppressive—only when one goes out the sunshine is sometimes too dazzling."

"That is why you are so pale, Miss Ramsay," observed Mr. Harland, with a pitying look at her thin, drooping form and sallow complexion. The girl was not pretty, certainly, but it was the absence of all coloring that seemed to mar her good looks. She had well-cut features, a gentle, mobile mouth, and large dark eyes. As he spoke, she looked at him reproachfully.

"Why did you call me Miss Ramsay? Is that the English fashion, my cousin? You know I have never lived in England, and its ways are foreign to me. To a relative I am Annette—is it not so?"

"Yes, of course; you are perfectly right," replied Mr. Harland, cheerfully; "you will soon be English enough, Miss Annette. The fact is, you have made a mistake: I am not your cousin, though I shall hope to be considered as a friend. Your cousin, Mr. Leonard Willmot, died two years ago."

"*Il est mort!*" with a sudden relapse into French. "Oh, *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*" clasping her hands, with a gesture of despair, "is it my fate that every one belonging to me must die? Then I am desolate indeed!"

Mr. Harland found it necessary to clear his throat; that young, despairing face was too much for him.

"My dear Miss Ramsay," he exclaimed, "things are not as bad as you think. It is true that poor Willmot has gone—a good fellow he was, too, in spite of one or two mistakes—but his daughter is ready to be your friend. She is your cousin, too, so you have one relative, and she has commissioned me, as her oldest friend, to find you out, and offer you a home."

Annette's eyes filled with tears.

"A home! do you really mean it? Monsieur, will you tell me the name of this unknown cousin? Is she a girl like myself?"

"How old are you, Miss Ramsay?"

"I am nineteen."

"Well, your cousin Averil is seven-and-twenty; so she is older, you see, though she is hardly tall enough to reach to your shoulder."

"But I am not big myself—not what you call tall; my cousin must be a very little person; she is quite old, too—seven-and-twenty." And Annette looked perplexed.

"You are not as tall as my daughter Louie, but you are a fair height. Averil has never grown properly, but she is the nicest little person in the world when you come to know her. You are lucky, Miss Ramsay; you are, indeed, to have made such a friend; for Averil is true as steel, and I ought to be a good judge, for I have known her from a baby."

"She must be very good. It is kind, it is more than kind, to offer me a home. I do not seem to believe it yet. Are you sure—are you quite sure, monsieur, that this is what my cousin intends?"

"Oh, I am not without proofs," returned Mr. Harland, touched by the girl's gentle wistfulness and anxiety. "I have brought you a note from Averil herself; it is written in a great hurry, but I dare say you will find the invitation all right."

Annette's eyes brightened. She stretched out her hand eagerly for the letter.

"MY DEAR COUSIN ANNETTE," it began, "your letter to my father has made me feel very sad. When my good friend, Mr. Harland, gives you this, you will have heard of my dear father's death. Had he been living, I know well how his kind heart would have longed to help you, you poor, lonely child! But, Annette, you must allow me to act in his place. Remember, I am your cousin, too. While I live you shall not want a home. Mr. Harland will explain everything, and make things easy for you. Do not hesitate to trust him. He will guard you as he would his own daughter. I go to him in all my troubles, and he is so wise and helpful. His time is valuable, so if you will please us both you will make as much haste as you can in packing up your possessions, and then come to your English home. I will do all I can to make you happy, and to console you for past troubles. I do so love taking care of people. I have no time to add more.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"AVERIL WILLMOT."

"How kind! how good!" murmured Annette, as she put down the note; "it seems to me as though I love her already, this Averil."

"You will love her more by and by," returned Mr. Harland, in his cheery manner. "I expect you two will get on first rate. Now, Miss Ramsay, I am a practical sort of a person. How long do you think it would take you to pack up your things, eh?"

"It is so few that I have," she answered, seriously. "Indeed, monsieur, I have only one other gown."

"So much the better—so much the better; then we can be off the day after to-morrow. Well, what is it?" as the girl glanced at him rather appealingly.

"It is only that there must be one or two things that I must do," she returned, timidly, "that is, if you will permit me, monsieur. There is the lace-work to carry back to Madame Grevey; also I must make my adieus to old Manon Duclos—she is my good friend, although she is only a peasant; and"—hesitating still more—"there is the cemetery, and it is the last time, and I must take fresh flowers for my mother's grave." And here Annette's eyes brimmed over with tears, and one or two rolled down her cheek. "Monsieur, we were everything to each other, mamma and I."

"My dear child," replied Mr. Harland, hastily, "you shall have time to fulfill all your little duties. You are a good girl not to forget your friends. Would you like me to stay another day?"

"Indeed, no!" in a shocked voice. "How could I be so inconsiderate after my cousin's letter? Monsieur, you are too good. There is no need of so much time; by to-morrow afternoon it will be all done."

"If you are sure of that, I might call for you about four, and we would have a stroll together along the banks of the river. Shall you be tired? Would you rather that I left you alone?"

"I would rather come with you, monsieur—I ought to say sir; but since my mamma died I have spoken no English, not a word—always it is the French."

"Very well, we will have our walk," trying not to smile at her childish naïveté. "I will call for you at four; and after our walk we will dine together. Good-bye, Miss Ramsay, or, better still, *au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*—that pleases me best," she said, gently. "Take care of that step, monsieur; the staircase is so dark."

"Now I must go to my Clotilde," she said to herself, "and tell her this wonderful thing that has happened."

CHAPTER III.

ON THE BANKS OF THE RANCE.

PUNCTUALLY at the appointed hour Mr. Harland stood before the dark little house in the Rue St. Joseph; but he had hardly touched the bell before the door opened, and Annette confronted him.

"I am quite ready," she said, hurriedly: "I have been looking out for you for some time, because I did not wish to keep you waiting. Is it your pleasure to come in and wait a little, monsieur, or shall we take our walk now?"

"Well, it is a pity to waste even a quarter of an hour in-doors this lovely evening," returned Mr. Harland, in his quick, cheery manner; "so, if you are ready, Miss Ramsay, we will begin our stroll at once."

He looked at her rather keenly as he spoke, at the slim, girlish figure in the black dress. The hat shaded her face; but even at the first glance he could see she was very pale, and that her eyes were swollen, as though she had been crying. How young and pathetic she looked, standing there in the afternoon light, with the little silk kerchief knotted loosely round her shapely throat, and a tiny rosebud fastened in her dress! He was just a little silent as they turned down the street, for he feared to question her too closely; and he was much relieved when Annette began to talk to him in her frank, naïve way.

"I fear I am a dull companion," she said, gently; "but I am a little sad at the thought that there will be no one but Clotilde to visit my mother's grave. I have been saying good-bye to it. That is why my eyes are so red. Look, monsieur; this rosebud is the first that has blossomed; was it selfish of me to gather it? The dear mother loved roses more than any other flowers; they were the offerings she liked best on her fête day; this little white bud will be a souvenir when I am far away. Monsieur, perhaps I am foolish; but I feel I shall miss my mother more when I can not kneel beside her grave."

"Oh, you will get over that feeling," replied Mr. Harland, hastily; "that is just how my wife feels about Mysie. Mysie was our youngest but one, and she died when she was six years old. My wife half broke her heart about her; and when we moved from Norbiton to Chislehurst, it was her one regret that we were leaving Mysie behind; but I used to tell her"—and here Mr. Harland's voice had a suspicion of huskiness in it—"that it was just fancy, that Mysie was as near as ever, and that it was better to think of her growing up in heaven among all the other children than to think of the poor perishing little body that lies in that Norbiton church-yard."

"You are right, monsieur; it is the truth you are telling me," returned Annette, humbly, and she looked up at him very sweetly; "but I can understand so well the regret of madame, your wife. That is the worst of us. We do forget so often that it is not our beloved who lie in the grave. At one moment we smile to think they are so safe in Paradise, and the next we are weeping over the grass mound that covers them. It is we who are inconsistent, faithless; too well do I know this, monsieur."

"Oh, it is natural; one does not learn everything at once," returned Mr. Harland, cheerily. Sorry as he was for her, he had not a notion how he was to talk to her; if only Louie or his wife were here—women always know what to do in such cases. "No one can blame you for fretting about your mother; a good mother is not to be replaced; but you are young, and after a time you will find yourself consoled. Why, your cousin Averil—no one but Mrs. Harland and myself know how that girl misses her father. He made an idol of her. I do not believe he ever crossed a wish of hers, except in his marriage, and she held her tongue about that, and he never found out the difference it made in her life. Yes, and she misses him still, though she says so little about it; only my wife finds her crying sometimes; but Averil is just the bravest-hearted little woman in the world; she is not one to inflict her feelings on other people."

Mr. Harland talked on all the faster as he saw Annette wipe away a furtive tear or two; he wanted to give her time to recover herself.

"It is all so true," she observed, in a broken voice, as he finished. "No, it is not wrong to weep for the best of mothers; our dear Lord has taught us that. Still, one must not sorrow too much. Monsieur, you have interested me greatly about my cousin; if I did not fear to fatigue you, I should like to hear more. Oh, we have come to the quay; now let us cross that little bridge lower down, and there we can walk quite close to the river. It is so green and quiet further on; nothing

but wooded banks, and the blue river flowing on so peacefully."

"It is charming. Look at that young fellow in his boat, Miss Annette; he is going to take his little sister for a row. I bet you anything he is English before he opens his mouth. Yes, I thought so," as the lad shouted out, "Mind what you are about, Minnie. Now, then, look sharp and jump!"

"There are so many English," remarked Annette, softly. "I think Dinan is full of them. This boy—I have seen him before. There is no mother; but he is so good to that little pale sister. Often I have watched them. His name is Arthur; he is one of my friends; for, do you know," with a dreamy smile, "though there are only Clotilde and Gaston's wife, and the Old Manon Duclos, to whom I can talk, I have many friends, people whom I meet, and about whom I make up stories, and to whom I say good-evening under my breath when I meet them; for, when one is young, one longs for friends. As for this Arthur, I have spoken with him; for once, when he dropped his hat, I picked it up; and another time, when he was in some difficulty with his oar, I helped him, and so his little sister gives me a nod when we meet."

Mr. Harland felt no inclination to smile at this childish recital; on the contrary, his genial face was rather grave as he realized how lonely this girl had been. What would Averil say when he told her that? To think of bidding good-evening under her breath to strangers, and making up stories about them; he could not have laughed for worlds, in spite of the quaintness of the notion.

"Now I shall have my cousin," she went on. "Monsieur, there is something you said which I do not at all understand—something about my cousin Leonard marrying. Does not my cousin Averil live alone? No?" as Mr. Harland shook his head in an amused way. "With whom, then, does she live?"

"Why, with her step-mother, of course. Look here, Miss Annette, I see I must coach you up in the family history, or you will take all sorts of notions into your little head. Not that there is much to tell," with a sudden remembrance that Averil had begged him to say as little as possible about her affairs; "but you may as well know people's names."

"Are there so many people?" asked Annette, looking a little bewildered. "Where is it that my cousin lives?"

"At Kensington. It is rather an old house, but it is a very comfortable one, and there is actually a garden. Gardens do not abound in the fashionable parts of London; that is why I live at Chislehurst, because my wife and the girls, Louie especially, wanted a garden. It is Averil's house. She has her mother's fortune, beside what her father left her; and her step-mother and her family live with her."

"Step-mother? Ah, I see—the wife that my cousin Leonard married, and they had children. Yes, of course. That must be so nice for Averil."

"No; nonsense," returned Mr. Harland, still more amused. "You have got wrong notions altogether. Mr. Willmot never had any other child but Averil, and a boy who died. His second wife had a grown-up family; her name was Mrs. Seymour."

"And he married her? But that seems strange," observed Annette, for she was not without shrewdness.

"Oh, men do strange things sometimes. Mrs. Seymour was a very handsome woman, and she could make herself fascinating."

"And she was rich?"

"Rich? Oh, no; tolerably well to do; that was all."

"And the grown-up children—how many are there who live with my cousin Averil?"

"Three, without counting Lottie Jones. There is Maud; she is the eldest, and a fine, handsome girl she is, too; and Georgina, and Rodney. Rodney is his mother's darling; a good-looking, idle young scamp of a fellow."

"And Lottie Jones—and who may that be?"

"Well, Lottie is a sort of hanger-on—a niece of Mrs. Seymour; and it seems she has no one belonging to her but this aunt. She is a nice little girl, and Averil is very fond of her."

"Does she like her better than this Maud and Georgina?"

Mr. Harland laughed outright. "Come, come, Miss Annette, you are too sharp; you ask too many questions. Wait until you get to Redfern House, and then you will find out things for yourself."

A sensitive flush crossed Annette's face.

"You must pardon me if I seem too inquisitive," she said, timidly. "I did not know I was asking what was wrong; it was difficult to understand my cousin's household; but I will remember to wait, and not to tease you with any more questions. Indeed, you are so good, monsieur, that I do not wish to tease you at all."

"My dear little girl," returned Mr. Harland, kindly, "you do not tease me in the least; it is only that silly child Averil who has made me hold my tongue. 'Do not talk about me much to my cousin; let her find things out for herself'—that is what she said to me, and that is why I checked you just now."

"And you were perfectly right, monsieur. I will ask no more questions about my cousin. Look, there is a kingfisher—*martin-pêcheur* they call him here. Is he not pretty? And did you see that water-rat? We have been sitting so still on this bank that they have forgotten to mind us."

"That reminds me that it is growing late, and that you and I must be hungry, and that our dinner at the Trois Frères will be waiting."

"Well, she was a little hungry," Annette confessed. The long walk had tired her also; she was not used to walking, much as she loved it. "For, you see, monsieur," she added seriously, "when one has to feed and clothe one's self, there is no time to be idle. One puts in another sprig into the lace-work, and then another, and then the light goes, and it is dreary to walk in the dusk; besides, there are *les convenances*—what you would call the propriety—one would not willingly offend against that."

"To be sure; how thoughtless I have been!" ejaculated Mr. Harland; but when he offered his arm, Annette shook her head with a smile. "She did not need help; she would do very well, and there was the bridge in sight, and Monsieur Arthur had returned from his row."

"She is Averil's sort," he said to himself, as he watched her graceful walk, and saw how bravely she was keeping up, in spite of her fatigue; and as soon as possible he hailed a fiacre.

"But that is extravagant," she protested, with a little pout. "And it is for me, I see that well, for you are not a bit tired, monsieur." But monsieur was not listening to her. He was wondering how long this girl would have borne her life, and if she could possibly have grown paler as the time went on.

"She is like a plant that has grown up in a dark cellar," he thought; and he almost shuddered as he remembered that room in the Rue St. Joseph; but by and by, as they sat together at the *table d'hôte*, Annette forgot her fatigue in her astonishment at the magnificence of the feast.

"How many more courses?" she whispered to her neighbor, who was enjoying some excellent *ragoût*. "One goes on eating, and still there is more. At the Rue St. Joseph the dear mother and I were satisfied with coffee and eggs, and perhaps a salad. Sometimes Clotilde would bring us a dish of fried potatoes, or some stewed pears; then we feasted like gourmand. Is it possible, monsieur, that people dine like this every day?"

Mr. Harland was not too much engrossed with his *déjeuner* to enjoy the girl's naïveté; on the contrary, he took a great deal of interest in the fact that the food, and most likely the pleasant excitement, had brought a tinge of color to her face. He insisted on her partaking of some delicious-looking pastry. "All young people like sweets," he said; and when he had finished, and they had their coffee at the window, he showed her the photographs that he had bought that morning, and talked, and asked questions about the places he had seen; and they were very happy indeed.

"She is a nice little thing, and I am sure Averil will like her," was his parting thought that night.

As for Annette, she scarcely slept at all, with mingled fatigue and excitement. Her thoughts traveled back to every event of the past day. Now she was sitting with old Manon Duclos, and the feeble old creature was weeping over her. "Must I lose thee, *chérie*? Oh, what news! What an unhappy fate! Who will read to me when thou art gone, *ma petite*? Who will be good to old Manon?" And then there had been that good-bye in the cemetery. How her tears had flowed over that little white rosebud! Nay, it was true what monsieur had said—it was not the dear mother who lay there; she must try to remember that. And then there had been the long walk. How lovely the river had looked in the evening sunshine. How kind and benignant monsieur had been!

"I hope I shall see him often," she thought. "Perhaps I was wrong to question him so closely about my cousin's household. But it was all so confusing; even now I do not seem to understand. How can my cousin Averil be mistress while her step-mother lives? She is only a girl like myself. I wonder if she be handsome? I think all English people are handsome. What a nice face monsieur has—so clear and honest. I think I love gray hair. But I remember he said she was little. Somehow, I can not picture her. And this Lottie Jones. Ah, it is all bewildering! How strange I shall feel among all those people." And Annette sighed, for she was tired, and her poor little heart was aching for her mother; and when at last she fell asleep, it was to dream that they were sitting together in the little room down-stairs.

Annette slept so soundly after all her fatigues, that it was quite late when she woke, and she had only just time to dress herself, and swallow the coffee Clotilde brought her, before Mr. Harland drove up to fetch her.

Perhaps it was just as well that she had only those few moments in which to take leave of her old life. She bade adieu very quietly to Clotilde. "I shall never forget thee, my best friend," she said, gently. "One day, if my cousin permit, I will come and see thee and Gaston and Toinette."

As for Clotilde, she wept volubly. "*Le bon Dieu* would watch over their dear mademoiselle. *Hélas!* the place would be empty without her. No; she must not forget them; she would have their prayers," and so on. A thousand blessings followed her in that shrill voice. The girl smiled rather sadly as she listened to them.

"Poor old house!" she said, softly, as they drove away. "In spite of hard work, one had happy hours. Always it is so in life—the good and the bad mingled, and some have more of God's sunshine than others." And then she was silent, and Mr. Harland did not disturb her, for he knew by a certain kindly instinct that the girlish heart was stirred to its depths.

CHAPTER IV.

COULD THIS BE AVERIL?

It was late in the afternoon of the following day that Mr. Harland and his young companion drove through Kensington.

"You must be very tired, my dear," he observed, in quite a fatherly manner, for during the last four-and-twenty hours their friendship had made great progress.

"But no—why should I be tired?" returned the girl, in her pretty French accent, which he already found so charming. "Monsieur, what has there been to fatigue me? I have slept so well, oh, perfectly well, in my little box of a berth. Did not the captain say himself that we had a grand passage? I was not seasick, not the least little bit in the world, and yet I have never found myself on a ship before."

"Well, it was a trifle rough toward three o'clock. But you must have been fast asleep, Miss Annette."

"Yes; and as the waves only rocked me, I was glad, for I did not much like the ship; the cabin was not so hot and crowded. But the train—that was more amusing. I could look out on the flying hedge-rows, and tell myself that this was England—my mother's country. Even these streets please me, although I find so much noise a little confusing. Are all your streets so terribly full, monsieur? There is no room for those poor horses to pass."

"Oh, you should see some of our city streets—Cheapside, or by the Mansion House. I wonder what you would say to the traffic there? England is a busy place; people pride themselves on always being in a hurry. This is quiet enough compared with some of our thoroughfares. Look at those fine shops. I suppose, like other girls, you are never weary of admiring smart things?"

"If one's purse were not always empty, it would be a pleasure," she said, with a sigh; "but to see things is only to long for them, and that makes one discontented. I think I like better to walk by the river, or under the trees in the Promenade des Petits Fosses. You have been there, monsieur. It is pleasant to sit there and watch the children with their *bonnes*; in the evening it is so cool and shady. It is there I so often greet my unknown friends. There is a little French girl who is lame; I think she is a seamstress. Well, I have seen her so often, that at last I made up my mind I would speak to her. To-morrow I will say, 'Good-evening'—that was what I promised myself. But you see, monsieur, it has all come to nothing, for monsieur has come, and here I am driving with you through these wonderful English streets."

"Yes, and in another moment we shall be at our destination. Do you see that large red-brick corner house? That is Redfern House."

"Is it so? But, monsieur, my cousin must be very rich to live in so big a house; it is larger than our English consul's;" and Annette looked a trifle disturbed. Mr. Harland saw how the poor child twitched the ends of her little silk kerchief, and shook the dust off her black serge gown, while a frightened expression came into her large, soft eyes.

"I don't think Averil cares much for her large house," replied Mr. Harland. "She is not a bit grand herself, so you need not look so alarmed, my dear."

"It is foolish to be nervous," she stammered; "and of course you will be with me, monsieur, and already you seem like an old friend. Ah, we have stopped, and the door has opened like magic." But in spite of her effort to speak bravely, Mr. Harland felt how her hand trembled as he assisted her out of the cab, and could not forbear giving it a kindly pressure.

The gray-haired butler who received them glanced at the young stranger with benevolent interest.

"Where is Miss Willmot, Roberts?" asked Mr. Harland.

"She is in her private sitting-room, sir, and she begged you would go to her there. Mrs. Willmot and the young ladies are dining out."

"Oh, then we shall be alone. Come along, Miss Annette;" and he took the girl's arm, and conducted her quickly through the large hall, and down a passage lined with bookcases, which gave it the appearance of a narrow room. As Roberts opened the door a tiny figure in black appeared on the threshold, and met them with outstretched hands.

"Ah, you have come at last! I thought you late. But you are very welcome, Cousin Annette," accompanying the words with a warm kiss. "Mr. Harland, thank you so much for bringing my cousin. You have acted like a true friend. Will you sit in this comfortable chair, Annette? You must be tired out after your long journey."

Annette left this assertion uncontradicted—she had simply no words at her command. Could this be Averil? her cousin Averil? the mistress of this grand house, whom she had so longed and dreaded to see? this little creature, who was no bigger than a child? Why had not Mr. Harland prepared her? It was impossible to conceal her astonishment, and, to tell the truth, her disappointment. Happily, Mr. Harland came to her relief by engaging Averil in a conversation about their journey. He wanted to explain why they were late; it was owing to the blockheadedness, as Mr. Harland termed it, of an official at the custom-house; a couple of minutes would have been sufficient to have investigated Miss Ramsay's modest luggage; but no, the idiot must keep them waiting; and so on, detailing the grievance at full length. Annette did not listen; she was regarding the slight, bent figure and small, intent face opposite to her. Her cousin Averil was ill, or did she always look so grave? But no; as she asked herself the question,

Averil broke into a sweet little laugh, and the next minute her quick, observant eyes took in her cousin's puzzled scrutiny. She flushed faintly, but the smile did not leave her lips.

"You are surprised to see such a very small person, are you not, Annette? I suppose if I stood up, Mr. Harland, you would find that my cousin is a head taller. People always begin by taking me for a child. I am quite used to it," with easy frankness. "Confess you were saying to yourself, Annette, 'Surely, this very little person can not be my cousin Averil, who wrote me that letter.'"

"Oh, you are a witch," returned Annette, blushing, "or you would not have read my thoughts. But indeed it is I who have been rude. How could I know how you would look, my cousin? I am ashamed that I have been so indiscreet."

"You have been nothing of the kind, dear. Why, what nonsense!"—for Annette was evidently very much ashamed of herself. "You shall think what you please about me, and I will promise to forgive you if you will only tell me you are glad to find yourself at home." And here Averil gave her one of the rare winning smiles that lighted up the little dark face wonderfully. But she was almost sorry that she had made this speech when she saw the tears spring to Annette's eyes.

"Home! is it indeed my home?" she said, wistfully, looking round the room, which was full of beautiful things, and yet had the indescribably cosy air that belongs to a well-used apartment. Annette had never seen such a room; even the English consul had nothing to compare with it. She knew that well, for she had often mended lace for Mrs. Greville, the consul's wife, and yet they had a fine drawing-room, with red velvet chairs and lounges. Annette was too bewildered, too ignorant, to take in details; she was not aware of the value of those cool, delicious little bits of landscape that hung on the walls, though they rested her eyes with their suggestion of breezy moorlands and sunny meadows. She glanced at the carved cabinets and book-cases, the soft easy-chairs, the flowers, the birds, even the black poodle that lay on the rug, with a sort of dreamy surprise. "I never thought any home could be so beautiful," she finished, softly; "it does not seem true that I am to live in it."

Averil laughed, and then checked a sigh. "I am so glad you like the look of it," she said, simply. "Will you take off your hat, Annette? The room is warm, and we are going to have tea. Ah, that looks much more comfortable," as Annette obeyed her, and smoothed her dark-brown hair.

"My cousin looks pale, and a little thin," she continued, turning to Mr. Harland, who was watching the girls with benevolent anxiety. He was hoping that his little traveling-companion would soon recover herself. He had not seen her so timid and tongue-tied before. He wished Averil could hear how prettily she could talk. When she spoke of anything that interested her, her eyes got quite large and bright. And then how fluent she could be!

Averil was evidently a patient person; she had made her little attempt to put her cousin at her ease, and now she seemed inclined to let things take their course. "She is tired and strange, poor child," she said to herself, "and she finds it difficult to unbend; presently she will talk to me of her own accord, for she looks both intelligent and gentle." As she addressed Mr. Harland, Roberts entered the room with the tea-things, which he arranged on a low table beside Averil's chair.

"Where is Miss Lottie?" she asked in an undertone; but Roberts did not know—she had gone out early in the afternoon, and had not returned.

"Ah, to be sure; little Miss Jones generally has tea with you, does she not, Averil?" observed Mr. Harland.

"I have not seen her since luncheon," she replied, and a slight shade crossed her face. "I think her aunt must have given her some commission, for Roberts tells me only Maud and Georgina were in the carriage. Poor child! she will be tired. I must ask Milner to give her some tea when she comes in."

"I never knew any one like you, Averil, for looking after people's little comforts. I wonder what Miss Lottie would do without you, not to mention a good many other people?"

Mr. Harland spoke in a joking tone, but Averil reddened as though she detected a compliment. She was pouring out the tea, but as she rose to carry a cup to Annette the girl started up impulsively.

"But it is not for you to wait on me, my cousin," she said, in quite a shocked voice. "No one has ever waited on me, or brought tea to me before."

"But you are tired, and have had a long journey, Annette; besides, I love to wait on people."

"But you must not love what is wrong," returned Annette, quaintly. "See, I will place myself beside you at that little table, and then you will not jump up every minute; will not that be better, my cousin?"

"Yes, dear," and Averil, with quiet tact, made room for the girl beside her; she even checked Mr. Harland with a glance when he would have volunteered his services. "Annette has everything within reach now," she said, pleasantly, and she took no notice when Annette, with quick officiousness, insisted on waiting on monsieur; on the contrary, she admired her graceful movements, and the utter want of self-consciousness that was Annette's chief charm.

"What a pretty figure she has!" she thought, wistfully; "and perhaps, if she were not so pale, so utterly colorless, her face might be pretty too; anyhow, it interests me."

Mr. Harland could not stop long; he had to take an early train to Chislehurst. Before he left he found an opportunity to give one of his good-natured hints to Averil as she followed him out into the lobby.

"What do you think of her, eh, Averil? But I suppose it is too soon to ask your opinion. I forgot, too, what a cautious little person you are."

"It is not always wise to speak. I am very much interested in my cousin; she looks gentle and lady-like, but I should prefer to answer your question a week later."

"Ah, to be sure—an Averil-like speech. Well, I only want to give you a hint. She is a little shy, and the idea of all those people frightens her. Let her be as quiet as possible this first evening."

"My dear Mr. Harland, she will see no one; I have arranged all that. Mrs. Willmot and the girls are dining out, and I have ordered an informal supper in my own room. Annette will like that much better, will she not?"

"I should think so; that is a first-rate idea of yours, Averil. Do you know I have quite taken to that little French girl? Pshaw! I always forget she is English. Louie will be quite jealous when I tell her. By the bye, you must bring her down to see my wife, Averil; she and the girls will be delighted to make her acquaintance."

"I grieve that monsieur has gone," were Annette's first words as Averil re-entered the room. "I look upon him as my first friend. Do you know, I took him for my cousin? When Clotilde announced an English gentleman I thought, of course, that it was he. Forgive me, my cousin, if I make you sad; people are so different; with some it is always silence—it is as though speech would desecrate their dead; but for me, I am forever speaking of my mother to Clotilde, to Manon, even to myself. Why should the name we love most grow strange to one's lips?"

"You are quite right," returned Averil, softly; "if I have not talked much about my dear father, it is for other reasons." Here she stammered, hesitated, and then changed the subject.

"Annette, when I read your letter to him I grew quite sad. 'You must bring her home to me.' That is what I told my good old friend Mr. Harland. 'We must make her forget her troubles; she shall be like my own sister.' Shall it be so between us, dear? Do you think you can care for a poor crooked little body like me?" and her dark sad eyes rested for a moment yearningly on her young cousin's face.

"Oh, I shall love you—you will see how well I shall love you," returned Annette, throwing her arms impulsively round Averil. "What does it matter how you look, my cousin? Why is it you make such a speech to me? You have kind eyes—I can trust them. Monsieur tells me you have a good heart—is it not proof that you have written me that letter, that you permit me to call this home? Let us not make any more speeches to each other; it is all understood between us that we are friends."

Averil's grave face softened. "I have one faithful little friend already; how pleased I shall be to have another! As I told you, I do so like taking care of people."

"Oh, but it is I who must wait on you," returned Annette, seriously. "There is a look on your face, my cousin, as though you were always thinking; it is not a frown," as Averil looked amused, "and yet your forehead contracts itself—so," drawing her brows together; "it gives one a fatigued sense, as though you were too heavily burdened; and you are grave, and yet you have never known what it is to be poor."

"No; but I have sometimes forgotten to be grateful for my riches. Annette, you are a shrewd observer; no one here notices my gravity. But I must not let you go on talking like this. I want to show you your room, and then you can make any change you like in your dress; not that it matters to-night"—as Annette's face fell a little—"for, unless Lottie join us, you and I will be alone. Will you come with me, dear?" touching her arm, as Annette appeared lost in thought.

The staircase at Redfern House was wide and handsome, and the spacious landing was fitted up prettily with cabinets of china and stands of flowers.

"I have chosen a room near mine," continued Averil, quietly; "it is not very large, but I think you will find it very comfortable."

"Comfortable! oh, it is far, far too grand for me. You must have made a mistake my cousin;" and Annette's eyes grew large and round. Perhaps, if Averil had seen the girl's sleeping-room in the Rue St. Joseph, she might have understood the situation more perfectly; but to her luxurious ideas there was nothing out of the common in the fresh cretonne hangings, the pretty, well-appointed furniture, the couch and writing-table. To be sure, there was nothing wanting to any young lady's comfort; she had herself placed all kinds of knickknacks on the toilet-table.

Annette stood by in puzzled ecstasy as her cousin opened the wardrobe and drawers and then pointed out to her the tasteful little work-basket and blotting-case. "You will find everything ready for your use. I hope I have not forgotten anything. It has been such a pleasure to me fitting up this room. Now I will leave you for a little while to rest and refresh yourself, and then we will have some more talk;" and with a nod and a smile Averil withdrew to her own room.

CHAPTER V.

LOTTIE.

"OH, my mother, if thou could only see me now!" was Annette's inward ejaculation when the door

closed upon her cousin; and as though this tender reflection had opened the flood-gates of suppressed emotion, the tears flowed rapidly, and for a little while they could not be checked.

Poor, tired Annette was struggling against a tide of conflicting feelings; now a pang crossed her faithful heart at the thought of that humble grave in the cemetery at Dinan, so far away, and then she chid herself for the fancy. "It is not the grave, it is the life that we should remember," she said to herself; "life that is forever. Who can deprive me of those prayers that my mother prayed on her death-bed? While memory lasts who can rob me of her example, her precepts, of the remembrance of her gentle patience? There is no death to love. Truly, monsieur is right—my darling mother is as near me as ever;" and Annette dried her eyes.

After this she moved timidly about her beautiful room, looking at one treasure after another with a sort of admiring awe and reverence. Annette's innate sense of the beautiful had never before been gratified. She had grown up to womanhood among the meager surroundings of poverty; her inherited instincts and a natural love of refinement had found no vent in that dark, unlovely house in the Rue St. Joseph, with its dim, smoke-begrimed walls and long, narrow windows, overshadowed by neighboring gables, when only a few sous expended on flowers was possible to the young lace-mender, and whose chaplet of white-roses for her mother's coffin was only procured at the expense of a meal.

But Annette was less gratified at the thought of becoming the possessor of all these fine things than touched at the womanly thoughtfulness that had provided them. "What a fine heart my cousin Averil must have," she reflected, "to have expended her money on an unknown stranger! How sweet to think that while I was imagining myself lonely and forsaken, this room was being prepared for me! It is the heavenly kindness that warms me so," she said to herself as she examined one thing after another.

It was true; Averil had forgotten nothing; her generosity had anticipated all her cousin's little wants. "All her life the poor child has been poor," she thought. "I should like her to find everything ready for use. It will be a sort of sisterly welcome. Lottie will help me to think of things."

And so it was that silk-lined basket with its dainty work implements had found its place, and the well-stocked paper-case. There was even a case of brushes on the toilet-table, and a new Bible and prayer-book on the little round table, while a few choice photographs in simple frames adorned the walls.

Annette was so absorbed in her researches, so loath to put down one treasure and take up another, that she hardly had time to brush her thick hair and smooth her rumpled collar before Averil reappeared. She looked at the closed trunk in some surprise. "You have not unpacked! Shall I help you?" she asked, kindly. "I was afraid I had left you too long. But perhaps you are not ready to come down?"

"Does it matter about the unpacking?" returned the girl, a little wearily. "It is not as though I had fine gowns and laces. My one poor dress will not hurt. Ah," looking at Averil's dress, which, in spite of its plainness, had all sorts of pretty finishes, "I fear I shall shame you, my cousin, with my poverty."

"Poverty never shamed any one," replied Averil, quickly. "Do not trouble about anything to-night, Annette," looking at her a little anxiously, as she noticed the traces of recent tears. "To-morrow you shall tell me what you want, and we will get it together. I dare say you will find shopping very amusing. I know Lottie loves it."

"And you, my cousin?"

"Well, perhaps I do not care for it myself, but it is all in the day's work," replied Averil, cheerfully. "I could spend half the day in a book-seller's, or looking over pictures and engravings, but for dresses and fine things, they are, of course, indifferent to me, unless I buy them for others;" and Averil shrugged her shoulders with a little gesture of contempt.

They were passing through the hall as they spoke when a door opened quickly, and a young lady in gray came out. She was a pretty, dark-eyed girl. Averil at once accosted her.

"My dear Lottie, where have you been? It is nearly seven o'clock!"

"Yes, I know. Please don't keep me, Averil. Maud wants me to arrange her flowers. I have been to Whiteley's and the Stores, but I can not match those things that Georgina wants. It is no use her being vexed about it, for I have done my best;" and she was hurrying away when Averil called her back.

"But you have not spoken to my cousin, Lottie. You will surely shake hands with her?"

Lottie extended her hand at once. "I did not mean to be rude, Averil," she said in a flurried, apologetic manner. "How do you do, Miss Ramsay? I have no time to speak to you now, but when they are all gone I will come to you;" and she nodded to Averil and ran up-stairs.

"Poor Lottie! How tired she looks! You must excuse her abruptness, Annette. Lottie is not her own mistress. She will come down to us by and by, when Mrs. Willmot and the girls have gone to their dinner-party. I want you and Lottie to be good friends."

"I think she has a nice face, only she looked what you call harassed, just as I used to feel when there was too much work to be done and Clotilde wanted me to walk. This young lady is like myself, is she not?—she has no parents. Oh, yes, monsieur told me something of her history. She was a poor orphan, and her uncle adopted her, and then he died, and his wife, who is your step-

mother, my cousin, had the magnificent generosity to keep her still."

A faint smile flitted over Averil's face, but she made no direct response to this last clause. "Lottie was quite a little girl when Mr. Seymour adopted her. Her parents died young. Her life has been hard, like yours, Annette. I hope you and Lottie will take to each other. I have a large family, and nothing pleases me more than to see the members of my family happy together."

"But—yes—why not?" returned Annette, regarding her cousin with widely opened eyes. "In this house that is so large there is surely room for every one—there will be no need to quarrel."

"Oh, I was not speaking of Redfern House," replied Averil; but she offered no further explanation. She drew Annette down on the couch beside her and talked to her in a low voice, so that Roberts, who was putting the finishing touches to the supper-table, could not have overheard those quiet tones. When everything was ready Roberts quietly withdrew, and the two girls seated themselves at the table. Annette noticed that a place was laid for Lottie, but they were half through their meal before she joined them. Annette, whose tongue was now unloosed, was giving Averil a graphic description of her Dinan life when Lottie came quickly into the room. She looked pale and worried.

"Oh, Averil, I am so sorry to be late," she said, looking half inclined to cry; "but it was really not my fault. They have only just driven from the door, and there were a hundred things Georgina wanted me to do. Something had gone wrong with her dress, and of course she was very much put out, and—"

"Never mind all that, Lottie, dear," observed Averil, in her quick, decided way. "'Brush away the worries,' as dear father used to say. Here is a nice cup of coffee, and I will cut you some of the breast of that chicken. Nonsense!" as Lottie protested that her head ached, and that she was too tired to eat: "starving never rested any one. Annette, will you give Lottie some of that salad you praise so much and then, while she is a good girl and eats her supper, you shall go on with your picturesque description. Lottie, you have no idea how well Annette talks—she makes one see things so plainly. That is what we love—a storybook of talk, don't we, Lottchen?"

Annette was quite willing to go on talking. Averil's gentle look of sympathy and her evident interest were sufficient inducement: it was enough that she pleased her auditors. She even grew a little excited as Lottie's pale listlessness faded, and the weary contraction of her brow relaxed. She seemed roused, interested, taken out of herself.

"She has had a hard life too, Averil," Annette heard her whisper; "and then she has not had you;" and Lottie's eyes grew soft and pathetic over this little speech.

Roberts came to clear away and to bring the lamps, and then Averil bade her two young companions join her at the open window. Lottie placed herself on a stool at her feet and laid her head on Averil's lap. In the pauses of her talk Annette could see Averil's thin light hand with its single diamond ring flashing in the lamp-light as it smoothed Lottie's dark hair tenderly. Presently she said in a half whisper: "Go on, Annette; do not stop talking. Lottie has fallen asleep, and the rest will do her good. Perhaps, after all, she will not have one of her bad headaches."

"But why does she tire herself so much?" asked the girl, in some surprise. "It is not good to make one's self sick with fatigue. Oh, I know what it is when one's back aches with stooping, and the light goes, and there is still work to be done; but to walk and not to stop when one is tired, it is that that passes my comprehension."

"Lottie is a busy little woman in her way," replied Averil, quietly. "She works beautifully, and her aunt and cousins give her plenty to do."

"Oh, she is not rich, and that is how she repays her aunt's kindness. Doubtless she is very happy to do them service. My cousin, I have yet to learn in what way I shall be able to repay your goodness. But I shall find out some day, and answer that question for myself."

Averil was not a demonstrative little person or she could have found a ready response to Annette's question, so touching in its graceful naïveté: "Love me for myself," she would have answered. "Love me and you will repay me a hundred-fold;" for hers was a nature that was never satisfied with loving that spent itself, and yet was forever giving—full measure, yet without hope of return. Yes, young as she was in years, Averil had already learned the sorrowful lesson that Life teaches to her elder scholars—that it is useless to expect too much of human nature, and that though, thank God, love often begets love, it is better and wiser to give it freely, as God gives His blessed sunshine, pouring it alike on the thankful and ungrateful, for "with what measure ye mete," said the Divine Master, "it shall be measured to you again." Alas! how niggardly are our human measures, how carefully we weigh out our small grains of good-will, for which we expect to be repaid so richly!

Averil was bent on being a listener to-night. She said little; only an intelligent question, a sympathetic monosyllable or two, drew out fresh details.

"If I want to know Annette thoroughly," she thought, "I must let her tell me all about herself. I think our great mistake in making acquaintance with people is that we never put ourselves sufficiently in the background, so we contrive to stamp a portion of our individuality on every fresh person. Annette is very original—she is also frank and unreserved. It is a relief for her to talk, and it is always easy for me to listen."

It was growing quite late, when Lottie suddenly started up with a rather guilty air.

"Have I been asleep, Miss Ramsay? How rude you must have thought me! But when I am tired, and Averil strokes my hair, she always sends me to sleep. Why, it is nearly ten o'clock!"—jumping

up in a hurry. "Oh, Averil, you ought to have woken me! The girls' room is in such a state, and Georgina made me promise to put it tidy."

"Suppose I ask Unwin to do it as a favor—you are half asleep, Lottie. She looks like a little owl, does she not, Annette?"

"Oh, no; we must not trouble Unwin. And there is aunt's room, too. It is all my fault for going to sleep and forgetting my duties;" and Lottie's pretty face wore its harassed look again.

"What is there to do? At least I can help you," observed Annette, eagerly. "Is it to make things tidy? Surely that is not difficult. My cousin, I should love to help Miss Jones, if she will have me."

"Very well; we will all go," returned Averil, gratified by Annette's ready good-nature; and Lottie at once brightened up.

Annette looked a little astonished as they entered the large, handsome room; the bed, chairs, even the floor, seemed strewn with a profusion of garments, the toilet table heaped with laces, gloves, and trinkets. "What gorgeousness! what splendor!" thought Annette; but she did not utter her wonder aloud; she only shook out the folds of a black lace dress that was trailing across a couple of chairs, and began folding it with quick, deft fingers.

Averil was called away at this moment; when she returned all traces of chaos had been removed. Annette was standing by the toilet table rolling up some ribbons, and Lottie was locking up the trinkets in the dressing-case.

"Oh, Averil!" she exclaimed, "Miss Ramsay has been helping me so nicely. She has folded up all the dresses, and she does it as well as Unwin. And now she has promised to mend that lace flounce for me to-morrow, so I shall be able to practice before Herr Ludwig comes. Maud was so bent on my doing it, though I told her that my piece was not nearly perfect."

"But to me it is a trifle," replied Annette, quickly. "I can work a new sprig where the old one has been rent. Miss Jones will not know it has been mended at all, and to me it will be play. And now, if there is nothing else that I can do, will you permit me to retire? for, like Miss Jones, my eyes are heavy, and the hour is later than that to which I have always accustomed myself."

"My dear child, how thoughtless I have been! Tired! Of course you are tired after your journey. Lottie, I will take Annette to her room, and then come back to you."

Averil was not long away, but Lottie had finished her task, and was awaiting her with some impatience.

"Well, Averil?"

"Well, my dear," in rather a quizzical voice, "have you altered your opinion at all since the morning? Are you still as sure that the arrival of my little Frenchified cousin must spoil everything? Have you found her quite as disagreeable as you expected?"

Lottie pouted.

"Don't be tiresome, Averil. A person must make a mistake sometimes. Miss Ramsay is not disagreeable at all. On the contrary, I think she is rather nice."

"Nice!" still in the same teasing voice. "I should have said my cousin was charming."

"Oh, of course; you are never for half measures, Averil. I should not wonder if in time you liked her far better than you do me—no, I should not wonder at all."

Averil broke into her little silvery laugh as Lottie finished her speech in rather an injured manner.

"Indeed, Lottie, I am not at all sure that I shall not become excessively fond of Annette. She is amiable, and yet she has plenty of character. And then she has such winning ways!"

"Yes; and my manners are so abrupt. You are always telling me so, Averil."

"For your own good, dear. Why, what nonsense!" as Lottie's eyes filled with tears. "Do you think Annette will make any difference between us? For shame, Lottie! I can not believe for one moment that you could seriously entertain such an unworthy thought. What! Can you who know me so well—can you begrudge me another object of interest, another friendly being on whom I may bestow a little affection? No; this sort of petty jealousy does not belong to my Lottie."

"No, not really, Averil"—throwing her arms round her neck and giving her a penitent kiss. "I am only cross because I am so tired. No one can take my place, not even this fascinating Miss Ramsay. Do you think I would begrudge you anything—when I want the whole world to love you as much as I do?"

"Hush! Good-night! There, there, you foolish child!" as Lottie mutely pleaded for another kiss, and Averil left her smiling. But the smile faded as she entered her own room, and a look of utter weariness took its place.

"Oh, Unwin," she said, as a gray-haired, pleasant-looking woman came from an inner room, "I did not think it possible that one could ache so!"

"You are just worn out, Miss Averil," returned the old servant, tenderly. "You are none of the strongest, and you are young yet, though folks seem to forget that, and put too much upon you. It goes to my heart to see you so white and spent of a night, and no one to spare you anything. You are always looking after other people, and forgetting yourself."

"You dear old story-teller! Why, I am grumbling about my own aches and pains at this very minute."

"Yes, my dear, and I hope you will always grumble to me, as you call it," returned Unwin, as she gently unplaited Averil's hair and brushed out the dark, shining masses that nearly reached to the ground. Unwin did not leave her young mistress that night until her weary little head was laid on her pillow, and more than once she entered the room softly, to assure herself that Averil had fallen asleep.

"Her mind is too big for her body," she thought, as she crept away, and nearly stumbled over the poodle. "No one knows the strain there is on that young creature, and no one ever sees her give way but me;" and Unwin sighed, for she had known and loved her young mistress from childhood, and it grieved her to see her darling young lady so weary and exhausted.

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKFAST AT REDFERN HOUSE.

ANNETTE was an early riser; she had slept soundly in her new, luxurious bed, and awoke refreshed and full of energy. When she had dressed herself carefully, and had disposed of her scanty stock of clothing in the big wardrobe that seemed to swallow it up, she was at a loss what to do. She had read her chapter in the new Bible—with her mother's worn old Bible lying all the time on her lap—but there were no other books, and no work that she could do. She would have liked to have used her pretty blotting-case, but no one would expect a letter. Perhaps she could find her way to her cousin Averil's sitting-room—there would be plenty of books there.

Annette had just reached the hall when the sound of a piano from a room near excited her curiosity. Perhaps Miss Jones was practicing, and would tell her what to do. As she opened the door Lottie looked up and nodded, while she finished her scale.

"Good-morning, Miss Ramsay," she said at last, as Annette stood by the piano looking with some envy at her brisk little fingers. "I hardly expected to see you before the breakfast-bell rang. So you have found your way in here."

"Am I wrong to come here?" asked Annette, looking round the bright, home-like apartment, with its well-littered work-tables and handsomely filled book-shelves. "I was about to find my cousin's room, only the sound of the piano attracted me. How beautifully you play, Miss Jones! Your fingers seem to fly over the keys. For myself, I have never learned music"—somewhat mournfully.

"Oh, I was only playing my scales," returned Lottie, carelessly. "Yes, you were quite right to come here; no one goes to Averil's room without permission. It is her private sitting-room, you see, and I dare say she is reading there now. This is the morning-room, where every one sits, and works, and writes their letters."

"Morning-room! Is there then a room for evening?" asked Annette, in such a puzzled tone that Lottie could not help laughing.

"Well, there is the drawing-room, you know, and we certainly use that of an evening—that is, when we entertain visitors. Would you like to see it?" And Lottie, who was a little weary of her scales, rose with alacrity. She was beginning to think Annette a very amusing person. She thoroughly enjoyed the air of wonder with which she regarded everything.

"But this room is magnificent. I have never seen so grand a room," she kept repeating at intervals.

"Yes it looks very nice when it is lighted up," replied Lottie nonchalantly. "Averil has the art of making all her rooms look comfortable and home-like. There is nothing stiff even in this one. Some people's drawing-rooms always have an unused look, just as though no one ever lived in them."

"Two fire-places, and all those big windows, and a floor so long that one could dance over it. Ah! I thought that was a stranger, that girl in black, with the pale lace and I see it is myself." And Annette stood before the glass panel, gravely regarding herself, while Lottie watched her in some amusement.

"I think you will know yourself again," she said, a little sarcastically. But the sarcasm was lost on Annette, who was still contemplating her image with the utmost seriousness.

"Forgive me if I keep you too long," she returned; "but until this moment I do not think I have ever seen myself clearly; that is why I interview myself as I would a stranger. It is good, it is wholesome, to realize that one has no claims to admiration—a pale, long face—Bah! You shall take my place, Miss Lottie—the big glass will be more pleased to reflect you."

The little compliment pleased Lottie, though she pretended to laugh it off. "You are not fair to yourself" she said, blushing. "The glass has not seen you talk. When people are animated they look better. No one can judge of themselves. Averil always speaks of herself as an ugly little thing; it is a sort of craze with her to think she shocks people at first sight. But there are times, I assure you, when I almost think she is beautiful. Oh! there is the breakfast-bell. I am so glad, for I am as hungry as a hunter. Come along, Miss Ramsay; we shall find Averil at her post."

Averil, who was almost hidden behind the big urn, looked up from her letters, and gave Annette a kind welcome.

"Have you slept well, dear? I think you look more rested. Mrs. Willmot, this is my cousin, Annette Ramsay"—addressing a tall, fine-looking woman in widow's dress, who was reading the paper in the window.

"Oh, indeed!" she returned, rather coolly, holding out her plump white hand as she spoke, but without advancing a step. "I hope you are very well, Miss Ramsay."

"I am always well, thank you," returned Annette, shrinking a little from the keen scrutiny of those handsome hazel eyes. It must be confessed Mrs. Willmot's reception was somewhat chilling. "To that lady I am an unwelcome visitor," she thought; for the girl was tolerably shrewd and clear-sighted.

"Come and sit by me, Annette," observed Averil, quickly. "Lottie, will you help Annette to some of that omelet? The others are not down—we generally begin without them. I wonder how you felt when you woke up in a strange room this morning, and if you wished yourself back in the Rue St. Joseph?"

Annette was about to disclaim this notion somewhat eagerly, when Mrs. Willmot's clear, metallic voice struck in:

"I can not think why the girls are not down. We were home last night at a ridiculously early hour. There is not the slightest excuse for being so late. Lottie, do go up and hurry them. Georgina is getting into lax ways. I am always telling her that early rising is the best cosmetic for the complexion. I do not know if you have noticed it, Averil, but Georgie is getting positively fat."

"No, I can not say that I have noticed it," returned Averil, rather curtly. "They are not later than usual. I hope they will not keep Lottie, or her breakfast will get cold." But Mrs. Willmot interrupted her; this time she spoke in a decidedly injured voice.

"My dear Averil, it is too bad. The toast is hard again. I can not possibly eat it. Really, Mrs. Adams is growing more careless every day."

"I am so sorry. Annette, would you mind ringing the bell, and I will order some fresh toast to be made." Averil spoke with the utmost good-humor, but as she gave the order Mrs. Willmot's cloudy brow did not relax, and Roberts had hardly closed the door before she burst out again:

"It is really shameful, Averil, to see how you are duped by your servants. Look at the wages you give Mrs. Adams—nearly double what I used to pay Ransome—and she is growing more neglectful every day. Why, the lobster cutlets the other day were not fit to eat, and she had flavored the white soup wrongly. How you can put up with such an incompetent person, just because she is a respectable woman, passes my comprehension. In my opinion old servants are mistakes. Of course, you shake your head. One might as well talk to the wind. It is a little hard that at my age and with all my experience, you will never consent to be guided by me in such matters."

Averil elevated her eyebrows slightly. "I am afraid, my dear Mrs. Willmot, that on these points we must agree to differ, as you well know, for we have often discussed the matter. Nothing would induce me to part with Mrs. Adams. She is an invaluable servant; she is industrious and economical, and my father always praised her cooking. I think Rodney has infected you with his club notions. He has got it into his head that it is his prerogative as an Englishman to grumble, but I mean to give him a strong hint to hold his tongue before Roberts. By the bye, Mrs. Willmot"—gliding easily from the vexed topic—"I have two more refusals this morning—from the Farnboroughs and Lathams."

"What are you saying about the Lathams, Averil?" interposed a fresh voice, and a tall, striking-looking girl, the youthful image of her mother, entered the room, followed closely by Lottie.

"Good-morning, mother! What are you frowning at?" bestowing a light, butterfly kiss rather carelessly as she passed. "Oh!" with a sudden change of tone, and with rather a cool stare at Annette. "This is Miss Ramsay, I suppose. How do you do? Very well, I hope—pleasant journey, and all that sort of thing?" And the young lady swept to her chair with an impertinent insouciance of manner that some people thought charming.

"What has become of your sister, Maud?" asked her mother, in rather a freezing tone.

"My sister?" with an amused air. "Is it not absurd, Averil, when mother uses that dignified tone? I would not be Georgie for the world at this moment. It is all Doctor Rathbone's fault. He took mother in to dinner last night, and regaled her with all kinds of entertaining speeches. He told her Georgie was getting fat, and that she ought to ride before breakfast. Oh, no, I would not be in Georgie's shoes for the next month." And Maud drew down the corners of her mouth in a ridiculous manner, that nearly convulsed Lottie with suppressed merriment.

"I have often told Georgina that she ought to walk more," returned Averil, rather seriously. "She is too fond of an easy chair, she reads too many novels, and—" but here Mrs. Willmot checked her.

"There now, Maud, you are making Averil severe on Georgina, as usual. You might know by this time how hard she always is on her, and yet no girl ever deserved blame less. I told Doctor Rathbone that it was laughing so much that made her fat. What a disagreeable old man he is! I never saw her in better looks than she was last night. That blue dress suited her admirably. I am sure Captain Beverley thought so, for he was most attentive."

"I can't say I noticed it," replied Maud, coldly. "Have the Lathams really refused, Averil? What a pity!"

Mrs. Willmot looked a little alarmed at her daughter's heightened color and evident vexation.

"Oh, the room will be crowded as it is," she said, soothingly. "It does not matter about the Lathams. Mrs. Mortimer was telling me last night, Maudie, that she never saw you look to more advantage. 'Georgina is very much improved,' she said, 'and you have reason to be proud of them both; but in my opinion Georgina will never hold a candle to her sister—she has not Maud's beautiful figure, you see.'"

"My dear Mrs. Willmot, is it not a pity—" but here Averil stopped, while Maud bridled her long neck, and tried not to look pleased at this foolish flattery.

Just then an interruption occurred. The door opened rather noisily, and a fine, buxom girl, with a broad, heavy type of face, and a profusion of light, flaxen hair, made her appearance.

"Good-morning, good people all!" she said, airily, as she subsided into a vacant chair. "Lottie, will you please cut me some of that ham? I am literally starving, for Captain Beverley gave me no time to eat my dinner. Why are you looking so glum, Averil? Oh, I see. I have forgotten my manners. Miss Ramsay, please excuse me. I completely overlooked you;" and Georgina, feeling that she had made a graceful apology, turned her shoulder on Annette, and applied herself to her breakfast.

"Averil," exclaimed Maud, at this moment, "I suppose we can have the carriage this afternoon? We want to pay some calls."

"I am very sorry, Maud," began Averil, in a hesitating voice, "but my cousin has some shopping to do."

"There are excellent shops in High Street," responded the young lady, in the coolest manner. "Miss Ramsay will find all she wants at Siemans & Little, or there is Barker," with a supercilious glance at Annette's neat black dress.

"I am afraid, all the same, that you can not have the carriage this afternoon, Maud."

"Not have it!" and here Maud looked excessively put out. "Averil, I did not think you could be so inconsiderate. Mamma has all these calls owing, and they positively must be paid, and to-morrow we are going to that garden-party at Richmond, and the next day is Sunday, and Monday is Lady Morrison's At Home, Tuesday is ours, and—"

Annette, who, had listened to this expostulation in puzzled silence, suddenly interposed.

"The carriage, my cousin," she said, in some surprise. "What is it that I want with a carriage? Surely I can walk, and then this young lady will not be inconvenienced. Oh, yes, that is best, and I can walk."

But here Lottie nudged her impressively, and Averil said, a little sadly, "But I can not walk, Annette—at least, very little walking knocks me up."

"But is it absolutely necessary for Miss Ramsay's shopping to be done to-day?" asked Maud, rather disdainfully.

"Say No, my cousin," whispered Annette, with a pained flush.

But Averil smiled back at her and said, "Hush!"

"I think it is you who are inconsiderate, Maud," she said, very quietly. "Yes, it is absolutely necessary that Annette should not be disappointed. But as your heart seems set on paying these visits, you may have the carriage, and we will manage with a hansom, please say no more about it," as Maud certainly had the grace to look a little ashamed of herself. "Annette will not mind, I am sure. Now, will one of you two girls look after Rodney when he comes down? I want Lottie to finish her practicing before Herr Ludwig comes. Come, Lottie! come, Annette!" and Averil beckoned to them.

As soon as the door closed behind them Lottie burst into an indignant remonstrance. "Oh, Averil, how can you put up with it? It is really too bad of Maud! and for aunt to encourage her in such impertinence!"

"Please, Lottie, dear, let the subject drop," and Averil's mouth had a weary curve. "Time is too precious, and you and I have far too much to do to waste it on such trifles. Annette, do you think you will be dull in my sitting-room? I have my letters to write, and all sorts of business."

"I shall not be dull if I can see you," returned Annette, simply. "Since my mother's death I have worked alone. Alone! Ah, what a bitter word! One is slow in learning it. Often I have forgotten—I have lost myself in some dream. 'Is it so, mother?' I would say, and raise my head. Alas! there were only the dark corners, the empty chair—no answering smile to greet me. Oh, my cousin, I see I make you sad with my little retrospect. But it was only to prove to you that I shall be gay—what you call cheerful—by comparison."

Averil did not answer for a moment—when she next spoke it was to question Annette about the torn lace flounce she was to mend for Lottie.

Annette was eager to begin her task; she wanted to show these dear people that there was something she could do. "It is play to me," she said, with innocent egotism. "You shall see, and Miss Lottie too, that I can work well. 'One need not starve when one has ten fingers,' as poor Clotilde says. Ah! poor Clotilde! she is peeling her onions now, and perhaps saying a prayer for me in her heart. Hold! I am a sad chatter-box. I will not speak again for an hour"—and for a wonder, Annette contrived to keep her word. But though Annette's tongue was silent, her thoughts were busy enough. Again and again she raised her dark eyes from her embroidery, and

fixed them on the quiet figure before her, on the grave, intent face, on the small, busy hands, as Averil wrote letters, added up bills, or made entries in her housekeeping book.

CHAPTER VII.

RODNEY MAKES HIS APPEARANCE.

BUT the morning was not to pass without interruption. The young mistress of Redfern House was evidently a woman of business. First, a stout, comely looking woman demanded admittance, and had a long and evidently a most important interview. Annette, in her sunny corner, could only hear a word or two—mayonnaise, apricot tart, and so on. Evidently Averil was making out the *menu*. Then, when Mrs. Adams was dismissed, Unwin took her place, and again snatches of conversation reached Annette's ears; they seemed to be discussing some charitable case, for soup and linen were mentioned.

"You will go yourself, Unwin," she heard Averil say. "My time is fully occupied to-day; but if you find out that they are really deserving people, I will call myself to-morrow. In any case a little soup and a few comforts will do no harm, for the woman is certainly very ill."

"Very well, ma'am: I will pack a basket, and—" Here her voice dropped, but there was a great deal more said before Unwin left Averil to resume her letter-writing.

Again there was silence, only broken by the trills of the bullfinch. Averil's pen traveled rapidly over the paper; then she stopped and appeared to listen, and a moment afterward rose with a quick exclamation of annoyance.

"What can she have heard?" thought Annette. But her curiosity was soon gratified. Averil had forgotten to close the door behind her, and the next moment Annette heard her speaking to Lottie.

"Why have you stopped playing, Lottie? It is not eleven o'clock. I thought you told me that you particularly wanted two hours."

"Yes, I did say so, but aunt wants some letters written, and Maud says she is too busy to do them. Never mind, Averil; don't trouble about it. I shall only get a scolding from Herr Ludwig because my piece is not perfect."

"Go back to your playing, Lottie. I will speak to Mrs. Willmot. Now, don't argue; it is only a waste of time, and you know you have promised to be guided by me. Quick—march!" Here the drawing-room door closed in a summary manner.

A heavy footfall in the passage outside—the talk begins again. Annette pricks up her ears. Yes, she is behind the scenes; she is beginning to learn the ways of the household.

"Mrs. Willmot, I want to speak to you"—in Averil's voice. "Why is Lottie always to be interrupted? I thought it was understood between us that she was to have time for her practicing. Herr Ludwig is an expensive master; it is throwing my money away unless she prepares properly for her lesson. Last week he was very angry because she played her piece so imperfectly."

"I am sure I do not know why you are telling me all this, Averil. I am not aware that I am interrupting Lottie."

"Maud has just asked her to write some letters."

"Oh, I forgot. I remember now that both the girls told me that they were too busy; and really Georgina is so careless, and writes such a shocking hand, that I never care to ask her."

"But Maud is always writing to some one."

"Yes; and every one says how clever and amusing her letters are. But really she is quite cross if I beg her to answer a few notes. Girls are so selfish; they never will take trouble for other people."

"I think you should insist on Maud making herself useful. I suppose we should all grow selfish if we yielded to the feeling. Indeed, Lottie must not be disturbed; another scolding from Herr Ludwig would dishearten her. If no one else will write your letters, I must offer my services."

"You, Averil! What nonsense! Thank you, I prefer to manage my own business"—very stiffly. "I suppose the letters can wait." Here there was a slow sweep of a dress over the floor, and the next moment Averil re-entered. Annette looked at her wistfully, but said nothing, and again the soothing stillness prevailed. The black poodle slumbered peacefully; Annette worked on busily; her task was nearly finished. She made up her mind, when it was completed, that she would slip through the open window and explore the green, winding path that looked so pleasant. A garden was a novelty to her, and the sight of the trimly shaven lawn and gay flower-beds was wonderfully pleasant to her eyes.

Another tap at the door—a quick, imperative tap—followed by the entrance of a fair, boyish-looking young man, dressed in the height of fashion.

"I say, Averil, are you very busy? I want to speak to you"—and then he checked himself as he caught sight of Annette.

"I beg your pardon. I had no idea you had any one with you," honoring Annette with rather a cool,

supercilious stare as he spoke.

"Good-morning, Rodney. This is my cousin, Miss Ramsay. You knew yesterday that she was expected. Annette, this is Mr. Seymour, my step-mother's son."

Annette acknowledged the introduction with rather a haughty bend of her head—the little lace-mender had her pride. These Seymours were not gracious in their reception of her. Each one in turn had informed her by their manner that she was an unwelcome guest. Good; she would keep herself to herself; they should not be inconvenienced by her. A naughty little sparkle came into Annette's brown eyes.

"If it please you, my cousin, I will take a turn in that pleasant garden," she said, rather primly. "I have finished the sprig, and Miss Jones will not know where it has been mended, and then I shall be in no one's way."

"Please do not disturb yourself on my account, Miss Ramsay," began Rodney.

But Annette did not give him time to finish. She had had enough of these Seymours, she told herself, as she brushed a thread or two from her black dress. She did not even wait for Averil's permission, but ran down the steps, followed by the black poodle, who was enchanted at the prospect of a game. Annette had never found out that she had a temper till that minute. "One must grow tall to stand on tiptoe with these English," she said, with a little toss of her head, as she walked down the shrubbery.

Rodney lolled against the window-frame and watched her rather lazily. "What a very energetic young person!" he muttered. Then aloud, "It must be an awful bore for you, Averil, having a poor relative turning up in this unexpected fashion."

"I am not so sure that Annette will prove a bore," replied Averil, rather coolly. "I am very pleased with the little I have seen of her. In spite of poverty and hard work, she seems to have a great deal of refinement. She is clever and amusing, and I have discovered that she is an excellent companion."

"Indeed! The girls did not seem much impressed by her at breakfast. It is a pity she is not better-looking. She has a half-starved sort of appearance. But if you are pleased, and all that—"

"Rodney!" a little impatiently, "did you come to my room to discuss my cousin's merits and demerits?"

"No, indeed. How sharp you are, Averil! You are always down on a fellow before he can get a word in. There is no particular hurry, is there?" fingering the rosebud in his button-hole in a way that provoked Averil.

"No hurry for you," rather sarcastically; "but if you will excuse me for mentioning it, I am very much pressed for time myself, so please let me know what you want as quickly as possible."

"Well, you might be a little more gracious, Ave," in a rather sulky tone. "I don't often take up your precious time, do I?" Then, as she made no answer, he went on in the same drawling fashion. "The fact is, I am a bit hard up, and I dare not let the mater know it. She cut up rough last time, and if there is anything I hate it is a scene—my nerves won't stand it."

Averil sat down and folded her hands on her lap in a resigned way. Her manner said mutely that this was exactly what she expected to hear. She looked such a little creature—so absurdly childish—beside the tall lazy figure that was propping itself against the wall; but there was nothing childish in the small, resolute face. Rodney seemed to find the silence trying. He shifted from one foot to the other, and pulled his mustache as he furtively eyed her.

"Can't you speak a word to a fellow?" he said, when the situation became intolerable.

Averil flashed a look at him. "Oh, dear yes; a thousand words if you like," she returned, scornfully. "The question is, whether the *fellow* will like them."

"Come now, Ave, don't be so confoundedly hard on me. You are such a good-natured little soul, and have so often helped me, that you are not going to turn rusty now."

"Does it never strike you"—in a keen, incisive voice—"that there are limits even to good nature, that I may possibly have conscientious scruples about throwing my money away on a spendthrift? Now, please do not interrupt me, Rodney; I must speak, even if the truth is not to your taste. I am not one to prophesy smooth things. You have come to tell me that you have exceeded your allowance, that you are in debt again, and that you dare not apply to your mother; and I will tell you in return that you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Of course I must bear anything that you choose to say, if I put myself in this position." And here Rodney seemed to gulp down something.

Averil's voice softened unconsciously. "Rodney, it is for your good I am speaking. I have no wish to be hard on you or any one, but I can not see you ruining yourself without a word of remonstrance. How long do you mean to go on like this, living upon"—she was going to say "me," but hastily substituted the word "mother?"

Rodney colored as though he understood her.

"If only something would turn up," he muttered. "It is just like my luck, failing to pass that examination."

"When people do not work, is it a surprising fact that they cannot pass an examination? Ill luck—something to turn up!" still more impatiently. "How I hate those phrases! The very cant of the

idler. Is there anything in this world worth having that can be procured without effort—without downright labor? 'By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.' Why should you be exempt, Rodney, from the common burden of humanity?"

"Oh, come! don't preach, Ave. Who says that I don't mean to work?"

"Did you work at Oxford? Are you working now?"

"Perhaps not. But I am young; and even the mater says there is plenty of time. You need not grudge me a little amusement. I'll work fast enough by and by."

"My dear," replied Averil, with a quaint motherliness that sat oddly upon her, "'by and by' is a dangerous ally. 'Now' is a stouter fellow, and a better staff for a young man. You know what Mr. Harland says, 'The longer you wait for work, the less you will feel inclined for it when it comes. Idleness never improved any one.'"

"How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour!" drawled Rodney, who was getting weary of this lecture.

"Exactly so. And you have not stored a bit of honey yet. Now, Rodney, in spite of your impatience, I must beg you to listen to me a moment. I will help you this once."

"Oh, thanks, awfully! I always knew you were a brick, Averil."

"This once"—holding up her finger impressively. "But, Rodney, never again. I tell you my conscience will not allow me to do it. I cannot throw away good money that might help worthy people in paying the debts of an extremely idle young man, and so encourage him to contract more."

"Upon my word, Averil!" in an affronted tone.

"My dear boy, I am stating the sober truth. You are an idle young man; and you are far too fond of pleasure. All the Seymours are."

"You are vastly complimentary to the family"—relapsing into sulkiness. "Why don't you turn us out? You are not bound to put up with us. Come now, Averil, answer that if you can?"

"I could answer it easily," looking at him with an expression of sadness. "But silence is golden, Rodney. But do not try me too much. There are times, I do not deny it, when I long to run away from you all."

"Well, you are awfully good to us"—in a penitent tone. "I often tell the girls what a little brick you are. I know we are a troublesome lot. It is our up-bringing, as Aunt Dinah calls it. The mater has spared the rod and spoiled the child, don't you know? Awful nuisance that."

Averil smiled. In her heart Rodney was her favorite—weak, self-indulgent, and easily led. He was not without good impulses, and he was not so hopelessly selfish as the others.

"Now tell me what you want and I will write the check," she observed, resuming her business-like manner; "or, better still, let me have your bills."

"Oh, of course, if you do not trust me!" and Rodney looked hurt and mortified.

"Very well, I will. Now then!" and as Rodney whispered the amount in her ear she merely elevated her eyebrows, but made no remarks as she wrote the check and passed it to him. She checked his profuse thanks.

"Never mind about that. I never care much for words. If you want to please me, if you have the faintest wish to preserve my respect, you will look out seriously for a berth. You will ask Mr. Harland to help you. Do, Rodney; do, my dear boy; and I shall still live to be proud of you."

Rodney tried to laugh at her earnestness, but it was easy to see that his light facile nature was touched.

"Well, I will see about it. Don't bother yourself Ave. I never was worth the trouble. You are a good little soul, and I am awfully obliged to you. I am, indeed. Oh, there is the young woman—the cousin, I mean. And I may as well take myself off." And Rodney sauntered off.

"Are you alone? Then I need not fear to interrupt you?" began Annette. Then she stopped, and regarded Averil with close attention. "Ah! you are tired, my cousin. You have grown quite pale and fatigued during my absence. I will take a book to that shady garden seat."

"No, no! I will put away my letters. I have had so many interruptions. Indeed, I must talk to you, Annette. That is part of my business for this morning. Shall we go up to your room? I want you to tell me exactly what you require for renovating your wardrobe, just as you would have told your mother. You are still in mourning, of course. It is only six months since you lost her."

"Only six months! To me it seems like six years. Yes, I will keep to my black gown; any color would dazzle me too much. You are in black, too, my cousin!"

"Yes; but this is not mourning. I think I dislike any color for myself. Unwin sees to my dresses. When she thinks I want a new one she tells me so. I should never remember it myself. But, strange to say, it is always a pleasure to me to see people round me well dressed."

"That is because you have an artistic taste. Miss Jones dresses well. I was remarking on her gown this morning."

"Oh, yes! Lottie has excellent taste. And then she knows she is pretty."

Averil could have said more on this subject, but she was singularly uncommunicative on the

subject of her own good deeds. Lottie would have waxed eloquent on the theme. She could have informed Annette of a time when the little school-girl had shed hot tears of humiliation and shame over the out-grown shabby gown, with the ink-stain dropped by a malicious school-mate on one of the breadths; days when faded ribbons and mended gloves were the order of the day; when Lottie's piteous petitions for a new frock, even for new boots, were refused on the score of reckless extravagance.

Lottie's sweet youth had been imbittered by these minor vexations, these galling restrictions enforced by unloving tyranny and despotism. In a thousand ways she had been made to suffer for being an incumbrance. The bright, lively girl, conscious of latent talents, and yearning for a higher education and self-culture, was literally starved and repressed in her intellectual faculties—reduced to a dull level of small, grinding duties. Lottie had good masters in the school at Stoke Newington, but as she lacked time for preparation, their lessons yielded scant profit. She had to teach history and geography to the young ones, to help them with their sums, their mending, to overlook their practicing. The young pupil teacher was the drudge of the whole school. And yet even there she won golden opinions. It was Averil who was her benefactor, whose sympathy and ready affection smoothed her daily life. It was Averil who watched over her in a hundred ways.

Lottie had still much to bear from her aunt's selfish caprices, but her life was a far happier one now. The shabby gowns were things of the past. Averil had taken that matter in hand. Lottie's fresh, dainty toilets often caused a remonstrance from Mrs. Willmot, and a sneering remark from Maud or Georgina. Her neglected musical powers were cultivated by the eminent Herr Ludwig. Lottie was not ungrateful for all this kindness. Her loving nature blossomed into fresh sweetness, and she repaid Averil by the devotion of her young girlish heart—"my sweet Saint Averil," as she often called her.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WILL YOU TAKE BACK THOSE WORDS, MAUD?"

A VERY few minutes were sufficient for the inspection of Annette's scanty stock of clothes. Averil's eyes grew misty over the little pile of coarse, neatly mended linen; the worn shoes, the pitiful contrivances, gave more than one pang to her warm heart.

"How can she contrive to look so ladylike?" she thought, as she remarked the frayed edges of her black gown; "none of them seem to have noticed that indefinable air that stamps her as a true gentlewoman. I wish Maud and Georgina had half such good manners; but they are thorough girls of the period."

Annette looked at her wistfully when the brief survey was over.

"I told you the truth, my cousin, did I not, when I said I was poor? In the Rue St. Joseph it did not seem to matter, but here, among all these fine people, I do not love to be shabby."

"Oh, we will alter all that," returned Averil, cheerfully. "I shall give you the same outfit I gave Lottie when she first came to live here. As I am to enact the part of fairy godmother, I am sorry that the pumpkin-coach is wanting; but we shall do very well, I dare say." And then, as she went to her room, she reproached herself for not being sufficiently grateful for her riches. "How often have I complained of the burden of my wealth!" she said to herself. "How often have I longed to shift my responsibilities and to betake myself to a cottage with Lottie and Unwin! Why am I so impatient, so cowardly? I ought to rejoice at the richness of the talent intrusted to me. 'Give an account of thy stewardship.' Yes, those awful words will one day sound in my ears. So much has been given me, that surely much will be required. Oh, what a poor creature I am, for I would willingly, thrice willingly give it all if only I could be like other girls!" Here she caught sight of herself in the glass, and a flush came into her pale, sad face. "No one—no one guesses my weakness; even Unwin, dear soul, only thinks I am tired and far from strong. But One knows," raising her eyes reverently; "and He who has laid this cross upon me will surely help me to carry more bravely to the end." And then she whispered, softly:

"Multiply our graces,
Chiefly love and fear;
And, dear Lord, the chiefest
Grace to persevere."

That afternoon Annette thought she was in fairyland. If Averil had been a benevolent fairy and had waved her magic wand, she could not have worked greater wonders, and yet it was all so quietly done. Averil seemed to know just what she wanted, and her orders were executed in a marvelous way. They went to a linen warehouse first, and then drove to a dressmaker.

"Mrs. Stephens will know exactly what to get us," Averil remarked in the hansom. "As you are in mourning, there will be no need to select shades. She will take your measure and show us a few stuffs. We shall not be fatigued with looking over fashion books. Annette, you must not be afraid of speaking. If any material takes your fancy, please tell me so without reserve. Lottie always chooses her own gowns, and she has a very pretty taste."

But, in spite of this kindly permission, Annette could not bring herself to speak, except at last,

when Averil felt a timid touch on her arm.

"Do not give me so much," she pleaded, in a grave tone of remonstrance. "My cousin, you are too extravagant. I shall ruin you. How many more dresses? One for morning, and one for promenade, and a dinner-dress, and yet another. Why should I have that other, Cousin Averil?"

"Why? Because you will have to look your best on Tuesday, when all my friends are coming," returned Averil, smiling. "My dear Annette, you have no idea of the crowds that are invited. The grenadine is for that occasion. Now you must have a hat and a jacket; and then there are boots and shoes. Come, we have no time to waste in talking;" and again they jumped into the hansom.

More purchases—gloves, a sunshade, even an umbrella, then two weary, jaded beings were driven back through the sweet evening air. Averil leaned back in the corner of the hansom, with closed eyes, almost too tired to speak. Her frail form ached with fatigue, her heart felt peaceful and at rest; she had forgotten herself in giving pleasure to another, and the reward of unselfishness was hers already. Annette was silent too: her heart was too full for speech. "For what is it that I can say?" she thought; "to thank is only to give words. I must wait and prove my gratitude in other ways;" and Annette's girlish bosom throbbed with sweet, warm feelings. Already she loved her cousin, already her orphaned heart seemed to cleave to her. "If thou hadst known her, thou wouldst have loved her too, my mother," she thought, as her dark eyes were fixed on the blue, cloud-flecked sky.

As Annette sprung lightly from the hansom and ran up the steps of Redfern House, she noticed how slowly and stiffly Averil moved after her. "Oh, you are tired, tired!" she said, remorsefully. "Miss Jones will tell me I have killed you."

"Lottie knows better than that. I am so often tired, Annette. Why, Roberts"—interrupting herself—"that is surely not the going? It is only just seven."

Roberts looked embarrassed. "The young ladies have ordered dinner half an hour earlier," he said, in a rather hesitating fashion. "I told them, ma'am, that half past seven was the hour mentioned, but Miss Maud said—"

"Do you mean that dinner is actually served?" and a slight frown crossed Averil's brow. "Annette"—turning to her cousin "there is no time to dress; will you please take off your hat, and come down into the dining-room?"

Annette obeyed, but as she took her place at the dinner table beside Lottie, she looked round her somewhat bewildered. "They must be going to a party," she thought. Even Lottie was in white, the table was dressed with flowers; surely it must be a fête day.

Averil came in by and by and took her place. She looked unusually grave. Mrs. Willmot gave a deprecating cough, and threw back her voluminous cap-strings.

"I hope my dear Averil, that the little change in the programme has not inconvenienced you," she said, in a tone intended to be propitiatory; "but Maud said that she was sure you had forgotten the concert at the Albert Hall."

"It was Maud's doing, then. At least I need not apologize for my walking-dress."

But though she said no more, Mrs. Willmot glanced nervously at her daughters, and Maud tossed her head in a supercilious way. Only Rodney seemed at his ease. Lottie looked red and uncomfortable until Averil began talking to her.

"Are you going to the concert too, Lottie?" she asked, in some surprise.

"Not if you want me," returned Lottie, anxiously. "Only, as there was a vacant seat in the box, aunt said I might as well go. I only knew it about an hour ago. I had no idea at luncheon."

"My dear, there is no reason why you should not enjoy the treat, and you have never heard Madame Patey: go, by all means. Annette and I are both so tired that we should not be good company; indeed, I mean to give her a book for the rest of the evening."

"Then you do not mind—oh, I am so glad!" and Lottie's brow grew clear in a moment. She began to chatter to Annette about this wonderful concert, and about the singer.

"What a fuss you make about it Lottie!" observed Maud, who seemed somewhat out of temper. "Miss Ramsay will think you have never been to a concert before."

"I have not been to many, and I think concerts are the most heavenly things in existence; there is nothing on earth I love better than music."

"Except a few superlatives," was the sarcastic rejoinder; and somehow Lottie's innocent enthusiasm seemed quenched in a moment.

"What's up with you girls?" remarked Rodney, lazily, as the conversation flagged at this point. "Lots of people talk in superlatives, so you need not be down on Lottie. You and Georgie are always awfully in love with something or other. It is awfully nice of you, you know."

Maud gave him a withering glance, but made no answer, and he rattled on in his good-humored, boyish way. He even addressed Annette once or twice, as though to make amends for his sister's influence. Neither Maud nor Georgina seemed disposed to trouble themselves about her. In their eyes she was only an incumbrance—another applicant for Averil's bounty. They had not been consulted in the matter. Averil rarely consulted any one. If they had been asked for their opinion of this new inmate of Redfern House, they would have termed her "a plain, uninteresting, shabby little thing;" for the Miss Seymours were never sparing of their adjectives. Lottie they tolerated. Lottie knew how to make herself useful. They would have been at a loss without her; in many

ways she was invaluable. They had no maid. Mrs. Willmot's means could not afford such extravagance, with Rodney's college debts to pay, and a hundred private expenses. Lottie had excellent taste. She was clever, and knew how to use her needle. She could turn a dress and arrange a drapery; she could advise them on the choice of a trimming. It needed all Averil's skillful management to prevent Lottie from becoming a perfect drudge. Many a task of mending was privately performed by Unwin, or one of Averil's protégées, to give Lottie leisure for her beloved music. When it was possible to secure an hour from interruption, Averil read French and history with her. The poor girl felt her imperfect education bitterly, and Averil's strong will was set on raising her to her own level.

"Is a bright, intelligent creature like Lottie to degenerate into a mere lady's maid?" she would say to herself. "We must all serve our apprenticeship. God forbid that I should hinder her from making herself useful, but there are limits to everything: only Maud and Georgina do not seem to recognize the fact. Why are some natures so selfish? I suppose their mother has spoiled them. Some people would say that I was spoiled, too, for I generally get my own way. Dear father! as though he ever refused me anything."

As they left the dining-room, Annette lingered for a moment to admire a fine bronze figure. The hall was somewhat dark, and in the summer twilight she was unperceived by Averil, who had just joined Maud at the foot of the staircase.

"Maud, I want to speak to you for a moment. What has happened just now must never occur again." Averil spoke with a decision that was not to be mistaken, and Maud looked excessively offended.

"I am sure I do not know why you are making all this fuss, Averil. What does such a little thing signify? One would think, from your manner, that I had committed some crime in asking Mrs. Adams to serve dinner half an hour earlier."

"It was taking a great liberty, Maud; a liberty that must never be repeated in my house. No one shall contradict the mistress's orders. Mrs. Adams will be taught that she must only take orders from me. I am sorry to have to speak like this, but you give me no option. This sort of thing has occurred too often; I am resolved to put a stop to it."

"It is mamma who ought to be mistress of the house," returned Maud. "I wonder you are not ashamed to put her in such a position. You treat us all like children, and you are only a girl yourself."

"I shall not reply to you, Maud—recriminations are useless. You can ask yourself, and I can safely leave to your conscience to answer, whether one of you has received anything but kindness at my hands. And what do you give me in return? Do you ever consult my taste, my pleasures? Do you care for anything but your own wishes?"

"You have everything," in the same proud, passionate tone. "How can you expect us not to envy you, Averil? We are dependent on you, and I hate dependence—just because mamma was cheated out of her rights."

"Maud," in a voice so hard and cold that Annette scarcely recognized it, "I can bear much, but there are limits to my generosity. Will you take back that speech, or shall I go to your mother?"

"I declare, you are too bad Averil," bursting into indignant tears. "You are using your power mercilessly."

"Will you take back those words, Maud?"

"As though I meant them!"—dashing her tears away. "Of course; I know the money is yours."

"You are wrong; it is not mine; it is no more mine than any other gift I possess. I do not desire it—it is more a burden than a pleasure. At times it is almost an unbearable responsibility. Not that I expect you to believe me," rather sadly.

"Well, you know you are odd enough for anything. I never knew any one like you, Averil."

"Are you quite sure you know me, Maud? Have you ever tried really to know me? I am perfectly aware what you and Georgina think of me. Oh, yes; I am odd, eccentric—none of your friends understand me."

"Oh, don't let us quarrel," returned Maud, impatiently. She had recovered her temper, at least outwardly, for she thought it would be more politic to keep the peace. "Of course, we never shall agree in things. I love society, and you only care to associate with dowdy, frumpish people. In your place, I should keep open house—I should never be alone. But, there! one might as well argue with the wind." And Maud shrugged her shoulders and ran up-stairs, leaving Averil still standing there. Annette heaved a heavy sigh as she moved slowly away; there was something indescribably pathetic in the small, slender figure, the drooping head, the tightly locked hands.

"Oh, they are cruel, these people!" exclaimed Annette, half aloud. "They care not to understand—they have no kindness in their hearts." But, in spite of her sympathy and youthful indignation, she did not venture for a long time to follow her cousin; she moved about uneasily, taking up a book and laying it down again. She saw the party drive off to the concert. Lottie kissed her hand to her, with a beaming smile, as she passed. "She would not look so happy if she had heard that talk," thought Annette. And then she could bear the solitude of the big rooms no longer. And though her heart beat a little quickly at her own temerity, she crossed the dusky hall again, and tapped softly at the door of her cousin's room. Perhaps that light tap was inaudible, for there was no answer, and Annette timidly entered. The moon had risen, and a flood of silvery beams was

pouring in at the open window, beside which Averil sat. For a moment Annette thought she was asleep; she was lying back in her chair with closed eyes, but as Annette advanced noiselessly, she was shocked to see a large tear steal down her cheek, followed by another.

Annette's affectionate heart could not bear the sight. She startled Averil by stooping over her to kiss it away.

"Annette!" in rather an embarrassed voice. "My dear, why have you followed me?" But this delicate hint that she would rather be alone was lost on Annette.

"Don't be vexed with me, my cousin. I came because I overheard, and because I was sorry for you. Indeed, I did not like you to be alone, and Miss Jones was not here to comfort you. Oh, you have been shedding tears! It was cruel—cruel to speak to you like that! You did well to be angry."

"Oh, Annette, please hush! You must not say such things. It is never well to be angry. I ought to know Maud by this time. She has a bad temper when she is put out, she does not always measure her words. Do you know why I am so unhappy? Not because of what Maud said, but because I can not forgive myself for being so hard. Oh, I am proud, terribly proud, and sometimes they make me suffer; but I do not often forget myself. I think"—with a little sob—"that I was too tired; one can bear so little when the body is weak."

"My poor dear!"—three little words; but the sympathetic tone was infinitely soothing to Averil's sore spirit.

"Do not pity me too much; I deserve to suffer. I had no right to be so angry."

"But, my cousin, surely Miss Seymour was in the wrong to contradict your orders?"

"Most certainly; but I could have told her so more quietly. I was right to reprove her, but I ought not to have suffered her to provoke me. Annette, if only one could be sweet-tempered. One has to fight such a hard battle sometimes—and, oh! I am so tired of it all."

"You are young, and have much to bear," returned Annette, in her serious way. "And always goodness is difficult. How well do I remember my mother speaking to me on this subject. One day, as we sat together at our work, she surprised me by telling me that her temper was naturally a bad one. Never shall I forget my astonishment. No, it could not be possible. 'Seest thou, Annette,' she said—for we talked often in the language of our adopted country—'I have taught myself, by God's help, to control it while I was young. When I first married I was very hasty, and would say bitter things when others displeased me; but one day I said to myself, 'Felicia'—my mother's name was Felicia—'thou art growing sharper every day. People will cease soon to love thee. Thy tongue should be thy servant, not thy master.' My cousin, never have I heard an irritable word from my mother's lips; her patience and sweetness were wonderful. Do you care to know how she cured herself? When her husband, her child, her servant, or perhaps some troublesome neighbor, provoked her, she would be silent a moment, then she would reply. And always she repeated the same words in her heart, 'Deliver us from evil;' that was her charm of charms, as she called it. But it answered well."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY.

"THANK YOU, dear. You have done me good," returned Averil, gratefully, when Annette had finished her little story.

"Ah! that is well, my cousin."

"No one has done me so much good before. But, Annette, you must call me Averil. We are strangers no longer. We must be sisters to each other. Lottie, too; there is no need to call her Miss Jones."

"I will remember. I will do anything that pleases you. Every day I shall grow more English. I shall learn your ways."

"I hope you and Lottie will be good friends."

"But why not? Already I feel to love her. She is bright—she has a sweet temper; and then, how she plays!"

"And you long to play, too?"

"Surely. And to sing; above all things, to sing. Oh, my cousin—I mean, Averil—what does that look mean? Is it that you will altogether crush me with kindness? I am to dwell in this fine house, and I am to dress as grandly as the consul's lady used to dress. And still that is not enough?"

"No, certainly. We must think of better things than clothes. Annette, shall you think me hard if I give you books to read?"

"Books? Ah! they will content me much. Never have I had time to read, except on Sunday."

"Lottie and I read history together. Why should you not join us, Annette? And then I have begun to teach her French. Poor Lottie's education has been sadly neglected. And she is so clever, and feels her deficiencies so deeply."

"Stay, my cousin—I have a notion," and Annette's eyes were sparkling with eagerness. "Already I have an idea. Why should we not make the exchange? Miss Jones—Lottie, I mean—shall teach me my notes in music, and I will read and talk French with her. Ah! that pleases you," as Averil smiled. "You think it a good idea?"

"Excellent! Lottie is used to teaching. You will not need a master for at least a year. But there is only one obstacle in this charming scheme: How is Lottie to find time for all this?"

"I have thought of that, too," returned Annette, gravely. "Listen, my cousin. Ah! you shake your head. I shall learn to say Averil by and by. For myself, I love work. I can mend, I can darn—even my mother praised me, and she was hard to please. I will share Lottie's tasks. When two work, the labor is sooner ended. We can talk French. Our tongues will be at liberty, though our hands are busy. Ah! this, too, contents you. I am happy that I have already found out a way to please you."

"My dear child!" Averil was almost too touched to say more. She felt a generous delight as this beautiful nature, at once so simple and so child-like, unfolded itself before her. It was her secret trouble that so few natures satisfied and responded to her own. All her life she had hungered and thirsted for sympathy, though she had long ago ceased to expect it. Her father had loved her, but he had formed other ties, regardless of his child's best interests. Averil's home life had been terribly isolated. Her large nature had been compelled to create its own interests. For Lottie she felt the affection that she would have bestowed on a young sister. Lottie's gay, healthy nature, with its robust sweetness, was a singularly youthful one. She leaned on Averil, and depended on her for all her comforts. But it may be doubted if she understood Averil's strange, sensitive temperament. With all Lottie's devotion, her dog-like fidelity, her loyal submission, she failed to give Averil what she required.

Annette was young too, but she had been early schooled in adversity, and its bitter lessons had been tempered by the watchful love of an earthly parent. Until lately, Annette had not suffered alone. "My mother and I." In spite of privations, that dual existence had been sweet. Annette's cheek had grown pale and thin, but her heart had kept young. No unkindness had frozen her young energies; no galling restrictions, no want of sympathy, had driven her back upon herself. She was like a closed-up flower; the sunshine would soon open the blossom.

"She is different from Lottie. She is older, graver, more intense," thought Averil. "Last night I thought her interesting; the French word *spirituelle* seemed to express her perfectly. To-night I have found out that there are still depths to be sounded. I must not allow myself to expect too much. She may disappoint me, as others have done. It is not wise to demand too much of human nature. But already I feel to love her."

They did not talk much after this. Averil was obliged to own that she was weary, and that her head ached, and after a little she retired to bed.

Annette was almost too excited to sleep. She had found a way to make herself useful. "Ah! they should see, these dear people, how she could work." Annette was not a bit dismayed at the thought of the task she had set herself; the thin, slender fingers were longing to achieve those marvelous feats of invisible darning, those dainty hem-stitched borders and delicate embroideries. Annette would not be daunted by any amount of dilapidated lace and frayed flounces. Like Alexander the Great, she was longing for new worlds to conquer—those regions that belonged to her woman's kingdom. "Ah! they shall see! they shall see!" she said to herself a dozen times before she fell asleep.

When Annette entered the dining-room the next morning she was surprised to find Maud occupying Averil's place. Her anxious inquiries were answered carelessly.

"Averil had the headache. She was having breakfast in her own room. Oh, there was no need to be so concerned," as Annette plied her with questions. "Averil was often ailing. She had wretched health. Any one could see at a glance what a sickly little person she was. It was her own fault. If she would only rest more, and winter abroad, and not be running out in all weathers to see all sorts of people, she would do very well;" and here Maud gave her favorite shrug, that was so expressive, and turned a cold shoulder on Annette.

No one else addressed her. Mrs. Willmot read her letters, and conversed with her daughters. Lottie scarcely spoke. She ate her breakfast hurriedly, and left the room as soon as possible. Annette followed her.

"Why is it that you are making such haste?" she asked. "Is it that you have your music to practice?"

"No, indeed," returned Lottie, stretching her arms a little wearily; "but I have work to do that will occupy me for the rest of the day. Ah! how I do hate work—at least, how I long sometimes to do something better. Oh, that concert, Miss Ramsay, was glorious! I could scarcely sleep afterward. I think I am crazy about music. I want to try over something I heard on the grand piano; but Georgina would be so vexed to hear me. She and Maud want their dresses for to-morrow, and there is ever so much to do to them."

"Never mind; I will help you. I will fetch my new work-basket, and you shall show me your room, and you will see how much sooner the work will be done."

"Will you really?"—and Lottie's face brightened, and her dimples came into full play. "How good-natured you are, Miss Ramsay!"

"If I call you Lottie, you must say Annette also. Averil, my cousin, thinks it is not well to be stiff.

Oh! is this your room? It is almost as pretty as mine. You have a writing-table also; and what a dear little round table for work! Those are the dresses, I suppose?"—looking at some flimsy white garments on the bed, and she listened to Lottie's instructions gravely.

How the girls' tongues unloosed as their needles flew through the soft stuff! Lottie had so much to say about the concert. Her little pleasure-loving soul had been stirred to the depths by that wonderful music.

"There is nothing like it—it is the highest of all the arts!" cried Lottie, with flushing cheeks. "Oh, I know poetry is glorious, and, of course, one must always love beautiful pictures; but, as Averil says, music is the most unearthly of all the arts."

"Did my cousin say that?"

"Yes; you should hear her talk about music. As she says, there is so much about it in the Bible, she thinks it will be one of the chief pleasures in heaven. Don't you know how one reads of the harpers harping with their harps, and the new song before the throne? I remember when we were talking on this subject that Averil showed me a verse about the predicted fall of Babylon, where it said, 'The voice of harpers, and minstrels, and flute-players, and trumpeters shall be heard no more.' Music was a great power even in those days."

"Then you will teach it to me?" asked Annette; and thereupon she unfolded her scheme: how she was to share Lottie's labors; how they were to talk French over their work; and how Averil had promised to read to them when she had time. "We are to form a mutual improvement society, my cousin says; each is to help the other. You will have time for your beloved music. I shall listen to you, and now and then you will give me a lesson. Ah! you do not speak, Lottie, and yet I can see you are well pleased;" for Lottie's work had dropped to her lap, and she was regarding Annette with bright, wide-open eyes.

"Oh, I am so ashamed of myself," she returned. "Miss Ramsay—Annette, you are heaping coals of fire on my head. Do you know"—with an amusing air of contrition—"that I was dreadfully cross when Averil told me you were coming to live here? I sulked about it nearly all day. 'What do you want with changes?' I said. 'This French cousin will spoil all.' Oh, I was as disagreeable as possible. I was jealous because Averil took such pains with your room. 'How do you know whether you will like her?' I said, more than once. But Averil only laughed at my bad humor. 'I can know nothing until I see her,' she returned. 'But, all the same, her room shall be as pretty as possible.'"

"Oh, she is an angel, my cousin!"

"You would say so if you knew all," was Lottie's reply. "Sometimes I wonder how she can go on living this life that is so uncongenial to her; but I know she does it partly for my sake. I was so miserable until I knew Averil;" and here a shade crossed her bright face. "No one seemed to care whether I had proper things or not, and the school-girls at Stoke Newington laughed at my shabby frocks, though in a way they were kind to me, and would often give me some of their own things. I pretended not to care, and I would laugh with the rest of them; but I often had a good cry over it in private. I used to dream sometimes that I had a new dress, such a pretty one! and then, when I woke, the tears would come, because I was so disappointed to find it only a dream. Perhaps it was wrong to fret about it. I wish I could be more like Averil. I think she would wear sackcloth as happily as silk."

"It seems to me that you and I, Lottie, are more earthly minded. I do care exceedingly for nice things."

"Yes; and I used to envy the Israelites. Don't you remember, their clothes never wore out in the wilderness? How I used to sigh over those patches! And then the darns! I shall never forget my feelings of supreme content when I found myself the possessor of half a dozen brand new stockings."

"Is it that your aunt is so poor?" asked Annette, in a puzzled tone.

Lottie colored. "Well, you see, she has many expenses, and is not exactly what you call rich. Mr. Willmot left most of his money to Averil. I have heard that there was some mistake. He thought aunt had plenty of money when he married her. And uncle certainly left her a good income. But it seems as though it has dwindled somehow. Rodney costs her a good deal, and Maud and Georgina are extravagant. Perhaps I ought not to tell you all this, but I do not wish you to be hard on them." For Lottie was too generous to blame her relatives. In her heart she knew she owed them little gratitude; that her services fully repaid them for the scanty maintenance—that was all they had given her. It was Averil whose roof sheltered her, who was in reality her benefactor.

Annette read the girl's generous reticence aright. She said no more on that subject; but she recurred regretfully to Lottie's speech about her cousin's uncongenial life.

"I do not understand you," she said, wistfully. "Is it that monsieur was right and that my cousin would prefer to live alone? So many people must be trying, if one loves quiet. But it seems to me as if she could at all times seclude herself in her own room."

"My dear Annette, you forget that Averil is mistress of the house. It would never do to shut herself up in her own apartments. Maud would get the upper hand in a moment. And if Averil were not firm—if she did not hold the reins—Redfern House would be a very different place from what it is. The girls are always teasing her to have dinner-parties. They want to fill the house; but Averil does so dislike a crowd. She is dreading Tuesday, I know."

"But what is to happen on Tuesday?"

"Oh, only one of those stupid, senseless 'At Homes.' A lot of people will come and eat ices and strawberries. There will be music that no one will hear, and a professional is going to sing. Poor, dear Averil, she will be as miserable as possible; and next day she will be ill, and have one of her nervous headaches. But they have teased her into sending out about two hundred invitations, and so she must go through with it."

"But it is too bad. Monsieur, who is her good friend, should protect her."

"Monsieur!" and Lottie looked mystified. Then a light broke on her. "Do you mean Mr. Harland, Annette?"

"Yes. But I think I must always call him monsieur," returned Annette, softly. "He was so good to me. When I saw his gray hair and pleasant face I thought it was my cousin Leonard. Picture to yourself my delight in having a friendly hand held out to me. Oh, he was so kind, so fatherly! I have called him monsieur always to myself."

"I wonder what these two young workwomen are chattering so busily about?" asked a quiet voice at this moment, and Averil smiled at them from the threshold. "So the mutual improvement society has begun, eh, Lottie?" as the girls greeted her with delight. "Annette, how fast you work! Why, that dress is nearly done!"

"She is ever so much cleverer than I," returned Lottie, mournfully. "Oh, dear! how quickly the time has passed. Luncheon will be ready directly."

"Never mind; lay those dresses on the bed, and Unwin shall add the finishing touches. You both looked as tired as possible. Annette, we really must put some color into those pale cheeks."

"You have none to spare yourself, my cousin," she replied, with an affectionate glance. Averil looked wan and thin, and there were dark circles round her eyes.

"Come, that is too bad! when my headache is gone, and I expected a compliment. You are as bad as Unwin, who wanted me to go to bed. Now, Lottie, I am going to show Annette the parks this afternoon. A drive will do me good, and if you like you shall go too. I shall tell Mrs. Willmot that I want you to act as *cicerone*, as I am not equal to any exertion. We shall not go very early, so you will have time for an hour's practicing." But she was not allowed to finish her sentence, for Lottie was kissing her in the most merciless manner.

"You dear, sweet thing! I do so love a drive! And the park will be so amusing! Perhaps we shall see the Princess of Wales. A concert yesterday; the park to-day—really, I am getting quite gay."

"Are you sure you feel fit to go?" remonstrated Annette. "Lottie, I thought you said my cousin disliked crowds."

"Oh, no; unless I have to entertain them. It is a pretty sight, I assure you; and I too, like Lottie, find it very amusing. It always reminds me of Britain Row in 'Vanity Fair.' I am sure my Lord Luxurious, the Lord Desire of Vain-glory, and Sir Having Greedy are still to be found in the nineteenth century." And Lottie laughed as though she understood Averil's allusion.

CHAPTER X.

AVERIL AT HOME.

THE next two or three days passed quickly and pleasantly to Annette; "the dear Fairy Order," as Lottie had called her playfully, during their first morning's work together, was already exercising her beneficent sway on her companion's behalf—tasks that would have entailed hours of labor on Lottie were now finished long before the luncheon-bell rang. After Annette's long, solitary days passed in that dark room in the Rue St. Joseph, these two or three hours spent with Lottie, listening to her broken French, and interspersing laughing corrections, seemed merely playtime to Annette.

"Do you know Averil is fitting up a room for us?" remarked Lottie, on the morning of the eventful Tuesday when Averil was to hold her reception, and about a hundred and fifty people had accepted her invitation to come and be bored. "She does not like the idea of our sitting in my bedroom. There is a room that is never used at the end of the corridor, and she is having it repapered, and has chosen such a pretty carpet for it; it is to be half workroom and half study; and the piano that is in Rodney's room is to be taken up there for your use. You see, Averil is so thoughtful, she never forgets anything, and she says it will never do for you to annoy people with practicing scales and beginner's exercises down in the morning-room."

"Oh, that is wise, I have thought much of this difficulty, Lottie. You are very outspoken—ought you to have told me all this? Did not my cousin mean to give me this little surprise?"

Lottie laughed, but she had the grace to look ashamed of herself.

"My dear Fairy Order," she said, "I never can hold my tongue. Averil thinks I must talk even in my sleep. Well, it was naughty of me to betray Averil's nice little scheme. You must just pretend to be surprised when she shows you the room. You must open your eyes widely, and say—"

"But that would be deceitful," returned Annette, gravely. "You are a funny little person, Lottie; you would even recommend me to deceive. Ah! it is your joke," as Lottie only laughed again. "You

are always so ready with your joke, you will not make me believe you. When Averil shows me the room, I shall thank her with all my heart, but I will not be surprised—not one little bit."

"You are very provoking," returned Lottie, pouting. "If you had not darned Maud's white silk stockings so beautifully, I would not forgive you so easily. But you are such a dear old fairy. Ah! here comes Averil with Motley's 'Dutch Republic;' she is going to read to us for half an hour;" for after this pleasant, desultory fashion Lottie's education was carried on; but it agreed with her wondrously well—she sipped knowledge as sweetly as a bee sips honey.

Annette felt unusually gay that morning; she found it a little difficult to concentrate her attention on the reading. Down-stairs the rooms were decked with flowers, as though for a fête; her new dress had come home, and she was longing to try it on. She wondered how Averil could sit there reading so quietly, as though no hundred and fifty people were coming. "It must be that she wishes to shut out the thought of them all," Annette said to herself; and her shrewd surmise certainly grazed the truth. Averil was nervously dreading the ordeal; with all her passionate desire for human sympathy, her very real love of human kind, these vapid interchanges of compliments, that passed under the name of receptions or At Homes, were singularly distasteful to her. How could conversation be carried on in a crowd? How could one enjoy one's friends when civilities had to be exchanged with strangers? Averil's world was not theirs; her ardent and earnest temperament could only expand in a higher temperature. She had not the graceful art of saying nothings; the trifling coinage of society, its passwords, its gay bandinage, were unknown to her. Without being awkward—Averil was never awkward—she was at once too grave and too reserved to make a popular hostess; and though her gatherings were successful, and people liked to come to Redfern House, they were more at their ease with Mrs. Willmot and her daughters. "Such a charming, well-bred woman!" was the universal verdict. "Such a model stepmother!"

Averil could scarcely eat the luncheon that was served, for the sake of convenience, in Rodney's snug little den. The other rooms, with the exception of Averil's, were thrown open *en suite*—tea and ices and strawberries were to be served in the dining-room; the drawing and morning-rooms were for the reception; there were tent-like awnings from the windows; the lawn was dotted over with red-cushioned chairs and Japanese umbrellas; and the grand piano was ready for the professionals.

Annette had put on her pretty black summer dress, and was regarding herself with a grave, satisfied air when Averil entered. She had a little case in her hand, and a tiny bouquet of creamy rosebuds and maiden-hair.

"I have come to put the finishing touches to my *débutante*," she said, smiling. "You must have a few flowers to light up your black dress, and I think this will also suit you;" and she clasped a little collar of sparkling jet round Annette's throat.

"Is this for me? It is beautiful, beautiful! Never have I possessed an ornament. But you are unadorned, my cousin!" looking at the little child-like figure. Averil's soft black silk was unrelieved by anything except the delicate lace at the throat and wrists; she always dressed very simply, but to-day there was something almost severe in the absence of anything like ornament.

"Do not look at me," she said, hastily. "Unwin always does her best for me, but she has a thankless task, Annette. You look very nice. If you keep near me, I will introduce some people whom I think you will like. Ah, there goes Lottie!" as a white dress floated down the staircase. "We must go down, too."

Mrs. Willmot and her daughters were already in the drawing-room, and Rodney was strumming with one hand on the grand piano. Mrs. Willmot put up her eyeglass in rather a puzzled manner as Averil entered with her cousin.

"Who is that distinguished-looking girl in black, Maud?" she asked, in a whisper.

Her daughter broke into a scornful laugh.

"Distinguished! My dear mother, are you blind! It is only Miss Ramsay. I suppose Averil has given her a decent frock for the first time in her life. But I can see no such wonderful transformation; she is very plain, poor girl! with her sallow skin and big eyes;" and Maud turned her long neck and regarded herself in the glass that hung near them. Her dress fitted to perfection, and was really very tasteful and becoming. True, it was not paid for, and she knew that her mother would treat her to an angry lecture on extravagance; but Maud was quite used to these lectures. She hummed a little air, and moved through the room with that haughty insouciance that was considered her style.

It was Lottie who tripped up to Annette, with her girlish, outspoken admiration. Lottie was looking exceedingly pretty: her fresh bloom and bright expression were infinitely more attractive than Maud's cold perfection of feature.

"Does not she look nice?" she whispered, in Averil's ear; "there is something very graceful about her. If she were not quite so thin, I think she would look almost pretty."

But Averil had no time to answer, as two or three guests entered the room that moment. The rooms filled after this. Annette, who had disregarded Averil's request, and had withdrawn into a quiet corner, looked on, well amused. What a gay scene! what a hubbub of voices and light laughter! She could scarcely see Averil's little figure near the door, with her stepmother's portly form behind her, as she received one guest after another.

Lottie was on the lawn in the midst of a bevy of girls; Maud was standing near her, talking to a white-haired officer, and Georgina was bandying jests with two young men; neither of them took

any notice of her. Presently a stout man with a sandy mustache pushed his way to the piano, and drew off his gloves. There was an instant's silence when he first struck the keys, but after a few minutes the hubbub began again. Very few people listened; only two or three edged their way nearer to the piano, and hemmed in the performer.

Annette stood among them; the sweet sounds had beguiled her from her corner. She stood motionless, entranced, without noticing that Averil was standing just behind her.

"Thank you so much, Herr Faber," observed Averil, gently, as the last crashing chord had been played; but Herr Faber only bowed stiffly as he rose; his small blue eyes looked irritable, and he drew his brows together.

"It is all in the day's work," Annette heard him mutter to a friend. "To make music for those who do not listen. Bah! It is thankless work. Come, my Hermann, we will at least make ourselves scarce until these Goths require us again:" which was hardly civil of the professor, since more than one pair of ears had listened patiently to every note.

"Herr Faber is put out, Frank," observed Averil, in a vexed voice: she was addressing a young man who stood beside her. Annette had looked at him more than once. She had never seen him before, she did not know his name, but she seemed to recognize his face. "We must manage better next time. What shall we do to silence these people? Herr Faber certainly feels himself insulted."

"Shall I stand on a chair and cry 'Silence!' at intervals? I think it would have an effect. Do let me, Averil."

"You absurd boy! No; we must try other means before my favorite signora sings. She has the voice of a lark and the temper of—please find me a simile." But the young man only laughed and shook his head. He had a pleasant face, without being strictly good-looking. And again Annette was tormented by some vague resemblance that seemed to elude her before she could grasp it.

At this moment Averil turned her head and saw her.

"Why, Annette, you were just the person I wanted! Where have you been hiding all this time? Frank, I want you to give my cousin, Miss Ramsay, an ice or some strawberries. Annette, this is Mr. Frank Harland. You remember our kind old friend, do you not?"

"Do you mean monsieur?" with a quick flush. "How is it possible that I should ever forget him, my cousin? And you are his son? Ah! that is the likeness, then," looking up at the young man a little shyly.

"Oh, I remember; you made my father's acquaintance at Dinan. Yes, I am his son and heir. I only wish I were half as good—eh, Averil?" with a merry glance. "Now, Miss Ramsay, I am to obey orders. Will you allow me to pilot you through this crowd?—it is almost as intricate as a lawyer's brief." And as Annette did not seem quite to understand him, he took her hand and placed it under his arm, and guided her skillfully through the various groups.

"But what a crowd!" were her first words, as he found a seat for her, and ascertained her opinion on the respective merits of vanilla, coffee, and strawberry ice.

"Ah, yes, I do so love this sort of entertainment—don't you?" he returned, as he brought her the ice. "People do look so cool and comfortable, penned up like sheep, on a warm summer afternoon. Just standing room, don't you know, and not a seat to be had, except for the dowagers. If I had a wife—but, you see, there is not a Mrs. Frank Harland at present—I should insist on her seeing her friends in detachments, and not *en masse*, in this heathenish way. As it is, my mother's tea-parties are worth a hundred of these."

"Ah! you have a mother"—with a quick sigh, that made the young man glance first at her and then at her black dress.

"Yes; and I am the happy possessor of four sisters and three young torments of brothers. So you and my father are old acquaintances, Miss Ramsay?"

"Monsieur? But, yes, he was my first friend. Never shall I forget his kindness, his consideration. If I had been a duchess instead of a poor little lace-mender he could not have treated me with greater courtesy. He is what you call an English gentleman."

"Dear old boy, so he is!" and Mr. Frank looked as though he had himself received a compliment.

"Old boy! That is surely not the name for him," she returned, in a rebuking tone, that greatly amused her hearer. "I do not like monsieur to be called thus."

"That is because you are a stranger to our English ways," replied the young man, trying hard to restrain his inward mirth. "Fellows of my age often use these sort of terms. They mean no disrespect. A man like my father never gets old. I believe he has the secret of perpetual youth. He is as young as any of us. It does one good to see his freshness. If I were only half as good!" finished Mr. Frank, in his cordial, hearty way.

Annette looked at him with interest. This eulogy entirely mollified her. "When you are as old as monsieur some one may call you 'dear old boy,' too," she said, sedately.

There was no help for it. If Frank must have died for it, he could not have helped laughing. He had never met any one so original as this grave, dark-eyed girl. Her very freshness and absence of coquetry were refreshing contrasts to many girls that he knew.

Coquetry was not in Annette's vocabulary. She had no acquaintance with men, either young or otherwise. A civil word from the English consul when he saw her in his wife's room; a little

friendly conversation with her kind old chaplain—these were her only opportunities. True, there was Clotilde's priest—a thin, brown-faced man, who took snuff, and gave her his blessing. But he was very different from this lively Mr. Frank, with his droll speeches and his merry laugh, and his "old boy." The young people grew quite friendly and confidential in their snug little corner, fenced in by the blossoming plants. Annette was so well amused that she was almost sorry when her companion suggested that they should go back to the drawing-room.

"We have lost the signora's song, and there is Herr Faber crashing among the keys again. There are lots of people I know, and to whom I must make myself agreeable. One must not be selfish, Miss Ramsay."

But it may be doubted if Annette understood the implied compliment.

CHAPTER XI.

"A PLAIN, HOMELY LITTLE BODY."

At their entrance into the dining-room Frank Harland found himself surrounded by a group of friends. As one of them addressed him, Annette, with much tact, slipped away with a softly whispered excuse. She had caught sight of Averil at the other end of the room.

Averil beckoned her to a chair beside her. "What have you done with Frank?" she asked, smiling. "I thought I put you in his charge. Ah! there he is with the Courtlands, surrounded as usual. He is a general favorite."

"One need not wonder at that," returned Annette, sedately. "I have never talked to any young man before, but I found him very pleasant. He has been telling me about monsieur and his mother. He seems to have a happy home, my cousin."

"Yes, Grey-Mount is a dear old house; and all the Harlands are nice. They are very dear friends of mine, Annette, and one day I must take you to see them. A day at Grey-Mount always does me good. And there is another place—Well, Frank"—as that individual made his way to them rather hastily.

"I have shaken off that young puppy, Fred Courtland. I hate fellows who scent themselves. Faugh! You have been talking for the last two hours, and I dare say no one has thought of getting you a cup of tea."

"No, never mind." returned Averil, smiling. "The signora is going to sing again, and I must not leave the room just now. No, indeed, Frank," as he seemed determined to argue the point. "Let me listen to her first, and then I will go with you."

"All right. But please understand that I am to have the monopoly of your conversation. No followers allowed at present." And to Annette's amusement he coolly took up his position so as to fence Annette completely from notice, and his monopoly of conversation consisted of an unbroken silence. Averil seemed perfectly satisfied with this arrangement. She leaned back in her chair and listened to the song, and a more rested look came upon her face as the high, pure notes of the signora's voice floated through the room.

Some degree of attention was paid to the gifted young vocalist; but just at the last a group outside the window, beside which Frank Harland was standing, began talking rather too audibly.

"Miss Seymour," observed a languid, drawling voice, "I wish you could inform me where I can find my hostess. It is awkward, to say the least of it, when one has no conception of a person."

"I do not see her at present," returned Maud, coldly. "It will not be easy to find her in this crowd. A very small person in black. That is the only description I can give you, Captain Faucit. A plain, homely little body like Miss Willmot is not very easy to describe."

"No, indeed!" and here Mrs. Willmot's smooth voice chimed in. "My step-daughter is a sad invalid, Captain Faucit. Dear Averil is quite a recluse. One can not wonder at it"—dropping her voice, although every word was distinctly audible. "With her affliction, poor girl, her want of health, and her deformity, the world offers few attractions."

"Now for the tea, Averil!" exclaimed Mr. Frank, briskly. He had set his teeth hard for a moment, and his hand was clinched, as though it longed to do injury to some one; but the next moment he was leaning over Averil's chair with a gentle, brotherly sort of freedom. "Come," he said, touching her cold little hand. "A cup of strong tea—that is my mother's panacea for all ills."

Averil rose and took his arm without a word. There was a dark, pained flush on her face, a strained look in her eyes, as though the cruel words had gone home. Annette looked after her pitifully. She could see that kind Mr. Frank was still talking to her. He was very tall, and had to stoop a good deal.

"A plain, homely body, indeed!" groaned Annette. "And she looked so sweet just now. Deformity! Oh, what a wicked, wicked lie!" For once Annette did not measure her words. "What does it matter, such a little thing as that? What does it matter that she is not as tall and straight as Lottie, when every one loves her?"

Annette's pleasure in the fête was over. She could hardly keep her tears back as she sat there.

Where was Lottie? She had not once come across her. But even as the thought passed through her mind Lottie waved to her gayly. She was sitting under the awning with a merry group of girls, and seemed happy and well amused. Annette felt far too miserable to join them. The room was thinning now. The professionals had gone. A little later on she saw Averil glide quietly to her stepmother's side, as the guests made their adieus. The next moment Mr. Frank came up to her corner. "I must be going too," he said rather gravely. "I hope every one has had as pleasant an afternoon as I have;" but he spoke without his old gayety.

"The afternoon is spoiled to me," returned Annette, with more vehemence than caution. "Mr. Frank Harland, why is it that people are so cruel? Why do they hurt my cousin, who has the goodness of an angel? This is all they give her in return for so much generosity."

Frank Harland's lips twitched a little under the brown mustache. "You must not ask me, Miss Ramsay," he said hurriedly. "I can't help it if people will be such brutes. I beg your pardon—I believe it was a lady who spoke. I only know I had to pull myself up pretty tight. That fellow Faucit spoke to her just. I longed to kick him."

"I do not like these Seymours," returned Annette, with the same frankness with which she would have talked to Lottie. "They take too much, and they give nothing back. Every day my cousin has much to bear—to suffer. If she were not a good Christian, she would not be so patient."

"Ask my father what he thinks of Averil," was Frank's reply. "Oh, I know all about it. It pretty nearly sickens me to see the airs they all give themselves. If they would only treat her decently. Miss Jones knows my opinion—we have often talked about it. Good-bye, Miss Ramsay. I dare say we shall meet again soon;" and he shook hands with her heartily.

"She is not a bad sort, and she is fond of Averil already," he thought; for the Harlands, from the eldest to the youngest, were stanch to Averil, and Frank especially had a brotherly affection for the gentle little creature.

Annette, after all, did not tell Lottie. Lottie was so gay, so excited, so full of the afternoon's delights, that she had not the heart to damp her; and when Lottie said, "And you have enjoyed yourself, too, Annette?" she only answered, rather soberly, "Yes, very much." But she hardly dared look at Averil that evening, the shade was still so deep in her eyes, and the grave, measured tones spoke so clearly to her ears of repressed melancholy. Only when she bade her good-night Averil detained her.

"Annette, I understand," she said, softly; "but there is no need to take it so much to heart."

Annette started.

"What is it you mean, my cousin? I have said nothing."

"No; only you have looked so sorry for me all the evening. My stepmother meant nothing—it was only her way. If only"—here she caught her breath, as though something stabbed her—"if only Frank had not heard her! My dear, there are tears in your eyes. Why, what nonsense! As though I am not used to it by this time. No, I am not deformed—there was no need to put it quite so strongly—but a little crooked creature such as I am has long outlived vanity."

"My cousin, you shall not talk so—it hurts me. To me you are beautiful; and Lottie says so, too."

Averil laughed a little mirthless laugh; she was so tired, so worn out with all sorts of conflicting feelings, that she felt she must laugh or cry; but Annette's grieved look seemed to rebuke her.

"I meant it—I meant it truly," she said.

"Thank you, dear. What a blessing love is so blind sometimes. Well, I hope to be beautiful some day"—and here her eyes softened; "there will be no little homely bodies in heaven, Annette."

"There will be no cruel words either, my cousin."

"Hush! you are as bad as Frank. They did not mean to be cruel. Mrs. Willmot thinks so much of good looks. All her children are handsome. She is a good-looking woman herself. She attaches too much importance to outward appearance. Personally she means me no unkindness."

Annette was silent; if she had known these words, she would have quoted them: "Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as by want of heart." What utter want of delicacy to speak of the daughter of her dead husband in such contemptuously pitying terms to a stranger!

Averil seemed battling with some unusual mood, for she continued quickly, almost impatiently:

"Do not think that I am not grateful to you for your sympathy; but you must not spoil me; one wants to be strengthened, not weakened. There was a noted saint once—his name was Francis Xavier—and his prayer used to be: 'Lord, remove not this cross until it has worked that in me for which Thou didst send it.' It was a grand prayer, Annette—it included so much."

"My cousin, we are not saints; few of us could say that prayer."

"No; but we must all try our poor little best; we must not feed our pride and self-love. Now bid me good-night, and put all speeches, unkind or otherwise, out of your head;" and Averil kissed her affectionately.

There was a saying that Averil greatly loved, and which is generally attributed to Thomas à Kempis: "I have sought rest everywhere, and have found it nowhere, save in a little corner with a little book."

How often, during the last five years, she had entered her room, feeling bruised and weary from contact with hard, uncongenial natures, and had risen from her knees feeling quieted and

refreshed. This night, when Unwin had left her, she opened a favorite book that always lay beside her Bible; its title had attracted her—"Weariness"—and in its kindly, consoling pages she had found endless comfort. A passage she had marked and remarked now met her eye: "Night after night, as you lie down to rest, the weary day ended, think that a day offered to God in weariness and quiet endurance may bring you fuller joy than the brightest, happiest seasons of enjoyment can do; and when morning brings a fresh beginning, it may be of weariness of body and spirit, strive to hear the voice of God saying: 'My son, it is thus I will that thou shouldst serve Me. If I will that thy service be weary and lifeless, and deficient in all earthly reward, and pleasure, what is that to thee, so long as it is My will? What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter. Follow thou Me without questioning the love which inflicts this weariness and sadness, and seeming privation of all thou most delightest in.'"

Averil closed the book and sat motionless for awhile. Outside, the summer moonlight was steeping everything in its pure white light, the night-dews were bathing the sleeping flowers.

"I have not been good to-day," she said, presently. "What does it matter if he heard it? It is better so—it makes no difference. I will not let this fatal sadness conquer me. To-morrow I will go down to the Dove-cote, and I will take Annette;" and with this resolution Averil slept.

The next morning, as Annette was standing by her window watching a pair of quarrelsome sparrows, who had fallen out over a moldy crust, and who were pecking at each other's soft feathered bodies with angry, defiant chirps, there was a tap at her door, and Averil entered fully dressed, without a trace of last night's cloud on her serene face.

"Good-morning, Annette. Are you nearly ready? for I have ordered an early breakfast for you and Lottie and myself. I am going a little way into the country to see some friends of mine, and if you like the idea you shall go with me."

"Oh, that is good—delightful! What friends are these, my cousin? Is it monsieur and—"

"My dear child!" and Averil could not forbear a smile, "the Harlands are not my only friends. I see you are pining for a sight of monsieur, as you persist in calling him, so I shall have to take you to Grey-Mount. But to-day I am going to my Dove-cote. No; you shall not ask me any questions. Wait until you see my friends. Now, you must hurry, for the gong will sound in less than ten minutes, and the carriage will be round at half past nine. Put on your new cambric—we are going to have a hot day."

Annette was not long in finishing her toilet; but Averil and Lottie were already seated at the breakfast-table. Lottie made a little grimace when she saw Annette.

"What a charming day you are going to have! I do love the Dove-cote. Averil is very disagreeable not to invite me too."

"But are you not going Lottie?" and Annette regarded her with some surprise. But Averil answered for her.

"No, dear; it is your turn to-day, and Lottie is only pretending to be vexed. She knows she has far too much to do. There are letters to be written, and Georgina wants her to go with her to Kew, as Maud is engaged. Lottie will enjoy that, especially as she will meet some of her own friends."

"Oh, that is all very well," grumbled Lottie who looked as fresh and bright as the morning. "But I would rather be with you and Annette. I don't care about the Courtlands, and unless Mr. Frank will be there—"

"He will be there," returned Averil, quickly. "He told me so yesterday. And his friend, Mr. Chesterton, will be there. Lottie, you are getting up a grievance for nothing. The party will be as nice as possible."

But Lottie made no answer, and she was remarkably silent the remainder of the meal.

"Is life to be one fête?" thought Annette, as she put on her new shady hat, and selected a pair of gloves from the smart little case on her toilet-table. No more mended finger-tips, no more frayed and faded ribbons for the young lace-mender. "Tell me, my cousin—are your friends grand?" she asked, as the carriage bore them swiftly in the direction of Paddington. But Averil refused to answer.

"You shall judge of my friends when you see them, Annette, dear. They are very dear friends. I call them my family. Some of the happiest hours of my life—and, thank God, I have had many happy hours—have been spent at the Dove-cote."

"It is, then, dearer to you than Grey-Mount?"

Averil hesitated, and was half annoyed, half amused at this curious pertinacity on her cousin's part. "Comparisons are odious," she said, lightly. "One does not measure one's friendship. Mr. Harland is my very good friend; but still"—with a thoughtful look and a sigh that was quickly repressed—"I am happier at the Dove-cote."

Here the carriage stopped, and in the bustle of taking tickets, and finding a less crowded compartment, the subject dropped.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DOVE-COTE.

THE next hour passed quickly. Averil had her book, and Annette amused herself with looking out of the window. "How could one read," she thought, "when the sun was shining, and the foals were frolicking beside their mothers, and every green field had its picturesque group of feeding cattle and sheep? It was like turning over the pages of a picture-book. Now they came to a cluster of cottages with a little Norman church, half hidden in trees; then a winding road; a clear, silvery river, with gay little boats floating on it, with fine houses beside it; then another pastoral scene, and so on. Is not the world beautiful?" thought Annette, as the train stopped, and Averil beckoned to her. She was almost sorry that the journey was over.

She heard Averil order a fly, and then followed her into a curious old inn. They sat for a few minutes in a close, stuffy parlor, with a print of the battle of Trafalgar over the fire-place.

"We have a mile and a half still to go," Averil said. "If I could only walk through those delicious lanes! But old Jemmy always has to take me. Ah! there comes our chariot. Rather a ramshackle affair, is it not, Annette? But Jemmy and his old mare are both worthy creatures."

Annette had no fault to find with the lumbering wheezy vehicle; she was looking delightedly at the rich hedge-rows with their wealth of wild-flowers, at the rustic cottages with their gay little gardens, at the green fields with browsing cattle. Every moment there was something to admire. Presently they came to a sort of hamlet; there was a village inn, with The Duck and Drake swinging on the old sign-board, a few scattered cottages with heavy thatched roofs, and a small green with snow-white geese waddling over it. Here Jemmy, a gray-haired, wizen-faced man drew up of his own accord.

"There be the Dove-cote, surely," he said, pointing down a steep lane. "I suppose there be no need to come further."

"No; the goose green will do. Come for me at the usual time, Jemmy, and wait for me here;" and Averil dismissed him with a kindly nod.

Annette was looking round her in some perplexity. There were the inn and the cottages, but where could the Dove-cote be? She could see no house of any pretension, only in the distance, half-way down the lane, there was a low gray roof half hidden in trees.

"Yes, that is the Dove-cote," observed Averil, walking in her usual slow fashion across the little green, while the geese stretched their long necks and hissed after her. "Is this not a sweet little nook, Annette? How the children do love this lane! It is a perfect play-ground for them. In autumn, when the blackberries are ripe, you can see them with their little tin pails, scratching themselves with the brambles, and half smothered with travelers' joy. Ah! there is Daddy, sunning himself, with Bob asleep beside him. Well, Annette," unlatching a little white gate as she spoke, "welcome to the Dove-cote."

Annette was a good deal surprised. It was only a cottage, after all, or, more correctly speaking, two cottages, for there were two stone porches and two open doors; a long strip of flower-garden was on one side, and a still narrower strip of smoothly mown turf on the other. There was an elm-tree with a circular seat, on which an old man was sitting, and a black terrier was curled up beside him.

"Well, Daddy, where is the Corporal?" asked Averil, in her clear voice, as the old man rose up rather stiffly, and, leaning on his stick, gave her a military salute. He was a very tall old man, with a long gray beard, and his joints were not so supple as they used to be, for he seemed to support himself with difficulty. As Averil spoke the terrier gave a shrill bark of welcome, and came limping over the grass on three legs, and Annette saw the fourth was missing.

"The Corporal is at work among the cabbages, and Snip is helping him, ma'am. Snip's a terrible hand at digging. Corporal said to me as we were smoking our pipes yesterday, 'Snip's a handy fellow. He will be worth his salt presently. He puts his heart into things, Snip does, if it is pulling up a weed or hoeing a potato-bed. He don't shirk work like other boys of his age, don't Snip.'"

"I am glad to hear that," returned Averil. "The Corporal is not one to bestow praise where it is not due. I was very anxious about poor Snip. I was rather fearful how he might turn out. It would not do to expect too much, Daddy. A city arab seldom has his fair chances. If you had told me that he spent his day in turning somersaults and making catherine-wheels of himself among the Corporal's cabbages, I should not have been surprised."

The old soldier smiled grimly.

"Well, he has a refresher sometimes, and stands with his heels uppermost when his feelings is too many for him—when he has had his fill of pudding, perhaps. Mother Midge says it is by way of grace. She finds the boy somewhat aggravating in the house. He is better out among the pensioners; the pensioners are not so mortal particular as to manners."

Averil broke into a merry laugh. Daddy was evidently a wag in his way. There was a twinkle in his eye as he patted Bob, as though he had enunciated a clever joke.

"We will go to them presently; but we must first pay our respects to Mother Midge. Ah, Methuselah"—as a crippled jackdaw hobbled across the grass, and greeted her hoarsely. "Is he not a wise-looking bird, Annette? He and Bob are such friends. They are like Daddy and the Corporal."

At that moment a little woman in gray, with a droll, weather-beaten face and a pair of spectacles

perched on the top of an absurdly small nose, suddenly appeared on one of the porches, and clapped her hands delightedly at the sight of her visitors.

"Dear me! if it is not Miss Willmot," she exclaimed, "and you are as welcome as flowers in May. Come in out of the sun, my dear, and you shall have a glass of Cherry's milk. She is yielding us a grand supply just now, and, though I say it that should not, I don't believe there is sweeter milk to be found anywhere."

"Wait a moment, Mother Midge," as the little woman was bustling away; "I want you to speak to my new cousin first. Annette, this lady's name is really Bennet—Miss Lydia Bennet—but she is always known among us as Mother Midge."

"And it is a name I love, ever since dear little Barty gave it to me. Poor little lamb! But he is better off now."

Mother Midge was no beauty, certainly. There was something comical, something altogether incongruous, in the lined forehead and gray hair, and the pert little nose and those bright, kittenish blue eyes. But she had the sweetest voice in the world.

"But it is so strange a name," objected Annette, in her serious manner.

Averil seemed amused, but Mother Midge gave a little sigh.

"My dear young lady," she said, gently, "the name has never seemed droll to me, for it was the last word dear little Barty ever spoke. Shall I tell you about him? Miss Willmot found him—she finds them all. He was a mere baby, and nearly skin and bone when he came here. He and a sister a year or two older were turned on the streets to beg, and the brute who owned them—I believe she called herself their mother, only the dumb beasts have more compassion on their young—had turned them out of doors to sleep. Oh! you look shocked; but one sees such cases in the paper. The little creatures were found on a doorstep one snowy evening. Deb had taken off her frock to wrap round Barty, who was ill and coughing. Well, he did not last long—one could not wonder at that, after all that exposure and ill-usage; but we made him very happy as long as he lived. Mother Midge was the name he gave me. No one knew what it meant, but Deb taught it to the others. Well, I was sitting with him on my lap one afternoon—I knew the end was near—and I was talking to him and Deb about heaven—for they were just like heathens—and, baby as he was, Barty was as clever and acute as possible. Just as I was talking, I felt his little bony hand creep up to my neck; 'I don't want no 'eavens,' he whispered, hoarsely; 'I'd like better to stop along of Deb and Mother Midge.' Those were his last words. But maybe he has changed his mind since then," finished the little woman, softly.

"And Deb! Where is Deb?" asked Annette, eagerly.

"Oh, you shall see her presently. Deb is my right hand. Now I must go and fetch you the milk and a slice of home-made cake, for you must be starving."

Annette looked round the room as Mother Midge trotted off. It was a small room, and very simply furnished. There was a square of carpet that did not quite cover the white boards; there were one or two well-worn easy-chairs, a work-table, a comfortable-looking couch, and some well-arranged book-shelves.

"This is the Midge's nest," observed Averil, who noticed Annette's perplexity. "Ah! I see you are dying to question me; but there is no time now. Mother Midge is a wonderful woman, though I dare say a certain person, if she knew of her existence, would certainly call her a plain, homely little body. But she has a great soul. She is one of God's heroines!"

"My cousin, forgive me if I am pertinacious. Who are these people? I do not understand."

"Lottie, when she wants to tease me, calls them my waifs and strays. But they are no such things. This is my family. I lead two lives, Annette. When things go wrong with me, and I get out of harmony with my surroundings, I take refuge with Mother Midge and her children. Nothing does me so much good. Hush! not a word of this at Redfern House. No one knows of the Dove-cote but Lottie. Ah! here come our refreshments. Mind you praise the cake, for if there be one thing on which Mother Midge prides herself it is her seed-cake."

Annette ate and drank in a sort of dream. What new views in life were opening before her! This, then, was Averil's secret—the little refuge that the young heiress had provided for a few stricken creatures who had fallen in the battle of life.

Annette was to hear all about it presently; now she could only look round her and wonder, with a sort of touched reverence.

"Now we must go and see Jack," observed Averil, as she swept the crumbs from her lap. "Annette, do you see there are two cottages? We have added a new wing. There was no room big enough for the children, and no place for them to sleep. This is the Corporal's room, as we call it, where the old men sit and smoke their pipes. This"—as they entered a clean, spacious room, with a long table and some forms, and a few gay Scripture prints hanging on the walls—"this is where the children live. They are with the Corporal now, all except Jack"—walking up to the window, where there was a small couch covered with a red quilt. "Well, my little man, how does the world go with you?"

"Thank you, ma'am, I'm spry!" returned a small chirping voice, and a shock head, covered with rough, carrotty hair, raised itself from the pillow. Annette gave a pitying exclamation. Could it be a child's face, with those hollow, sunken features, those lusterless, staring eyes? A skeleton hand and arm were thrust out from the quilt. "I'm spry, ma'am, and the Dodger is spry too. Come out,

you varmint, when the leddy's asking after your 'ealth!"—and Jack, panting, and with infinite difficulty, extracted a miserable-looking gray creature, evidently a veteran who had certainly run the tether of its nine lives, and was much battered in consequence.

"Oh, the Dodger is spry, is he?" observed Averil, with much interest, as the cat purred feebly, and began licking its lean sides. "But I hope both you and he mean to get fatter with all your good living."

"Jack was found in a cellar, Annette," she continued, stroking the shock head tenderly—"in a den of thieves. Some murder had been committed in a drunken brawl. The gang had been obliged to seek a fresh hiding-place, and Jack, who was crippled with hip disease, had been left there, forgotten. The good city missionary who discovered him, and told me the story, found him lying on a heap of moldy straw under the grating, with the cat beside him. They were both nearly starved, and half dead with cold—weren't you, Jack?"

"We was, ma'am, just so," was Jack's response. "The Dodger had brought me a mouse, but I could not stomach sich food. Dodger hasn't nothing to say to mice now. He feeds like an alderman, he does. Spry! that ain't the word for it, ma'am—he is just bursting with enjoyment, is the Dodger."

Averil smiled faintly; but as they left the room, she said in a low voice, "How long do you think he will last, Mother Midge?"

Mother Midge only shook her head. "The dear Lord only knows that, Miss Willmot. But they are making room for him and the Dodger up there, surely."

Annette opened her eyes rather widely at this remark. But Averil pressed her arm meaningly. "Don't take any notice," she whispered, when the little woman had gone on a few steps. "This is only one of her notions. She will have it that animals are to go to heaven too. I have never heard her reason it out; but she is very angry if any one ventures to dispute her theory. 'The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain,' she says, sometimes. 'But it will all be set right some day.' I never argue against people's pet theories when they are as harmless as this."

Mother Midge had preceded them into a small kitchen, where a diminutive girl, with a sharp precocious face, was scouring some tins. A stolid looking young woman, with rather a vacant expression, was basting a joint. "That's Deb," remarked Averil, with a kindly nod to the little girl, "and this is Molly."

A gleam of pleasure, that seemed to light up the coarse, heavy features, crossed Molly's face at the sight of her.

"I'm fain to see you, ma'am," she muttered with a courtesy to the strange lady, and then she turned to her basting again.

"Molly does wonders, and she is a first-rate teacher for Deb," observed Mother Midge, as they left the kitchen. "I am not going to tell you Molly's history, Miss Ramsay. I see no use in burdening young minds with oversorrowful stories. It is grief for her child that has nearly blunted poor Molly's wits. The little one had a sad end. But she is getting over it a little—and Jack does her good. I hope for Molly's sake Jack will be spared, for she just slaves for him. Now we will go out in the kitchen-garden and see the Corporal."

CHAPTER XIII.

MOTHER MIDGE AND THE CORPORAL.

A LONG sloping piece of ground behind the two cottages had been laid out as a kitchen-garden. The trim condition of the beds, the neatly weeded paths, all bore traces of the Corporal's industry. But neither he nor his assistants were to be seen. An overturned basket, with a hoe and a rake lying beside it, and a boy's battered straw hat, alone bore evidence of the morning's work. The bees were hovering over the thyme, and a little white rabbit, that had escaped from its hutch, was feasting on one of the finest cabbages.

"Where can they be?" asked Averil; and Mother Midge, whose sharp ears had caught the sound of voices, suggested they were in the field with the pensioners, a surmise which proved to be perfectly correct.

The field lay on the other side of the lane. It was a large field, and boasted of a cow-house and a couple of sheds. The Corporal was sitting on the gate, with a small group of boys round him, whom he seemed haranguing. He had taken his pipe out of his mouth, and was gesticulating with it. He was a small, wiry man, with gray stubby hair, and a pair of twinkling black eyes. He had a large nose and a deep voice, which were the only big things about him.

"It is no good you youngsters argufying with me," the Corporal was saying, with an appearance of great severity. "What I say I sticks to. That 'ere boy is a bully"—pointing to a small lad with the innocent eyes of a cherub.

"Please, Mr. Corporal, I b'ain't that," replied the child, with a terrified sniff.

"Don't you bandy words with me," continued the Corporal, sternly. "The boy who shies stones at old Billy ought to be made an example of—that is what I say."

"Please, sir, it was only fun," stammered the culprit. "Billy knows I would not hurt him."

"What is the matter, Corporal?" interposed Averil, briskly. "Tim hasn't got into mischief again, has he?" laying her hand caressingly on the curly head.

"Servant, ma'am"—and the Corporal saluted her stiffly. "It is all along of Billy's snorting and scampering, and kicking up his hoofs, that I knew that mischief was going on. That boy"—pointing to the still sniffing cherub—"goes without his pudding to-day. Look at Billy, ma'am, and if ever a horse is injured in his tenderest feelings, that horse is Billy. He can't stomach the sweetest patch of grass, he is that wounded—and all along of Tim."

"Oh, fy, Tim!" was all Averil ventured to say—for the Corporal was a severe disciplinarian, and allowed no infraction of rules. Any want of kindness to the pensioners was always punished severely.

"Go back to your weeding, sir," continued the Corporal, and Tim slunk away.

Averil looked after him regretfully. "Is he not a pretty boy?" she whispered, so that the others could not hear her. "He is the Corporal's favorite, though you would not think so to hear him. Tim and his hurdy-gurdy and monkey came here a year ago. He was found sitting beside a dry ditch one winter evening—his drunken father was lying at the bottom. It was impossible to say whether Tim or the monkey looked most miserable. The poor things were half starved, and had been cruelly used. Topsy—that is the monkey—is in one of the sheds. Now, if there is a thing in the world Tim loves, it is his monkey. Half Tim's grief at the loss of his pudding will be that Topsy will forfeit his share. Topsy is one of our pensioners. That is Billy"—pointing to a lean old horse at the further end of the field. Two donkeys and an old goat were feeding near him. A toothless old sheep-dog, and a yellow mongrel with half a tail, were lying on a mat in front of the shed, basking in the sunshine.

"The pensioners are all old then, my cousin?"

"Billy is old, and Floss, the sheep-dog, and Nanny also. Anyhow, my pensioners all have a history. They have been through the furnace of affliction—even that lame duck. Only Cherry, and the cocks and hens, have led a happy existence. The Dove-cote has its rules, and one of these is, kindness toward our four-legged pensioners."

"It is a good rule. Your pensioners seem well content. Who are these other boys?"

Evidently the Corporal thought Annette's question was addressed to him, for he struck in briskly:

"This is Snip, ma'am"—pointing to a sturdy-looking lad with a merry face. "This is the fellow who aggravates our feelings by making a spread-eagle of himself, and walking down the paths with his feet in the air, and Bob barking alongside of him. Not but what Snip can do his fair share of work too. I'd back that boy for hoeing a bed or training a creeper against any gardener in the land"—this in a loud aside that was perfectly audible to the grinning Snip. "Then there's Dick"—singling out the next, a shambling, awkward boy, with a vacant, gentle face. "Dick is the fellow who minds the pensioners. Who says Dick isn't bright, when he can milk Cherry and harness Mike and Floss? Law bless you! If all the boys were as clever as Dick we should do well. Dick has nothing to say to book-learning"—dropping his voice mysteriously. "Too many kicks in early life have put a stop to that. Dick couldn't spell his own name—couldn't answer a question without a stutter. But he is a rare one among the animals. The worst of it is, he gets into a rage if he sees any one else misuse them. He had collared Tim, and would have made an end of him in no time if Billy had not snorted and kicked up his heels."

Dick seemed perfectly impervious to the Corporal's criticism. He shambled away in an aimless manner.

"There is only wee Robbie left," interrupted Mother Midge, as the Corporal laid down his empty pipe and paused for breath. "He is our baby now, since dear little Barty left us. There are two other graves besides his. We call them gardens. We can not hinder some of our doves from flying away. Look at him!" as the little creature rubbed his face lovingly against her gown. "That is his way of showing affection, for wee Robbie is deaf and dumb."

Averil sat down and lifted him on to her lap, while the Corporal made his salute, and hurried after his boys.

"He does not grow much," she said, touching his cheek softly. "Annette, we have no idea of his age. He is just wee Robbie. He is almost as small as he was that day when we first saw him;" and Averil gave a faint shudder at the remembrance.

"Did you find this little one also, my cousin?"

"Yes," returned Averil, rocking him in her arms, while a soft, pitying look came into her eyes. "I have spoken to you once or twice of a city missionary who tells me of cases. His name is Stevenson; he is a good man, and we are great friends. I was with him one day. I had just been to see Daddy, who was very ill. We were passing a public-house—it was in Whitechapel, but I forget the name; it is unfamiliar to me. It was a wretched street, and the public-house was one of the lowest of its kind. Just as we were passing, a miserable-looking tramp, with a child in her arms, reeled out of the doorway. A man was following her. There was some quarrel; she put down the child on the pavement and flew at the man with the ferocity of a wild-cat. Mr. Stevenson wanted me to move on, but I had caught sight of the child's face, and it seemed to rivet me—such a white baby face, with such a dumb, agonized terror stamped on it. 'The child! we can not leave the child!' I kept saying. But Mr. Stevenson prevailed on me to take refuge in a shop near. A crowd was collecting; there was no policeman, and no attempt was being made to stop the drunken

brawl. An hour later Mr. Stevenson entered with a shocked face. He had the child in his arms; it looked half dead with fright. 'It is too horrible,' he said. 'The woman is dead. No one would interfere, and the brute—they say it is her husband—gave her a push, and she fell and struck her head against the curb. They have taken the man into custody. He is too drunk to know what has happened. Here is the child. They tell me he is a deaf-mute. Did ever any one see such a pitiful sight in a Christian country? Alas! that such things should be.' I was sitting by Daddy's fireside. The Corporal got me some water, and we washed the poor little creature (for he was in the most filthy condition), and wrapped him up in an old shawl, and gave him some warm bread and milk. His baby breath reeked of gin. But he was famished, and took the warm food greedily. There was no Mother Midge then. The Dove-cote was not in existence. I was obliged to leave him with the Corporal until I could find some one to take care of him. Oh, there is the dinner-bell! Do you hear the boys scampering to the house? We must follow them, or the Corporal will have said grace."

It was a curious dinner-party, but Averil looked happier than Annette had ever seen her, as she sat between wee Robbie and Deb. The Corporal sat at one end of the table, with Mother Midge opposite to him. Deb and Snip waited on every one. And several of the pensioners, including Topsy and the lame jackdaw, were waiting for their portion of the meal.

The boys were on their best behavior before Averil. Even Snip did not venture on one somersault. Tim's face grew a little sorrowful when he caught sight of the pudding. A lean, brown arm was already clutching his coat-sleeve, and the monkey's melancholy eyes were fixed on the empty plate.

"Topsy shall have some of mine," whispered Averil. And Tim's face cleared like magic.

When dinner was over, the boys rushed off to play in the field, and the Corporal and Daddy lighted their pipes and strolled to the gate to overlook them. Mother Midge was busy, and Averil proposed that she and Annette should sit under the elm-tree.

"Everything goes on just as usual when I am here," she explained. "By and by the boys will come to their lessons. The Corporal teaches them to read and write. I have not shown you my bedroom, Annette. I often spend a night or two here. The thought of my Dove-cote helps me over my worst times."

"Will you tell me how you came to think of it first, my cousin?"

"Well, it is not much of a story. There were the two old men, you see. Oh, I forgot! I never told you about them. Mr. Stevenson had found them out. One day as we were talking, he told me of an old soldier who was very ill, and who was living in a miserable garret. 'He has a friend with him,' he said, 'an old soldier, too—an ingenious fellow, who supports them both by carving little wooden toys and selling them. They are not related to each other, only old comrades. And it is wonderful how neat and ship-shape the place is. The Corporal is as handy as a woman. I wish you would go and see them, Miss Willmot. They seem to me fine fellows, the Corporal especially.'

"Fine fellows indeed! Would you believe it, Annette, that the Corporal was living on tea and bread, and working eighteen hours out of the twenty-four to keep himself and his old chum from the disgrace of the work-house? 'It is not the place for her majesty's soldiers, ma'am,' observed the Corporal to me. 'I think it would break Daddy's heart to take his medals into that sort of place. No, ma'am, asking your pardon. The work-house and the jail are not for the likes of us. We don't mind starving a bit if we can keep a roof over our heads. If only Daddy could work! But when rheumatics gets into the bones there's no getting it out again.' Well, I took a fancy to these brave, kindly old men. I thought it was a noble thing for the Corporal to be starving himself for his friend. If you want heroism, you will find it among the poor. I used to go and see them constantly. I sent in a doctor for Daddy, and nourishing food, and warm blankets, and some fuel for the fireless grate. But I think some good tobacco from Mr. Harland pleased them most. It seemed to make a different man of Daddy. Well, I did not see my way clear at first. I had found wee Robbie, and the Corporal was minding him. They were still in their miserable garret. Then all at once the thought came to me, Why should not Mother Midge take care of them all?"

"Then you knew her also."

"Oh, yes, I knew her. She was one of Mr. Stevenson's friends, and I had already heard her history. Hers is such a sad story. There are no happy stories at the Dove-cote. She was the youngest of a large family. Her father was a lawyer. He was a bad, dishonest man, and very brutal to his wife and daughters. He had even turned them out-of-doors, when he was in one of his mad rages. He was taken up at last for disposing of some trust money. I think he speculated with it. But before the trial came on he died from some short inflammatory illness. Mother Midge was hardly grown up then. But she has a keen recollection of all that miserable time.

"The mother sunk into a chronic invalid. One of her daughters was crippled; the rest worked at dress-making and millinery. Once they kept a little school. But the name of Bennet was against them. They had no friends; people seemed to be shy of them. Years of struggle followed, during which first one, then another, succumbed. They were all delicate except Mother Midge. She was the youngest and sturdiest of them all. When I first knew her she was all alone. Her last sister was just buried. She was working for a ladies' outfitting shop, and was very poorly paid. Her eyesight, too, was failing, partly from impure air and insufficient food. I thought, Why should not Lydia Bennet make a home for my dear old men? I spoke to Mr. Harland, and he humored my fancy. Dear father was just dead, and he thought the plan would occupy my thoughts a little. He bought the cottages for me, and the field, and I furnished a few rooms. Mother Midge took possession, and then came the two old men and wee Robbie. Barty and Deb came next. It is only a family, Annette. We do not pretend to do great things. Three of my children—little Barty, and

Freddy, and Nan, have left us—flown away, as Mother Midge says. Jack will be the next to go. We have room for two more. And as the pensioners die off we shall replace them. You have no idea how wisely Mother Midge and the Corporal rule. These neglected children learn to obey, and soon discover that their happiness consists in keeping the rules. We allow no idleness. Every child feels that he earns his or her daily bread. Even Dick, with his limited intellect, has work that he can do. Ah! there they go to their lessons," as the little knot of lads hurried past, with the Corporal at their head.

And then came Mother Midge with her knitting, and wee Robbie. "No one can teach wee Robbie anything," said Averil; "but in his own way he is as happy as the day is long."

CHAPTER XIV.

"WHEN THE CAT IS AWAY."

Two or three hours later, as they were crossing the little goose green in the sunset, Averil said softly to Mother Midge:

"I have had such a nice time. The sweet country air and the sound of the children's voices have destroyed all the cobwebs."

"I am so glad of that, dearie," was Mother Midge's answer; and then Jemmy touched his old white hat to them, and again they drove through the still, dewy lanes. Averil leaned back against the shabby cushions. Annette thought she was tired, and left her undisturbed; but it was not fatigue that sealed Averil's lips. A sweet spell of rest, of thankfulness, of quiet heart-satisfaction, seemed to infold her. These sort of moods were not rare with Averil; she had her hours of exaltation, when life seemed very sweet to her, and the discords of existence, its chilling disappointments, its weary negations, and never-ending responsibilities, lay less heavily on her, as though invisible hands had lifted the burden, and had anointed her eyes with some holy chrism. Then it was that Averil grasped the meaning and beauty of a life that to those who loved her seemed overfull of care and anxiety—when the veil seemed lifted; and as she looked round on the few helpless creatures whom she fed and sheltered, she felt no personal happiness could be so sweet as this power of giving happiness to others. "What does it matter," she said softly, to herself—and a solemn look came into her eyes as she looked over the tranquil landscape—"what does it matter if one be a little lonely, a little weary sometimes, if only one can help others—if one can do a little good work before the Master calls us? To go home and have no sheaves to take with us, oh, that would be terrible!"

"I wonder if Lottie has had a happy day, too?" observed Annette, as they came in sight of Redfern House. The moon was shining; through the open windows came the sound of laughter, of voices.

Averil roused herself with an effort.

"They seem very merry," she said, tranquilly. "Annette, I have ordered supper to be laid in my sitting-room. I knew they would have finished dinner by this time. When you have taken off your hat, will you join me there?"

"May I speak to you a moment, ma'am?" asked Roberts. "Captain Beverley and Mr. Forbes are dining here, and—"

But Annette did not hear any more. She was tired and hungry; she made a speedy toilet. As she ran down-stairs she was surprised to find Averil still in her walking-dress. "Do not wait for me," she said, hastily. "Roberts, will you see my cousin has all she wants? Annette, I am sorry, but I shall not be long."

Averil's room looked the picture of comfort. The supper-table was laid; the pretty shaded candles and flowers had a charming effect; the glass doors were open, and a flood of moonlight silvered the lawn and illuminated the garden paths. Maud was singing; the clear, girlish voice seemed to blend with the scene. A masculine voice—was it Rodney's?—was accompanying her. "Oh, that we two were maying!"—how sweetly it sounded.

It was some little time before Averil reappeared. To Annette's surprise, she was in evening-dress. The old grave look had come to her face again; but she said nothing—only summoned Annette to the table.

"You should not have waited," she said, reproachfully. "Annette, when we have finished supper, I shall have to leave you. Roberts tells me that some of Rodney's friends are dining here, and it will not do for the mistress to absent herself."

"Is it for that you have changed your dress, my cousin? And you are so tired. It is a pity—it is a great pity. Ah, the music has stopped! They have been singing so deliciously. I wish you could have heard them. There was a man's voice—I think he must be a great singer."

"Captain Beverley has a fine voice. I suppose he and Maud were trying a duet together. Oh, here comes Lottie!" as a bright face suddenly appeared in the door-way. "Well, little one, come and give an account of yourself."

"Oh, how cozy you look!" exclaimed Lottie, pouncing on them both in her lively way, and giving them a score of airy kisses. Lottie was looking charming in her pretty pink frock.

"Well, what do you think of Mother Midge and the Corporal? Is he not an old dear, Annette? No, Averil, I am not going to answer a question until Annette gives me her opinion of the Dove-cote."

Annette was too happy to be interrogated; she poured forth a stream of eulogy, of delight, into Lottie's listening ears. Nothing had escaped her; she retailed the day's proceedings in her own vivid, picturesque way.

"My cousin is the happiest person in the world," she finished, seriously. "Most people have to be content with their own happiness. You and I are those people, Lottie. But Averil creates heart-sunshine. Ah, you must not tell me to hush! Have I not heard all those wonderful stories—Mother Midge, and the two old men, and wee Robbie, even the pensioners? Oh, if we could only go through the world and gather in the sick and sorrowful ones! My cousin does not need to envy any one—surely no happiness can be like hers."

"Thank you, dear," returned Averil, in a low voice; but the grave look was still in her eyes. "Lottie, it is your turn now. Have you had a happy day?"

"Oh, yes," returned Lottie, carelessly; but her dimples betrayed her. "Everything was very pleasant. The Courtlands were civil, and the gardens beautiful, and the ices were excellent."

"And Frank was there?"

"Oh, yes; Mr. Frank was there. His mother had given him a note for you;" and Lottie fumbled in her pocket. "Mr. Chesterton was there too. By the bye," with an evident effort to appear unconcerned, "Georgina wants you to ask the Courtlands and Mr. Chesterton to dinner next week. She was talking about it all the way home."

"Well, I have no objection," began Averil, with rather an amused look; but Lottie interposed in a rather shame-faced way:

"No, and, of course, Georgie will speak to you herself. Only she said this evening to Maud, that there would be no room for me at table. I think Georgina does not want me to be there; she seemed put out because—" Here Lottie came to a dead stop.

"Oh, I see," in a meaning tone, as Lottie produced the letter; "well, you are wise to come to headquarters. Georgina's little humors can not be allowed to disarrange my dinner-table."

"If there be no room for Lottie, there can be no room for me, my cousin," struck in Annette.

"There will be room for both," returned Averil, quietly. "I will ask Frank and Louie, and will make Georgina understand that it is quite an informal dinner-party. Don't distress your little head about it, Lottie. Let me read my letter in peace;" and Lottie's look of radiant good-humor returned. Her cheeks had grown as pink as her dress during the last few minutes, but Averil took no notice, only when she had finished her letter she smiled and handed it to Annette.

It was Annette's turn to look radiant now. "Oh, how kind!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Lottie, this is for you also. Mrs. Harland (that is monsieur's wife, I suppose) has made the most charming arrangement. We are to spend the day and sleep—that will be twenty-four hours of happiness. This is what she says: 'My husband will be pleased to see his little Dinan friend again. He was highly complimented when Frank told him how cordially monsieur was remembered. My girls are most anxious to make Miss Ramsay's acquaintance; and as we can put up Lottie, there is no need to leave her behind. If you will come to lunch, we shall have a nice long day, and Lottie can have some tennis.' My cousin, shall we go? Next Monday—that is a good day, is it not?"

"Of course we shall go," interposed Lottie. "Do you think Averil could have the heart to refuse us such a treat? Mrs. Harland is a darling for thinking of me. Of all places, I do love to go to Grey-Mount."

"You need not tell me that," returned Averil, rising.

Now, what was there in that little speech to make Lottie change color again? Annette's quickness could make nothing of the situation. Why should not Lottie love Grey-Mount, when monsieur lived there, and so many charming people? Why did Averil give that amused little laugh as Lottie pushed her chair away petulantly, and said rather impatiently that it was growing late, and that she must go back to the drawing-room. Lottie was really a very excitable little person; she did not even wait when Averil said she was coming too; she ran down the steps and across the lawn, leaving Averil to bid good-night to Annette.

"I shall be late—you must not wait for me," she said, quietly. "Where has that madcap flown? I dare say you think Lottie is in an odd mood to-night. How pretty the child grows! Lottie has a sweet face—one can not wonder if she be admired. Good-night, Annette; pleasant dreams. Tomorrow I will answer Mrs. Harland's kind invitation."

Annette went to bed happily, but she was far too excited to sleep; the recollections of the day were too vivid. Jack and Snip, and even woe-begone Molly, with her patient, heavy face, started up one by one before her—the green field, with the pensioners, the seat under the elm-tree, Daddy and Bob and the lame jackdaw, wee Robbie with his wistful blue eyes, passed and repassed before her inward vision. Now she was walking with Mother Midge across the goose green, now watching Deb as she fetched the water from the well; the pigeons were fluttering over the cottage roofs. She seemed sinking into a dream, when a voice spoke her name.

"Are you asleep, Annette? I thought I heard you cough," and Lottie, still in her pink dress, shielded her candle, and glided into the room.

"I was dreaming, but I do not think I was asleep," returned Annette, drowsily. "Is it not very late,

Lottie? And you are still up and dressed."

"Yes, and I am so tired," she returned, disconsolately, as she extinguished the light and sat down on the bed. "Annette, I hope I am not disturbing you, but I felt so wretched I could not go to my own room."

"Wretched, my Lottie!" and Annette was wide awake now.

"Yes, but not on my account. Oh, no; it is Averil of whom I am thinking. How can they be so ungrateful?—how can they have the heart to treat her so? It is not Rodney, it is Maud who puts this affront on her, who will have that odious man to the house. What can aunt be thinking about? Why does she not take Averil's part? But no; they are all against her, and yet they owe everything to her."

"I do not understand," returned Annette, in a bewildered tone. "What has happened? Lottie, I implore you to speak more plainly. Have they quarreled with my cousin? And it was only yesterday—yesterday—"

"Yes, I know; Mr. Frank told me. I don't think he will ever forgive aunt that speech. They are always making those little sneering innuendoes. I think Mr. Frank would like to fight them all. He is just like Averil's brother—her great big brother—and I am sure he is nearly as fond of her as he is of his sister Louie."

"But he has many sisters, has he not? Monsieur told me of his sons and daughters. There were Nettie, and Fan, and Owen—oh, I forget the rest."

"Yes; but Louie is Mr. Frank's own sister. Don't you see, their mother died when they were quite young, and Mr. Harland married again. Oh, yes, Mr. Frank has plenty of half-brothers and sisters, but they are much younger. Nettie and Fan are still in the school-room, and Owen and Bob at Rugby; and the twins are only seven years old."

"I like to hear about these people very much; but, Lottie, this is not the subject. What has gone wrong to-night? Why is our dear Averil so troubled?"

"Everything is wrong," returned Lottie, dejectedly. "Averil has taken a very great dislike to Captain Beverley. He is very rich, and a friend of Rodney, and he is paying Maud great attention. Averil, for some reason, does not think well of him, and she has begged aunt to keep him at a distance. She insists that he is only a flirt, and that all his attentions mean nothing; and he is doing Rodney great harm."

"A flirt! What is that, my Lottie?"

"Oh, he pretends that he admires Maud—and perhaps he does, for every one knows how handsome she is; but he has no right to single her out as he does, and make people talk, unless he means to marry her. Averil is afraid Maud is beginning to like him, and she has spoken very seriously to aunt. But, you see, they believe in him, and they will have it that Averil is prejudiced."

"And they invite him here to dinner in her absence?"

"Yes—that is so wrong, because, of course, it is Averil's house, and she has several times refused to have him. He was at the At Home, but she could not help herself there. You must have seen him—a tall, fine-looking man, with a red mustache, and eyes rather close together—he is generally beside Maud."

"I did not regard him; but what of that? It seems to me that Mr. Rodney is to blame most."

"Of course he was to blame, but it was Maud who suggested the invitation. Anyhow, it was putting a very serious affront upon Averil. You must know that Maud and Georgina too take such liberties that Averil has been obliged to make it a rule that no one is to be invited to the house unless she be consulted. Maud has been trying to pass it off as an impromptu thought, but she planned it herself at breakfast, and when aunt tried to dissuade her, she talked her and Rodney over. Mr. Forbes is another of Averil's *bêtes noires*. He is rich and idle, and she says it will ruin Rodney to associate with such men."

"Does not Mrs. Willmot recognize the danger? She is old—she is a mother—most mothers are wise."

"I am afraid aunt is not very wise," replied Lottie, sorrowfully; "she never could manage Maud. I think she is afraid of her. But this is not all, Annette. Averil is very strict in some things—she has been brought up differently from other girls. She does not like cards; and it is one of her rules that no play for money is allowed in this house. Well, when we went to the drawing-room they were all playing at some game—I don't know the name—for three-penny points. Captain Beverley had started it."

"But that was wrong—it was altogether wrong."

"Rodney got very red, and looked uncomfortable when he saw Averil; but Maud only held up her cards and burst out laughing. 'When the cat is away, my dear,' she said, in her flippant way. 'Don't look so terribly shocked, Averil; we shall only lose a few shillings—no one will be ruined. It is your turn to play, Captain Beverley.'

"'Will you excuse me, Captain Beverley,' returned Averil, in the quietest voice, 'if I venture to disturb your game? It is a matter of principle with me: both my father and I have always had a great dislike to any game that is played for money. In this house it has never been done until this evening. You will do me the greatest favor if you will choose some other game.'"

CHAPTER XV.

MME. DELAMOTTE'S LITTLE BILL.

"How could she have the courage?" mused Annette, when Lottie had finished her recital, and she repeated her thoughts aloud.

"Averil is never wanting in courage, but the worst of it is, her mind is stronger than her body, and that tells on her. Of course, when she spoke in that quiet, decided tone, there could be no possible appeal. Maud threw down her cards and walked to the piano with the air of an offended queen. 'I believe music was forbidden in some Puritan households, Captain Beverley,' she said, in a sarcastic voice. 'I am thankful to inform you that it is not yet placed on the list of tabooed amusements.' Captain Beverley made some answer in a low voice, and then they both laughed. Averil tried her best to put them all at their ease. She praised Maud's singing, she talked to them cheerfully; but both gentlemen took their leave as soon as possible. Rodney went with them. I heard Averil beg him as a favor to her to stay at home, but he was sulky, and refused to listen. He said, 'The other fellows would only think him a muff, and he was not going to stand any more preaching.' They went away to their club. I can see how uncomfortable Averil is. She thinks that she has done more harm than good. I left her talking to aunt and Maud. Maud was in one of her tempers, and there was a regular scene. Hush! I hear her voice now; they are coming up to bed. Not a word more; they must not find out I am here."

Annette lay perfectly still, and Lottie crept to the door. Maud's room was just across the passage, and both the girls hoped to hear her close her door; but to their dismay, she stood outside, talking in an angry voice to her mother.

"It is too bad; she gets worse every day!" they heard her say, in a tone of passionate insistence.

"I can not help it," returned Mrs. Willmot, fretfully. "You ought to know Averil by this time. You go too far, Maud; I am always telling you so. You think of nothing but your own pleasure. It was foolish to put this affront on Averil. You might know that with her high spirit she would resent it."

"Nonsense, mamma. You are afraid of her, and Georgie is afraid of her too. How can you let yourself be ruled by a slip of a girl? Of course, I know it is her home. Does not everything belong to her? If we were not so miserably poor, we need not live in this Egyptian bondage—afraid to invite a friend or to say our soul is our own. I wonder what Captain Beverley thinks of his evening's amusement? It will be a fine joke between him and Mr. Forbes. I declare, I don't envy Rodney. 'My father and I have always had a great dislike to any game that is played for money.' Did ever any one hear such cant in a modern drawing-room? I am glad I made her uncomfortable about Rodney. The poor boy is not playing those penny points now at the club. Ah, she turned quite white, I assure you."

"You talk as though you had not your brother's interest at heart," returned Mrs. Willmot, in the same fretful voice. "I wish Captain Beverley would not take him to his club; he is far too young. Averil is right there. Maud, what was he saying to you in the garden just after dinner?"

But here the voices dropped, and a moment afterward the door of Maud's room closed, and with a whispered good-night Lottie made her escape.

But there was no rest for Averil. Long after Annette had fallen into a refreshing sleep a weary little figure paced up and down the deserted drawing-room. She had sent Roberts to bed when that faithful old domestic came to extinguish the lights.

"I will wait up for Mr. Rodney," she had said. "I do not expect he will be very late." But for once she was wrong. Rodney was very late indeed. The church clock had chimed two before she heard his bell. Averil's thoughts were not pleasant; the sting of Maud's words was still abiding with her.

"Is she right? Have I driven him away to worse things?" she asked herself. "Ought I to have allowed the game to go on, and then have spoken afterward? Would that not have been been temporizing with wrong things? 'One can always go down the little crooked lane,' as dear father used to say. He was so fond of the 'Pilgrim's Progress!' I could only remember how he hated this sort of amusement, and to see it played in this house, when in his life-time they never dared propose such a thing! I know his friends thought him strait-laced—even Mr. Harland; but what does that matter? If one has principle, there must be no compromise. Still, if she be right, and Rodney—" Here a look of pain crossed Averil's face, and she clasped her hands involuntarily. "Oh, my darling, how can I save you when your own mother and sister will not help me? Maud is infatuated. That man will never ask her to marry him; he will look far higher for his wife. A Miss Seymour will not be good enough for Oliver Beverley. I have told my step-mother so again and again; but Maud's influence is greater than mine. Oh, how much happier will be my little Lottie's fate! I know from what Frank says that Ned Chesterton is in earnest; and what could be better—a good son and brother, and rising in his profession? Perhaps he will not speak yet; but they are both young enough to wait. Lottie looks very happy to-night—God bless her!" And here a low, heavy sigh rose to Averil's lips.

She started as the sound of the bell reached her, and hurried out to unbolt the door. Rodney did not at once see her; he thought it was Roberts. He came in whistling—his face was flushed and excited.

"Sorry to keep you up so late, old fellow," he said, in his good-humored way. "Why, Averil!"—and

then his face clouded—"there was no need for this attention," he muttered, as he put down his hat.

Averil followed him.

"Don't be vexed, Rodney. I could not go to bed until you came in. You have given me enough to bear already. Why were you so unkind as to refuse to stay at home, when I asked you as a favor?"

Rodney's reply was very unsatisfactory. He boasted of his small gains in a tone that deeply grieved Averil. Seeing his face flushed with drink and with the excitement of play, she turned away. Could she save him? Was he not already a long way down that little crooked path upon which another brisk lad, whose name was Ignorance, and who came out of the country of Conceit, had already walked?

There were bitter tears shed in Averil's room that night as she prayed long and earnestly for one whom she called her brother.

Was Rodney conscious of this as he lay tossing feverishly? How many such prayers are offered up night after night for many a beloved and erring one! What says the apostle? that "he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."

Unwin had reason to grieve over her mistress's worn looks the next morning, but she asked no questions and made no comments. Unwin was too wise a woman to waste regrets over what could not be helped. Roberts had told her enough, and she could form her own conclusions. The household were quite aware that another indignity had been on their idolized mistress, "and by them as are not fit to tie her shoes," observed the kitchen-maid, contemptuously; for Maud's imperious manners and lack of courtesy made her no favorite with the servants.

Averil did not waste words either. She took no further notice of yesterday's occurrence. When she met her step-mother and the girls at luncheon, she accosted them pleasantly and in her usual manner; it was Maud who hardly deigned to answer, who averted her head with studied coldness every time Averil addressed her. Some hours of brooding and a naturally haughty temper had only fanned Maud's discontent to a fiercer flame. It was easy to see that she regarded herself in the light of an injured person.

Lottie, who had been to the Stores to execute some commissions for her aunt, did not make her appearance until luncheon was nearly over, and then she and Rodney came in together. Rodney still looked a little sulky; he gave Averil a curt nod as he took his place, and snubbed Georgina when she inquired after his headache. "There is no need to publish it on the house-tops," he said, irritably. "It is only women who are fond of talking about their little ailments. I suppose there is some ice in the house, Ave? This water is quite lukewarm."

"I'll ring and ask Roberts," observed Lottie. "Maud, Madame Delamotte is waiting to speak to you. She says there has been no answer, and when Hall told her that you were at luncheon, she only said she would wait, as her business was very important."

Georgina darted a frightened, imploring glance at her sister, but Maud only grew very red.

"It is very impertinent," she muttered, angrily, "but these sort of people have no consideration. I shall tell Madame Delamotte that I shall withdraw my custom if she pesters me in this way. Lottie, will you tell her, please—But no, perhaps I had better go myself;" and Maud swept out of the room in her usual haughty fashion.

Rodney laughed and shrugged his shoulders, but Averil seemed uneasy and preoccupied.

Mrs. Willmot had taken no notice of this little interruption; her slow, lymphatic temperament seldom troubled itself over passing things. Madame Delamotte was the girls' dress-maker. She supposed Maud had been extravagant enough to order a new dress for Lady Beverley's "small and early." "I really must lecture her about extravagance;" and here she adjusted her eyeglass, and looked at some fashion-plates with a serene absorption that was truly enviable.

Averil's uneasiness seemed to increase, and at last she made an excuse to leave the table. As she passed through the hall quickly, she came upon Maud; she was in close conversation with a thin, careworn-looking woman dressed in the height of fashion. Averil knew Mme. Delamotte slightly; she had been to her shop on more than one occasion. As she bade her a civil "good-morning," the French woman accosted her in a nervous, agitated manner.

"Miss Willmot, may I implore your assistance with this young lady? I can not persuade her to hear me. The bill is large, and she says I shall have still to wait for my money; and, alas! business is 'bad.'"

"Averil, I must beg you not to interfere," returned Maud, angrily. "Madame Delamotte is grossly impertinent. I have every intention of settling her bill, but just now it is not convenient, and—" here Maud hesitated.

"Madame Delamotte, will you come into my room a moment?" observed Averil, quietly. "Maud, you had better come, too. There is no need to take the whole household into confidence; and the hall is far too public a place for this sort of conversation."

But Maud refused. "I have said all I have to say," she returned, contemptuously. "If Madame Delamotte chooses to dun me in this fashion, I shall have no further dealings with her. If you mix yourself up in my affairs, you must take the consequences: the bill will be settled all in good time."

Averil made no answer; she only signed to the dressmaker to follow her, and as soon as they were alone Mme. Delamotte produced her account. She was visibly discomposed, and began to apologize.

"Miss Seymour is too hard with me," she said, almost tearfully. "I have never dunned any one. The young ladies are good customers; I have great pleasure in working for them; but it is necessary to see one's money. This account has been running for a year and a half, and now Miss Seymour says it is exorbitant. Everything is down; I have used the best of materials—nothing else would satisfy her. What would become of me if all my customers treated me in this way?"

Averil glanced down the bill, then she folded it up. "You are perfectly right, Madame Delamotte; your complaint is a just one. Will you leave the account with me? I can promise you that it shall be settled before to-morrow evening. I think you know me sufficiently to rely on my word."

"Every one knows Miss Willmot," returned the French woman, politely. "You have removed a great weight from my mind trusting you with the fact that I am greatly in need of the money."

"Then in that case I will write you a check in advance, if you will give me a receipt;" and as Mme. Delamotte seemed overjoyed at this concession, Averil sat down to her writing-table; but as she wrote out the check a look of disquiet crossed her face. "How can any one act so dishonorably?" she thought; but she little knew the seducing and evil effects of pampered vanity. She checked Mme. Delamotte's profuse thanks very gently but decidedly, and when she had dismissed her she sat on for a long time with her head on her hand, revolving the whole matter.

"I have robbed my poor, just to pay for all these fine dresses," she said, bitterly, "and yet it had to be done. Now I must go and speak to Mrs. Willmot. Oh! what a sickening world all this is. I feel like Sisyphus, forever rolling my stony burden uphill. Oh, Mother Midge, if I could only leave it all and take refuge with you!"

Mrs. Willmot was dozing in the morning-room; her book lay on her lap; but it had long ago slipped through her fingers. She regarded Averil drowsily as she sat down opposite to her, and settling her cap-strings with a yawn, asked what had become of the girls.

"I do not know, Mrs. Willmot. I am sorry to disturb you, but it is necessary for us to have a serious talk. Madame Delamotte has been here to beg Maud to settle her bill. Are you aware?" regarding her sternly, "that neither she nor Georgina has attempted to pay their dress-maker for the last year and a half?"

Mrs. Willmot's placid face lost a little of its color; she looked alarmed, and held out her hand for the account, which Averil still held.

"There is no occasion to look at it," she said, coldly. "I can tell you the exact amount;" and as she named the sum, Mrs. Willmot uttered a faint exclamation and threw herself back in her chair.

"I don't believe it!" she said, vehemently, and her weak, handsome face was quite pale. "There is vile imposition. Madame Delamotte ought to be ashamed of herself; my girls do not owe half that sum. I will ask Maud. No; Maud is so hot and impetuous she never will let me speak. Georgina will be better."

"There is no need to send for her either. I have a good memory, and have verified most of the items. The bill is large, but then it has been running on for eighteen months. I only want to know how you propose to settle it."

CHAPTER XVI.

AVERIL'S STEP-MOTHER.

As Averil asked this question in her usual quiet manner, her step-mother's perturbation increased; she was brought face to face with an unexpected difficulty—and Mrs. Willmot hated any sort of complication. To eat, drink, and be merry were important items in her code. She was indolent, and liked comfort, and, as she said, "Her girls were too much for her."

"What shall you do?" reiterated Averil, patiently, as Mrs. Willmot only sighed and looked unhappy.

"I think I am the most miserable woman alive," she returned, stung to weak exasperation by Averil's quiet persistence. "You have no pity for me, Averil; and yet I was your father's wife, and a good wife, too. What is the good of asking me to settle this infamous bill—for infamous it is, as I mean to tell Madame—when I have not a hundred pounds left, in the bank, and that boy is always drawing on me?"

"Do you mean Rodney?" interposed Averil, eagerly. "Let us leave this bill for a moment while I speak to you of him. Has he answered Mr. Harland's letter?" For two days previously a letter had come to Rodney from the lawyer, offering him a post in Canada that promised to be very remunerative in the future. Mr. Harland had spoken very warmly of the advantages attaching to such a situation, and Averil had indorsed this opinion. The letter had arrived early on the morning of her reception; but, in spite of all her business, she had talked for more than half an hour to both Rodney and her step-mother, begging them to close at once with the offer. Rodney seemed rather in favor of it: to use his own phrase, he thought Canadian life would be "awfully

jolly," and he promised to talk his mother over; but until now Averil had heard nothing.

"Has Rodney written to Mr. Harland?" she asked again, as Mrs. Willmot hesitated, and seemed unwilling to answer.

"Yes, he has written," she said, at last, when Averil compelled her to speak. "I declare, you make me so nervous, Averil, sitting opposite me, and questioning me in that jerky fashion, that I hardly know how to answer."

"And he has accepted the post?" still more eagerly.

"He has done nothing of the kind," returned her step-mother, pettishly. "You have no heart, Averil. You do not understand a mother's feelings. Do you suppose I am going to let my boy go all that distance? As though there were no other places to be found in England. I should break my heart without him. I was awake half the night, thinking about it. I did not have a bit of peace until I got the dear fellow to write and decline it this morning."

Averil's little hands were pressed tightly together. "Give me patience," she whispered. Then aloud, "Mrs. Willmot, are you aware of the advantages you have thrown away? Let me implore you to reconsider this; it is not too late—a telegram will nullify the letter. I am very unhappy about Rodney. He seems to be mixed up with a set of most undesirable friends. They are all richer and older than he. They take him to their club; they induce him to play for money. It is no use warning you against Captain Beverley on Maud's account but for Rodney's sake—"

But here Mrs. Willmot interrupted her.

"Don't say a word against Captain Beverley, Averil. Things will very soon be settled between him and Maud, I can tell you that," with a meaning nod. "I know he is not a favorite of yours; but he is one of the best catches of the season. Every one will tell you that. Look at Beverley House! And then Oliver, though he is only the second son, has fifteen hundred a year, and they say he is his uncle's heir. No one thinks much of his brother's health—he seems a sickly sort of person. Mark my words—Maud will be Lady Beverley one day."

Averil gave vent to a despairing sigh. What impression could she make on this weak, worldly nature? She had often argued with her step-mother, and had encountered the same placid resistance to all her appeals. Weak people are often obstinate. Mrs. Willmot was no exception; she would listen to Averil, agree with her, and finally end by doing exactly as she had intended at first.

On the present occasion Averil did not spare her.

"You are wrong," she said, vehemently. "One day you will know how wrong you have been. Captain Beverley is only flirting with Maud—he will never propose to her. The Beverley's will look far higher than our family. You are encouraging her in this miserable infatuation, and both you and she are sacrificing Rodney."

"What do you mean by this extraordinary statement, Averil?" And Mrs. Willmot drew herself up with an affronted air.

"Captain Beverley is using Rodney for his own ends. Do you suppose a man of his age has any interest in a boy like Rodney? It pleases him to come here, and he throws a careless invitation to him now and then, which he is far too pleased to accept. Rodney will be ruined, for Frank tells me they are a wild, extravagant set. This Canadian scheme would save him—it would break off his intimacy with those men; it would remove him from the scene of his temptation. Mrs. Willmot, you are sacrificing your boy to Maud's fancied interest—it is she who is keeping him here."

But though Averil went on in this strain until she was exhausted, she could not induce her step-mother to alter her decision. She was evidently touched once or twice as Averil pleaded; an uneasy look came over her face.

"You are prejudiced—Maud thinks very differently from that," she observed, more than once. It was Maud who was evidently the mother's adviser.

Averil had to desist at last with a sore heart; but before she broke off the conversation she returned again to the subject of Mme. Delamotte. She made far more impression here. Mrs. Willmot burst into tears when she saw the receipted bill; she even kissed Averil affectionately, and called her her dear, her dearest girl. There was no want of gratitude for the timely help that had staved off the evil day of reckoning. Mrs. Willmot spoke the truth when she said that she would never forget this generous act.

"My girls have treated me badly," she said, with unusual bitterness—"Maud especially. I know I am to blame leaving things so much to Maud; but she is clever, and has a clear head, and never muddles things as I do. I thought there were only two quarters owing—I certainly understood that last year's account had been settled. I remember drawing a check—Stop! was it for Madame Delamotte or Rodney? My memory is so bad, and the children seem always pestering me for money."

Mrs. Willmot's explanation was by no means lucid; but Averil, who knew her perfectly, did not in the least accuse her of insincerity. She was aware that her stepmother was a bad woman of business; that she was indolent, and suffered herself to be ruled by her high-spirited daughter. She had always shifted her responsibilities on to other people.

To do her justice, she was extremely shocked at the want of rectitude on Maud's part, and promised readily that such a thing should never occur again—the quarterly bill should be settled in future. She even acquiesced very meekly when Averil announced her intention of speaking to

Maud very plainly.

"I shall tell her," she finished—and there was a stern, set look round Averil's mouth as she spoke, that showed she fully meant what she said—"that if such a disgraceful occurrence ever takes place again in this house, I shall consider it my duty to make different arrangements for the future."

"I am sure she deserves to be frightened," returned Mrs. Willmot, tearfully. She was plainly awed by Averil's manner, though she did not in the least believe this threat.

But Averil had not spoken without due reflection. During the long sleepless night she had tried to look her duty in the face; her step-mother had claims on her, but was it right that her poor should be defrauded—that her father's money should be squandered to satisfy the rapacity of these headstrong young people? Was she not encouraging them in habits of extravagance and idleness? She could bear her daily martyrdom, the homely sacrifice; but that it should be in vain, that it should be productive of evil and not good, this was intolerable to her.

She went to her own room, feeling weary and disquieted. The worst part—her talk with Maud—was to come. She felt she had need to brace herself afresh for the stormy discussion. As she sat down by the window she saw Rodney lounging on the lawn; his brief sulkiness had vanished. In reality he was a sweet-tempered fellow, and hated to be on bad terms with any one.

"Halloo, Ave," he said, as he caught sight of her, "what have you and the mater been talking about all this time? There seems to be a precious row about something."

Averil was utterly spent—she put out her hand to him with a little sob.

"Why do you all make my life so miserable?" she said. "It is not fair. I have done nothing to deserve it."

Rodney gave his usual shrug and kicked a loose pebble. He wished he had not spoken. The least approach to a scene gave him an uncomfortable sensation. Averil saw his dismay, and recovered herself at once.

"Come and sit down," she said, hastily. "I want to talk to you. Rodney, why did you write to Mr. Harland without speaking to me again? It troubles me inexpressibly to think that you have thrown away such a chance. Do you know, Frank says—"

"Oh, Frank again!" returned Rodney, crossly. "I beg your pardon, Ave," as she looked somewhat offended at this; "I do hate to have a fellow flung at me like that. How could I help writing when the mater and Maud made such a fuss—"

"But you would have liked it yourself?"

"I don't know. It is rather a bore leaving all one's friends. Beverley says there are better berths to be picked up here. There is Forbes's brother, Alick—"

"Please do not tell me what Captain Beverley or Mr. Forbes think; Mr. Harland is a far wiser adviser. Rodney, dear, I am very unhappy about you. You are not choosing your friends wisely. I dread Captain Beverley's influence. He is rich, a man of the world, and intensely selfish. His habits can not be yours. Your mother's means are not large; you have no right to live as though you had expectations. You would be far safer and happier in Canada than staying on here in idleness."

"It is not my fault," returned Rodney, impatiently. "I was quite willing to go, only the mater cried about it, and Maud told me that I was only thinking of my own interests. Don't you see, Ave," in a coaxing voice, "I am in rather a difficult position—I can't turn a cold shoulder on Beverley when he is making up to Maud. It is quite true what she says—that I am the only son, and that it is rather shabby to leave the mater if she does not want to part with me."

"Rodney, if you would only give up the society of these men. I think I dislike Mr. Forbes even more than Captain Beverley. I never can trust a man who does not look you in the face. Frank told me that he belongs to one of the fastest sets in town."

"Nonsense! Forbes is a capital fellow—I don't know any one more good-natured or amusing. He has done me a good turn more than once. But"—interrupting himself—"you are only a girl—you would not understand."

"I think I know more than most girls," returned Averil, with a sad smile. "I am very old for my age. Try me, Rodney. I wish you would tell me everything;" and she looked anxiously at the fair, boyish face, with its handsome, irresolute mouth. If he would only confide in her! But even as the thought passed through her mind Rodney threw off some unwelcome reflection, and shook himself with a light laugh.

"You are a good little soul, Ave," he said, jumping up. "Don't bother your head about me. Something is sure to turn up, so there is no need to banish me to Canada;" and Rodney went off whistling.

Averil sat for a little time alone, then Lottie brought her some tea, and after that she went in search of Maud.

No one knew what passed between them. Mrs. Willmot, in her selfish policy, thought it wise not to inquire. Averil did not appear again that evening—she had a headache, and remained in her own room. Georgina noticed that Maud was in an unusually bad temper; she snubbed Lottie mercilessly, and was positively rude to Annette. But Georgina was not a very close observer; she failed to detect a certain uneasiness and restlessness, that seemed to increase as the evening

wore on. Maud took no one into her confidence; if any expectation she had formed had met with disappointment, she was strong enough to bear it in silence.

"It has been a stupid day," said Annette, as she parted from Lottie that night. "Something has gone wrong—my cousin is miserable."

But Lottie could give her no information. The evening had been a failure; Maud had been cross and detestable; Rodney had gone out; no one had ventured to speak. "Never mind; things will be better to-morrow, and there is Grey-Mount on Monday," she said, with the gay philosophy that was natural to her.

"Things will be better to-morrow"—a very Lottie-like speech. Lottie's sanguine temperament never predicted misfortune; if matters were unsatisfactory to-day, they were sure to mend. It was this bright joyousness, this faith in an ultimate good, that had made the little school-girl happy in spite of shabby clothes, hard task-masters, and uncongenial labors; it was this sweet, unselfish nature, so child-like, and yet so sound at the core, that was weaving the love that was to be the blessing of her life.

It was not Lottie's pink cheeks, her bright eyes, and pleasant ways, that were binding Ned Chesterton's heart to her so surely, for Ned was an intelligent, shrewd fellow, and knew better than to build his life's happiness on such shifting materials. It was the girl's frankness, her honesty, her loyal devotion to those she loved, and her sweet yielding temper, that had first attracted him. He was not a rich man: the young lawyer would have to work hard at his profession before he could afford the luxury of a wife; but he had long ago said to himself that that wife should be Lottie Jones.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANNETTE DECLINES TO PLAY TENNIS.

AVERIL was rather quiet and subdued the next day or two, but as usual she battled bravely with her depression, and tried not to damp the enjoyment of her two young companions.

The new work-room was finished, and looked very comfortable; and Fairy Order, as Lottie still called her, was quite in her element. There was plenty of time now for the music lessons and practicing. Lottie was learning to chatter in French, and Annette found her a most intelligent pupil. The girls sat together, walked together, or drove out with Averil; no one interfered with them. When Lottie had letters to write, or her aunt or cousins wanted her, Annette went in search of Averil, or sat in the garden with her book. Maud and Georgina made no attempt to admit her into their companionship; they still treated her with coldness, as though they regarded her as an interloper. In the evenings when Averil read to herself, she and Lottie escaped into the garden, or whispered together over their work. Georgina once asked them contemptuously what they could find to talk about; she sneered slightly as she spoke. When friends were not present there were often lapses of silence. Rodney would complain of the dullness, and go out in search of amusement.

"I wish we could go out too," Georgina would say. "I think no family of old maids could be more deadily dull. Mamma goes to sleep, and Averil reads, and Maud writes letters."

"I wish you would be quiet and let me finish my notes," Maud would say, pettishly—she seemed always irritable now; and then Georgina would subside into moody silence. If any one came in there was an instantaneous change; for example, if Captain Beverley dropped in for a moment to fetch Rodney, Maud's eyes would brighten, her prettiest songs would be sung; Mrs. Willmot would be broad awake and smiling; only Averil's grave little face did not relax, her greeting never became warmer.

The day at Grey-Mount was a great success. As Averil looked at the girls' bright faces as they took their places in the train the cloud seemed to lift off her own spirits; it was delightful to think that for twenty-four hours her worries would be in the background. Kind greetings, approving smiles, hearty sympathy, were all awaiting her; no dissatisfied looks, no struggling wills would mar her enjoyment. Averil's brow grew calm and clear as a little child's as the prospect widened, and when they reached Chislehurst she was talking as merrily as her companions.

"There is Louie!" exclaimed Lottie, as the train slackened speed, and a tall, pleasant-looking girl gave her an answering nod and smile. She had a strong resemblance to her brother Frank, and, like him, had no claims to beauty; but her frank, open countenance, attracted Annette.

"She is a Harland, so of course she is nice," she said to herself, with illogical reasoning.

Miss Harland did not seem to require any introduction; she shook hands cordially with Annette. "Mamma was too busy to come, Averil," she said, leading the way to the station door, where an open barouche and a pair of handsome bays were awaiting them. "What have you been doing with yourself lately, you naughty little person? Lottie, she looks more shadowy and unsubstantial than ever! Father will be horrified when he sees her."

"Don't be so absurd, Louie. I am perfectly well," laughed Averil, who certainly looked very small and slender beside this fine-grown, vigorous young woman. But Miss Harland chose to argue the point; and as Lottie took her part, there was a lively discussion that lasted until they reached

Grey-Mount.

Grey-Mount was a substantial gray-stone house standing in its own grounds. As they drove up to the door, a bevy of young people came out to greet them. Louie introduced them all in a quick, off-hand fashion to their new guest as, "Nettie and Fan—and the twins, Fred and Winnie. And this is my little mamma," she continued, in an affectionate, patronizing tone, as a quiet, lady-like little woman appeared in the background. Annette thought her still very pretty; she liked her soft voice and ways. It was evident that her children doted on her, for a word from mamma seemed to have a restraining influence on the twins, a pair of noisy, high-spirited children.

Annette found herself at home at once; there was no stiffness, no reserve, at Grey-Mount. Nettie and Fan had pounced on Lottie as their rightful prey, and had carried her off at once. Mrs. Harland had followed with Averil, and Annette felt a hand pressed through her arm.

"You and I will have to entertain each other until luncheon," observed Louie, in a comfortable voice. "When mamma and Averil begin to talk they never leave off. Oh, of course it is Bob and Owen—they generally begin about the boys. Frank will be home presently, and then we shall have tennis. Frank is my own, own brother, you know. Not but what Owen and Fred are brothers too, but Frank is my special—"

"Oh, yes, I understand about that. Lottie has told me he is monsieur's son, and this lady you call mamma is your step-mother. I have not talked to her much, but her looks please me. She is altogether different from Mrs. Willmot."

"My dear Miss Ramsay, there are step-mothers and step-mothers. Frank and I think mamma perfect; she has not a selfish thought. As to Mrs. Willmot and the Misses Seymour, I had better hold my tongue on that subject. Averil is a darling; we are all so fond of her; but she is just wearing herself out—"

"Do you think my cousin looks so ill?" returned Annette, in such quick alarm that Miss Harland regretted her speech. She was a warm-hearted, impulsive girl, and sometimes said more than was prudent. She was anxious now to explain away her words, for the sad wistfulness that had come into Annette's dark eyes touched her.

"She has always been delicate," she returned, hastily. "At one time her health was a great anxiety to us all; but during the last year or two she has been stronger. Miss Ramsay, are you fond of flowers? Shall we go and see the green-houses? Yes, Winnie, you may come too"—as the pretty little girl ran up to them.

Before luncheon was quite over Frank Harland made his appearance. He was accompanied by a tall, good-looking man, whom they all called Ned, and who was afterward introduced to Annette by Lottie in the shyest of voices as "Mr. Chesterton."

If Annette had not been such a recluse, and so totally unacquainted with the ways of young people—the curé and his snuff-box being her sole masculine acquaintance in the Rue St. Joseph—she might have read certain facts from Lottie's shy eagerness and pleased, downcast looks. She might even have adduced the same conclusion from the young lawyer's evident absorption and almost exclusive monopoly of the girl.

In tennis he was her partner, and afterward they walked about the garden together. Every one took it as a matter of course. No one interfered with their *tête-à-tête*—not even Averil, whose eyes often rested on her protégée with fond wistfulness. "Lottie is very happy," Annette heard her whisper once to Mrs. Harland.

Annette was very pleased to see Mr. Frank again; but she could not be induced to take her first lesson in tennis, though he employed all his eloquence to coax her to become his partner.

"You are bent on snubbing me," he said at last, in mock despair. "You were much more amiable when I met you last, Miss Ramsay, and we exchanged confidences over our vanilla ices."

"That is too bad," she returned, trying not to laugh. "What is it you mean by 'snub?' I do not understand all your English words. It is you who are unkind, Mr. Harland; for you want to make me ridiculous in the eyes of your sister and friends. Ah, yes; it would amuse them to see how often I should miss the ball! They would just clap their hands with the fun. No; I will sit here in the shade and watch you, and that will be my first lesson in tennis; and if you will come to Redfern House, you can teach me there, and Lottie can play with us."

"To be sure! that is a good idea," he said, eagerly; and then, as they called to him, he lifted his cap and ran down the grass slope to the tennis court. Annette kept her promise, and watched the game with intelligent interest. Every now and then Frank came to her to explain things. He was pleased with the girl's naïveté and frankness, and he always left her a little reluctantly when Louie waved her racket, or Ned shouted to him that they were waiting.

He was just making his way to her for the fifth time when he saw her suddenly rise from her seat with a quick exclamation of pleasure at the sight of a gray-haired man who was crossing the lawn in a leisurely, middle-aged fashion.

"Monsieur, it is you at last," she said, holding out her hand. "Oh, how glad I am to see you again!"

Mr. Harland smiled as he cordially responded to her greeting; but the next moment he held her out at arm's-length and critically surveyed her.

"Do you know," he said, in a pleased voice, "that if you had not spoken to me I think I should hardly have recognized my young friend of the Rue St. Joseph? What has she done with herself, Averil?"—in quite a puzzled tone.

Mr. Harland could not understand it at all. He remembered the girl as she stood that morning in her shabby gown, with the little lace kerchief knotted round her throat, and her small, pale face and grave eyes. The young creature that stood before him was as slim and graceful as a fawn. She was no longer pale. Her eyes were clear and sparkling, her black dress was enlivened by a dainty breast-knot of dark crimson roses. Could these few weeks have effected this transformation? "No, I should not have known you," he said, dropping her hand; but he looked very kindly at her.

Frank had been much amused at this little scene; but by and by his mood changed. He was even guilty of the unfilial wish that his father had been detained longer at Lincoln's Inn.

Frank found he could no longer secure Miss Ramsay's attention. She evinced a preference for monsieur's society, and could not be induced to leave his side, even to see the hot-houses under Frank's guidance.

Frank turned rather sulky at last, to his father's amusement. Mr. Harland's eyes twinkled mischievously as he watched his discomfiture.

"Miss Ramsay," he said, "you are very good to stop with an old fellow like me, but I must not monopolize you. Mr. Frank seems a little put out with us both."

"He is only pretending," she said, in a voice that reached the young man. "I think it is his way of making fun—it is so long since I have seen you, monsieur. And I like better to sit and talk to you of Dinan, and those days when you were kind to me. As for Mr. Frank, I shall see him often—often." Mr. Harland glanced at her in extreme surprise; he noticed that Frank turned his head to listen. "He is coming to teach me tennis," went on Annette, in a composed, matter-of-fact tone. "I would not play to-day, because I knew I should only make myself ridiculous; but I understand the game now; and Lottie and I will practice; when Mr. Frank comes he will be surprised at my progress."

"Father, shall I bring you and Miss Ramsay some tea out there?" asked Frank suddenly at this moment. Now, what had become of the young man's brief moodiness? Frank was humming an air as he brought out the teacups: he had a little joke for Annette when she thanked him for his trouble; but he shook his head when she would have made room for him.

"Don't disturb yourself," he said, quickly; "I know you and monsieur"—with a little stress on the word—"are as happy as possible. I am going to talk to Averil about the tennis, and see which day I may come."

"Very well," she returned, tranquilly; and she resumed her conversation. She was telling her friend about her life at Redfern House, about the new work-room, and her cousin's kindness. As she talked on in her bright, rapid way, Mr. Harland told himself that she was not far from being pretty; she was not so thin, and her complexion had improved, and the *spirituelle* expression of the dark eyes was very attractive.

Meanwhile, Averil was listening to Frank's plans with rather a puzzled look. Frank had announced his intention of coming down to Redfern House as often as possible to practice tennis with the girls.

"You have a good lawn," he went on, in an off-hand manner, "and I daresay Seymour will join us. Thursday is my best day, if it will suit you, Averil."

"Any day will suit me," she returned, with the soft friendliness that she always showed him. "But, Frank, I want to speak to you. You must not misunderstand Annette. Perhaps you may think her frankness a little strange, but she means nothing by it; she has lived so completely out of the world that she hardly knows its ways. I believe that she has never spoken to a young man in her life; and she treats you as she would Louie. You will not mind if I say this to you; but Annette is so sweet and good I could not bear her to be misunderstood."

"I shall not misunderstand her. How could any one mistake such child-like frankness?" returned the young man, gravely; but he flushed a little, as though Averil's words touched him.

"Please come, then, as often as you can," she returned, cheerfully. "You know how welcome you will be."

Frank did not make any more attempts to speak to Annette that evening; but he showed her little attentions, and watched her a good deal; it pleased him to see how friendly she was with them all. As she bid him good-bye at the station the next morning—for he and Mr. Chesterton had accompanied them—she said to him:

"I have had such a happy time. Every one is so nice and kind. Monsieur, and your step-mother, and sister, and—"

"I hope you are going to include me," he returned, mischievously; but Annette took the question in good part.

"And you too; oh, yes! I think it is very good of you, Mr. Harland, to teach me tennis. Is it not so, my cousin?"

But Averil was apparently deaf, for she made no response.

"Annette," she said, gently, when she found herself alone with her cousin that evening, "I want to give you a little hint, because you have been such a recluse, and do not know the ways of society. Young girls of your age do not generally invite young men. Now, when you asked Frank to play tennis—"

But Annette interrupted her in quick alarm. "Have I done wrong? I am so sorry. It is your house, and I ought to have left it to you."

"Well, another time; but, of course, in this case it does not matter; the Harlands are like my own brothers and sisters. Frank comes as often as he likes."

"But I am sorry, all the same," returned Annette, gravely, and a distressed color came to her face. "It seems I have been bold. My cousin, will you explain? I do not know the rules, and I would not willingly offend. Mr. Harland was so kind; he proposed to teach me, and I thought there could be no harm."

"My dear," replied Averil, kissing her hot cheek remorsefully, "there is nothing wrong. If Frank came every day he would be welcome; it is only a hint for your future use."

But Annette was sensitive; her innate sense of propriety had taken alarm; she had been forward, or her cousin would not have given her this reproof.

"You shall not have to find fault with me again," she said, humbly. "I will remember the difference between old men and young men for the future, my cousin."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"I HEAR THAT WE HAVE TO CONGRATULATE YOU."

A FEW more weeks passed. The summer days flew merrily by for Annette and Lottie; and if, as time went on, Averil's hidden anxieties and secret watchfulness did not relax, and a growing fear pressed more heavily upon her, she made neither of the girls her confidante. With that innate unselfishness that belonged to her nature, she refused to burden their youthful spirits with the shadow of coming trouble. But on those summer nights, when the moonlight was stealing into each sleeper's room, its pure white beams would often fall on one small, kneeling figure; for in those days Averil prayed for Rodney as one would pray for some unwary traveler hovering on the edge of a perilous abyss.

Frank Harland had kept his promise loyally, and the Thursdays had become an institution at Redfern House. Ned Chesterton frequently accompanied him; and as Rodney often condescended to don his flannels and join them, his sister's frigidity relaxed, and as one or two other young people would drop in, there was often a pleasant party collected on the trim green lawn. Averil would sit at her window with her work and book and watch them contentedly; it amused her to see the young men's stratagems to secure their favorite partners. Georgina was inclined to monopolize Mr. Chesterton, and he often had to have recourse to some innocent ruse to win Lottie to his side. Averil noticed, too, that Frank's choice generally fell on Annette. "Outsiders see most of the game," she thought. Averil was always ready to fulfill her duties as hostess, and talk to Frank in the pauses of the game, to listen to Ned's artful praises of Lottie's play, to interest herself when any defeated combatant talked of his or her ill-luck. There were always iced drinks and tea to be had in the gay little striped tent over which Roberts presided. Frank once told Averil that she was a first-rate hostess, and that his friend Ned never enjoyed himself so much as at Redfern House.

"I am so glad you are pleased," was Averil's answer; but she blushed a little at the young man's praise. Yes, it was her part to be Lady Bountiful—to give pleasure rather than to receive it.

One afternoon she was in her usual seat, when Rodney came up to her; he had had an engagement with one of his West End friends, and Averil had not seen him since breakfast. He looked tired and heated as he flung himself down on the steps by Averil's chair, and with her usual quickness she detected in a moment that something was wrong.

"Where's Maud?" he asked, after an instant's moody silence. "Oh, I remember!" before Averil could answer him. "She and the mater were to lunch at the Egertons'. Ave, it is all over the club. I would not believe it at first. I told Forbes that he could not be such a cad. But it is true; I heard it from half a dozen fellows. Beverley is going to marry his first love, Lady Clementina Fox."

Rodney had expected an exclamation of dismay, but Averil only grew a little pale.

"Well?" she returned, briefly.

"It's true, I tell you," he repeated, staring at her as though unable to believe this calm reception of his news.

"Of course it's true. I do not doubt you for a moment. If you think I am surprised, Rodney, you are very much mistaken. I have expected this for the last few weeks."

"But it is hard lines for Maud," groaned the lad, who, with all his faults, was fond of his sisters. "I am glad I called him a cad to Forbes. Here he has been paying her attention for the last six months. I call it a confounded shame for any man to get a girl talked about. Lots of fellows have said to me, 'I suppose Beverley and your sister mean to hit it off.' I declare, he deserves to be horse-whipped!"

"Instead of that, he has secured a beauty and a fortune," returned Averil, bitterly. "What does it matter to a man of his caliber if a woman's heart is damaged more or less? Don't let us talk of him, Rodney. I might be tempted to say something I should repent. The question is, How is Maud

to be told?"

"That is just what I was going to ask you," he returned, ruefully. "The mater must not do it—she would drive Maud crazy. She can not help fussing. And then she cries, and that irritates Maud. You will have to do it, Ave. You know just how to put things, and you know when to stop talking. I'll back you against any one for common sense and that sort of thing."

"I!" returned Averil, recoiling with such a pale look of dismay on her face that Rodney was startled. "I to inflict a wound like that on any woman. Oh, no, Rodney!"

"But I tell you, Ave, it must be you," replied the lad, impatiently. "Do you think I am the sort of fellow to manage a delicate business like that? I should just blurt it out and then flee like what's-a-name—the messenger that came to Jehu. I won't have a hand in it, and you will do it so beautifully, Ave."

"No, no," she returned, almost harshly. "Maud has no love for me, and she would only grow to hate me. If neither you nor your mother will do it, Rodney, she must go untold. Tell her! How could I do it?" she went on, half to herself, "when I know—none better—how it will hurt. Oh, that women should have to suffer so!"

But Rodney would not give up his point.

"How can you have the heart to refuse?" he said, reproachfully. "Would you leave her to the tender mercies of outsiders! Do you know she will meet them to-night at the Powells'? If she does not know before, she will see it for herself then."

"To-night!" in a shocked voice.

"Yes; don't I tell you so?" still more irritably. "Would you expose her to such an ordeal unprepared? Ave, you must do it—you must get her to stop at home. She can have a headache—women can always have headaches—and Georgina must go in her place."

"Very well, I will tell her," in a weary voice. "Let me go now, Rodney, or Frank will see I am upset. Don't think I am not sorry, because I do not say much; but it is all such a terrible mistake, dear. You would none of you believe me. I told you he meant nothing;" and then she sighed and left him.

Averil knew that her task was a hard one. She doubted how Maud's proud nature would receive such a blow. Would it be totally unexpected? had she already a secret fear—a terrible suspicion—that Captain Beverley was playing fast and loose with her? Averil could not answer these questions. Maud had looked worn and jaded for the last week or two, and the brightness of her beauty had dimmed a little, as though under some secret pressure; but she had not even made Georgina her confidante.

Averil's opportunity came sooner than she expected. Half an hour later she heard the carriage-wheels, and a few minutes afterward there was a tap at her door, and to her surprise Maud entered. She was still in her walking-dress, and looked extremely handsome.

"Averil," she said, pleasantly, "mamma quite forgot to ask you if we could have the carriage to-night. Stanton says the horses are not tired, and it's only a mile and a half to the Powells'."

"Certainly. Stanton is the best judge. He is careful not to overwork Whitefoot;" and then, as Maud was leaving, she continued, rather nervously: "Do you mind staying a moment? I wanted to speak to you alone. There is something you ought to know that Rodney has just told me about Captain Beverley—it is all over the club."

"Some scandal, I suppose," was the careless response. But Averil was grieved to see the sudden fading of the bright color. "There are always plenty of tales going on. I think men are just as much given to gossip as women. I daresay it is some mare's-nest or other."

"I am afraid not," returned Averil, with marked emphasis. "Mr. Forbes told Rodney, and you know he is a connection of Captain Beverley. He said—indeed, indeed, it is true, Maud—that he is engaged to be married to Lady Clementina Fox."

"I do not believe it," replied Maud. She had not a vestige of color on her face, but her attitude was superb in its haughtiness. "Oliver Beverley engaged! Nonsense! You ought to know better than to bring me such tales."

"My dear," returned Averil, tenderly, "I bring you the news because no one else would take upon themselves such an unkind office—because I want to spare you all the pain I can. You will not go to the Powells' to-night, Maud?"

"And why not, may I ask?" in a freezing tone, that repelled all proffered sympathy.

"Because he and Lady Clementina will be there"—in a half whisper.

"That is all the more reason for me to go—that I may contradict this extraordinary statement," was Maud's unflinching response; but a dark flush crossed her face as she spoke. "Very well; I will tell mamma that we can use the carriage;" and she swept out of the room.

Evidently Rodney was on the watch, for he slipped in a moment after.

"Have you told her, Ave?"

"Yes; and she does not believe it—at least, she says so."

"Do you think she does?"

"Certainly she believes it."

"Oh, she was always a game one," he returned. "Maud has plenty of pluck; she will brave it out in her own way. And she will not be pitied, mind you. Anyhow, you have got her off to-night?"

"I tried my best; but she says she will go. She is determined to find out the truth for herself."

Rodney's face fell. "Shall I tell my mother? She must not be allowed to go. No girl should put herself in such a position, with all her pluck; she could not face them like that."

"I believe she could and will. No; leave her alone. You do not know Maud; she has pride enough for ten women. Let her go and find out the truth for herself. If you take my advice you will say nothing to your mother. Mrs. Willmot will be able to control her feelings best before strangers."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he replied, reluctantly. "We must just make the best of a bad business."

"Just so. And if you want to help your sister, take no notice of her. Maud will bear nothing in the way of sympathy. I know her, Rodney: she is deeply wounded, but she will bleed inwardly. Captain Beverley will have to answer for his dastardly behavior, though not to us;" and Averil's face grew very stern.

"Well, I'll come and tell you about it afterward—that is, if you are not asleep, Ave."

"Am I likely to be sleeping?" she replied, reproachfully. "Come here to this room—you will find me up;" and Rodney promised he would do so.

Maud appeared in her usual spirits at dinner-time; she laughed and talked freely with Frank and Mr. Chesterton; only Averil noticed that the food was untouched on her plate, while Rodney more than once replenished her glass with water.

She looked handsomer than ever as she stood in the hall, drawing on her long gloves. Once Averil, moved to exceeding pity, touched her on the arm.

"Maud, dear, do not go. Why will you not spare yourself?"

A mirthless laugh answered her. "Do not people generally congratulate their friends? I have armed myself with all sorts of pretty speeches. Mamma shall hear me say them. How she will open her dear old eyes! Mamma, I think you and I are going to enjoy this evening."

"Indeed I hope so, my love. And how well you are looking—isn't she, Averil? I know somebody who will think so."

Maud winced; then she recovered herself, and gave a low, mocking courtesy. "Many thanks for the compliment. Good-night, dear people, all. Rodney, take mamma to the carriage."

How superbly she was acting! Rodney could have clapped his hands and cried, "Bravo!" but Averil only sighed. How long would such false strength avail her? When would that proud spirit humble itself under the chastening Hand?

Averil spent a miserable evening, in spite of all Frank could do to rouse her. She sent him away at last.

"Go and talk to the others—Lottie and Annette. I am bad company to-night, Frank."

"You are not yourself," he said, affectionately. "Something is troubling you, and you will not tell us." And though Averil owned he was right, he could not induce her to say more.

She was glad when the young men took their departure, and she was free to seek her own room. Rodney found her there, trying to read, but looking inexpressibly weary. She took his hand and drew him to a seat beside her.

"Tell me about it, Rodney."

"There isn't much to tell. Alicia Powell got hold of Maud directly we entered the room. I heard her say: 'Every one is congratulating them. Lady Clementina looks charming. She is really a fine-looking woman for her age, though she is older than Oliver.' You see, Alicia is a sort of cousin, so she calls the fellow by his Christian name. They are to be married in October, and go abroad for the winter."

"How did Maud take it?"

"Why, as a matter of course. Oh, I can tell you she behaved splendidly. 'Rodney has told us,' she said, as coolly as possible. 'It is an excellent match. Mamma, there is a such a crowd here. Shall we move into the next room?' You should have seen the mater's face—the poor thing looked ready to drop. I believe Maud did not dare let her stay there, for fear of the young lady's sharp eyes."

"Well?" for Rodney paused here.

"Well, I took them into the next room, and Forbes joined us there. And of course he had plenty to say about Beverley's good luck. The fellow—how I longed to kick him!—was standing talking to a big red-haired woman. Oh, she was not bad-looking, but I was not exactly in the mood to admire his choice. Well, he looked rather uncomfortable when he caught sight of us, but he put a bold face on it. You should have seen the air with which Maud gave him her hand—she might have been a queen, and wasn't I proud of her! 'I hear that we have to congratulate you, Captain Beverley,' she said, in quite a composed way. 'I hope you will give us the pleasure of an introduction to Lady Clementina.' Beverley seemed quite taken aback. I never saw a man look so foolish. He had to bring her. And Maud made one or two pretty speeches. And then she complained that the room was hot and crowded, and Stewart—you know Stewart—took her away."

I believe she had had just enough of it."

"And your mother?"

"Oh, I looked after the mater pretty sharply. I got a seat for her by old Mrs. Sullivan—you know her. She is as deaf as a post, and so short-sighted that she never sees anything. The mater was turning all manner of colors. We had quite a scene with her on the way home. But Maud never spoke a word. She bade us good-night, and went up to her own room, and locked herself in; and then I coaxed the mater to go to bed too."

"Poor Rodney! You have had a hard time of it."

"I suppose it was not particularly enjoyable. If I could only have kicked him, Ave! It is a shame that one is not allowed to horsewhip a fellow like that."

And Rodney shrugged his shoulders and walked off with a disgusted face.

CHAPTER XIX.

"YOU WILL TRY ME, AVE?"

AVERIL had a painful interview with her step-mother the next morning; but she was very patient with the poor, weak woman, who bemoaned herself so bitterly.

Mrs. Willmot never brooded silently over her wrongs; her feeble nature needed the relief of words; her outbursts of lamentation, of indignation, of maternal solicitude, were all poured into Averil's ears.

"To think my girl, my own beautiful Maud, should be set aside by that red-haired woman! Handsome! She can not hold a candle to Maud. Averil, you do not know how a mother's heart bleeds for her child. My only consolation is that she does not suffer as I feared she would. She is angry with him—her pride is hurt, and no wonder! He has treated her shamefully. But I am thankful to see that her affections are not deeply engaged. If she had cared for him, would she have looked at him with a smile, as she did last night?"

Averil let this assertion pass. Mrs. Willmot was not a person of much penetration; she loved her children, but they could easily hoodwink her. Averil herself held a different opinion, and her conviction only deepened as time went on.

Maud bore herself much as usual. She still fulfilled her numerous engagements, and seemed as much engrossed by her daily occupations as ever, though she was perhaps a trifle more haughty, more exacting in her demands on Georgina and Lottie.

But Averil noticed how heavy her eyes looked when she came down in the morning, how often they were encircled with black rings. She ate little, but any remark on her loss of appetite seemed to irritate her. She was paler, too, and as time went on there were sharpened lines in her face; the lovely curves seemed to lose their roundness; a sort of haggardness replaced the youthful freshness. Averil tried once or twice to break down the girl's reserve, but her gentle hints availed nothing. Maud would have no sympathy, permit no condolence; and after a time Averil's thoughts were diverted into another channel.

It was the middle of September now; Georgina had gone to visit some friends in Ireland, and Mrs. Willmot and Maud were planning to spend the greater part of October and November in Devonshire. Averil's expenses had been heavy that year, and she had given up, in consequence, a much-talked-of trip to Switzerland.

"Next year, if I live, I will take Annette and Lottie," she said to Mr. Harland; "but Rodney is not leaving town just yet and I do not care to leave him. Perhaps I will take the girls later on to Brighton for a week or two; one summer in town will not hurt me;" and though Mr. Harland grumbled at this resolution, she carried her point.

No, she could not leave Rodney; she was growing daily more anxious about him. He was often moody and irritable, had fits of gloom, followed by moods of reckless gayety. He was seldom at home, and when questioned about his engagements by his mother and sisters always answered evasively—Townley had asked him to go down to Cricklewood, or Forbes or Stewart had invited him.

"Who is this Townley?" Maud had once asked. "Is he a new friend of yours, Rodney?"

"Oh, I have known him for some time," he returned, curtly; "he is a chum of Forbes—he is one of the clique;" and then he sauntered out of the room.

Averil looked up from her work.

"Maud, I do not like the idea of this Mr. Townley. Frank knows him; he says he is the most worthless of the set—a thoroughly bad fellow. I am getting very anxious about Rodney."

"I think he ought to stay at home more," was Maud's reply. "I must get mamma to lecture him. He has been borrowing money off her again—he spends far too much."

"He would have been safer in Canada," returned Averil, quietly. But to this Maud made no response, only a shade crossed her face; if she regretted that false step, she did not say so; it is

only a generous nature that owns its mistakes.

That night Averil had a sad shock. She had been very busy all day, and had sat up later than usual to finish some letters. As usual, Rodney was out; but a little before one she heard Roberts admit him. She was just putting away her papers, and as she closed her desk and opened the door she heard the old butler's voice raised in a serious remonstrance.

"Mr. Rodney, sir, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You will wake your mother and the young ladies! Do, I beg of you, let me help you to bed before my mistress sees you; she is writing in her room."

"All right, old fellow! Don't you put yourself out," returned a thick voice, curiously unlike Rodney's. As they passed, Averil covered her face with a low cry. She must shut out that sight—her boy, with his fair hair disheveled, and flushed, meaningless face, as he lurched past her unsteadily on the butler's arm.

"Oh, Rodney, Rodney!" At that bitter cry the young prodigal seemed for the moment half sobered.

"Never mind, Ave," he stammered; "I am only a little poorly. Roberts—he is a good fellow—will take care of me. Good-night!"

Averil made no answer; she followed them up, with a white, stony face, and went to her room. There was no sleep for her that night. If vicarious shame could have saved Rodney, that bitter expiation might have been his. "But no man can save his brother, or make an atonement for him."

Rodney looked miserable enough the next morning: his conscience was not yet hardened. Averil took no notice of him; it was Maud who lectured him in sharp accents for his irregular habits.

"You will get into trouble one day if you go on like this," she said, in her hardest manner; and yet Maud knew nothing of the disgraceful scene. "You stop out late every night; you spend mamma's money, and you are forming idle, useless habits from always mixing with richer men. Mamma will be ruined if you go on like this."

"What a pity you hindered me from going to Canada!" sneered Rodney; and somehow that home-thrust silenced Maud, and she shortly left the room.

Averil was finishing her breakfast; she had risen late, after a sleepless night; but she only read her letters, and took no part in the conversation. Rodney glanced at her uneasily.

"I wish you would speak to me, Ave," he said at last. "If you only knew how confoundedly miserable I feel. Yes, I know I made a beast of myself last night—you need not tell me that. Roberts has been rowing me. It was those fellows—they would keep taunting me with being a temperance man."

Averil looked at him in speechless indignation; but the flash of the gray eyes was not pleasant to meet—they expressed their utter contempt, such measureless disdain.

"Oh, of course I know you will be down on me; I have done for myself now."

"Yes, and for me too. You have robbed me of a brother—do you think I can own you for one now?"

"Do you mean that you are going to kick me out?"—in a tone of dismay. Certainly, Rodney had never expected this.

"I will answer that question later," she said, sternly. "If you think such scenes are to be permitted in my house, you are strangely mistaken. These walls shall shelter no drunkard."

"You have no right to call me such names," retorted Rodney, angrily. "I am no worse than other fellows. It was Saunders and Townley. They laid a wager—"

"Stop—I will not hear you. Have you no manliness? Are you a child, to be led by other men? What do I want to know about Saunders and Townley, or any other of these worthless companions, who are ruining you? Will they answer for your sin, Rodney—for your miserable degradation of last night?"

"You won't let a fellow speak," he said, quite cowed by this burst of indignation. "I know I made a wretched ass of myself. I am ashamed of myself, I am indeed, Ave; and if you will only look over it this once, I will promise you that it shall not occur again."

"How am I to have faith in such a promise?" she returned, sadly; but her anger was lessening in spite of herself. He looked so wretched, so utterly woe-begone, and he was only a boy; she must give him another chance.

Rodney read the softening in her voice. "Only try me," he said, eagerly; "I am not all bad—I am not, indeed! I will turn over a new leaf. I will drop Staunton and all those other fellows, and look out for a berth in earnest. Don't say you'll give me up. You are my best friend, Ave"—and there were tears in the poor lad's eyes.

Averil's loving heart was not proof against this. He had been a mere boy when her father had married, and from the first she had taken to him. Rodney had never made any distinction between her and his own sisters. He had always been fond of her; he tried to take her hand now, and she did not draw it away.

"You will try me, Ave?"

"If you will give up the society of those men," she returned, in her old gentle manner. "Do, my dear boy—do, for my sake—break with them entirely, and with the club."

"I will—I will, indeed—I promise you! I must go there to-day, because I have business with

Townley."

"Oh, not to-day—never again, Rodney!"

"But I must, I tell you. Ave, I have business that can not be put off. After to-day I will promise you gladly. I am getting sick of the whole thing myself."

"And you must go?" And Averil felt a sinking of her heart as she put the question.

"I give you my word, I must; but I won't be long. There shall be no staying out to-night. I suppose"—looking at her wistfully—"that you would not let me kiss you, Ave?"

Averil drew back. She had forgiven him, but she was not quite ready for that. She had often permitted his brotherly caress, but somehow the scene of last night was still before her.

"I will shake hands instead, Rodney." But directly he had left the room she repented of her hardness. "I wish I had let him kiss me," she said to herself more than once that day.

To distract herself, Averil ordered the carriage after luncheon, and took Annette and Lottie for a long drive. They had tea at a little village inn, and put up the horses for a couple of hours. Then they drove back leisurely in the cool of the evening. The girls had filled the carriage with festoons of honeysuckle and all kinds of wild-flowers.

It was nearly nine when they returned. The little expedition had revived Averil, but her careworn look came back when Roberts told her that Mr. Rodney had not dined at home.

"Miss Seymour was asking about him just now, ma'am. She said her mother was quite anxious, for he had promised to come early."

Averil turned away without answering. She was sick at heart. Surely he had not forgotten his promise already? She was too weary to sit up: she was obliged to leave him to Roberts, who would have undergone any amount of fatigue to shield his young mistress. She let Unwin help her undress, and lay down in bed with the most miserable sense—that her trust was gone. Unwin saw the tears stealing through her closed eyelids. The faithful creature was relieved when worn-out Nature had its revenge, and Averil fell into a heavy sleep that lasted until late in the morning. She woke to find Unwin standing by the bed with a breakfast-tray, and an anxious expression on her pleasant face.

"You have slept finely, ma'am," she said, as she opened the window a little wider. "It seemed a pity to disturb you, but Miss Seymour seemed to think it was late enough."

"Why, it is ten o'clock!" replied Averil in dismay. "My good Unwin, you ought not to have let me sleep so long." And then, dropping her voice a little—"When did Mr. Rodney come home?"

"He has not been home, ma'am," returned Unwin, in a distressed voice. "That is why Miss Seymour begged me to wake you. She and Mrs. Willmot seem very much worried; they say Mr. Rodney has never done such a thing in his life as to stop out all night. Mrs. Willmot is fretting herself about it. She will have it that something must have happened to him."

Averil lay quite still for a moment; then she sprung up.

"I must dress quickly," she said. "Put the tray on the table; I will drink the coffee presently. Unwin, you were wrong not to wake me. I must write to Mr. Harland at once; he will know what to do. Tell Mrs. Willmot that I will be with her soon."

Averil hardly knew how she dressed that morning. Just before she left the room she opened her Bible for a moment, and her eyes rested on the words: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he will sustain thee," and the promise seemed to comfort her.

On her way down-stairs she encountered Annette and Lottie. They both looked very grave, and Annette slipped her hand through Averil's arm.

"I am so sorry, my cousin. It is not good of Mr. Rodney to frighten us all like this."

"He ought to be ashamed of himself!" added Lottie, indignantly. "Aunt is making herself quite ill."

"You must not keep me," returned Averil, as she disengaged herself gently from Annette's detaining touch.

She found her step-mother in a piteous condition. The poor lady had got it into her head that something terrible had happened to her boy.

"He has been run over, or there has been a railway accident," she said, hysterically. "Averil, why don't you send Roberts to inquire at all the hospitals? He has never done such a thing in his life as to stop out all night. He knows how frightened I should be—"

"Mamma," interrupted Maud, in a hard, resolute voice, "there is not need to conjure up such horrors. Why should there be an accident? Rodney is not a child; he is able to take care of himself. How do we know what may be detaining him?" But her words failed to convince her mother.

It was some time before Averil could find an opportunity to speak, and then she had little comfort to give.

"I think he is in some trouble, and that he is ashamed to come home," she said, in a low tone. "Some money trouble, I mean. I am going to write to Mr. Harland; he will know best what to do, and Roberts shall take my letter."

And then she withdrew to her room, leaving Maud to combat the weary, endless conjectures, the

tearful questions that were so difficult to answer, mingled with incessant upbraiding; for Mrs. Willmot was selfish in her grief.

"I wish we had let him go," she moaned. "It is your own fault, Maud, for he had nearly persuaded me. If anything happens to your brother, how are we to forgive ourselves?"—and so on through the slow-dragging hours. No wonder Maud grew paler as the day wore on; her own heart felt heavy as lead, and she could find few words of comfort for her distressed mother.

CHAPTER XX.

"HAVE YOU FOUND HIM, FRANK?"

AVERIL was somewhat surprised when, two hours later, Frank Harland made his appearance. His father had a touch of the gout, he explained. He had come in his stead to offer his services. He listened attentively as Averil put him in possession of the few facts.

"I will go down to the club at once," he said starting up with a business-like air that seemed to promise efficient masculine aid. "Don't trouble more than you can help, Averil. I shall be sure to find out everything from some of the men. I expect the foolish fellow has got into difficulties, and is keeping himself dark."

Mrs. Willmot cheered up a little when Averil imparted the young lawyer's view of the case; her imagination ceased to dwell so exclusively on hospital wards and fractured limbs. She had horrified Maud and Lottie by mysterious hints of belated folks smuggled into dark entries. "How do I know he is not made away with by ruffians?" she had sobbed; and Maud, who had reached the limits of her endurance, and who was suffering secretly the deadly sickness of remorse, silenced her with impatient harshness.

"Mother you will drive me crazy," she said at last. "Why will you say such things? It is cruel to us!" And Mrs. Willmot, who was easily quelled by her eldest daughter, relapsed into weak tears.

It was Annette who came to Maud's relief at last. "Let her talk to me," she said, quietly. "The air will do you good; this room is so close. She can say what she likes to me, and it will not hurt—not as it hurts you. Oh, I know all about it! She must talk; it is her only relief;" and, to Maud's surprise, she placed herself beside the poor lady. "You will talk to me, will you not?" she said, taking her hand in her pretty, earnest way. "I will listen to you—oh, yes, I will listen! I think there is a difference in people—some are so silent in their grief. What is it you fear? Surely the good God will take care of your son! You have prayed to Him? No!"—as Mrs. Willmot shook her head—"then no wonder you are miserable! When one can not pray there is no help."

A swift pang of regret crossed Maud's mind as she heard these simple words. They had treated Annette badly; they had ignored her existence as far as possible, and this was the kindly return she was making them.

Maud felt as though she hated herself as she paced restlessly up and down the garden walks, straining her ears for the sound of Frank's wheels. "What have I ever done in my life?" she thought, bitterly. "Have I considered any one but myself? I deserve my punishment; I deserve all this suspense and misery!" But so wretched was her mood, that though her repentance was real, and there was nothing she would not have done to ease her mother's mind, she could find no words for Averil when she joined her.

"Dear Maud, I think this is worse for you than for any one," whispered Averil, affectionately, looking into the brilliant, strained eyes, that seemed as though they could not shed a tear. "I know how trying it has been; but Annette is managing your mother so nicely."

"Don't Averil; I can't talk," returned Maud, hoarsely, and she turned away. No, she could not talk. Averil meant kindly, but it was not for her to understand. "If anything happens to Rodney it will be my fault—mine," she murmured, as she resumed her restless walk.

It seemed hours before Frank returned. Averil met him in the hall, and took him into her own room.

"Well," she asked, breathlessly, as she leaned against a table, "have you found him, Frank?"

He shook his head. "He was not there. No one knows exactly where he is. Will you sit down?" bringing her a chair, and compelling her with gentle force to rest. "There is no need to stand for I have much to tell you."

"Ah! then you have found out all about it?" And Frank nodded.

"He is in money difficulties—I was sure of that from the first. I have seen Forbes, and he has told me all. That fellow Townley—he seems to be a precious cad—got him to put his name to a bill some months ago. It has been renewed. Well, I will spare you all that part. I need only tell you that Townley behaved like a mean hound about it. He knew all the time that he was sold up, and that they would come on Rodney."

"Was it for a large amount?"

"It was for three hundred and fifty pounds—a pretty sum for a young fellow to pay who is living on his mother! He made the poor boy believe that it was just a matter of form—that he would not

be implicated in the least."

"Frank, I will pay it. It is sad to throw my father's money away, but we must clear Rodney. He has been duped by this man."

"Stop! There is more to tell. It is a very bad business altogether. They left the club together last evening—they had been dining with Forbes—and the vexation and terror, and the wine he had taken, had got into the poor fellow's head. He was in an awful rage when he left the club—they all say that—but Townley was only sneering and laughing at him. Forbes says he heard Rodney mutter that he would have his revenge, and, not quite liking the look of things, he lighted his cigar and followed them."

"Wait a moment, Frank;" and Averil caught at his arm a moment. She was white to her lips. Then, after a minute—"Now go on. I will try to bear it!" And Frank obeyed her.

"Forbes did not like to follow them too closely, or to act as a spy, but he could see they were quarreling. They had turned into a quieter street, as though to carry on their discussion without hinderance, and after a time they stood still under a lamp-post. Forbes was hesitating whether he should pass them or not, when he heard Rodney say, 'You have done for me, but I will be even with you;' and then he raised his hand and gave him a terrible blow, and the next moment he saw Townley fall."

Averil moved her lips, but no words came.

"Forbes rushed up to them and thrust Rodney away. 'You have killed him!' he said; and for the minute he thought he was speaking the truth. Townley had fallen and struck the back of his head against the curb; he was insensible, but not dead. As he knelt down and tried to support him in his arms a policeman hurried up to him. 'I saw it done, sir,' he said, excitedly, 'and I tried to nab the gentleman; but he was too quick for me. One of my mates is giving him chase. He is not dead, is he sir?' 'No; I can feel his heart beat,' returned Forbes. 'You must get me a cab, and I will take him round to his rooms—they are not far from here.' And then he went on to tell me how they took him home and sent for the doctor, and how the physician feared concussion of the brain. Forbes thinks he will not die. Don't look so white, Averil."

"Ah! I did not see you. Miss Seymour," as Maud's rigid face appeared in the window. Evidently she had heard all.

"Rodney—where is he?" she asked. But her voice was almost inaudible; and Frank went on addressing Averil.

"No one knows what has become of him. I have inquired at Scotland Yard, but it appears he eluded the man who chased him. He is in hiding somewhere. Don't you see, Averil, he is suffering a double fear. Townley had told him the Jews would be down on him, and Forbes' statement that he had killed Townley made him feel himself a murderer. He dare not come home, for fear of being arrested; and our difficulty is—where are we to look for him?"

"Oh, Frank, this is dreadful! What are we to do?" But Maud said nothing. She leaned against Averil's chair, with her despairing eyes fixed on Frank's face.

"We can do little at present, I fear. Until Townley is out of danger we dare not hazard an advertisement. It would only put them on his track. I can set a special agent to work, and, if you wish it, we can settle with Isaacs about the bill."

"Yes, yes: I do wish it!"

"Then it shall be done at once. I am not without hopes, Averil, that he may find means to communicate with us. I am sure, if Townley recovers, that we shall hear from him soon."

"And if he dies?"

"Then he will get out of the country. But for that he will need money. But I have a strong conviction that he will not die. Now I will go and see after this business, and come back to you when I have settled it."

"But; you must not go without your dinner. I told Roberts that we would have a cold supper to-night. Go into the dining-room, Frank, and I will send some one to look after you. I must go to Mrs. Willmot now."

Frank was not unwilling to refresh his inner man. He went off obediently. He blessed Averil in his heart when, a few minutes later, Annette came into the room.

"My cousin wishes me to attend to you," she said, in her serious, sedate way. "Lottie is out, and Miss Seymour is engaged. What is there I can get you? There is cold lamb and salad, and a mayonnaise of salmon."

"I will help myself, and you shall sit and talk to me," returned Frank, who was quite equal to the occasion. There was something restful to him in the girl's tranquil unconsciousness. Frank's heart beat a little faster as she took the chair beside him, and talked to him in her soft voice.

"It is too horrible; there is no English word to express it. You must find him, Mr. Harland—you and monsieur—or my poor cousin will break her heart. You have hope, you say? That is well. In every case one must always have hope."

"I will not leave a stone unturned; you may be sure of that," replied the young man, fervently. He was ready to promise anything to this gentle, dark-eyed girl who seemed to repose such faith in him. Something of the old chivalrous feeling came into Frank's heart as he listened to her; a longing to be her true knight—hers and Averil's—and to hew his way through any obstacles.

"I shall not be here again to-night," he said, as he took a cup of coffee from her hand. "It is late now, and I must consult my father. But to-morrow—will you tell Averil that I will be here as early as possible? I shall see you then?" looking at her inquiringly.

"But, certainly! Why not?" she rejoined, with naïve surprise. "This rose—it is one of the last—will you give it to monsieur?"

"Monsieur—it is always monsieur," he returned, rather dolefully. "I wish you thought of me half as much."

"But I think of you always," she replied, simply, "when I remember all my good friends."

Frank was obliged to content himself with this temperate compliment. It was this simplicity, this child-like, truthful nature, that had drawn Frank to her from the first. "I have never seen any girl like her," he said to his confidante, Louie, that night. "But, with all her sweetness, I doubt if she cares for me in the least."

"You will have to find that out for yourself, by and by," returned Louie, in her sensible, matter-of-fact way. In her heart she thought no one could be good enough for her brother. Louie's ideal sister-in-law would have been an impossible combination of beauty, intellect, and amiability—a walking miracle of virtues. She honestly believed that there was no man living to equal her father and Frank. Annette was very nice, but she almost wished that Frank had not been so hasty in his choice.

Mr. Harland quite forgot his pint as he listened to his son. He rubbed up his grey hair with mingled annoyance and perplexity.

"I always told Averil the lad was as weak as water," he said, irritably. "I hope that crazy mother of his is content with her work now. They have brought things to a pretty pass between them. Why, it seems to me that he has only just missed killing the man."

"I am afraid that Rodney thinks he has done for him. I wish we could find him, father—the poor fellow must be suffering a martyrdom."

"And serve him right, too," returned Mr. Harland, with unusual severity; and then he and his son plunged into a long business discussion.

It was a miserable evening at Redfern House. Averil could not leave her step-mother, who was in a pitiable condition of mind and body. Maud at last suggested that Dr. Radnor, who knew her mother's constitution, should send her a composing draught; and as this took immediate effect, they were at last set free. Lottie and Annette found it impossible to settle to their ordinary occupations, and after supper they sat out in the moonlight, talking in low, subdued tones of the sad events of the day. Lottie, who was very tender-hearted, and easily moved by other people's feelings, cried at intervals; she was fond of her cousin, in spite of his love of teasing, and the thought of him, lonely and unhappy, oppressed her sadly.

"I was afraid we were too happy," she murmured. "I don't think I have ever been so happy in my life. It has been such a beautiful summer—it brought you, my dear Fairy Order, and, oh! lots of nice things."

"It will not be always dark," replied Annette, quietly. "Look at that sky, my Lottie; how the little stars are shining through the cloud. Presently it will pass away. Oh, there is my cousin coming in search of us."

Yes, Averil had come to fetch them. It was late, very late, she said, and they would be safer in bed. Unwin had offered to watch that night. Averil could not rid herself of the thought that perhaps in the darkness of the night their poor boy might steal into his home. "He will see the light, and then he will know we are expecting him," she said to herself, as she followed the girls up-stairs.

CHAPTER XXI.

JIM O'REILLY.

AVERIL had just reached her own room when she remembered that she had not bidden Maud good-night. It was very late, and just for a moment she hesitated; then she crossed the passage and tapped softly at her door. There was no response. She knocked again, and then gently turned the handle. For the instant she thought the room was empty, until a sound of a low smothered sob from the bed arrested her. The moon had retired behind a cloud, and in the dim uncertain light Averil could just discern a dark form stretched across the bed. A great pang of pity crossed her as she groped her way to it—it was Maud; she had thrown herself down, fully dressed, upon the quilt, with her face buried in the pillow, and was trying to choke down the hysterical sobs that were shaking her from head to foot. The strain of the last few hours had been too great, and she had broken down the moment she found herself alone. The overmastering passion made her deaf to everything; and, as Averil stood beside her, the words, "Oh, Oliver, Oliver! cruel, cruel!" reached her ears distinctly.

There were pitying tears in Averil's eyes, and then with a sudden impulse she stooped over her and drew Maud's head to her bosom, and soothed her as one would soothe a broken-hearted

child.

"Do not try to check it; you must give way at last. All this time you have borne it so bravely and alone. Why should you fear me, your sister Averil? Oh, my poor dear, I know how you have suffered. And then this last cruel blow!" Then, as bitter sobs only answered her, she went on, tenderly, "You have been so good to-day; you have not thought of yourself, but only of your poor mother. Do you think I do not know how terribly bad it has been for you?"

"Don't praise me; don't say anything kind," returned Maud, hoarsely, as her strong will forced down another quivering sob. "Poor mamma! how gladly would I change places with her! She is unhappy, but she has not this weight," putting her hands on her breast. "Averil, if anything has happened to Rodney, I shall have been my brother's murderer. Mamma would have let him go, only—" she stopped, and Averil's sisterly arms only pressed her closer.

"You must not say such things," she returned, gently. "You have been selfish and thoughtless; you did not think of his good, but only of your own; but if you had realized all this mischief, you would have been the first to bid him go."

"You say that to comfort me," she returned, in a broken voice. "But, Averil, you do not know. I shut my eyes willfully; I sacrificed Rodney to my own interests; I thought of nothing but Oliver; and now I am punished, for he has left me. He taught me to love him; he made me believe that he cared only for me; and now he is going to marry another woman!" and the poor girl shuddered as she said this.

"Dear Maud, he was not worthy of you."

"Not worthy of me?" with the old scorn in her voice. Then she broke down again, and buried her face on Averil's shoulder. "What does it matter if he were not worthy, when I loved him? I loved him! Oh, you are good to me, but you do not know—how can you know?—all I have suffered."

"I know more than you think, dear," returned Averil, in a low, thrilling voice. "I may not have suffered in the same way—for to me there is no pain like the pain of finding one we love unworthy of our affection; but if it will comfort you, Maud—if it will make you more sure of my sympathy with you in this bitter trial—I do not mind owning that I also have known trouble!"

"You have cared for some one!" starting up in her surprise. "Oh, Averil, I am so sorry."

"Well, so am I," with quaint simplicity. "It was very foolish, was it not?—a little crooked body like me. But it was my father's fault. Dear old father! how his heart was set on it! No, Maud, I am not going to tell you the story; it is not old enough. In one sense I was happier than you, for he was good—oh, so good!—though he could never have cared for me. Well, it is past and over, and I am wiser and happier now—no one suffered but myself."

"Oh, Averil, how can you speak so calmly?"

"My dear, there was a time when I could not have spoken so; when I thought life looked just like one long, dull blank, when I did not know how I was to go on living in such a dreary world. I remember I was in this heavy mood one day when the words came into my mind; 'In the world ye shall have tribulation;' and then I said to myself, 'What if this be my special cross—the one that my Lord meant me to bear? Shall I refuse it, because it is so painful, when He carried His for me?' I had been bearing it alone, much as you have done; but it came upon me then that I must kneel down and tell Him all—the disappointment, and the human shame, and the misery, and all that was making me feel so faint and sick with pain. And when I rose the burden was not so heavy, and it has been growing lighter and lighter ever since. Dear Maud, will you try my remedy?"

"I can not, Averil. You will be shocked, but I have never prayed in my life. Of course I have said my prayers—just a collect or two morning and evening, and at church; but to speak like that, to tell out one's troubles—"

"There is no comfort like it," returned Averil, in her sweet, clear voice. "When we talk to others there is so much to explain; we fear to be misunderstood; we measure our words anxiously; but there is no need with our Heavenly Friend, 'Lord, Thou knowest'—one can begin like that, and pour it all out. We are not alone any more; we fear no longer that our burden will crush us: human sympathy is sweet, but we dare not lean on it. We fear to exhaust it; there is only one sympathy that is inexhaustible."

"If I were only like you!" sighed Maud; and then, in broken words, it all came out—the tardy confession of an ill-spent youth. The barrier once removed, there were no limits to that long-deferred repentance. At last Maud saw herself by a clearer light, and owned honestly the two-fold faults that had been the bane and hinderance of her young life—pride and selfishness. Yes, she was humbled now; the scorching finger of affliction had been laid upon her, but she had refused to recognize the chastening hand. It needed another stroke, another trial, before her haughty spirit was bowed in the dust.

Maud never knew how dearly she loved her brother, until terror for his fate awoke her slumbering conscience. "If I could only suffer in his stead!" she moaned, more than once.

Averil's disciplined nature knew better than to break the bruised reed. With gentle tact and patience she listened to all Maud's bitter confession of her shortcomings. In her sturdy truth she did not venture to contradict her. Only when she had finished she said, tenderly:

"Yes, you have been very selfish; but you will be better now. If you only knew how I love you for telling me all this, Maud! I have still so many faults. Life is not easy. We must help each other; we

must be real sisters, not half-hearted ones. And one thing more—we will not lose courage about our dear boy;" and then, after a few more words, and a tearful embrace from Maud, they separated.

If Averil's limbs ached and her head felt weary, there was thankfulness in her heart. At last the barrier was removed between her and Maud; the patient endurance of years was reaping its fruits of reward. Averil's generosity had already forgiven everything. Hers was the charity which "hopeth all things."

Maud was very quiet and subdued the next day. She looked ill, but nothing would induce her to spare herself.

"My mother likes to have me with her," she said, in answer to an affectionate remonstrance from Averil. "Why should Annette be troubled?" And Averil was obliged to let her have her way.

Frank kept his promise, and came early, but he could give little comfort. There was no news of Rodney, and Mr. Townley still lay in the same precarious state. He came again in the evening, and stayed to dinner. It seemed a relief to Averil to have him with them, and his cheery influence had a brightening effect on the dejected household.

Annette told him frankly that she was glad to see him, only she blushed a little at his evident delight in learning that fact. "Was I wrong to say that?" she thought; but she would not confess this doubt to Lottie.

"It is an ill wind that blows no one any good." Frank might have felt this, if he had been in the mood for proverbs; but he was too full of sympathy for his friends, too anxious on Rodney's account, to consider any personal benefit. His father's touch of gout was certainly in his favor; still, he condoled with him dutifully on his return from Redfern House. He sent a line by a messenger the next morning to tell Averil that Mr. Townley was certainly better. "Doctor Robertson has hopes of him now," he wrote. "My father is still incapacitated for business, though he is in less pain, so I am up to my ears in work; but I will contrive to look in on you at dinner-time. I shall possibly spend the night in town, as I have an early appointment for to-morrow."

Averil carried these good tidings to Maud, who was obliged to own herself ill. She had been seized with faintness while dressing, and Lottie had summoned Averil in alarm. Averil took things into her own hands very quietly; she made Maud lie down again, and put her under Unwin's care. When Dr. Radnor came to see Mrs. Willmot she would just give him a hint to prescribe for Maud, too. Secret trouble and want of sleep were telling even on her fine constitution. She wanted care, rest, and, above all, freedom from anxiety. Averil did her best for her. She prevented Mrs. Willmot invading her daughter's room, by representing to her that Maud was trying to sleep. She and Annette mounted guard over the poor, distracted woman, who could not be induced to employ herself or to do anything but wander about aimlessly, bemoaning herself to every one who had time to listen to her.

Maud could at least be in the cool, shaded room that Unwin kept so quiet, and brood over her wretchedness in peace. Now and then Averil came to her side with a gentle word, or Lottie, in a subdued voice, asked how she felt. For the first time in her life, Maud felt it was a luxury to be ill. No one expected her to make efforts. When every one looked so grave and sad, there was no need for her to try and hide her misery.

When Frank came that night he was shocked at Averil's wan looks. The suspense of these three days was telling on her. She shook her head at his first kind speech.

"It can not be helped," she said, quietly. "I was never one of the strong ones, Frank;" and she turned the subject. "Maud is ill, too, and Mrs. Willmot is in the same miserable state, unable to settle to anything. Dear Annette is so good to her. We have not told Georgina: we can not bear to do so. It would only make one more to suffer; and she is so far away. Have you heard of Mr. Townley again to-night."

"Yes, and he is going on well. If we could only let Rodney know that—" And then Roberts announced dinner, and Frank had no time to say more.

A little later, as he was speaking to Averil in the bay-window, Roberts came in rather hastily.

"There is a man outside asking to speak to you, ma'am," he said, addressing his mistress. "He seems a rough sort of body, like a crossing-sweeper; and he refused to send his message by me. He wasn't overcivil when I wanted him to state his business. 'I'll speak to Miss Willmot, the mistress of the house, and no one else;' and that's all I could get out of him, ma'am."

"Never mind, Roberts: I'll go to him;" for the old butler looked somewhat aggrieved.

"We will go together," returned Frank. "I dare say it is some begging petition, as my father says. You play the part of Lady Bountiful far too often, and of course you are taken in."

Averil smiled, but she was in no mood to refute the accusation.

"You may come if you like," she said, with gentle nonchalance. "But I am rather apt to form my own conclusions. Where have you put him, Roberts?"

"Well, ma'am, I just shut the door on him, for he was not over and above respectable," returned the old servant. But both he and Frank were surprised to find that she recognized the man as one of her endless protégés.

"Why, it is Jimmy!" she said, as he pulled off his frowzy cap, and displayed his grizzled gray locks. "I hope your wife is not worse, Jimmy?"

"Bless your kind heart, miss, she is doing finely. It is only an errand the young gentleman asked me to do for him. 'You will put this into her own hands, Jim O'Reilly,' he says to me; and, the saints be praised!—I have done it," finished Jim, as he burrowed in the pocket of his ragged jacket and produced a dirty scrap of paper that smelled strongly of tobacco.

Averil gave a little cry, for she had recognized the handwriting, scrawled and blotted as it was.

"I must see you, Averil. I can endure this suspense no longer. Do not be afraid. Trust yourself to Jimmy. He is as honest as the day, though a bit soft. He will bring you to me."

No more—not even a signature. But there was no mistaking Rodney's clear, familiar writing. She held it out to Frank. A gleam of pleasure crossed his face as he read it.

"Shall we go at once, Averil?" for she was watching him anxiously.

"Yes, yes. I will put on my bonnet. I must just tell Maud where we are going. What a comfort to have you, Frank!"

But Jim O'Reilly, who had been standing stolidly aside, struck in here.

"I can't be taking the pair of you, surely. It is Miss Willmot the gentleman wants. Better come along of me alone, miss, and then folks won't ask so many questions."

"But I could not think of letting Miss Willmot go alone," returned Frank, decidedly. "Look here, my good fellow: I am an old friend of the family, and Mr. Seymour will be glad to see me."

But evidently Jimmy held doggedly to his own opinion, until Averil interposed.

"He is right, Jimmy. You need not be afraid of trusting this gentleman. He knows about everything. Do not let us waste any more time in talking. Roberts, we shall want a cab."

"I will fetch one round at half past nine, sharp," interrupted Jimmy. "Look here, missus," addressing Averil, "I am to bring you along of the young gentleman, ain't I? Well, begging your pardon, I must be doing it my own way. It is not dark enough for the job yet. Just keep your mind easy for another hour, and I'll be round with a four-wheeler, as sure as my name is Jim O'Reilly. We have a goodish bit to go, and I'll look out a horse that is fresh enough to take you there and back. Half past nine—not before, and not after;" and Jimmy shambled toward the door.

"Oh, Frank, don't let him go!" exclaimed Averil, in a distressed voice; and Frank nodded, and followed him out. He came back after a few minutes.

"It is all right," he observed. "The man knows what he is about. He is going to smuggle us into some slum or other. How thankful I am to be here!"

And Averil indorsed this with all her heart as she ran up-stairs to share the good tidings with Maud.

CHAPTER XXII.

MOPS IS ADDED TO THE PENSIONERS.

AVERIL thought that hour the longest she had ever spent in her life; she was ready nearly half an hour before the time, and was sitting watching the minute hand of the clock, or starting up at every sound. But she need not have disquieted herself—Jimmy was faithful to his appointment. At the exact stroke of the half hour a cab was at the door, with Jimmy on the box. Frank handed Averil in, and then tried to question Jimmy; but the old sweeper was invulnerable.

"I'll take you there right enough. Don't trouble your head, sir. Now, then, cabby;" and Frank had to jump in hastily, for fear he should be left behind.

If the waiting seemed endless, the drive seemed still more interminable. A close, sultry day had ended in a wet night; only a few passers-by were hurrying through the rain. In the better thoroughfares the shops were closed: only the flaming gas-lamps, or some illuminated gin-palace, enabled Frank to see the route they were taking. Happily, they had a good horse, just fresh from his stable, and a steady driver.

By and by, when Averil was tired of straining her eyes in the hope of recognizing each locality, Frank discovered that they were turning into Oxford Street, and a few minutes afterward the unsavory precincts of the Seven Dials were revealed to them. Late as it was, the whole neighborhood seemed swarming out-of-doors—women with ragged shawls over their heads, and trodden-down, slip-shod heels, were passing through the swing-doors of a dingy-looking tavern; loafing men, barefooted children, babies in arms, and toddling infants blocked up the narrow pavements. Averil looked out on them pitifully, until the cab suddenly pulled up, and Jimmy appeared at the door.

"We won't go no further, master," he said. "You just take the lady down that there street," jerking his thumb backward over his shoulder. "Half-way down on the left-hand side you will see a bird-fancier's—Daniel Sullivan is the name. Just walk in and say Jim O'Reilly wants to know the price of that there fancy pigeon, and you'll find you've hit the mark. Cabby and I will wait here; you will find us when you want us."

"Come, Averil," interposed Frank, eagerly; but Averil lingered a moment to slip some money into the hand of a white-faced, weary-looking woman, with a baby in her arms, and a crying child, hardly able to walk, clinging to her shawl.

"Take them in out of the rain. God help you, you poor things!" she whispered, as the woman looked at her in a dazed way, and then at the coins in her hand. That dumb, wistful look haunted Averil as Frank hurried her along. Some quarrel was going on—a woman's shrill tones, then rough oaths and curses in a man's voice, mingled with the rude laughter of the lookers-on.

"Sure you are in the right of it, Biddy!" exclaimed one slatternly virago. "Ben ought to be ashamed of himself for calling himself a man—the serpent he is, to trample on a poor cratur, and to get her by the hair of her head, the owld bully!"

"Daniel Sullivan—this is the place," whispered Frank, as he drew Averil through the narrow doorway into a small, dimly lighted room, crowded with cages and hutches, wherein were rabbits, pigeons, and every species of bird. A dwarfish old man, with a gray beard and a fur cap, was haggling with a rough-looking costermonger over the price of a yellow puppy. The mother, a mongrel, with a black patch over her eye, was gazing at them in an agonized manner, and every moment giving the puppy a furtive lick.

"Get out, Mops," growled her master, angrily. "You aren't going to keep this 'ere puppy, so you may as well make up your mind to it;" and Mops feebly whined and shivered.

The poor creature's misery appealed to Averil's soft heart. She heard the costermonger say, as he took his pipe out of his mouth. "I will give you a tanner for the pup;" when, to Frank's surprise she interfered:

"Will you let me have that dog and the puppy? I have taken rather a liking to them. I would give you five shillings."

"I ain't so sure about parting with Mops," returned the old man, gruffly. "She ain't much to look at, but she is a knowing one."

Evidently Mops was knowing, for she wagged her tail, and licked her puppy again, with an imploring glance at Averil that fairly melted her heart. Daniel was induced to hesitate at the offer of seven shillings and sixpence, and in another moment Mops and the yellow puppy were Averil's property, to be added to the list of Mother Midge's pensioners.

Frank waited until the costermonger had gone out grumbling, and then he asked for Jim O'Reilly's fancy pigeon. The old bird fancier looked up quickly from under his overhanging eyebrows.

"Oh, that's the ticket, is it? Come along, sir;" and he pushed open a door, and ushered them into a close little room, lighted somewhat dimly by a tallow candle, and reeking of tobacco smoke.

As they entered, Rodney, who was sitting by the table as though he had fallen asleep, with his head on his arms, started up; and at the sight of his white, haggard face and miserable eyes, Averil's arms were round his neck in a moment.

"Oh, Rodney, my darling, at last we have found you! Why have you kept us in such suspense three whole days?—and we have been so wretched." And all the time she spoke she was fondling his hands, and pushing the hair off his forehead, and the poor lad was clinging to her as though she were his only refuge.

"Oh, Ave!" was all he could get out, for the lump to his throat almost choked him. He did not seem to notice Frank; he was half awake, and dazed, and paralyzed with misery. Averil was shocked to see the change in her boy; his eyes were sunken, he looked as though he had not slept or eaten, and his hand shook like an old man's. "Don't you hate me?" he murmured, hoarsely, in her ear. "Ave, I'm a murderer—a murderer!"

"My darling, no. You are no such thing," she returned, soothing him, for his manner terrified her. "Do you know, Frank and I have good news for you? Mr. Townley is not dead. Dear Rodney, God has been very merciful. He would not permit you to spoil your life; He has given you another chance. The poor man was stunned by your violence, but not killed; he is better, recovering—indeed, he will not die; will he, Frank?" For it seemed to her as though Rodney could not believe her—as though he dared not take in the full meaning of her words. He had pushed her away, and now he stood with his trembling hands on her shoulders, and his heavy, blood-shot eyes trying to read her face.

"You are deceiving me—he is dead," he muttered. For the moment Averil thought the shock had turned the poor lad's brain; but Frank knew better; his common sense came to her aid.

"Nonsense! Don't play the fool, Seymour," he said, with assumed impatience. "You know as well as I do that Averil is not the girl to tell you an untruth. Of course, Townley is not dead. I am going to see him to-morrow, and offer damages. We have taken up the bill for you, and it is all settled. You have got off far better than you deserve."

Frank was not mincing the matter; but his brusque, matter-of-fact speech seemed to have the effect of recalling Rodney's scattered faculties. He drew a long breath, changed color, and finally burst into tears.

Frank gave Averil a reassuring nod. "It will be all right now. I'll come back presently, after I have had a look at Mops;" for Frank's tact was seldom at fault, and his kindly heart, so like his father's, told him that Averil would like to be alone with her boy. "After all, there is no cordial like a woman's sympathy" he thought, as he stood looking into a wooden box, where Mops, relieved in

her maternal mind, was sleeping with her puppy.

Frank had time to indulge in a great many reflections before he thought it prudent to go back. Rodney looked more like himself now; he rose from his chair, and put out his hand to Frank somewhat timidly.

"I could not offer it before," he said, in a low voice. "I thought I should never venture to shake hands with an honest man again. I felt like Cain, branded for the whole term of my miserable life. Will you take it, Harland?"

"To be sure I will;" and Frank shook it cordially. "Let bygones be bygones. We are not any of us ready to throw stones. Averil, don't you think Jimmy will be tired of waiting? and our cabby will be making his fortune out of us. Besides, they do shut up shop here, even in the Seven Dials. Come along, Seymour. I expect you have had about enough of this place."

"Do you mean I am to go home with you?" for, somehow, such a blessed idea had never occurred to Rodney. Home—he had never hoped to see it again, "But it is not safe, is it, Ave?"

"And why not?" returned Frank, in his cheerful, off hand manner. "Of course, Isaacs had a writ out against you, but Averil has settled that. As far as that goes, you are a free man. I hear Townley's solicitor intends to claim damages. I am going to see after that to-morrow. Your mother means to sell out of the Funds and clear you. I can't help thinking"—and here Frank eyed him critically—"that a warm bath and a shave—I strongly recommend a shave—and a good supper will make a different man of you. We will just settle with your landlord and Jim O'Reilly, and then we will make the best of our way home." And to this they both assented.

But Averil did not forget her new pensioners—oh, dear, no! Mops and her puppy were both put into the cab. The way home did not seem half so long, for Rodney was telling them all they wanted to know. He described to them his panic-stricken flight that night, and how he took refuge in a dark entry, where Jim O'Reilly found him.

"He was a regular pensioner of mine," explained Rodney, "and he recognized me at once. 'You come along with me,' he said, when I had implored his assistance. 'There is a pal of mine in the Seven Dials that will keep you dark for a bit. You will be safe along of Daniel Sullivan;' and then he brought me here. I believe I have been nearly out of my mind half the time. And at last I could bear it no longer, and then Jim said he would take my note. I thought I must see you and get some money; that you would help me to escape out of the country. I never had a doubt that Townley was dead. Forbes' words, 'You have killed him!' rang in my ears day and night. Oh, Ave, if I can forget what you have done for me to-night!"—and the pressure of his hand spoke volumes.

"Seymour, there is still that post in Canada. Just at the last moment Hunsden was unable to go. They cabled to us yesterday for another man."

This was joyful tidings to Averil—a mute thanksgiving for another mercy crossed her lips. But Rodney only said, in a dispirited voice, that Mr. Harland never would give him the chance again.

"How can I expect people to trust me after what has happened?"

"We'll talk of that later on," was Frank's answer; and then the cab stopped, and the door flew open, as though Roberts had been stationed there some time.

"I am glad to see you, sir," he said, as Rodney sprang up the steps; for Roberts was a privileged person, and knew all the family secrets.

Mrs. Willmot was in her dressing-room, and Rodney went up at once to see her and Maud. When he came down he found a comfortable meal ready for him. How sweet and home-like it looked to the poor prodigal! But for the sight of Mops, who was making herself quite at home in an arm-chair, blinking with one eye at the eatables, those three days might have been some hideous nightmare. Rodney rubbed his eyes, and then looked again, and met Averil's smile.

"I must see you eat and drink before I go to bed," she said, beckoning him to a seat beside her. "Frank says he is hungry, and no wonder, for it is nearly one o'clock. Frank, will you put down a plate for Mops—the poor thing looks half starved!" And by the way Mops devoured her meal, Averil was probably right.

How peacefully the household at Redfern House slept that night! What a happy reunion the next morning, when Rodney took his accustomed place at the breakfast table by his mother's side! It was such a pity, as Annette observed, that Maud should be missing. Poor Mrs. Willmot could scarcely take her eyes off her boy; every moment she broke into the conversation to indulge in some pitying exclamation about his looks. "Did not dear Averil think he looked ill? He had grown thin; he was altered somehow." Then it was, "Poor, darling Maud had not slept all night; her nerves were in a shocking state;" and so on; but no one attended to her. Frank was talking to Annette in rather a low voice, and Rodney was listening to Averil. Frank tore himself away with much reluctance. True, he was coming again that evening. He was to see Mr. Townley's solicitor, and to offer apologies and ample damages on Rodney's account; and there was the Canada scheme to be discussed, for he had already hinted to Averil that there was not a moment to lose.

When Frank had gone off, Averil sent Rodney to sit with his sister, who was still too weak to leave her bed; and then she went into her own room and lay down on the couch and looked out on the sunshiny garden. Much to the black poodle's disgust, Mops had followed her there; Mops's sense of maternal dignity was evidently strongly developed—she had certainly a ridiculous fondness for

the fat, rollicking, yellow thing. It amused Averil to see the way Mops looked at her every now and then, as much as to say, "Did you ever see a finer, handsomer puppy?"

It was utter peace to Averil to lie there and watch the thrushes on the lawn; the soft ripeness of the September breeze seemed laden with a thousand vintages; the birds' twitterings, the bees' humming, even the idle snapping of Ponto at the flies—all seemed to lull her into drowsiness.

She woke from a delicious doze to find Rodney beside her. He was about to move quietly away, but she stretched out her hand to stop him.

"I have woke you," he said, penitently. "Ave, I never saw you asleep before. You have no idea what a child you looked;" and there was a little touch of awe in the young man's voice. Something in Averil's aspect, in the frail form, the pure, soft outlines, the child-like innocence, seemed to appeal to his sense of reverence.

Rodney was not wrong, for was she not a happy child? just then resting in her Father's love, content to trust herself and her future to Him.

"You look too shadowy and unsubstantial altogether," he went on, half seriously, half humorously; "as though you only wanted a pair of wings to fly away. But we could not spare you yet—we could not indeed."

"Not till the time comes," she said, stroking his face as he knelt beside her. "Oh, Rodney, how nice it is to have you again! Do you think I should ever forget my boy, wherever I may be—in this room or the next?"—as some one has quaintly said."

"Oh, one can't tell about those sort of things," he returned, vaguely.

"No; you are right, and I have never troubled myself with such questions, as some people do. How can we tell if we shall be permitted to see our dear ones still militant here on earth? I am content to leave all such matters; our limited human intelligences are unfit to argue out these deep things. Of one truth only I am convinced—that God knows best."

"I always said you were a little saint, Ave."

"Nonsense!" she returned, playfully. "I don't believe you know the meaning of the term. Do you remember what Dryden said?—

"Glossed over only by a saintlike show."

"It is far too big a word to apply to a poor little sinner like me. Now, I want to talk to you about something else, Rodney—something peculiarly earthly—in short, about Canada; for Frank will be here this evening, and we must make up our minds on the subject."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"GOOD-BYE, AVE!"

FRANK had a whole budget of news that evening. He had seen Mr. Townley, who was recovering fast, and had made him handsome apologies on Rodney's part.

"They say there is good in every one," observed Frank, sententiously, looking round a little patronizingly on his listeners. "There is often a touch of good in what seems most evil. Evidently, Townley's conscience has been giving him a twinge or two, for he won't ruin us in the way of damages; in fact, we have come to terms without his solicitor. You are to pay the doctor's bill, and that is about all, Seymour. And now let us go into the Canada question. My father wishes to know if you will take the berth."

There was no hesitation on Rodney's part this time; his grateful acceptance was annotated very tearfully by his mother. Rodney's repentance was too real to haggle over terms, to desire delay; if they wanted him, he would go at once—the sooner the better. His outfit could be managed in a couple of days. And to all this Averil assented.

She left them still in full conclave, and went up to tell Maud the news. As she did so she was struck with the melancholy wistfulness in her beautiful eyes.

"Oh, how I envy him!" she sighed.

Averil looked at her in surprise: "You envy Rodney?"

"Yes; not because he has sinned so deeply, and has been pardoned so generously—for I might almost say the same of myself—but because he is going to a new place, to begin afresh, to make another commencement. It will be like a different world to him; no one will remember his past follies, or cast a slur on him."

Maud spoke with intense earnestness and passion; and as she paused, a sudden thought flashed into Averil's mind—one of those quick intuitions that made Frank now and then call her a woman of genius.

"Should you like to go, too, Maud?" she asked, very slowly.

"I!" with a quick start and flush. "What is the use of putting such a question?"

"I mean, should you care to go and make a home for Rodney?"

"I should love it of all things. But mamma—you know she could not do without me. Georgina is not thoughtful, and somehow she has always depended on me."

"Yes, I know that; but why should you not all go? It would be better for Rodney, and his mother can not bear to part with him. I would help you to form a comfortable home, though, perhaps, not an extravagant one. Rodney will keep himself. After all, it is not a bad idea. I have often heard you and Georgie long for a Canadian winter. What do you say, Maud?"

"Oh, Averil, do you really mean it?" And now Maud's eyes were full of tears, and she could hardly speak.

"Tell me exactly what you think of it, dear," went on Averil, in an encouraging voice. "I know your mother will agree to anything you propose. She has never been selfish with regard to her children, except in that one instance—her refusal to part with Rodney."

"And that was more my fault than hers," returned Maud, remorsefully. "Do not blame poor mamma—she has her faults. We have none of us treated you well, but she has always been good to us. I know she is so fond of Rodney that it will almost break her heart to be separated from him; and it does seem so lonely for him out there without any of us. Rodney is so unlike other young men of his age—he never seems to want to leave us."

"I think he would love to have you."

"I know he would; and a home would be so comfortable—he would come to us every evening. Averil"—dropping her voice—"if you only knew what it would be to me to get away, so that I should not be obliged to meet them everywhere. I am afraid," speaking with great dejection, "that you will think me very weak, but I feel as though I should never get over it if I stay here, doing just the same things, and going to just the same places, and having no heart for anything."

"My poor child"—caressing her—"do you think I do not understand? Do you imagine that I am sending you away from me for my own good?"

"Ah, that is the only sad part—that I should have to leave you, Averil, and just as I was beginning to love you so. It is all my selfishness to plan this, and leave you alone."

"But I shall not be alone," returned Averil, brightly. "I do not mean you to take Lottie, so you may as well make up your mind to that. Besides, Ned Chesterton wants her, and I intend him to have her, by and by, when Lottie is a little older and wiser. Then I shall have Annette, and Mother Midge, and a host of belongings. Never was a little woman richer in friends than I am."

"You deserve every one of them," replied Maud; and then a shade passed over her lovely face "You will be better without us, Averil. Mamma, Georgina, and I have only spoiled your home and made it wretched. You will be able to lead your own life, follow your own tastes as you have never done yet. Do you think I do not see it all plainly now? how it has been all duty and self-sacrifice on your part, and grasping selfishness on ours? I wonder you do not hate us by this time, instead of being our good angel!"

"You shall not talk so," returned Averil, kissing her. "You are my dear sister, and sisters always bear with one another's faults. Well, it is settled; and now I shall leave you to talk it over with your mother, while I give a hint to Rodney and Frank. Then there is Georgina; she must come home at once; and you must get well, Maud; for your mother will do nothing without you."

"I feel well already," replied Maud; and indeed she looked like a different creature; something of her old energy and spirit had returned at the notion of the change.

Averil knew her suggestion had been a wise one; it was a "splendid fluke," as Frank observed when he heard it.

If a bomb had exploded at Mrs. Willmot's feet she could not have been more utterly aghast than when the idea was jointly propounded by Maud and Rodney. "Preposterous! Impossible!" she repeated over and over again. "A more impracticable scheme had never been heard. Cross the sea! Never! She was a wretched sailor. She would rather die than cross the Atlantic. Live out of England, where her two good husbands were buried! How could any one ask such a thing of a widow? Averil just wanted to get rid of them; it was a deep-laid plot to set herself free."

Rodney was too indignant at this charge to utter another word. He took himself off in a huff, leaving his mother dissolved in tears. He had been so charmed with the idea; the Canadian home had so warmed his fancy; but, if his mother chose to feel aggrieved, he would have nothing more to say to it—and as Maud was too weary to carry on the discussion, the matter dropped.

But a night's sleep effected wonders, for, lo and behold! the next morning Mrs. Willmot was in a different mood—the only impossibility now would be to bid good-bye to Rodney. "Sooner than be separated from that dear boy, she would cross a dozen Atlantics! Maud had evidently taken a fancy to the scheme, and the thing should be done."

"Thank you, mother," returned Rodney, gratefully; and Mrs. Willmot heaved a deep sigh.

"It was a sacrifice," she said, a little pompously; "but she had always thought more of her children than herself; and the change would be good for the dear girls. Young people were very gay in Canada, she heard. They had nice sledging-parties, and there were a good many dances;" and here she coughed, and looked significant.

In spite of her troubles, Mrs. Willmot would always be true to her own nature; her pleasure-loving instincts would always crave indulgence. She was neither stronger nor better for all her

trials.

But as Averil looked at Maud she did not fear the mother's influence. Maud's character was strong, for good or evil. With all her faults, there was nothing small or mean about her. If she had erred, she had also repented; and though hers might be a weary, uphill fight, Averil felt there would be no weak tampering with temptation. Maud would be a little hard in her judgment of herself and others—a little prone to hold the reins too tightly. She would discipline herself sternly, and exact the same scrupulous honesty from others; but Averil knew she could be safely trusted to do her best for her mother's and Rodney's comfort. To her strong nature, their very dependence on her would bring out her best points.

Her present position in the household had never suited Maud. She had grudged Averil her power; and though this might have been checked in the future, her life at Redfern House did not afford her sufficient scope.

"She will be far more her own mistress out there," observed Mr. Harland, as he joined the family circle the night before Rodney sailed. It had been arranged that Rodney should start alone, and that his mother and sisters should follow him in a month's time. Their preparations were much more extensive than his, and they had to bid good-bye to their friends. Besides, Averil was not willing to part with them quite so soon. Strange to say, she felt fonder even of her step-mother now she knew they were to be separated. There had never been anything in common between them, and yet Averil discovered, or thought she had discovered, a dozen new virtues.

"Maud will be very much admired out there," went on Mr. Harland, in the same aside.

But Averil scarcely answered. She was not thinking of Maud that night, but only of Rodney. Her eyes seemed to follow him everywhere. Had she realized how she would miss him? How quiet the house would be without his boyish laugh, his merry whistle! From the very first he had taken the place of a young brother to her. Frank had been her great big brother, but Rodney was a sort of Benjamin. His very faults, his moral weakness, had kept her closer to him. It is impossible to be anxious about people and not to grow to love them.

He saw her looking at him at last, and came and sat beside her, with a very sober face.

"I do hate good-byes; don't you, Ave?" he said, in rather a melancholy tone.

"Why, no," she said, trying to speak cheerfully. "I think the word the most beautiful word in our language. 'Good-bye—God be with you.' That is what it means, Rodney."

"Oh, yes, of course; but I was not meaning the word itself. It is only that I do hate leaving you, Ave." But she would not let him say that, either. Though her own heart was aching, she would send him away brightly.

"It is a grand thing you are doing," she said, in her sweetest and most serious voice. "You are going out to do a man's work in the world; to carve out your own career; to make a home for your mother and sisters."

"It is you who are doing that," he returned. "You have been far too liberal; we could have managed with much less."

"I do not need it," was all her answer; and then she went on with a few words of sisterly advice—not many words. Averil did not believe in much speaking; but she knew that Rodney loved her well enough to hear her patiently.

Of the two he seemed more affected when the time of parting came. There were no tears in Averil's eyes as there were in his—only something of solemnity.

"God bless you, my darling!" was all she whispered, as he kissed her again and again; and his "Good-bye, Ave," was dreadfully husky; but, as she smiled and waved to him, no one knew how her heart ached. "Shall I ever see him again?" she said to herself as she turned away. But she left that, as she left everything else, to the wise and loving will of her Heavenly Father.

The month that followed Rodney's departure was rather an ordeal for Averil. Georgina had rushed home at the first news of the flitting, and her exuberant spirits and abundant energy seemed to turn the house upside down.

If the Seymour family had contemplated a move into the wilds of Africa, to a spot most remote from civilization, there could not have been greater excitement. Friends crowded round them; dress-makers and milliners held mysterious interviews at all hours; huge traveling-boxes filled up the passages; and Lottie and Annette had their work cut out for them. It was "Lottie, will you do this for me?" or "Lottie, you must really find time to finish this," from morning to night.

Lottie was quite equal to the occasion. Her affectionate mind was brimming over with good-will to every one. Lottie's magnanimity had long ago overlooked the past. She had forgotten the minor miseries, the petty tyrannies, the small denials, that had harassed her youth; she only remembered gratefully that her aunt and cousins had given her a home. She must do everything she could for them in return. Lottie even chided herself secretly for her hardness of heart; she could not be as sorry as she wished. The thought of being alone with Averil and her dear Fairy Order was too delicious altogether; and as she found Annette held a similar opinion, the two girls indulged privately in many a delightful day-dream.

Averil was thankful when the ordeal was over, and the last parting words had been said. Her real "Good-bye" to Maud had been said overnight. Maud had come to her room, and they had had a long, long talk. Maud had been very much overcome, and Averil had found it difficult to soothe her; but just at the last she said hurriedly—and Averil loved to remember her words:

"Don't think I shall ever forget your goodness, Averil. If I ever become a better woman, it will be all owing to you; because you trusted me, and I dare not disappoint you. All these years you have set me an example, though I did not choose to take it; but I shall remember it when I am away from you. I must not promise—indeed, I dare not trust myself; but, Averil, you shall see—you shall see how I will try to do better!" And Maud nobly kept her word.

It was the end of October when the Seymours left Redfern House, and Averil, who was weary, and had long needed rest and change of scene, took her two girls the very next day to Brighton, where they spent the greater part of November.

It was a glorious time for Annette and Lottie; and even Averil, in spite of her fatigue, enjoyed the long, sunshiny mornings, the pleasant drives, and the cozy evenings, when they worked and read aloud; and during the pauses of their conversation they could hear the water lapping on the stones in the starlight.

It was a little strange settling into Redfern House again. The rooms looked large and empty, and for a long time a pang crossed Averil each time she passed the door of Rodney's room. But she would not give way to these feelings of depression. She devoted herself more than ever to her girls' interest. She had found a music-master for Annette, and a drawing-master soon followed; lectures on English literature, concerts and oratorios, social evenings with a few congenial friends, soon filled up the busy day.

In the spring, Louie Harland came for a long visit, and remained for some weeks, joining the girls in all their studies and amusements, and setting Averil free for a lengthy visit to Mother Midge; and when she left them it was with the full understanding that the first fortnight in June was to be spent by the trio at Grey-Mount House.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"YOU ARE MONSIEUR'S SON."

ONE lovely June afternoon Annette was sitting on the steps that led down from the veranda at Grey-Mount House. She was alone, and looked unusually pensive; indeed, there was a slight shade of melancholy on her expressive face. Annette had just remembered that it was on this very day last year that she had first seen monsieur. "A year ago—actually it is a year," she said to herself, "since I left the Rue St. Joseph! Oh, those days—how dark and narrow they seem beside my life now!" And Annette shuddered involuntarily as she remembered the close, dark room, the long, weary hours, the frugal, solitary meals, when the tired lace mender had finished her work.

But the next moment the old street, with its curiously gabled houses, vanished from her mental vision, and she took up a different thread of musing. "What could she have said last night to offend Mr. Frank so deeply? He had kept away from her all the evening, and this morning he had gone off with only a hurried good-bye, and without waiting for his button-hole bouquet, though it was all ready for him—the prettiest she had ever made."

It was this remembrance that had been tormenting Annette all day, and had spoiled the sunshine for her. She had left Louie and Nettie to finish their game with Lottie, because she was playing so badly; and, of course, that was Mr. Frank's fault, too.

Annette did so hate to hurt people; but, though she did not like to confess it even to herself (for she was very loyal to her friends), Mr. Frank had been so very touchy lately. He was always pulling her words to pieces and grumbling over them, and he never seemed quite satisfied with her. "I think I disappoint him terribly," she said to herself, plaintively. "And yet what have I said?" And here Annette tried painfully to recall her words. They had been talking very happily, Frank had been giving her an account of a walking-tour, and somehow the conversation had veered round to Dinan and monsieur. Perhaps he was a little bored with her praises of monsieur, for he suddenly frowned (and she had never seen him frown before), and said: "It is no use trying; I may as well give it up. I don't believe any man has a chance with you; you think of no one but my father."

"I think there is no man so good and wise as monsieur," she had replied, very innocently; and then, to her dismay, Mr. Frank had looked hurt, and became all at once quite silent.

"I do not understand young men," she said, as she laid her head on the pillow; "they are strange—very strange. Mr. Frank looks as though I had committed some crime. Friends ought not to quarrel for a word. To-morrow I will make him ashamed of himself. His bouquet shall be better than monsieur's."

Annette was quite happy as she prepared her little offering—she even smiled as she laid it aside. She was sure Frank saw it, though he took no notice; he always petitioned for one so humbly. But on this unlucky day he went out of the breakfast-room without a word; he was in the dog-cart beside his father as Annette crossed the hall, and his cold, uncompromising "Good-morning, Miss Ramsay!" left her no opening. The poor flowers were left to wither on the marble slab, and Annette, in rather a melancholy mood, settled to her practicing; but her scales were less perfect than usual. "What can it mean?" played the prelude to every exercise and study.

Annette had laid aside her mourning; she was in white this evening, and the cluster of dark roses at her throat suited her complexion admirably. Her pretty little head, with its dark, smooth plaits,

was drooping slightly. Something in her attitude seemed to strike Frank as he crossed the lawn on his way to the house; he looked, hesitated, then looked again, and finally sauntered up to the veranda with a fine air of indifference.

"Do you know where Louie is, Miss Ramsay?"

"She is playing tennis with Lottie. Oh, you are leaving me!" as Frank nodded and turned away, and a distressed look crossed her face. "All day I have wanted to speak to you, and now you will not listen! Mr. Frank, I do not like my friends to be angry with me when I have done no wrong—no wrong at all. It is not treating me well!" And Annette looked at him with grave dignity.

Evidently, Frank had not expected this. He had been brooding over his grievance all day—nursing it, magnifying it, until he believed that he was greatly to be pitied. But this frankness on Annette's part cut away the ground from beneath his feet. How could he explain to her the manner in which she had hurt him? She was so unlike other girls—so simple and child-like. Frank found himself embarrassed; he stammered out something about a misunderstanding.

"A misunderstanding, surely, since I have been so unhappy as to offend you," returned Annette, gently. "Mr. Frank, will you tell me what I have done, that I may make amends? I have hurt you—well, that gives me pain. I think there is no one for whom I care so much as—"

"Monsieur," finished Frank, gloomily, and there was quite a scowl on his pleasant face. "Why don't you finish your speech, Miss Ramsay? We all know what you think of monsieur!"—which was very rude of Frank, only the poor fellow was too sore to measure his words. He was angry with himself, with her, with every one. He could not make her understand him; all these months he had been trying to win her, and there had been no response on her part; but this frank kindness—

Annette looked at him for a moment with wide-open, perplexed eyes. She wished to comprehend his meaning.

"Well," she said, slowly, "and you are monsieur's son, are you not?"

Now what was there in this very ordinary speech—the mere statement of an obvious fact—to make Frank suddenly leap to his feet and grasp her hand?

"Do you mean that?" he exclaimed, eagerly. "Annette, do you really mean that you can care for me as well as for him? Tell me, quickly, dear! I have been trying so hard all these months to make you understand me; but you never seemed to see."

"What is it you wish me to understand?" she said, shyly; for, with all her simplicity, Annette could hardly mistake him now. "You quarrel with me for a word, but you tell me nothing plainly. Is it that I am too slow, or that you have not taken the trouble to instruct me?"

"Trouble! where you are concerned!" he said, tenderly. And then it all came out—the story of his love, his patient wooing, his doubts if his affection could be returned.

"You were always so sweet and friendly to me," he went on; "but I could never be sure that you really cared for me—that you cared for me enough to become my wife," finished the young man in a moved voice.

"You could not be sure until you asked me," returned Annette naïvely. "There was no need to make yourself so miserable, or to have given me this unhappy day."

"Have you been unhappy, too, my dearest?" but Frank looked supremely happy as he spoke.

"Yes; for I could not bear that anything should come between us. So you see, my friend, that, I too, have cared a good deal." But when Frank wanted her to tell him how long she had cared—"Was it only yesterday, or a week ago, or that day on which they had gone to the Albert Hall, when I gave you the flowers?" and so on, Annette only blushed and said she did not know.

"But surely you have some idea, my darling?"

"But why?" she answered, shyly. "Is it necessary to find out the beginning of affection? Always you have been kind to me. You have made me glad to see you. I have never separated you from monsieur since the day we talked of him so much. 'This young man resembles his father—he has the same kind heart:' that is what I said to myself that day"—and Frank was too content with this statement to wish to question his sweetheart more closely.

Mr. Harland was sitting in the study reading his paper, and talking occasionally to Averil, who was in her hammock-chair beside him, when a slim white figure glided between him and the sunshine, and Annette stood before him.

"Well, mademoiselle," he said, playfully—for this was his pet name for her—"what has become of the promised walk?"

"Oh, I have forgotten!" she said, with a little laugh; "and it is your fault, Mr. Frank"—but she did not look at the young man as she spoke. "Monsieur, you must forgive me, for I am not often so careless; and you must not scold your son, either, because we are both so happy."

"Eh, what!" exclaimed Mr. Harland, dropping his eye-glasses in his astonishment; for Frank actually, the young rogue, had taken Annette's hand, and was presenting her to him in the most curiously formal way.

"Father, do you want another daughter?" asked Frank hurriedly. "I have brought you one. The dearest girl in the world, as you have long known."

"I know nothing of the kind, sir," returned his father, in much anger. "To think of your saying

such a thing with Averil sitting by. The dearest girl in the world—humph!"

"Monsieur knows that is not the truth," replied Annette, and her dark, soft eyes were very pathetic. "Perhaps he is not willing to take the poor little lace-mender for his daughter."

"Is he not?" was the unexpected reply. And Annette, to her delight and astonishment, found herself folded in his arms. "My dear little girl, I am more than willing! Monsieur is not such a conceited old humbug. He knows what is good as well as other people; and he respects his son"—here he grasped Frank's hand cordially—"for his choice; and he begs to tell him, and every one else concerned, that he is a sensible fellow." And here Mr. Harland marched away, using his handkerchief rather loudly, to tell his wife the news.

"Dear Annette," exclaimed Averil, "will you not come to me and let me wish you joy?" And as she warmly embraced her, Annette whispered, "Are you glad, my cousin? Have I done well?"

"Very well indeed," returned Averil. But for a moment her heart was so full that she could say no more. Evidently Frank understood her, for he glanced proudly at his young betrothed.

"I am a lucky fellow, am I not, Averil? Ah, here comes Louie. I expect my father is literally publishing it on the house-tops. Come with me, Annette; let us go and meet her."

"So you have been and gone and done it, Frank," observed Louie, with great solemnity; "and I have a new sister. Annette, I warned you before that Frank was my own special brother; and now you will have to be fond of me as well as him, for I don't mean to be left out in the cold." And though Louie laughed, and spoke in her old merry way, the tears were very near her eyes.

"But I do love you already," protested Annette, earnestly. "And it makes me so happy to know that I, too, shall have brothers and sisters. Mr. Frank will not have them all to himself any longer. They will be mine, too. Is it not so?"—appealing to her lover; and of course Frank indorsed this with delight.

What a happy evening that was at Grey-Mount House! Frank, who was idolized by his brothers and sisters, found himself in the position of a hero. The Harlands were simple, unworldly people. It never entered their heads that the son and heir was not making a very grand match in marrying a young orphan without a penny to call her own—a little, sallow-faced girl who had once earned her living by mending lace. To them "kind hearts were more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood;" and they were wise enough to know that Annette's sweet disposition and lowly virtues would keep, as well as gain, her husband's heart.

It was very pretty to watch her, Averil thought, that evening. She took her happiness so simply; she seemed so unconscious of herself. Her one thought was to please her fiancé, and all those dear people who had taken her into their hearts.

"You are very happy, Annette?" Averil said to her later on that night. "But I need not ask; for your face is brightness itself."

"I think I am more than happy," returned Annette, with a deep sigh of utter content. "Ah! if only my mother could know that I am to spend my life with so good a man. Lottie has been trying to tease me. She will have it that Mr. Chesterton is nicer—as though he could compare with my Mr. Frank!" finished Annette, with a gesture of superb disdain.

"God has been very good to me," thought Averil, reverently, when Annette had left her, and she sat alone in the moonlight. "How different things were with me this time last year! Then I was troubled about Rodney; my home-life was miserable; Annette was an unknown stranger; even Lottie was a care to me. And now I trust, I hope, my boy is beginning a new life; I am happier about Maud; my burdens are all lifted, and if the future looks a little lonely, it will not be for long—not for long—" She stopped and folded her hands, and a sweet, solemn look came into her eyes. What if her work were nearly done? if the weary, worn-out frame would soon be at rest? Would that be a matter of regret? "When Thou wilt, and as Thou wilt," was the language of her heart. Soon, very soon—yes, she knew that well—the tired child would go home. And as this thought came to her in all its fullness, a strange, mysterious joy—a look of unutterable peace—came on the pale face. "Even so, Father," she whispered—and the dim summer night seemed to herald the solemn words. "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." "And for me—for me, too!" prayed Averil.

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