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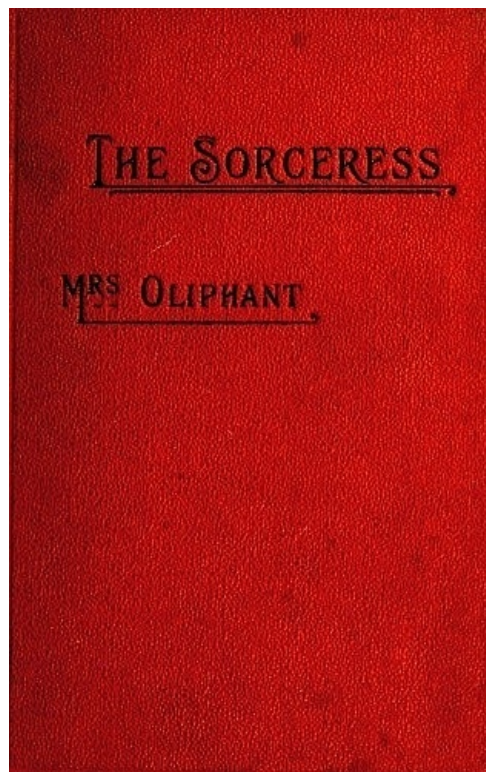
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SORCERESS; V. 1 OF 3 ***

THE SORCERESS.



THE SORCERESS.

A Novel.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT,
AUTHOR OF
"THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,"
"THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE SORCERESS.

CHAPTER I.

IT was the most exciting event which had ever occurred in the family, and everything was affected by it.

Imagine to yourselves such a young family, all in the very heyday of life, parents and children alike. It is true that Mrs. Kingsward was something of an invalid, but nobody believed that her illness was anything very serious, only a reason why she should be taken abroad, to one place after another, to the great enjoyment of the girls, who were never so happy as when they were travelling and gaining, as they said, experience of life. She was not yet forty, while Charlie was twenty-one and Bee nineteen, so that virtually they were all of the same age, so to speak, and enjoyed everything together—mamma by no means put aside into the ranks of the dowagers, but going everywhere and doing everything just like the rest, and as much admired as anyone.

To be sure she had not been able to walk about so much this time, and had not danced once, except a single turn with Charlie, which brought on a palpitation, so that she declared with a laugh that her dancing days were over. Her dancing days over! Considering how fond she had always been of dancing, the three young people laughed over this, and did not take the least alarm. Mamma had always been the ringleader in everything, even in the romps with the little ones at home. For you must not think that these three were all of the family by any means.

Bee and Betty were the eldest of I can't at this moment tell how many, who were safe in the big nursery at Kingswarden under the charge (very partial) of papa, and the strict and steady rule of nurse, who was a personage of high authority in the house. Papa had but lately left "the elder ones," as he called them, including his pretty wife—and had gone back to his work, which was that of an official at the Horse Guards, in some military department of which I don't even know the name, for I doubt whether the Intelligence Department, which satisfies all the necessities of description, had been invented in those days.

Colonel Kingsward was a distinguished officer, and the occasion of great *éclat* to the little group when he showed himself at their head, drawing round him a sort of cloud of foreign officers wherever he went, which Bee and Betty appreciated largely, and to which Mrs. Kingsward herself did not object; for they all liked the clank of spurs, as was natural, and the endless ranks of partners, attendants in the gardens, and general escort and retinue thus provided. It was not, however, among these officers, red, blue, green, and white—of all the colours in the rainbow—that Bee had found her fate. For I need scarcely say it was a proposal which had turned everything upside down and filled the little party with excitement.

A proposal! The first in the family! Mamma's head was as much turned by it as Bee's. She lay on the sofa in her white dressing gown, so flushed with happiness and amusement and excitement, that you would have supposed it was she who was to be the bride.

And then it was so satisfactory a thing all round. If ever Mrs. Kingsward had held anyone at arm's length in her life it was a certain captain of Dragoons who had clanked about everywhere after her daughters and herself for three weeks past. The moment they had appeared anywhere, even at the springs, where she went to drink her morning glass of disagreeable warm water, at the concert in the afternoon, in "the rooms" at night, not to speak of every picnic and riding party, this tall figure would jump up like a jack-in-a-box. And there was no doubt that the girls were rather pleased than otherwise to see him jump up. He was six foot two at least, with a moustache nearly a yard long, curling in a tawny and powerful twist over his upper lip. He had half-a-dozen medals on his breast; his uniform was a compound of white and silver, with a helmet that literally blazed in the sun, and his spurs clanked louder than any other spurs in the gardens. The only thing that was wanting to him was a very little thing—a thing that an uninstructed English person might not have thought of at all—but which was a painful thing in his own troubled consciousness, and in that of the regiment, and even was doubtful to the English friends who had picked up, as was natural, all the prejudices of the class into which their own position brought them.

Poor Captain Kreutzner, I blush to say it, had no "Von" to his name. Nobody could deny that he was a distinguished officer, the hope of the army in his branch of the service; but when Mrs. Kingsward thought how the Colonel would look if he heard his daughter announced as Madame Kreutzner *tout court* in a London drawing-room, her heart sank within her, and a cold perspiration came out upon her forehead. "And I don't believe Bee would care," she cried, turning to her son for sympathy.

Charlie was so well brought up a young man that he cared very much, and gave his mother all the weight of his support. His office it was to beguile Captain Kreutzner as to the movements of the party, to keep off that bold

dragoon as much as was possible; when, lo! all their precautions were rendered unnecessary by the arrival of the real man from quite another quarter, at once, and in a moment cutting the Captain out!

There was one thing Mrs. Kingsward could never be sufficiently thankful for in the light of after events, and that was, that it was Colonel Kingsward himself who introduced Mr. Aubrey Leigh to the family. He was a young man who was travelling for the good of his health, or rather for the good of his mind, poor fellow, as might be seen at a glance. He was still in deep mourning when he presented himself at the hotel, and his countenance was as serious as his hatband. Nevertheless, he had not been long among them before Bee taught him how to smile, even to laugh, though at first with many hesitations and rapid resuming of a still deeper tinge of gravity, as if asking pardon of some beloved object for whom he would not permit even himself to suppose that he had ceased to mourn. This way he had of falling into sudden gravity continued with him even when it was evident that every decorum required from him that he should cease to mourn. Perhaps it was one of the things that most attracted Bee, who had a touch of the sentimental in her character, as all young ladies had in those days, when Mrs. Hemans and L. E. L. were the favourite poets whom young ladies were expected to read. Well brought up girls were not permitted, I need not say, to read Byron. Shelley was a name of fear, and the poems of Mr. Thomas Campbell, not to say Mr. Thomas Moore (carefully selected) were likely to promote that quality.

The pale young man, with his black coat, his hatband, his look of melancholy, drove out the image of the Captain at once from Bee's mind. She had perhaps had enough of captains, fine uniforms, spurs, and all. They had become what modern levity calls a drug in the market. They made *Fenster* parade all day long under her windows; they thronged upon her steps in the gardens; they tore the flounces from her tarlatan into pieces at the balls. It was something far more original to sit out in the moonlight and look at the moon with a sorrowful young hero, who gradually woke up into life under her hand. Poor, poor boy!—so young and so melancholy!—who had gone through so much!—who was really so handsome when the veil of grief began to blow away!—who had such a pretty name!

Bee was only nineteen. She had mocked and charmed and laughed at a whole generation of young officers, thinking of nothing but picnics and dinner parties and balls. She wanted something new upon which to try her little hand—and now it was thrown, just when she felt the need, in her way. She had turned a young fool's head several times, so that the operation had lost its charm. But to bring a sad man back to life, to drive away sorrow, to teach him to hold up his head again, to learn how sweet it was to live and smile, and ride and run about this beautiful world, and wake every day to a new pleasure—that was something she felt worthy of a woman's powers. And she did it with such effect that Mr. Aubrey Leigh went on improving for three weeks more, and finally ended up with that proposal which was to the Kingsward family in general the most amusing, the most exciting, the most delightful incident in the world.

And yet, of course, it was attended with a certain amount of anxiety which in her—temporarily—invalid state was not very good for mamma. Everybody insisted on all occasions that it was a most temporary state, and that by the end of the summer she would be all right—the palpitations quite calmed down, the flush—which made her so pretty—a little subdued, and herself as strong as ever. But in the meantime this delightful romantic incident, which certainly acted upon her like a glass of champagne, raising her spirits, brought her some care as well. Her first interview was of course with Bee, and took place in the privacy of her chamber, where she cross-examined her daughter as much as was compatible with the relations between them—which indeed were rather those of companions and comrades than of mother and daughter.

"Now, Bee, my dear child," she said, "remember you have always been a little rover, and Mr. Leigh is so quiet. Do you think you really, really, can devote yourself to him, and never think of another man all your life?"

"Mamma," said Bee, "if you were not such a dear I should think you were very insulting. Another man! Why, where should I find another man in the world that was fit to tie Aubrey's shoe?"

"Well," said Mrs. Kingsward, dubiously; but she added, after a moment, "You know, darling, that's not quite the question. If you did find in the after ages a man that perhaps was—fit to tie Mr. Leigh's shoe?"

"Why in all this world, *petite mère*, will you go on calling him Mr. Leigh?"

"Well, well," said Mrs. Kingsward; "but I don't feel," she said again, after a moment's hesitation, "that I ought to go so far as to call him Aubrey until we have heard from papa."

"What could papa find to object to?" said Bee. "Why, it was he who introduced him to us! We should not have known Aubrey, and I should never have been the happiest girl in the world, if it had not been for papa. Dear papa! I know what he'll say: 'I can't understand, my dear, why you should hesitate for a moment. Of course, you don't suppose I should have introduced Mr. Leigh to my family without first ascertaining, &c., &c.' That, of course, is what papa will say."

"I dare say you are right, Bee. It is quite what I expect, for, of course, a man with girls knows what it is, though for my part I confess I always thought it would be a soldier—Captain Kreutzner or Otto von——"

"Mamma!" cried Bee, almost violently, light flashing out of the blue eyes, which were so bright even on ordinary occasions as to dazzle the beholder—you may imagine what fire came out of them now—"as if I should ever have looked twice at one of those big, brainless, clinking and clanking Germans. (N.B.—Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not tall.) No! Though I may like foreigners well enough because it's amusing to talk their language and to feel that one has such an advantage in knowing German and all that—yet, when it comes to be a question of spending one's life, an Englishman for me!"

Thus, it will be seen, Bee forestalled the patriotic sentiments of a later generation by resolving, in spite of all temptations, to belong to other nations—to select an Englishman for her partner in life. It is doubtful, however, how far this virtuous resolution had existed in her mind before the advent of Aubrey Leigh.

"I am sure I am very glad, Bee," said her mother, "for I always had a dread that you would be snatched off somewhere to—Styria or Dalecarlia, or heaven knows where—(these were the first out-of-the-way names that came to Mrs. Kingsward's mind; but I don't know that they were altogether without reference or possibilities), where one would have had no chance of seeing you more than once in two or three years. I am very thankful it is to be an Englishman—or at least I shall be," she added, with a sigh of suspense, "as soon as I have heard from papa——"

"One would think, *Mütterchen*, that you were frightened for papa."

"I shouldn't like you ever to try and go against him, Bee!"

"Oh, no," said Bee, lightly, "of course I shouldn't think of going against him—is the inquisition over?—for I

promised," she said, with a laugh and a blush, "to walk down with Aubrey as far as the river. He likes that so much better than those noisy blazing gardens, with no shade except under those stuffy trees—and so do I."

"Do you really, Bee? I thought you thought it was so nice sitting under the trees——"

"With all the *gnadige* Fraus knitting, and all the *wohlgeborne* Herrs smoking. No, indeed, I always hated it!" said Bee.

She jumped up from where she had been sitting on a stool by her mother's sofa, and took her hat, which she had thrown down on the table. It was a broad, flexible, Leghorn hat, bought in Florence, with a broad blue ribbon—the colour of her eyes, as had often been said—floating in two long streamers behind. She had a sash of the same colour round the simple waist of her white frock. That is how girls were dressed in the early days of Victoria. These were the days of simplicity, and people liked it, seeing it was the fashion, as much as they liked crinolines and chignons when such ornamental arrangements "came in." It does not become one period to boast itself over another, for fashion will still be lord—or lady—of all.

Mrs. Kingsward looked with real pleasure at her pretty daughter, thinking how well she looked. She wore very nearly the same costume herself, and she knew that it also looked very well on her. Bee's eyes were shining, blazing with brightness and happiness and love and fun and youth. She was not a creature of perfect features, or matchless beauty, as all the heroines were in the novels of her day, and she was conscious of a great many shortcomings from that high standard. She was not tall enough—which, perhaps, however, in view of the defective stature of Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not so great a disadvantage—and she was neither fair enough nor dark enough for a Minna or a Brenda, the definite and distinct blonde and brunette, which were the ideal of the time; and she was not at all aware that her irregularity, and her mingling of styles, and her possession of no style in particular, were her great charms. She was not a great beauty, but she was a very pretty girl with the additional attraction of those blue diamonds of eyes, the sparkle of which, when my young lady was angry or when she was excited in any more pleasurable way, was a sight to see.

"All that's very well, my dear," said Mrs. Kingsward, "but you've never answered my question: and I hope you'll make quite, quite sure before it's all settled that you do like Aubrey Leigh above everybody in the world."

"*A la bonne heure*," said Bee; "you have called him Aubrey at last, without waiting to know what papa will say:" with which words she gave her mother a flying kiss, and was gone in a moment, thinking very little, it must be allowed, of what papa might say.

Mrs. Kingsward lay still for a little, and thought it all over after Bee was gone. She knew a little better than the others what her Colonel was, and that there were occasions on which he was not so easy to deal with as all the young ones supposed. She thought it all over from the moment that young Mr. Leigh had appeared on the scene. What a comfort it was to think that it was the Colonel himself who had introduced him! Of course, as Bee said, before presenting anyone to his wife and family, Colonel Kingsward would have ascertained, &c., &c. It was just how he would write no doubt. Still, a man may introduce another to his wife and family without being ready at once to accept him as a son-in-law. On the other hand, Colonel Kingsward knew well enough what is the possible penalty of such introductions. Young as Bee was, she had already attracted a good deal of attention, though this was the first time it had actually come to an offer. But Edward must surely have thought of that. She was, though it seemed so absurd, and though Bee had laughed at it, a little afraid of her husband. He had never had any occasion to be stern, yet he had it in him to be stern; and he would not hesitate to quench Bee's young romance if he thought it right. And, on the other hand, Bee, though she was such a little thing, such a child, so full of fun and nonsense, had a spirit which would not yield as her mother's did. Mrs. Kingsward drew another long fluttering sigh before she got up reluctantly in obedience to her maid, who came in with that other white gown, not unlike Bee's, over her arm, to dress her mistress. She would have liked to lie still a little longer, to have finished the book she was reading, to have thought over the situation—anything, indeed, to justify her in keeping still upon the couch and being lazy, as she called it. Poor little mother! She had not been lazy, nor had the chance of being lazy much in her life. She had not begun to guess why it was she liked it so much now.

CHAPTER II.

I HAVE NOW to explain how it was that Mr. Aubrey Leigh was so interesting and so melancholy, and thus awoke the friendship and compassion, and secured the ministrations of the Kingsward family. He was in deep mourning, for though he was only eight-and-twenty he was already a widower, and bereaved beside of his only child. Poor young man! He had married with every appearance of happiness and prosperity, but his wife had died at the end of the first year, leaving him with a baby on his inexperienced hands. He was a young man full of feeling, and, contrary to the advice of all his friends, he had shut himself up in his house in the country and dedicated himself to his child. Dedicated himself to a baby two months old!

There was nobody who did not condemn this unnecessary self-sacrifice. He should have gone away; he should have left the child in the hands of its excellent nurse, under the supervision of that charming person who had been such a devoted nurse to dear Mrs. Leigh, and whom the desolate young widower had not the courage to send away from his house. Her presence there was a double reason, people said, why he should have gone away. For though his sorrow and trouble was so great that nobody for a moment supposed that he had any idea of such a thing, yet the presence of a lady, and of a lady still called by courtesy a young lady, though older than himself, and who could not be treated like a servant in his house, was embarrassing and not very seemly, everybody said. Suggestions were made to her that she should go away, but then she answered that she had nowhere to go to, and that she had promised to dear Amy never to forsake her child. The country ladies about who took an interest in the young man thought it was "just like" dear Amy, who had always been a rather silly young woman, to exact such a promise, but that Miss Lance would be quite justified in not keeping it, seeing the child had plenty of people to look after her—her grandmother within reach and her father dedicating himself to her.

Miss Lance, however, did not see her duty in the same way; indeed, after the poor little child died—and there was no doubt she had been invaluable during its illness, and devoted herself to it as she had done to its mother—she stayed on still at Leigh Court, though now at last poor Aubrey was persuaded to go away. The mind of the county was relieved beyond description when at last he departed on his travels. These good people did not at all want to get

up any scandal in their midst. They did not very much blame Miss Lance for declining to give up a comfortable home. They only felt it was dreadfully awkward and that something should be done about it, though nobody knew what to do. He had left home nearly six months before he appeared at the Baths with that letter to Mrs. Kingsward in his pocket, and the change and the travel had done him good.

A young man of twenty-eight cannot go mourning all the days of his life for a baby of eight months old, and he had already begun to "get over" the death of his wife before the second event occurred. This troublous beginning of his life had left him very sad, with something of the feeling of a victim, far more badly treated than most in the beginning of his career. But this is not like real grief, which holds a man's heart with a grip of steel. And he was in the stage when a man is ready to be consoled when Bee's blue eyes first flashed upon him. The Kingswards had received him in these circumstances with more *abandon* than they would have done in any other. He was so melancholy; his confidences, when he began to make them, were so touching; his waking up to interest and happiness so delightful to see. And thus, before anyone had thoroughly realized it, the deed was done. They knew nothing about Miss Lance—as how should they?—and what could she have had to do with it if they had known?

So there really was nothing but that doubt of Colonel Kingsward's approval to alloy the pleasure of the party, and it was only Mrs. Kingsward who thought of it. Charlie pooh-poohed the idea altogether. "I think I should know my father better than anyone," the young man said, with much scorn of his mother's hesitation. He was very fond and very proud of his mother, but felt that as a man himself, he probably understood papa better than the ladies could. "Of course he will approve; why shouldn't he approve? Leigh is a very decent fellow, though I don't think all the world of him, as you girls do. Papa, of course, knew exactly what sort of a fellow he was; a little too quiet—not Bee's sort at all. No, you may clamour as you like, but he's not in the least Bee's sort—"

"I'm supposed to prefer a noisy trooper, I believe," said Bee.

"Well, I should have said that was more like it—but mind you, the governor would never have sent us out a man here who was not good enough for anything. Oh, I understand the old boy!"

"Charlie, how dare you?" cried his mother; but the horror was modified by a laugh, for anything more unlike an old boy than Colonel Kingsward it would not have been very easy to conceive.

"Well, mamma, you wouldn't have me call him my honoured father, would you?" the young man said. He was at Oxford, and he thought himself on the whole not only by far the most solid and serious member of the present party, but on the whole rather more experienced in the world than the gentleman whom in the bosom of the family he still condescended to call "papa."

As for little Betty, who up to this time had been Bee's shadow, and who had not yet begun to feel herself *de trop*, she, no more than her sister, was moved by any of these cares. She was wholly occupied in studying the new thing which had suddenly started into being before her eyes. Betty was of opinion that it was entirely got up for her amusement and instruction. When she and Bee were alone, she never ceased in her interrogatory. "Oh, Bee, when did you first begin to think about him like that? Oh, Bee, how did you first find out that he was thinking about you? Oh, Bee, don't you mind that he was once in love before?" Such were the questions that poured in an incessant stream into Bee's ears. That young lady was equal to them all, and she was not unwilling to let her sister share more or less in the new enlightenment that had come to herself.

"When did I first begin to think of him?" she said. "Oh, Betty, the first minute I saw him coming through the garden with Charlie to speak to mamma! There were all those horrid men about, you remember, in those gaudy uniforms, and their swords and spurs, and so forth—such dreadful bad taste in foreigners always to be in uniform —"

"But, Bee," cried Betty, "why, I've heard you say—"

"Oh, never mind what you've heard me say! I've been silly, I suppose, in my day, like almost everybody. Aubrey says he cannot think how they can live, always done up in those hot, stiff clothes—none of the ease of Englishmen about them."

"Papa says they are such soldier-like men," says little Betty, who had not been converted from the *regime* of the officers, like Bee.

"Oh, well, papa—he is an officer himself, but he never wears his uniform when he can help it, you know."

"Well," said Betty, "you may say what you like—for my part, I do love a nice uniform. I don't want ever again to dance with a man in a black coat. But Bee, you're too bad—you won't say a word, and I want so to know how it all came about. What put it into your head? And what did you say to one another? And was it he that began first—or was it you?"

"You little dreadful thing," said Bee; "how could a girl ever begin? It shows how little you know! Of course he began; but we didn't begin at all," she said, after a pause, "it just came—all in a moment when I wasn't thinking, and neither was he."

"Do you mean to say that he didn't intend to propose to you?" said Betty, growing pale.

"Oh!" said Bee, impatient, "as if proposing was all! Do you think he just came out with it point blank—'Miss Kingsward, will you marry me?'"

"Well," said Betty: "what did he say then if he didn't say that?"

"Oh, you little goose!" said Bee.

"I am sure if he had said 'Oh, you little goose' to me," said Betty, "I should never have spoken a word to him again."

"It is no use talking to little girls," said Bee, with a sigh. "You don't understand; and, to be sure, how could you understand—at your age and all?"

"Age!" said Betty, indignant, "there is but fifteen months between us, and I've always done everything with you. We've always had on new things together, and gone to the same places and everything. It is you that are very unkind now you have got engaged; and I do believe you like this big horrid man better than me."

"Oh, you little goose!" said Bee, again.

"No, it isn't a big but a little, horrid man. I made a mistake," said Betty, "not like Captain Kreutzner that you used to like so much. It's small people you care for now; not your own nice people like me and mamma, but a man that you had never heard the name of when you first came here, and now you quote and praise him, and make the

most ridiculous fuss about him, even to Charlie, who is far nicer-looking!—and won't even tell your sister what he says!"

This argument came to so high a tone that mamma called out from her room to know what was amiss. "It does not become you girls to carry on your old scuffles and quarrels," she said, "now that one of you, at least, is so grown up and about to take upon herself the responsibilities of life."

"Is Aubrey a responsibility?" Betty whispered in her sister's ears.

"Oh, you little silly thing!" Bee replied; and presently Mrs. Kingsward's maid came in to say that Mr. Leigh was in the sitting-room, and would Miss Bee go to him as her mistress was not ready; for this was the little fiction that was kept up in those days before Colonel Kingsward's letter had been received. It will be seen, however, that it was but a fiction, and that as a matter of fact there was very little restraint put on the young people's intercourse. "You must not consider that anything is settled; you must not think there's any engagement," Mrs. Kingsward had said. "Indeed, indeed, I cannot take upon me to sanction anything till I hear from her papa." But virtually they met as much as they liked, and even indulged in little talks apart, and meetings by themselves, before Mrs. Kingsward was ready; so that as a matter of fact this restriction did very little harm.

And in due time Colonel Kingsward's letter was received, and it was not unfavourable. The Colonel said that, on the whole, he should have preferred it had Mr. Leigh waited till they had all returned home. It would have been a seemly forbearance, and saved Mrs. Kingsward a great deal of anxiety; but as matters stood and as his dear wife approved, and he heard nothing but good of Mr. Leigh, he would not withdraw the provisional consent which she seemed to have given. "It will be expedient in the circumstances that you should all return home as soon as possible, that I may go into matters with the young man," the Colonel added in that part of his letter which was not intended to be read to Aubrey Leigh. And he added, as Bee had prophesied, "You might have been sure that I should not introduce a young man to my family, and to yourself, my dear, without ascertaining previously," etc., etc., just as Bee had said. He added, "Of course I never contemplated anything of this sort: but one can never tell what may happen when young people are thrown together. The property is a good one, and the young man unexceptionable, from all I can hear." Then Mrs. Kingsward's mind was set at ease. It seemed to Bee that her father might have said something on the subject of her happiness, and acknowledged Aubrey to be something more than an unexceptionable young man. It was inconceivable, she thought to herself, how cool people are when they come to that age. The property good, and the young man unexceptionable—was that all? Did papa take no more interest than that? But at all events the engagement was now quite permitted and acknowledged, and they might walk out together all day, and dance together all night, without a word said; for which Bee forgave and instantly forgot—it was really of so little importance—the coolness of papa.

Mrs. Kingsward's "cure" was over, and by this time most people were leaving the Bath. Our party made their preparations for leaving too, in the pleasantest way. It was not to be at all a rapid journey, which would not have been good for Mrs. Kingsward. They were to make their way at leisure from one beautiful old city to another across the breadth of Germany, staying a day here and a day there, travelling for the most part in a large, old-fashioned carriage, such as was the custom then, with a wide-hooded seat in front, like the *banquette* of a French diligence, in which two people could be extremely happy, seeing the scenery much better than those inside could do, or perhaps not seeing the scenery at all, but occupying each other quite as agreeably with the endless talk of lovers, which is not interesting to anybody but themselves. Before they set out upon this journey, however, which was to hold so great a place in Bee's life, a little incident occurred to her which did not appear to be of very much consequence, but which made some impression on her mind at the time, and vaguely appeared afterwards to throw light on various other events. The German Bath at which the little story of her love took place is surrounded with woods—woods of a kind that are never seen anywhere else, though they are the special feature of German Baths. They are chiefly composed of fir trees, and they are arranged upon the most strictly mathematical principles, with that precision which is dear to the German mind, row upon row standing close together, as if they had been stuck in so at their present height, with so many cubit feet of air to each, as in the London lodging-houses. They are traversed by broad roads, with benches at intervals, and at each corner there is a wooden board on which is painted indications how to find the nearest *restauration* where beer is to be had, and the veal of the country—for the German, in his hours of ease and amusement, has continual occasion to be "restored."

Bee had gone out early in the morning to make a little sketch of an opening in the trees through which a village spire was visible. There were not many points for the artist in landscape, especially one of such moderate powers as Bee, and she was very anxious to finish this to present it, I need scarcely say, to Aubrey, as a memento of the place. Probably there was some other sentimental reason—such as that they had first spoken words of special meaning there, or had first exchanged looks that were of importance in their idyll, or some other incident of equal weight. She was seated on one of the benches, with her little colour box and bottle of water, giving the finishing touches to her sketch. Sooth to say, Bee was no great performer, and the ranks of the dark trees standing arithmetically apart to permit of that little glimpse of distance, were too much for her. They looked in her sketch like two dark green precipices rather than like trees, and had come to a very difficult point, when a lady coming along by one of the side walks, round the corner past the *restauration*, suddenly sat down by Bee's side and startled her a little. She was not a girl who was easily frightened, but the suddenness of the apparition out of the silent morning when she had thought nobody was in sight was a little startling and made her hand shake.

"I hope I am not intruding upon you," the lady said.

"Oh, no!" said Bee, looking up with her bright face. She was as fresh as the morning in her broad Leghorn hat with the blue ribbon, and her eyes that danced and sparkled. The stranger by her side was much older than Bee. She was a handsome woman; dark, with fine eyes, too, a sidelong look in them, and a curious half smile which was like La Gioconda, that famous picture Bee had seen in the Louvre, as we all have. She thought of La Gioconda at once, when she looked up into the lady's face. She was entirely dressed in black, and there could not have been found anywhere a more perfect contrast to Bee.

They got into conversation quite easily, for Bee was a girl who loved to talk. The lady gave her several hints about her little picture which Bee knew enough to know were dictated by superior knowledge, and then they got talking quite naturally about the place and the people who were there. After they had discussed the society and the number of English people at the Bath, and Bee had disclosed the hotel at which she was staying, and many details of her innocent life, which she was not at all conscious of disclosing—the stranger began to inquire about various

people. It was not by any means at once that she introduced the name of Leigh; not indeed till she had been over the Reynoldses, and the Gainsboroughs, and the Collinses, under Bee's exultant guidance and fine power of narrative; then she said tentatively, that there was she believed, at one of the hotels, a family of Leighs.

"Oh!" cried Bee, her countenance flushing over with a sudden brilliant delightful blush, which seemed to envelop her from top to toe. She had been looking up into her companion's face so that the stranger got the full benefit of this sudden resplendent change of colour. She then turned very demurely to her sketch, and said meekly, "I don't know any family, but there is a Mr. Leigh at our hotel."

"Oh," said the lady, but in a very different tone from Bee's startled "oh!" She said it coldly, as if recording a fact. "I thought," she said, "it was the Leighs of Hurstleigh, friends of mine. I may have been deceived by seeing the name in the lists."

"But I think, indeed I am sure, that Mr. Aubrey Leigh is connected with the Leighs of Hurstleigh," Bee said.

"Oh, a young man, a widower, an inconsolable; I think I remember hearing of him. Is that the man?"

"I don't know if he is an inconsolable," cried Bee, with a quick movement of anger and then she thought how foolish that was, for of course a stranger like this could have no unkind meaning. She added with great gravity, "It is quite true that he has been married before."

Poor little Bee, she was not at all aware how she was betraying herself. She was more vexed and indignant than words can say, when the woman (who after all could not be a lady) burst into a laugh. "Oh! I think I can see how matters stand with Aubrey Leigh," this impertinent intruder cried.

CHAPTER III.

IT was just two days after the interview in the wood described above, that the Kingsward party got under weigh for home, accompanied, I need not say, by Aubrey Leigh. Bee had not told him of that chance meeting, restrained I do not know by what indefinite feeling that he would not care to hear of it, and also by the sensation that she had as good as told the lady, who was so disagreeable and impertinent as to laugh, what change had taken place in Aubrey's sentiments, and what she had herself to do with that change. It was so silly, oh, so silly of her, and yet she had said nothing, or next to nothing. And there was no reason why she should not have said whatever she pleased, now that the engagement was fully acknowledged and known; indeed, if that woman were in any society at all, she must have heard of it, seeing that, as Bee was aware, not without pleasure, it had afforded a very agreeable diversion to the floating community, a pleasant episode in the tittle-tattle of the gardens and the wells. Bee had no absurd objection to being talked of. She knew that in her condition of life, which was so entirely satisfactory as a condition, everything that concerned a family was talked over and universally known. It was a thing inevitable to a certain position, and a due homage of society to its members. But somehow she did not mention it to Aubrey, nor, indeed, to anyone, which was a very unusual amount of reticence. She did not even give him the sketch, though it was finished. She had been quite grateful for that person's hints at the time, and eagerly had taken advantage of them to improve her drawing; but it seemed to her, when she looked at it now, that it was not her own at all, that the other hand was so visible in it that it would be almost dishonest to call it hers. This, of course, was wholly fantastic, for even supposing that person to have given valuable hints, she had never touched the sketch, and Bee alone had carried them out. But, anyhow, her heart sickened at it, and she thrust it away at the very bottom of the box that Moulsey was packing. She had no desire to see the horrid thing again.

In a day or two, however, Bee had altogether forgotten that interview in the wood. She had so many things to occupy her mind. There were few railways in those days, and the party had a long way to travel before they came to Cologne, where that method of travelling began. They all felt that common life would re-commence there and their delightful wandering would be over. In the meantime, there was a long interval of pleasure before them. The early breakfast at the hotel in the first hours of the autumnal morning, the fun of packing everyone away in the big coach, the books to be brought out to fill up corners, both of time and space, and "Murray" then alone in his glory, with no competitive American, no Badæker, no Joanne, to share his reign—spread out open at the right place, so that mamma inside should be able to lay her finger at once upon any village or castle that struck her—and above all the contrivances to be carried out for securing the *banquette*, as Bee said, for "ourselves," made a lively beginning. Charlie and Betty sometimes managed to secure this favourite place if the attention of the others flagged for a moment, and though mamma generally interposed with a nod or a whisper to restore it to the privileged pair, sometimes she was mischievous too, and consented to their deprivation, and desired them for once to keep her company inside. She generally, however, repented of this before the day was over, and begged that their favourite seat might be restored to them.

"For they are really no fun at all," the poor lady said. "I might as well have two images from Madame Tussaud's."

"It had been a little hard upon Aubrey at the moment of their departure to find half the garrison round the carriage, and bouquets enough to fill a separate vehicle thrust into every corner, the homage of those warriors to the gracious ladies. He had been very cross, and had made a great exhibition of himself, especially when Captain Kreutzner's faggot of forget-me-nots, tied with a ribbon like that on Bee's hat, had been presented with indescribable looks. What did the fellow mean by bringing forget-me-nots? He wanted to pitch it out of the window as soon as they were fairly started.

"What an idiotic custom!" he cried. "What do the fools think you want with such loads of flowers when you are starting on a journey?"

"Why, it is just then you do want them," cried Betty, who had a dozen or so to her own share, "to smell sweet and show us how much our friends think of us."

"They will not smell sweet very long, and then what will your friends think of you?" said the angry lover.

Was it possible that Bee was detaching a little knot of the blue flowers to put in her waistband? Bee, Bee! his own property, who had no right so much as to look at another man's flowers! And what did she do, seeing the cloud upon his face, but arrange another little bouquet, which, with her sweetest smile—the little coquette—she endeavoured to put into his, Aubrey's, button-hole! He snatched them out of her hand in a sort of fury. "Do you want

me never to forget that heavy brute of a German?" he cried, in his indignation. "You may put him near your heart, but I should like to kick him!" These very natural sentiments made Bee laugh—which was cruel: but then poor Captain Kreutzner had been blotted out of her life some time ago, and knew his fate, and had really no right whatever to present her with these particular flowers. His lovely bouquet with its blue ribbon was given to a girl in the first village, and awakened the still more furious jealousy of another swain who was less easily appeased than Aubrey; but this *ricochet* was not thought of by the first and principal pair.

There was not perhaps so many remarkable features in that journey as if it had been through Italy. There were great plains to traverse, where the chief sights were cottages and farmhouses, women going by with great loads of freshly cut grass full of flowers on their heads, fodder for the home-dwelling cows—or men carrying their hops clinging to the pole, to be picked at home, or long straggling branches of the tobacco plant; and in the evening the postillion would whip up his horses, and Charlie in the *banquette*, or John, the manservant, in the rumble, would tootle upon a horn which the former had acquired clandestinely before the party set out—as they dashed through a village or little town with lighted windows, affording them many a flying peep of the domestic life of those tranquil places. And in the middle of the day they stopped to rest somewhere, where the invariable veal was to be found at some Guest-house a little better than the ordinary, where perhaps a bigger village stood with all its high peaked stream: and at night rattled into an old walled town with shadowy high houses which belonged to the fourteenth century, and had not changed a whit since that time. There they stayed a day or two, varying the confinement of the coach by a course through everything that was to be seen, setting out in a party through the roughly-paved streets, but parting company before long, so that Aubrey and Bee would find themselves alone in the shelter of a church or in an insignificant corner by the walls, while the others pursued their sightseeing conscientiously.

"As for me, what I like is the general aspect," said Bee, with an air of superiority. "I don't care to poke into every corner, and Aubrey knows the history, which is the chief thing."

"Are they talking all the time of the history?" said Betty, overawed.

But this perhaps, was not the opinion of Charlie and mamma. No, they did not care very much for the history. People are bad travellers in that stage of life. They are too much interested in their own history. They went about like a pair of Philistines through all these ancient streets, talking of nothing but the things of to-day. The most serious part of their talk was about the home in the depths of England in which they were henceforth to spend their lives. Aubrey had ideas about re-furnishing—about making everything new. It would be impossible to tell the reader how bad was the taste of the time, and with what terrible articles of furniture he proposed to replace the spindle legs and marquetry of his grandfathers. But then these things were the fashion, and supposed to be the best things of the time. To hear them talking of sofas and curtains, and of the colour for the boudoir and the hangings of the drawing-room in the midst of all those graceful old places, was inconceivable. You would have said the stupidest, unimpressionable pair, talking of ugly modern English furniture, when they should have been noting the old world of Nuremberg—the unchanging mediæval city. But you must remember that the furniture was only a symbol of their love and their new life, and all the blessedness of being together, and the endless delights of every day. The sofas and the curtains meant the *Vita Nuova*, and the refurnishing of the old house a beautiful fabric of all the honour and the joy of life.

Then came the great river, and the progress down its shining stream, and between those beautiful banks, where again they made several pauses to enjoy the scenery. The Rhine is not now the river it was then. It was still the great river of romance in those days—Byron had been there, and the young people remembered Roland and his tower, with his love in the white convent opposite, and felt a shudder at the thought of the Lorelei as they floated under the high and gloomy bank. I doubt, however, whether the lovers thought much even of these things. They were busy just now about the gardens, which Bee was fully minded to remodel and fill with everything that was new and delightful in the way of flowers.

"I shall have masses of colour about the terrace, and every spot covered. I wonder which you like best, majolica vases or rustic baskets?" Bee was saying, when her mother called her to point out the Platz and Bishop Hatto's tower.

"Oh, yes, mamma, it's very pretty. But you like clematis, Aubrey, for the balustrade—to wind in and out of the pillars. Yes, yes, I can see it well enough. I like every kind of clematis, even the common one, the traveller's joy—and it would hang down, you know, over that old bit of wall you told me of. Do go forward, Aubrey, and let them see you are taking an interest. I do see it all quite well, and it is very romantic, and we are quite enjoying it I can assure you, mamma."

This was how they made their way down stream; in the moonlight nights they ceased to talk of practical matters, and went back to the history of their loves.

"Do you remember, Bee, that first time in the wood——?"

"Oh, Aubrey, don't you recollect that drive coming back in the dark—before I knew——?"

"But you always did know from the very beginning, Bee?"

"Well, perhaps I suspected—and used to think——"

"You darling, what did you think?—and did you really care—as early as that?"

They went on like this whatever happened outside, giving a careless glance at the heights, at the towers, at the robbers' castle above and the little villages below; not so much as looking at them, and yet remembering them ever after, enclosing the flow of their young lives, as it were, in that strong flowing of the Rhine, noting nothing and yet seeing everything with the double sight which people possess at the highest moment and crisis of their career. They came at length to Cologne, where this enchanted voyage was more or less to end. To be sure, they were still to be together; but only in the railway, with all the others round them, hearing more or less what they said. They said good-bye to the Rhine with a little sentiment, a delightful little sadness full of pleasure.

"Shall we ever be so happy again?" said Bee, with a sigh.

"Oh, yes, my sweet, a hundred times, and happier, and happier," said the young man; and thus they were assured it was to be.

I don't think any of them ever forgot that arrival at Cologne. They came into sight of the town just in the evening, when the last glow of sunset was still burning upon the great river, but lights beginning to show in the windows, and glimmering reflected in the water. The Cathedral was not completed then, and a crane, like some

strange weird animal stood out against the sky upon the top of the tower. The hotel to which they were going had a covered terrace upon the river with lights gleaming through the green leaves. They decided they would have their table there, and dine with all that darkling panorama before their eyes through the veil of the foliage, the glowing water, the boats moving and passing, with now and then a raft coming down from the upper stream, and the bridge of boats opening to give passage to a fuming fretting steamboat. Aubrey and Bee went hand in hand up the steps; nobody noticed in the half dark how close they were together. They parted with a close pressure of warm hands.

"Don't be long, darling," he said, as they parted, only for a moment, only to prepare a little for the evening, to slip into a fresh dress, to take out a new ribbon, to make one's youthful self as fair as such unnecessary adjuncts permitted.

But what did Aubrey care for a new ribbon? The only blue he thought of was that in Bee's eyes.

I do not think she was more than ten minutes over these little changes. She dressed like a flash of lightning, Betty said, who could not find her own things half so quickly, Moulsey being occupied with mamma. Such a short moment not worth counting, and yet enough, more than enough, to change a whole life!

Bee ran down as light as air to the sitting-room which had been engaged for the party. She felt sure that Aubrey would hurry, too, so as to have a word before dinner, before the rest were ready—as if the whole day had not been one long word, running through everything. She came lightly to the door of the room in her fresh frock and her blue ribbons, walking on air, knowing no shadow of any obstacle before her or cloud upon the joyful triumphant sky. She did not even hear the sound of the subdued voices, her faint little sob, strangest of all sounds at such a moment, which seemed to come out to meet her as she opened the door. Bee opened it wondering only if Aubrey were there, thinking of some jibe to address to him about the length of time men took to their toilettes, if she happened to be ready first.

She was very much startled by what she saw. Her mother, still in her travelling dress, sat by the table with a letter open in her hands. She had not made any preparation for dinner—she, usually so dainty, so anxious to get rid of the cloaks and of the soils of the journey. She had taken off her hat, which lay on the table, but was still enveloped in the shawl which she had put on to keep off the evening chills. As for Aubrey, he was exactly as he had been when they parted with him, except that all the light had gone out of his face. He was very pale, and he, too, had a letter in his hand. He uttered a stifled exclamation when he saw Bee at the door, and, lifting his arms as though in protest against something intolerable, walked away to the other end of the room.

"Oh, Bee," said Mrs. Kingsward, "Oh, go away, my dear, go away! I mean—get something to eat, you and Charlie, and Betty, and then get to bed. Get to bed! I am too tired to take anything, and I am going upstairs at once."

"I thought you had been upstairs, mamma, half-an-hour ago. What is the matter? You look like a ghost, and so does Aubrey. Has anything happened? Mamma, you won't look at me, and Aubrey turns his back. What have I done? Is it anything about me?"

"What nonsense, child!" said Mrs. Kingsward, with a pretence at a smile. "What could you have to do with it? We have both—Mr. Leigh and myself—found letters, and we are busy reading them. I am sure the dinner must be served. We ordered it in the balcony, don't you remember? Run away and make Charlie and Betty sit down at once. I am too tired. Moulsey will run down in a little and get something for me."

"Mamma," said Bee, "you cannot make up a story. Something has happened, I am sure of it; and it is something about me."

"Nonsense, child! Go away and have your dinner. I would come if I could. Don't you see what a budget of letters I have got? And some of them I must answer to-night."

"Have you letters, too, Aubrey?" said Bee, in her amazement, standing still as she had paused, arrested by the sight of them, just within the door.

"Bee, I must beg you will not put any questions; go and do what I tell you; your brother and sister will be coming downstairs. Yes, of course, you can see that Mr. Leigh has his letters to read as well as I."

"Mr. Leigh! I wonder if we have all gone mad, or what is the matter? Aubrey! tell me—you, at least, if mamma won't. You must have had a quarrel. Mamma, why do you call him Mr. Leigh?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, Bee, go away."

"I am not going away," cried the girl. "You have had a quarrel about something. Come, mamma, you must not quarrel with Aubrey—if he has done something wrong or said something silly, I will answer for him, he never intended it. Aubrey, what do you mean, sir, turning your back both on mamma and me? Come here, quick, and ask her pardon, and say you will never do it again."

Poor little Bee's heart was fluttering, but she would not allow herself to believe there was anything really wrong. She went close up to her mother and stood by her, with a hand upon her shoulder. "Aubrey!" she said, "never mind if you are wrong or not, come and beg mamma's pardon, and she will forgive you. There must not—there must not—oh, it is too ridiculous!—be anything wrong between mamma and you. Aubrey!"

He turned round slowly and faced them both with a face so pale that Bee stopped short with a gasp, and could not say a word more. Mrs. Kingsward had buried her face in her hands. Bee looked from one to the other with a dismay which she could not explain to herself. "Oh, what is the matter? What is the matter?" she said.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE WAS no merry dinner that night in the verandah of the hotel under the clinging wreaths of green. Mrs. Kingsward went up to her room still with her heavy shawl about her shoulders which she had forgotten, though it added something to her discomfort—followed by Bee, pale and rigid, offering no help, following her mother like an angry shadow. Charlie and Betty met them on the stairs and stood aside in consternation, unable to conceive what had happened. Mrs. Kingsward gave them a sort of troubled smile and said: "Get your dinner, dears; don't wait for us. I am too tired to come down to-night."

"But, mamma——" they both began in remonstrance.

"Go down and get your dinner," said Mrs. Kingsward, peremptorily.

As for Bee, she did not look at them at all. Her eyes were fierce with some sentiment which Betty could not divine, and angry, blazing, as if they might have set light to the hotel.

Little Betty pressed against Charlie's side as they went down, startled and alarmed. "Bee has had a quarrel with mamma," she whispered, in tones of awe.

"That's impossible," said Charlie.

"Oh, no, it's not impossible. There was once——"

It comforted them both a little in the awful circumstances that such a thing had perhaps happened before. They went very silently and much cast down to that table in the verandah, whither obsequious waiters beckoned them, and contemplated with dismay all the plates laid, all the glitter of the lamps and the glasses.

"I suppose we must not wait for them as they said so," said Charlie, sitting down in his place at the bottom of the table. "Tell Mr. Leigh—that is the other gentleman—that we are ready."

"The other gentleman, sir," said the waiter, who was the pride of the establishment for his English, "has gone out."

"Gone out!" said Charlie. He could only stare at Betty and she at him, not knowing what to think.

"He has had his letters, too, sir," said the waiter in a significant tone.

His letters! What could that have to do with it? Charlie also had had his letters, one of them a bill which he did not view with any satisfaction; but even at twenty-one a man already learns to disguise his feelings, and sits down to dinner cheerfully though he has received a bill by the post. Charlie's mind at first could not perceive any connection between Bee's withdrawal upstairs and Aubrey's disappearance. It was Betty who suggested, sitting down very close to him, that it looked as if Aubrey and Bee had quarrelled too.

"Perhaps that is what it is," she said, as if she had found out a satisfactory reason. "Lovers always quarrel; and mamma will have taken Aubrey's part, and Bee will be so angry, and feel as if she could never forgive him. There, that is what it must be."

"A man may quarrel with his sweetheart," said Charlie, severely, "but he needn't spoil other people's dinner for that;" however, they comforted themselves that this was the most likely explanation, and that all would come right in the morning. And they were very young and hungry, having eaten nothing since the veal at one o'clock. And these two made on the whole a very satisfactory meal.

The scene upstairs was very different. Mrs. Kingsward sent Moulsey away on pretence of getting her some tea, and then turned to her daughter who stood by the dressing-table and stared blankly, without seeing anything, into those mysterious depths of the glass which are so suggestive to people in trouble. She said, faintly, "Bee, I would so much rather you would not ask me any more questions to-night."

"That is," said Bee, "you would like to send me away to be miserable by myself without even knowing what it is, while you will take your sleeping draught and forget it. How can you be so selfish, mamma? And you have made my Aubrey join in the conspiracy against me—my Aubrey who belongs to me as papa does to you. If you are against us it is all very well, though I can't imagine why you should be against us—but at least you need not interfere between Aubrey and me."

"Oh, my dear child, my poor darling!" said Mrs. Kingsward, wringing her hands.

"It is all very well to call me your poor child, when it is you that are making me poor," said Bee.

She kept moving a little, first on one foot then on the other, but always gazing into the glass which presented the image of an excited girl, very pale, but lit up with a sort of blaze of indignation, and unable to keep still. It was not that girl's face, however, that Bee was gazing at, but at the dim world of space beyond in which there were faint far-away reflections of the light and the world. "And if you think you will get rid of me like this, and hang me up till to-morrow without knowing what it is, you are mistaken, mamma. I will not leave you until you have told me. What is it? What has papa got in his head? What does he say in that horrid—horrid letter? I wish I had known when I gave it to you I should have thrown it into the river instead of ever letting it come into your hands."

"Bee, you must know that this passion is very wrong and very improper. You ought not to face me like that, and demand an answer. I am your mother," said Mrs. Kingsward, but with a falter which was all unlike that assumption of authority, "and I have no need to tell you anything more than I think is for your good."

"Ah! I know where that comes from," cried Bee; "that's papa's thunder! that's what he has told you to say! You don't believe, yourself, that you have a right to hang up a poor girl over some dreadful, dreadful abyss, when she was so happy and never suspected anything." Here Bee's voice faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered herself. "And to drag her away from the one person that could support her, and to cut the ground from under her feet, and never to tell her what it means!"

It was at this point that Moulsey, with a little discreet cough to herald her approach, came into the room, bearing a tray with tea, and a little cover from which came a faint but agreeable odour. Mrs. Kingsward was in great trouble about her child, but she was much exhausted and in want of physical support, and it did seem to her hard that she might not be permitted to eat the smallest of cutlets before embarking on a scene such as she knew this would be. Oh, why didn't papa come and say it himself, when there was so much that was dreadful to say?

"Shall I fetch something for Miss Bee, too?" said Moulsey. "It ain't a good thing for a young creature to go without her dinner. If she's not going down, ma'am, as would be much the best, I'll just run and fetch a little something for Miss Bee too."

"Indeed, indeed, Bee, Moulsey is right. Think how miserable the others will feel all alone, and thinking something has happened. Do go down, darling, and strengthen yourself with a little food, and take a glass of wine just for once to please me. And after that you shall be told everything—all that I know."

Bee grew paler and paler, standing there before the glass, and her eyes blazed more and more. "It is as bad as that, then!" she said under her breath to herself, and then went away from where she was standing to the further end of the room. "I shall wait here, mamma, till you have had your tea. I know you want it. Oh, go away Moulsey! Let me alone! No, you shall not bring me anything! or, if you do, I will throw it out of the window," she said, stamping her foot. The dark end of the room seemed suddenly lighted up by a sort of aurora borealis, with the fire of poor Bee's burning eyes and the flashes here and there of her white frock—oh, poor white frock! put on in the sunshine of life and happiness to please her love, and now turned into a sort of sacrificial robe.

"Take it away, Moulsey; I can't eat anything—I can't, indeed—no more than Miss Bee—"

"But you must, ma'am," said Moulsey. "Miss Bee's young; she's had nothing to drain away her strength. But it's far different with you, after all your family and so weak as you are. If Miss Bee were a real good girl, as I always thought her, she'd go away and get something herself just for her poor mamma's sake, and leave you alone for a moment to get a little peace and rest."

"There is no rest for me," murmured the poor lady. "Oh, papa, papa, why didn't you come and tell them yourself?"

These piteous tones went to Bee's heart. They moved her half with contempt, half with compassion—with something of that high indignant toleration of weakness which is one kind of pity. If mamma could eat and drink at such a moment, why shouldn't she be left to do it? The girl started up and left the room in the quick flashing impulse of her passion. She walked up and down in the corridor outside, her arms folded over her high-beating, tumultuous heart. Yes, no doubt she was going to be miserable, all her happiness was cut down and withered away, but in her present passionate impulse of resistance and gathering of all her forces to resist the catastrophe, which she did not understand, it could scarcely be said that she was wretched yet. What was it—what was it? she was saying to herself. It might still be something that would pass away, which would be overcome by the determined, impassioned stand against it, which Bee felt that it was in her to make. The thing that was worst of all, that stole away her courage, was that Aubrey had failed her. He should have been there by her side whatever happened. He ought not to have abandoned her. No doubt he thought it was more delicate, more honourable, more something or other; and that it was his duty to leave her to brave it alone. It must have been one of those high-flown notions of honour that men have. Honour! to leave a girl to fight for herself and him, alone—but, no doubt, that was what had seemed right in his eyes. Bee walked up and down in the half-lighted passage, sometimes almost pushing against someone going up or down, waiters or chambermaids or surprised guests, who looked after her when she had passed; but she did not take any notice of them, and she heard as she passed her mother's door little sounds of tea-cups and dishes, and Moulsey's voice saying "A little more," and her mother's faint replies. Poor mamma! After all, what ever it was, it could not be her affair as it was Bee's. She would be unhappy about it, but not all unhappy. She had the others, who were all right. She had papa. It would not shatter her to pieces even if one of the children was to be shipwrecked. It was the shipwrecked one only who would be broken to pieces. For the first time in her life Bee felt the poignant sensation, the jealous pride, the high, desolate satisfaction of suffering. The others could all eat and do the ordinary things. She was elevated over all that, silent as on a Peak in Darien. She felt almost a kind of dreadful pleasure in the situation, smiling to herself at the sounds of her mother's little meal. She could dine while Bee was miserable. They could all dine—Charlie (which was natural), Betty, even Aubrey. She had no doubt that he, too, must be seated, feeling as a man does that dinner must go on whatever happens, at the table downstairs.

After a while, which seemed a long time to Bee, Moulsey came out with the tray. She was startled, and exclaimed under her breath at the appearance of the girl walking up and down in the corridor: "I did think you would have had the sense to go and join the others, Miss Bee." Bee was too much uplifted, too distant on her high pinnacle of martyrdom, to make any reply, but when Moulsey ventured to add a word of advice, to the effect that she must be careful of her mamma and not weary her with questions and she so tired and so weak, the girl flashed forth all her heart of indignation. "She has eaten her cutlet, it appears," cried Bee. "I should think she may answer my questions."

"Oh!" cried the maid, who had the privileges of an old servant, "you have got a heart without pity. You are just like your papa!"

Bee swept past her into the room, where poor Mrs. Kingsward, who after all had eaten but a morsel, sat lying back in an easy chair awaiting the dreadful conflict which she knew was coming. Poor lady, she had lost all her brightness, that pretty grace of the young mother among her grown up children, which prompted so many compliments. She lay back in her easy chair, feeling as she said "any age"—as old as any woman on the edge of the grave, not knowing how she was to bear the onslaught that was coming, and how she was to say what had to be said. He had borne it far better than Bee—poor Aubrey, poor Aubrey! whom she must not call Aubrey any more. He had not denied anything, he had fallen as it were at her feet, like a house that had been undermined and had no sound foundations, but Bee was different. Bee was a tower that had foundations—a girl that was able to stand up even to papa, and why—why had he not come to give forth his sentence in his own way?

Bee came forward flashing into the light, in that white frock which shone, and with those eyes that blazed through all the neutral tints in the room. She did not sit down, which would have been a little relief, but seized a chair and stood with her hand upon the back, leaning upon it.

"I hope, mamma," she said, pitiless, "that you liked your tea, and ate something—and that you are better now."

"Oh, Bee!" cried the poor lady; if there is one reproach more dreadful than another it is this of being able to eat when you ought to be overwhelmed with trouble." Mrs. Kingsward could scarcely keep from crying at the imputation. And Bee, I fear, knew that it was the unkindest thing that could be said.

"Now, mamma," she resumed, almost stonily, "it is time that you should tell me what has happened. We arrived here all quite happy—it is just an hour ago—" here Bee's voice shook a little, but she commanded it with an effort—"I ran up to dress for dinner, and when I came back in about ten minutes I found you and Aubrey—with your letters—looking as if you had both been dead and buried while I was away. You wouldn't answer me, and he never said a word. You had done something to him in that little time to make him turn away from me, and yet you will not tell me what it is. Here I am alone," said Bee, once more with a quiver in her voice. "Aubrey ought to be standing by me. I suppose he is having his dinner downstairs, too, and thinking no more of me. I just stand alone, nobody caring in all the world. What is the meaning of it, mamma?"

"Bee, you are very hard upon me. And poor Aubrey, he is having no dinner—of that I am sure."

"You called him Mr. Leigh downstairs."

"So I did, and so I must, and all of us; but I cannot have you speaking of him like that, poor, poor fellow; and just for this once— Oh, Bee, my darling, don't stand and look at me so! I would rather have died than say it either to him or to you. Your papa has been hearing I don't know what, and he has changed his mind about Mr. Leigh altogether, and says it must not be."

"What must not be?"

"Oh, Bee! Oh, don't take it so hard! Don't look like that! Your—your—engagement, my darling. Have patience;

oh, have patience! He has heard something. Men hear things that we would never hear. And he doesn't deny it. Oh! he doesn't deny it. I had a hope that he would contradict it at once, and flare up in a rage like you, and say it wasn't true. But he doesn't deny it—poor boy, poor boy! And after that, how can I say one word to papa?"

"My engagement?" said Bee, in a hoarse voice. She had been staring at her mother as in a dream—only partially hearing, not understanding at all the rest that was said. "My engagement? He gave his consent. It was all settled. You would not allow us till the letter came, but then it was consent."

"Yes, yes, dear. That was at first. He consented at first because—and now it appears he has heard something—someone has called upon him—he has discovered—and he writes to me that it must be broken off. Oh, Bee, don't think my heart doesn't bleed for you. I think it will kill me. He says it must be broken off at once."

"Who says so?" said Bee, in her passion. "He! One would think you were speaking of God—that can say 'Yes' to-day and 'No' to-morrow, and build things up and then snatch them down. But I will not have it! I am not a doll, to be put in one position and then in another, as anybody pleases. My engagement! It is mine; it is not his."

"Bee, think; it is papa you are speaking of. Dear, I feel for you—I feel for you! but so does he. Oh, my darling, you don't know what you are saying. Do you think he would do anything to make you unhappy if he could help it—your papa, Bee, who has been so good to you all your life?"

"I do not care how good he has been. He is not good now. How will it harm him? He sits at home, and he thinks he can do as he pleases. But not with me. It is my affair more than it is his. He thinks he can break his word and it doesn't matter—but I have given my word, and it does matter. Break my engagement!" cried Bee, her young bosom swelling, the sob rising in her throat that would soon choke her voice. "It is mine and not his; and nobody in the world shall break it. You can tell him so, mamma, or I will write myself and tell him so. I am not a wax image to take any shape he pleases. Who is he? He is not God—"

"Bee—he is your father—"

"Oh, my father! Yes, I do whatever he tells me. If he says I am to fetch anything I run like a little dog. I have never been disobedient. But this—this is different. I am not a child any longer. And, mamma, not for him nor for anyone—not even for you will I take back my word."

"Bee! You make me say a great deal more than I meant to say. I thought you would have been a good child and seen that papa must know best. My poor, poor little girl, there is worse behind. Mr. Leigh, whom we all thought so much of—"

"Aubrey," Bee managed to say, though for no other word could she command her voice.

"Darling, he has deceived us. He is not what he seems. He has done, oh, so wrong—there have been things—that you ought never to hear—"

"Stop!" said Bee. She had to speak in monosyllables with her labouring breath. "Wait!—not behind his back." She rushed to the bell and rung it so wildly that both waiter and chambermaid appeared in alarm, with Moulsey rushing in calling for a doctor, and saying that her lady was going to faint. Bee pushed the woman aside and turned to the waiter, who stood anxious at the door. "Mr. Leigh!" she cried, impatiently; "the gentleman—who was with us: tell him—to come here."

"The tall young gentleman?" said the waiter.

"No—the other: tell him he is to come here—instantly—this moment."

"I beg your pardon, miss," said the man. "The other gentleman? He have been gone away this half-hour."

"Gone away!" she cried. And it seemed to Bee that the blackness of darkness closed over her and the room and everything in it. She did not faint, oh no, no such happiness—but everything grew dark, and through the dark she heard her own voice speaking—speaking, and did not know what she said.

CHAPTER V.

BUT Aubrey had not gone away. He had gone out in the dizziness of a great downfall, scarcely knowing how to keep his feet steady as he wandered along the dark street, not knowing where he went. The landscape that had charmed them all so much—was it scarcely an hour ago?—the lamps reflected in the water; the verandah, with its wreaths of green; the brilliant yet mysterious glimmer of the moon, made his heart sink to look at them now. He strayed off into the darkest of the narrow streets, into the great gloom of the cathedral shadow, where he could see nothing but a poor light twinkling here and there, making the darkness visible. Oh! how certain it is that, however sweet they may seem, your sins will find you out! Oh! how more than certain if you have let yourself be dragged down once, only once, in a spotless life, that the one fault will be made into the central fact of your whole existence. If he had been a bad, dissipated man, it would have been only fair. But this poor young fellow was like the young man whom our Lord loved though he went away. All good things he had kept from his youth up—but once, only once, half distracted by grief, and by the desire which is so natural to escape from grief, and by infernal temptation, he had fallen—oh, there was no need to tell him how he had fallen! Had it not been the canker in his soul ever since? And now this one thing, this miserable, much-repented fault, which revolted, disgusted, horrified himself, was brought up against him as if it were the pattern upon which he had shaped his life.

And now, what was left for him but to fall down, down into the unfathomable abyss? The distracted feelings with which he had broken away from home, the horror and dismay that at once belonged to his natural grief and made the burden of it a thousand times harder to bear, all rushed back upon him, whirling him down and down to dimmer and more awful depths. He had partially healed himself in the intolerableness of his trouble by travel and change, and the arbitrary forgetfulness which comes from absence and the want of any association which could call back to him what was past; and then the touch of Bee's soft, girlish hand, the sound of her voice, had suddenly called him back into an enchanted land where everything had again become possible. He had hesitated for some time, wondering if he might dare—he who had a secret smirch upon him which nobody suspected—to avail himself of this way of salvation. The reader will think that he had not hesitated very long—poor Aubrey—seeing that the introduction, the acquaintance, the love, the engagement had all occurred within the small space of one month; but to the brooding spirit the hours of one interminable day are long enough for a chronicle. Something like the phenomena of love at first sight had occurred in the bleeding yet young heart, which had felt itself cut loose from all the best associations

of life. Deliverance, recreation, the new beginning of life and all its possibilities had gleamed upon him in Bee's blue eyes. Her appearance swept away everything that was dark and ominous in his life. Did he dare to ask for her hand, to set out again to make himself a new career? He had worked at that question almost from the first day, discussing it with himself for the three weeks preceding their engagement, waking and sleeping, almost without intermission; and then in a moment he had forgotten all controversy, and let forth without intention the words that had been lying, so to speak, on the threshold of his lips—and in that moment all the clouds had been swept away. He was only eight and twenty after all—so young to have such a past behind him, and what so natural as that his life should begin again—begin now as for the first time? He had hesitated in the first fervour of his betrothal whether he should not tell all his story. But there was no one to tell it to but Mrs. Kingsward—a lady, even a young lady, not looking much older than Bee herself. That is one of the drawbacks of a young mother. She was still in the sphere of the girls, not in that of the old ladies whom Heaven has ordained to represent the mothers of the race. How could he tell to her the story of that entanglement? If Colonel Kingsward had been there, Aubrey was of opinion that he would have made a clean breast of everything to him. But I think it very likely that he might not have done so. He would have intended it, and he would have put it off from day to day; and then he knew how lightly men of the world look upon such matters. What would have horrified Mrs. Kingsward would probably call forth nothing but a pooh-pooh from her husband. Aubrey, as it proved, was mistaken there, for Colonel Kingsward had ideas of his own, not always corresponding to those of the ordinary man of the world; but no doubt had he heard the story from that side and not from the other, he would have regarded it in a very different light.

But it was too late—too late for these reflections now. The fiat had gone forth, the sentence had been pronounced beyond appeal. Oh, Bee, Bee, she was too good for him; too fresh, too bright, unsullied by the world, for a man who had gone through so much already although he was still young enough. He who had loved and married—though, oh, how differently!—poor little Amy, who was nobody, whom he had liked for her yielding sweetness, sweetness which had cost him so dear—he who had been a father, who had lost his way in life amid the fogs of death and grief—how had he now dared to think that such a girl as Bee should dedicate her fresh young life to restore him again to the lost possibilities of his? It seemed to him the greatest presumption, the most dreadful, cynical, almost blasphemous attempt. It was the way of the world—to think that any woman, however good, might be sacrificed to the necessities of a man's restoration whatever he had done; everybody thought so, his own mother even. But he, Aubrey, should have known better—he should have known that even at his best he could never have been good enough for Bee, and to think that he had dared now when he was no longer at his best! What a fool, what a fool he had been! He had come to be able to endure the daylight and "get on" well enough when he had arrived at the Bath and seen her first. Why had he not contented himself with that, knowing that he had no right to expect more? And now there was nothing—nothing before him but a plunge into the unutterable darkness—darker than ever, without any hope—worse almost, if worse were possible, than when he had fled from his home.

He did not know how long he had been roaming about the dark town pondering all these dreadful thoughts. When he went back to the hotel, which he finally did, worn out, not knowing where else to go, one reproachful waiter, with eyes that said he ought to have been in bed long ago, was waiting for him with a curt demand what he would have to eat, and all the house, except that deserted eating-room, where one light twinkled—reproachful, like the waiter—was shut up. He went to his room when he had swallowed some brandy, which was the only thing he could find to put a little warmth into his chilled limbs and despairing heart, and threw himself miserable upon his bed, where I have no doubt he slept, though he was not aware of it—as Bee did, though she had no intention of doing so.

The only one who was really a sufferer in this respect was poor Mrs. Kingsward, who was ill, and who had been far more agitated than her feeble strength could bear. She it was who lay and wondered all through the night what she must do. Was he really gone without a word, thus proving how much he was in the wrong, and how right the Colonel was? It would have saved her from a great deal of embarrassment, but I do not think Mrs. Kingsward wished that Aubrey might have really gone. It was too summary, it was not natural, it would show Colonel Kingsward to have been too right. Oh! she believed he was right! She did not doubt that his decision was for the best any more than she doubted that it was inexorable; but still the heart revolted a little, and she hoped that he might not be proved so unutterably right as that. And poor Bee—poor little Bee! She did not know, poor child, that there were bitters in the sweetest cup—that if she had twenty years of Aubrey she would not probably have thought quite so much of him as now—that nobody was perfect, which was a conviction that had been forced upon Mrs. Kingsward's own mind, though it was not a strong one, by the passage of the years. And then the poor lady went off into perplexed considerations of what she personally must do. Must he leave them all at once, travel home in a different carriage, avoid them at the stations, not venture to come near their table when they dined on the way? It would seem so ridiculous, and it would be so embarrassing after their very close intercourse. But men never thought of these little things. She felt sure that the Colonel would expect her never to let the two meet again. And how could she do that when they were both travelling the same way? Besides, was it fair, was it just, would Bee endure it—never to see him again?

Bee woke up in all the energy of despair. It burst upon her in the first moment of her waking that he had gone away, that it was all over; but her mind, when it had time to think, rejected that idea; he would not, could not have gone without a word, without even saying farewell, without asking her—anything, anything—to forgive him or to forget him, or to be faithful to him, or not to believe what was said against him. One or other of these things Aubrey must say to her before he went away. Therefore, he could not have gone away, and everything was still possible. In her passion and pride she had refused last night to let her mother tell her what it was. She had resolved that Aubrey should be present, that he should hear the accusation against him, that he should give his own explanation—that was only just, she said to herself—the poorest criminal had a right to that! And Aubrey should have it. He should not, whatever papa said and whatever mamma said, be condemned unheard. She dressed in great haste and rang the bell energetically to ascertain if he had come back. But the chambermaid who answered Bee's bell was stupid and could not understand what Herr it was about whom the young lady questioned her so closely. Had he come back? Oh, yes, she believed all the Herren had come back; there was not a bed to be had in the house. But what Herr was it whom the gracious young lady sought. The old gentleman in the next room, who was so ill? She heard that he was a little better this morning—or the young Herr in number ten, or the Herr whose eyes were so bad, who was going to the great doctor at Dusseldorf? Perhaps poor Bee's German was at fault. She was still attempting to make the matter clear when Moulsey came in with the news that Mrs. Kingsward was very poorly, and had not slept at all, a

statement which Betty, rushing in half-dressed, confirmed anxiously. "Mamma has had a very bad night; and what is the matter, Bee, that we are all at sixes and sevens, and why did you lock your door? I came up as soon as I could—as soon as Charlie would let me. He said it was dreadful, nobody coming down; and that we must eat through the dinner for the sake of appearances. And Aubrey never showing neither, and me obliged to sleep in mamma's room because you had locked the door."

"I want to know," said Bee, "whether Aubrey came back last night."

"Oh, how should I know?" said Betty, "and why shouldn't he come back? Of course he must have come back. Is he going anywhere else but home? I wish people would not get letters," said the girl. "You are all so ridiculous since those letters came last night. Letters are nice when they are nice. But, oh! how much nicer it was yesterday morning when you had none, and we were all quite happy, and mamma well, and Aubrey and you as funny as you could be!"

There flashed upon Bee as she spoke the whole bright panorama of yesterday. Not a cloud in the sky nor a trouble in the world. Mamma as fresh as the morning, the river shining, the steamboat thrilling through the water with a shiver of pleasure in its wooden sides, every group adding amusement, and they themselves affording it, no doubt, to the rest. How conscious they had been when they laughed under their breath at the young German pairs, that they themselves were lovers too, quite as happy, if not so demonstrative. Oh! yesterday—yesterday! You might as well say last century for anything that resembled it now. Bee turned almost fiercely to Moulsey, who stood looking on with that air of knowing all about it which so often exasperated the girls, and requested her to go downstairs immediately and ask if Mr. Leigh had come back. Moulsey hesitated and protested that the chambermaid would know. "And you that know the language, Miss Bee."

"Go down directly and inquire if Mr. Leigh has come back. You know the waiter that speaks such good English as well as I do," said Bee, peremptorily. And Moulsey could do nothing but obey.

Yes, Mr. Leigh had come back; he had occupied his room, but was not yet up so far as the attendants knew. There came such a change on Bee's face at this news as startled both the curious observers. The light grew less fierce, more like the usual sunny brightness in her eyes. A softening came over her face. Her colour flashed back. "I want to know when mamma is coming downstairs," she said. "Moulsey—or no, stop. I'll go myself and see."

Moulsey was so roused that she caught the young lady by the arm. "If it was your papa himself, my lady shan't be disturbed," she said. "And not by you, Miss Bee, as are the cause of it all; not if you should put a knife into me afore her door."

"How dare you say I am the cause of it all?"

"Because it's the truth," said the enraged maid. "She was worried enough before by those letters, and you coming in like the wind, like your papa himself, as I always said you were his living image; and stopping her in the middle of her little bit of outlet that would have given her strength, and questioning of her like a drum-major, and pacing up and down outside the door like a wild beast. Mind my words: you don't know, none of you, how little strength my poor lady's got. And you're all so masterful, every one, with mamma here and mamma there, and you'll not find out till it's too late——"

"But mamma's better," cried Betty. "She has taken her cure, and she's all right till next year."

"I only wish as you may all find it so, miss," said Moulsey, folding her arms across her broad chest and shaking her head.

Bee was awe-struck for a moment by this speech, but she knew that Moulsey was always a croaker, and it was quite true about the cure. She paused a little uncertain, and then she resumed in a subdued voice—

"I never want to disturb mamma. But Moulsey, we've got to leave here to-day."

"That can't be," said Moulsey, decisively. "My lady is not fit to travel after such a bad night, and I won't have it," she said. "The doctor has put my lady into my hands, and he says 'She's not to be overtired. Mind, I don't respond for nothing if she's overtired.' And she just shan't go—that's flat. And you may all say what you like, and your papa, too."

"Not to-day?" said Bee, with another change of countenance. It flashed upon her that another day's delay would give time for all the explanations in which she could not help hoping. Her excited pulses calmed down a little. She was not alarmed about her mother. Had she been so, it would no doubt have given her thoughts another direction. But Bee knew nothing of illness, much less anything of death. She was not afraid of them. In her experience people might be ill occasionally, but they always got better. Mamma, too, would be better presently, when she got up; and then they could all meet, and the letters and the whole matter could be discussed. And it seemed to be impossible—impossible that from this some better conclusion could be arrived at. There had been so much confusion last night, when it burst upon them like a thunderstroke. When looked at calmly, without flurry or haste, the better moment would bring better views, and who could say that all might not yet be well?

CHAPTER VI.

EMBOLDENED by this thought Bee went downstairs to breakfast, which was spread again in the verandah in the warm sunshine of the autumnal morning. The new hope, though it were a forlorn one, restored her youthful appetite as well as her courage, and her coffee and roll were a real restorative after the long fast and agitated night. But there was no appearance of Aubrey, neither at the table nor in the passages, nor anywhere about. He seemed to have disappeared as if he had never been. When Charlie came down from his mother's room, where he had been shut up with her for some time, Bee, who had no particular respect for Charlie's opinion or inclination to allow him any authority over herself, such as an elder brother is sometimes supposed to have, began at once to question him. "Where is Aubrey?" she said. "Why doesn't he come to breakfast? Will you go and look for Aubrey, Charlie?"

"Indeed, I will do no such thing," said Charlie, almost roughly. "I hope he has had the sense to go away. I should just like to see him come calmly down to breakfast as if nothing had happened. If he came, then I can answer for it, you should not be allowed to say a word to him, Bee."

"Who should prevent me?" cried Bee, looking up with her eyes on fire and her nostrils dilating. She had not noticed before what a cloud was upon Charlie's face and how heavy and scowling were his brows. She added, springing up, "We shall soon see about that. If you think I shall do what you tell me, or condemn any man unheard
——"

"The cad! He never denied it. You can ask mamma."

"I will not ask anyone but Mr. Leigh," said Bee, throwing back her head; "and I advise you to mind your own business, and not to call names that may come back upon yourself."

"Stop where you are, Bee. I never went out into the world under false pretences. A man is a cad when he does that."

"I shall not stop for you, nor anyone but my parents," said Bee, in a splendid flush of anger, her countenance glowing, her eyes blazing. "Stand out of my way. Oh, if that is all, and you want to make a scene for the edification of the tourists, I can go in by the other door."

And she did so, leaving Charlie standing flushed and angry, but quite unable, it need scarcely be said, to coerce his sister. To make an attempt of this kind, which comes to nothing, is confusing and humiliating. He looked round angrily for a moment to see if it were possible to intercept her, then, yielding to necessity, sat down where Betty, eager and full of a thousand questions, sat calling for explanations. That is the good of a family party, there is always someone ready to hear what you have to say.

Bee went at once to the English-speaking waiter, and asked for Mr. Leigh, whom the man, curious as all lookers-on are at a social drama going on under their eyes, declared to be still in his room. She sent him off instantly with a message, and stood in the hall awaiting his return, angry and brave, like the rose in George Herbert's poem, yet soon getting shamefaced and troubled, as the people coming and going, travellers, visitors, attendants, stared at her and brushed against her as they passed. Bee never forgot all her life the gleam of the river at the foot of the steps, of which she had a glimpse through the doorway—the Rhine barges slowly crossing that little space of vision, the little boats flitting across the gleam of the rosy morning, and the strong flowing tide, the figures going up and down breaking the prospect.

The man came back to her after a time, looking half sympathetic, half malicious, with the message that the gentleman was just going out.

"Just going out!" She repeated the words half-consciously. "Was it Aubrey that sent her that message? Aubrey—who yesterday would not let her out of his sight, who followed her everywhere, saw every sign she made, heard every word almost before it was spoken!" The surprise and the pang together made her heart sick. She could not rush upstairs and knock at his door and call him out imperatively, to tell her immediately what it all meant—at least, though it occurred to her that this would be the most natural thing to do, she did not. Intimidated by the circumstances, by the half impertinence of the waiter, by the stare of the people about, she reflected for a moment breathlessly that he must come out this way, and that if she remained there she must see him. But Bee's instinct of a young woman, now for the first time awakened, made her shrink from this. When she was only a little girl, so very short a time ago, she did not mind who looked at her, who pushed past her. But now everything was different!

She went away, still holding her head high that nobody (above all not Charlie, who was watching her through the glass of the verandah) should guess that her courage was drooping, and going into the deserted sitting-room, where last night that blow had fallen upon her, sat down and wrote to her lover a hurried little note:

"Oh, Aubrey, what is the matter? Have you deserted me without a word? Do you think I am like them, to take up any report? I don't know what report there is—I don't know what it is, this terrible thing that has come between us. What is it? I will take your word and nobody else's. I don't believe you have done anything that is wrong. Aubrey! come and tell me out of your own mouth. I told mamma last night I would hear nothing unless you were there; but you were gone away, they said. And now you send me word that you are going out and can't see me. Going out and can't see *me*! What does it all mean?"

"If it is some fad of honour, of not seeing me against *their* will—though I do think your first duty is to me, Aubrey, before anyone else in the world—but if it should be so, mamma will be down here at twelve o'clock—and I invite you to meet her, to hear what is said, to answer for yourself and for me. If you have done anything wrong, what does that matter? Don't we all do wrong? And why should it come between you and me? Am I without sin that I should throw stones at you? Aubrey, you can't throw everything away without a word. You can't desert me without a word. I can bear anything—anything, rather than this.

"Your BEE—"

Bee, poor child, shrank from intrusting this to the impertinent waiter, who had a leer in his eye as if he were defending his own side from the importunities of the other. She went out furtively into the hall and studied the numbers of the rooms and the names of the tenants upon the board, necessity quickening her perceptions, and then she stole upstairs and gave her poor little appeal into the hands of the stout chambermaid who watched over that part of the hotel. It was for the Herr in No. 10, and the answer was to be brought immediately to the little salon No. 20 downstairs. "Eine Antwort," she said over and over again in her imperfect speech. "Schnell, schnell!" This, with the aid of a thaler—for it was before the days of the mark—produced perfect understanding in the mind of the maid, who with becks and wreathed smiles accepted the commission, and in a short time brought her back the answer for which she waited with feverish anxiety. It was very much shorter than her own.

"I am not worthy to stand before you. I cannot and I must not take advantage of your innocence; better I should disappear altogether than wound your ears with what they say. But I will not since you will it so. At twelve o'clock then, Bee, my darling, I will stand up before your mother, and say what I can for myself. Bee, my own dearest, my only hope!"

This last was scrawled across the paper as if he had put it in after the despair of the former part. It was this that the poor little girl fixed upon—the sweet words to which she had been accustomed, which her heart was fainting for. It was not, one would have said, a very cheerful note for a love-letter. But Bee was ridiculously cheered by it. So long as she was his own dearest, his hope, his darling—so long as there was no change in his love for her—why then, in the long run, whatever was said, everything must come right.

I need not follow Bee to her mother's bedside, when Mrs. Kingsward woke and for the first moment did not remember what had happened.

"Is that you, Bee?" she said, smiling, not thinking.

"Are you better, mamma?"

"Oh, yes, just in my usual—," said Mrs. Kingsward. And then she caught a fuller sight of her daughter's face. Bee had none of her usual pretty colour, the light in her eyes was like fire. The mother gave a little feeble cry, and in a moment was no longer in her usual, but lost in the feverish mists of a trouble far too great for her to bear. "Oh, Bee! Oh, Bee!"

"We had better not say anything about it, mamma, to agitate you. I have told him you will be ready at twelve o'clock, that I may know what the story is, and what he has to say."

Mrs. Kingsward struggled up to a sitting position. "At twelve o'clock? No! I cannot, I cannot!" Then she dropped back upon her pillows sobbing, "Oh, Bee, spare me; I am not equal to it. There is Charlie can read your papa's letter. Bee! Bee!"

"Charlie!" cried Bee, with a flash of fury. "Who is Charlie, that he should sit in judgment on Aubrey and me? If he has anything to do with it, I tell you, mamma, I will go away. I will go with Aubrey. I will not hear a word."

"Oh, Bee," cried Mrs. Kingsward, holding out her hot, feverish hands, "I am not fit for it! I am not fit for it! If I am to travel to-morrow—ask Moulsey—I ought to stop in bed and be quiet all day."

"I don't see that it matters," said Bee, sternly, "whether we travel to-morrow or in a week. To go home will be no pleasure to me."

"If we were there, then papa could manage it all himself; he is the proper person. On a journey is not the time to settle things so important. I will write and tell him I have put it all off, and have not said anything, till he could do it himself."

"But that will not be true," cried the young Rhadamanthus, inexorable, with her blazing eyes.

"O Bee! you are dreadfully, dreadfully hard upon me!" the poor young mother said. This is the drawback of being so young a mother, just as young as your grown-up children. It is very delightful, when all is sunny and bright, but in a great emergency like this it is trying for all parties when a girl's mother is only, so to speak, a girl like herself. Bee lifted up her absolute young head, and gave forth her ultimatum unmoved.

"Well, mamma, it must be as you choose. If you think my happiness is of less consequence than the chance of a headache to yourself, I have naturally nothing more to say."

A headache! That was all she knew.

Mrs. Kingsward was ready by twelve o'clock, much against Moulsey's will, who dressed her mistress under protest. "I ain't one to interfere with what's going on in a family," said Moulsey, as she combed out the long locks, tangled with the restlessness of a troubled night, which were as silky and as smooth as Bee's. "I'm only a servant, and I know my place; but you're not fit to struggle among them young ones. The nursery children, it's all very well; if they're naughty you whip them, or you put them in a corner, and there's a good cry and all right again. But when it comes to a business with a young lady and a gentlemen, the Colonel ought to have come himself, or he ought to have put it off till we all got home."

"Oh, I wish, I wish he had!" Mrs. Kingsward said, sighing. "I am not in the least what I used to be, Moulsey; don't you think I am very different from what I used to be? I have not half the strength."

"There often is," said Moulsey, "a time when a lady isn't so strong, after all these children and everything. It takes a deal out of you, it do. And I don't hold much with them foreign cures. I'm one that stands for home. And there's where you ought to be, ma'am, whatever anyone may say."

"I am sure it is where I wish to be," said the poor lady, "but we must not be unjust, Moulsey. My cure did me a great deal of good, and I liked being out and seeing everything just as much as the girls."

"That is just it, ma'am," said Moulsey; "you're a deal too much the same as the young ladies, and can't make up your mind as you haven't the strength for it. I'm not one to ask any questions, but I can't help seeing there's something wrong. Don't you give in to Miss Bee in everything. I wouldn't go down to make up the quarrel if I was you. Leave 'em to themselves, and it'll all come right. Bless us, lovers' quarrels is nothing—it wouldn't be half the fun if it wasn't for that."

Moulsey knew very well this was no lovers' quarrel; but it seemed to her a good way of satisfying herself what it was.

"Oh, if that were all!" sighed the poor lady. "Moulsey, you are an old friend, and take an interest in the family. You have known Miss Bee since ever she was born. I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. It is no quarrel; it's something the Colonel has heard about Mr. Leigh."

"All lies, ma'am, I don't make no manner of doubt."

"Do you think so, Moulsey; oh, do you think so? Have you heard anything? You often know more, hearing the servants speak, than we do. If you have any light to throw on the subject, oh, do so, do! I shall be grateful to you all my life."

"I don't know as I have any light to throw. I knew as there was some trouble at the time the poor young lady died—some friend of hers, as Mr. Leigh, being a kind-hearted gentleman, couldn't turn out of the house—and it made a talk. But if there was anything wrong, you take my word, ma'am, it was none of his fault."

"Ah, it's so easy to say that, Moulsey; but the man must bear the blame."

"I've always heard, ma'am, as it was the woman that got the blame; and right enough, for they often deserve it the most," Moulsey said.

"Oh, I wish—I wish, whoever was to blame, that it was not I that had to clear it up," poor Mrs. Kingsward said.

"Oh, cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right."

She would not have said this, poor lady. She would have thought it swearing and unbecoming for a woman's lips; still, Hamlet's sentiment was hers, with much stronger reason. She looked like anything but a strong representative of justice as she went downstairs. Charlie had come to give her his arm, and though he was very tender to her, Charlie had no idea of sparing her any more than Bee. He, too, thought that it was only the risk of a headache, and that a headache was no such great matter. Charlie's idea was, however, that what the governor said

was, of all things on earth, the most important to be carried out—especially when it did not concern himself.

Bee was sitting at the window looking out upon the river, seeing the reflections flash and the boats pass. The steamer had just started with its lively freight—the steamboat which had brought them down the stream yesterday, with all its changing groups, and the pairs of German lovers with their arms about each other in the beatitude of the betrothal. All just the same, but how different, how different! She did not rise, but only turned her head when her mother came in. She was on the other side. She did not see, with so many other things in her head, how fragile Mrs. Kingsward looked. Betty was the only one who perceived at all that mamma was less strong than usual, and even Betty took no notice, for she, too, was on the other side. As for Charlie, he stood behind her, a sort of representative of executive force at the back of Justice, backing her authority up. It was he who arranged her chair, her footstool, the shawl Moulsey had insisted she should wear, and which Charlie, who knew nothing about shawls, huddled up about her neck, not unlike the judge's ermine. He did it all, not with sympathetic touches as the girls would have done had they not been on the other side, but rather with an eye to her dignity as a representative of the law.

And then, just as the hour of noon sounded from all the church clocks, Aubrey came in. He was very pale, but dressed with care, no symptoms of neglect about him, with an air of preparation which became a man who was going to stand his trial. Bee jumped up from her seat and went up to him, putting her hand through his arm, and Betty, half-frightened, with a glance at her mother, offered him a timid hand. She sat down behind them, on a chair that was ranged against the wall. The defendant's side was her side. She wanted to show that, and yet not to go against mamma. Charlie took no notice at all of the new comer, but stood scowling, looking at nobody, behind his mother's chair.

Mrs. Kingsward, frightened at her own dignity and breathless with agitation, cried, "Oh, Mr. Leigh!" which was a kind of salutation. She had some papers in her lap, over which her hands fluttered restlessly, her husband's letter, and something else beside, and she looked at the group before her with a little dubious smile, asking pardon of the culprit whom she had come here—oh, so much against her will—to try for his life.

"Now, mamma," said Bee, in a cheerful voice, "we are quite ready, Aubrey and I—"

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. KINGSWARD'S opening speech was a wonder to hear. She sat and looked at them all for a moment, trying to steady herself, but there was nothing to steady her in what she saw before her—Aubrey and Bee, the pair who had been so sweet to see, such a diversion in all circumstances, so amusing in their mutual absorption, so delightful in their romance. It all flashed back to her mind; the excitement of Bee's first proposal, the pleasure of seeing "her bairn respected like the lave," though Mrs. Kingsward might not have understood what these words meant, the little triumph it was to see her child engaged at nineteen, when everybody said there was nobody for the girls to marry—and now to have that triumph turned into humiliation and dismay! And to think of Bee's bright face overcast, and her happiness over, and poor Aubrey thrown out into the uttermost darkness. Had she seen Charlie it might have given her some support, for Charlie was the impersonation of immovable severity; but Betty's wistful little face behind the other pair, coming out from Aubrey's shadow by moments to fix an appealing look upon her mother, was not calculated to make her any stronger. She cleared her throat—she tried hard to steady her voice. She said, "Oh, my dear children," faltering, and then the poor lady ended in a burst of sobbing and tears. It gave her a little sting and stimulant to see through her weeping that though little Betty ran towards her with kisses and soothing, Bee took no notice, but stood hard and unaffected in her opposition, holding close to Aubrey's arm. Mrs. Kingsward indeed got no sympathy except from little Betty. Charlie put his hand imperatively upon her shoulder, recalling her to herself, and Bee never moved, standing by the side of Aubrey Leigh. The mother, thus deserted, plucked up a little spirit in the midst of her weakness.

"Bee," she said, "I do not think it is quite nice of you to stand there as if your own people were against you. We are not against you. There has been, I fear, a great mistake made, which Colonel Kingsward"—here she turned her eyes to Aubrey—"has found out in—in time; though it is a pity, a sad pity, that it was not found out before. If Mr. Aubrey had only been frank and said at once—but I don't see what difference that would have made. Papa says that from what he has heard and discovered things must not go any further. He is sorry, and so am I, that they have gone so far, and the engagement must be broken off at once. You hear what I say, Bee?"

"I heard you say so last night, mamma, but I say it is my engagement, and I have a right to know why. I do not mean to break it off—"

"Oh, how can I make explanations—how can I enter into such a question? I appeal to you, Mr. Aubrey—tell her."

"She ought not to ask any explanations. She is a minor, under age. My father has a right to do whatever he pleases—and she has none to ask why."

This was how Charlie reasoned on the height of his one-and-twenty years. Charlie was the intolerable element in all this question. Aubrey cast a look at him, and forcibly closed his own lips to keep in something that was bursting forth. Bee defied him, as was natural, on the spot. "I will not have Charlie put in his opinion," she cried. "He has nothing to do with me. Even if I obeyed papa, I certainly should not obey him."

"Let Aubrey say, himself," said Mrs. Kingsward, "whether you ought to be told everything, Bee."

"It is cruel to ask me," said Aubrey, speaking for the first time. "If Bee could know all—if you could know all, Mrs. Kingsward! But how could I tell you all? Part of this is true, and part is not true. I could speak to Colonel Kingsward more freely. I am going off to-night to London to see him. It will free you from embarrassment, and it will give me perhaps a chance. I did not want to put you to this trial. I am ready to put myself unreservedly in Colonel Kingsward's hands."

"Then," said Bee, hastily, "it seems I am of no sort of importance at all to anyone. I am told my engagement is broken off, and then I am told I am not to know why, and then—Go, then, Aubrey, as that is your choice, and fight it out with papa, if you please." She loosed her arm from his, with a slight impulse, pushing him away. "But just mind this—everybody," she cried; "you may think little of Bee—but my engagement shall not be broken by anybody but me, and it shall not be kept on by anybody but me; and I will neither give it up nor will I hold to it, neither one nor the other, until I know why."

Then the judge and the defendant looked each other in the face. They were, as may be supposed, on opposite sides, but they were the only two to consult each other in this emergency. Aubrey responded by a movement of his head, by a slight throwing up of his hand, to the question in Mrs. Kingsward's eyes.

"Then you shall know as much as I can tell you, Bee. Your father had a letter last week, from a lady, telling him that she had a revelation to make. The letter alarmed your father. He felt that he must know what it meant. He could not go himself, but he sent Mr. Passavant, the lawyer. The lady said that she had lived in Mr. Leigh's house for years, in the time of his late wife. She said Mr. Leigh had—had behaved very badly to her."

"That I do not believe," said Bee.

The words flashed out like a knife. They made a stir in the air, as if a sudden gleam had come into it. And then all was still again, a strange dead quiet coming after, in which Bee perceived Aubrey silent, covering his face with his hand. It came across her with a sudden pang that she had heard somebody say this morning or last night—"He did not deny it."

"And that he had promised her—marriage—that he was engaged to her, as good as—as good as married to her—when he had the cruelty—oh, my dear child, my dear child!—to come to you."

Aubrey took his hand away from his white face. "That," he said, in a strange, dead, tuneless voice, "is not true."

"Oh, more shame to you, Aubrey, more shame to you," cried Mrs. Kingsward, forgetting her judicial character in her indignation as a woman, "if it is not true!"—She paused a moment to draw her breath, then added, "But indeed you were not so wicked as you say, for it is true. And here is the evidence. Oh!" she cried, with tears in her eyes, "it makes your conduct to my child worse; but it shows that you were not then, not then, as bad as you say."

Bee had dropped into the chair that was next to her, and there sat, for her limbs had so trembled that she could not stand, watching him, never taking her eyes from him, as if he were a book in which the interpretation of this mystery was—

"Never mind about me," he said, hoarsely. "I say nothing for myself. Allow me to be as bad as a man can be, but that is not true. And what is the evidence? You never told me there was any evidence."

"Sir," said Mrs. Kingsward, fully roused, "I told you all that was in my husband's letter last night."

"Yes—that she," a sort of shudder seemed to run over him, to the keen sight of the watchers—"that she—said so. You don't know, as I do, that *that* is no evidence. But you speak now as if there was something more."

She took a piece of folded paper from her lap. "There is this," she said, "a letter you wrote to her the morning you went away."

"I did write her a letter," he said.

Mrs. Kingsward held it out to him, but was stopped by Charlie, who put his hand on her arm. "Keep this document, mother. Don't put the evidence against him into a man's power. I'll read it if Mr. Leigh thinks proper."

Once more Aubrey and Bee together, with a simultaneous impulse, looked at this intruder into their story.

"Mamma! send him away. I should like to kill him!" said Bee within her clenched teeth.

"Be quiet, Charlie. Mr. Leigh, I am ready to put this or any other evidence against you into your hands."

He bowed very gravely, and then stood once more as if he were made of stone. Mrs. Kingsward faltered very much, her agitated face flushed. "It begins," she said, in a low fluttering voice, "My dear little wife—"

Then there came a very strange sound into the agitated silence, for Aubrey Leigh, on trial for more than his life, here laughed. "What more, what more?" he said.

"No, it is not that. It is—'I don't want my dear little wife to be troubled about anything. It can all be done quite easily and quietly, without giving an occasion for people to talk; a settlement made and everything you could desire. I shall make arrangements about everything to-day.' It is signed A. L., and it is in your handwriting. Bee, you can see it is in his handwriting; look for yourself."

Bee would not turn her head. She thought she saw the writing written in fire upon the air—all his familiar turns in it. How well she knew the A. L.; but she did not look at it—would not look. She had enough to do looking at his face, which was the letter—the book she was studying now.

"No doubt it is my handwriting," he said, "only it was addressed not to any other woman, but to my wife."

"Your wife died two years ago, Mr. Leigh; and that is dated Christmas—this year."

"That is a lie!" he cried; then restrained himself painfully. "You know I don't mean you—but the date and the assumption is entirely a lie. Give me time, and I will tell you exactly when it was written. I remember the letter. It was when I had promised Amy to provide for her friend on condition that she should be sent away—for she made my house miserable."

"And yet—and yet, Mr. Leigh—. Oh, don't you see how things contradict each other? She made your house miserable, and yet—when your wife was dead, and you were free—"

He looked at her, growing paler and paler. "And yet!" he said. "I know what you mean. That is the infernal art of it. My own folly has cut the ground from beneath my feet, and put weapons into every hand against me. I know—I know."

Again there came into Bee's mind the words she had heard last night—"He does not deny it." And yet he was denying it with all his might! Denying, and not denying—what? The girl's brain was all in a maze, and she could not tell.

"You see?" said Mrs. Kingsward, gently. "Oh, I am sorry for you in my heart. Perhaps you were led into—a connection that you feel not to be—desirable. That I can understand. But that you should think you could save yourself by means of an innocent girl, almost a child, and impose yourself on a family that had no suspicions!—oh, Mr. Leigh, Mr. Leigh! you ought to have died sooner than have done that!"

He looked at her piteously for a moment, and then a dreadful sort of smile came upon his face. "I allow," he said, "that that would have been the best."

And there fell a silence upon the room. The sun was shining outside, and the sound of the water gurgling against the sides of boats, and of all the commotion of the landing place, and of the hundreds of voices in the air, and of the chiming of the clocks, came in and filled the place. And just then there burst out a carillon from one of the steeples setting the whole to music, harmonising all the discords, and sweeping into this silence with a sudden rush

of sound as if some bodily presence had come in. It was the touch too much for all these excited and troubled people. Mrs. Kingsward lay back in her chair and began to weep silently. Aubrey Leigh turned away from where he was standing and leant his head against the wall. As for Bee, she sat quite still, dazed, not able to understand, but crushed out of all her youthful self-assertion and determination to clear it all up. She to clear it up!—who did not even understand it, who could not fathom what was meant. That there was something more than met the eye, something that was not put into words, seemed to show vaguely through the words that were said. But what it was Bee could not tell. She could not understand it all. And yet that there was a fatal obstacle rising up between her and her lover, something which no one could disperse or clear away, not a mistake, not a falsehood, not a thing that could be passed over triumphantly and forgotten—not as youth is so quick to believe a mere severity, tyranny, arbitrary conclusion of papa—she felt in every fibre of her frame. She could not deny it or struggle against it; her very being seemed paralysed. The meaning went out of her face, the absolute, certain, imperious youthfulness died out of her. She who loved to have her own way, who had just protested that she would neither give up nor hold fast except by her own will and understanding, now sat dumb, vaguely staring, seeing shadows pass before her and hearing of things which were undeniable, mighty things, far more powerful than her little hot resolutions and determinations. Bee had never yet come face to face with any trouble which could not be smoothed away. There was her own naughtiness, there were Charlie's escapades at school and college—some of which she had known were serious. But in a little while they had been passed over and forgotten, and everything had been as before. One time she remembered papa had threatened not to let Charlie go back to Harrow, which was a dreadful thing, exposing him and his naughtiness to all the world. But after a while papa had changed his mind, and everything had gone smoothly as before. Could papa change his mind now? Would time make it, even if he did, as it was before? Bee had not mental power enough to think these things, or ask these questions of her own will. But they went through her mind as people come in and go out by an open door.

It was Aubrey who was the first to speak. The carillon stopped, or else they got used to the sound and took no further notice of it, and he collected himself and came forward again to the middle of the room. He said, "I know it will be a relief that I should go away. There is an afternoon train which I shall take. It is slow, but it does not matter. I shall be as well there as anywhere—or as ill. I shall go direct to Colonel Kingsward and lay my whole case before him. He will perhaps confront me with my accuser—I hope so—if not, he will at least hear what I have to say for myself."

"Oh, Mr. Leigh! Oh, Aubrey! I can't wish you anything but well, whatever—whatever may be done!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Kingsward, I looked for nothing less from your kind heart. Will you give me that letter?"

She put it into his hands without the least hesitation, and he examined it—with a sort of strained smile upon his face. "I should like to take this back to Colonel Kingsward," he said. Then added quickly with a short laugh, "No, I forgot; there might be suspicions. Send it back to him, please, by the first post, that he may have it when I get there." He gave the letter back, and then he looked round wistfully. "May I say good-bye to Bee?"

She got up at the words, feeling herself vaguely called upon—yet quite dull, dumb, with all sorts of thoughts going and coming through those wide-open doors of her mind—thoughts like strays which she seemed to see as they passed. Even Aubrey himself appeared a ghost. She got up and stood awaiting him when he approached her, not putting out a finger. Nobody interfered, not even Charlie, who was fuming internally yet somehow did not move. Aubrey went up to her and put his hands upon her shoulders. Her unresponsiveness sent a chill to his heart.

"Have you given me up, Bee?" he cried, "Already, already!" with anguish in his voice.

She could not say a word. She shook her head like a mute, looking at him with her dazed eyes.

"She does not understand it—not a word!" he said.

Bee shook her head again. It was all she could do. No, she did not understand, except that it was a kind of dying, something against which nobody could struggle. And then he kissed her on her forehead as gravely as though he had been her father; and the next moment was gone—was it only out of the room, or out of the world, out of life?

CHAPTER VIII.

IT was a slow train. The slowest train that there is, is, of course, far, far quicker than any other mode of conveyance practicable in a land journey, but it does not seem so. It seems as if it were delay personified to the eager traveller, especially on the Continent. In England, when it stops at a multiplicity of stations at which there is nothing to do, it at least goes on again in most cases after it has dropped its half-passenger or taken in its empty bag of letters. But this can never be said of a German or even of a brisker Belgian train. The one in which Aubrey was meandered about Liege, for instance, till he had mastered every aspect of that smoky but interesting place. It stopped for what looked like an hour at every little roadside station, in order, apparently, that the guard might hold a long and excited conversation about nothing at all with the head man of the place. And all the while the little electric bell would go tingling, tingling upon his very brain. Thus he made his slow and weary progress through the afternoon and evening, stopping long at last at a midnight station (where everything was wrapped in sleep and darkness) for the arrival of the express, in which the latter portion of the journey was to be accomplished more quickly. If there had been anything wanted to complete the entire overthrow of a spirit in pain it was such an experience. All was dismal beyond words at the place where he had to wait—one poor light showing through the great universe of darkness, the dark big world that encompassed it around—one or two belated porters wandering through the blackness doing mysterious pieces of business, or pretending to do them. A poor little wailing family—a mother and two children, put out there upon a bench from some other train, one of the babies wailing vaguely into the dark, the other calling upon "mamma, mamma," driving the poor mother frantic—were waiting like himself. It gave Aubrey a momentary consolation to see something that appeared at least to the external eye more forlorn than he. He remembered, too, that there had once been a baby cry that went to his heart, and though all the associations connected with that had now turned into gall and bitterness, so that the sound seemed like a spear penetrating his very being, and he walked away as far as the bounds of the station would allow, to get, if possible, out of hearing of it—yet pity, a better inspiration, at last gained the day. He went up and spoke to the woman, and found that she was an English workman's wife making her way home with her children to a mother who was dying. They had turned her out here, with her babies, to wait—ah, not for the express train which was to carry on the gentleman, but for the slow, slow-

creeping third-class which only started in the morning, and which would, after other long waits at other places, reach England sometime, but she could scarcely tell when.

"And must you pass the night here out in the cold?" said Aubrey.

"It isn't not to call a cold night, sir," said the woman, meekly, "and they've got plenty on to keep them warm."

"I'll try and get them to open the waiting-room for you," said Aubrey.

"Oh, no, sir; thank you kindly, but don't take the trouble—the rooms are that stuffy. It's better for them in the open air, and they'll go to sleep in a little while. Baby will be quite warm on my lap, and Johnny's lying against me."

"And what is to become of you in this arrangement?" said Aubrey, looking pitifully, with eyes that had known the experiences both of husband and father, upon this little plump human bed, which was to stand in the place of down pillows for the children.

"Oh, I'll do very well, sir, when they go to sleep," she said, looking up at him with a smile.

"And when does your train go?"

"Not till six in the morning," she replied; "but perhaps that's all the better, for I'll be able to get them some bread and milk, and a good wash before we start."

Well, it was not much of an indulgence for a man who was well off. He might have thrown it away on any trifle, and nobody would have wasted a thought on the subject. He got hold of one of the wandering ghosts of porters, and got him, with a *douceur*, to change the poor woman's cheap ticket for her into one for the express, and commissioned him, if possible, to get her a place in a sleeping carriage, where, I fear, she was not likely to be at all a warmly welcomed addition to the luxurious young men or delicate ladies in these conveyances. He saw that there was one found for her which was almost empty when the train came up. He scarcely knew if she were young or old—though indeed, as a matter of fact, the poor little mother, bewildered by her sudden elevation among the gentlefolks, and not quite sure that she would not have preferred to remain where she was and pick up in the morning her natural third-class train, was both young and pretty, a fact that was remarked by the one young lady in the carriage, who saw the young man through the window at her side, and recognised him in a flash of the guard's lantern, with deep astonishment to see him handing in such a woman and such children to the privileged places. He disappeared himself into the dark, and indeed took his place in the corner of a smoking carriage, where his cigar was a faint soother of pain. In his human short-sightedness, poor Aubrey also was consoled a little, I think, by the thought that this poor fellow-passenger was comfortable—she and her children—and that instead of slumbering uneasily on a bench, she was able to lay the little things in a bed. It seemed to him a good omen, a little relaxation of the bonds of fate, and he went away cheered a little and encouraged by this simple incident and by the warmth of the kindness that was in his heart.

He spoke to them again on one or two occasions on the way, sent the poor woman some tea in the morning, bought some fruit for the children, and again on the steamboat crossing, when he listened to the account of how they were going on, from Dover, with a certain interest. When they parted at the train he shook hands with the mother, hoping she would find her relation better, and put a sovereign into Johnny's little fat hand. The lady who had been in the sleeping carriage kept her eye upon him all the time. She was not by any means a malicious or bad woman, but she did not believe the poor woman's story of the gentleman's kindness. She was, I am sorry to say, a lady who was apt to take the worst view of every transaction, especially between men and women. People who do so are bound in many cases to be right, and so are confirmed in their odious opinion; but in many cases they are wrong, yet always hold to it with a faith which would do credit to a better inspiration. "I thought young Mr. Leigh was going to marry again," she said to a friend whom she met going up to town.

"Oh, so he is! To the nicest girl—Bee Kingsward, the daughter of one of my dearest friends—such a satisfactory thing in every way."

"Wasn't there something," said the lady of the sleeping carriage, "about a woman, down at his place in the country?"

"Oh, I don't think there was ever anything against him. There was a woman who was a great friend of his poor wife, and lived with them. The wife was a goose, don't you know, and could not be made to see what a foolish thing it was. My opinion is that he never could abide the woman, and I am sure she made mischief between them. But I believe that silly little Mrs. Leigh—poor thing, we should not speak ill of those that are gone—made him promise on her deathbed that this Miss Something-or-other should not be sent away from the house. It was a ridiculous arrangement, and no woman that respected herself would have done it. But she was poor, and it's a comfortable place, and, perhaps, as there was no friendship between them she may have thought it was no harm."

"Perhaps she thought she would get over him in time and make him marry her."

"Oh, I can't tell what she thought! He rushed off in a hurry at a moment's notice, nobody knowing what he intended, after the poor baby died, the very day of its funeral. Not much to be wondered at, poor young man, after all he had gone through. I don't know how things were settled with Miss Lance, but I believe that she has gone at last. And I am delighted to hear of his engagement. So will all his neighbours in the county be."

"I should not like a daughter of mine to marry a man like that."

"Why? I wish a daughter of mine could have the chance. Everybody likes him at home. Do you know anything of Aubrey Leigh?"

He did not know in the least that this talk was going on as the train went rushing on to town; his ears did not tingle. He was in the next carriage, divided only by a plank from these two ladies in their compartment. The woman who took the bad view of everything did not wish him any harm. She did not even think badly of him. She thought it was only human nature, and that young men will do that sort of thing, however nice they may be, and whatever you may say of morals and so forth. I do not think, though she had made that little conventional speech, that she would at all have hesitated to give her own daughter to Aubrey, provided that she had a daughter. His advantages were so evident, and the disadvantages, after all, had so little to do with actual life.

Aubrey did not present himself before Colonel Kingsward that night. He did not propose to follow him to Kingswarden, the old house in Kent, which was the sole remnant of territorial property belonging to the family. He wanted to have all his wits about him, to be cool and self-possessed, and able to remember everything, when he saw the man who had given him Bee and then had withdrawn her from his arms. He already knew Colonel Kingsward a

little, and knew him as a man full of *bonhomie*, popular everywhere—a man of experience, who had been about the world, who knew men. By this time Aubrey had recovered his spirits a little. He thought it impossible that such a man, when a younger than himself laid bare his heart to him, could fail to understand. It was true that the Colonel was probably a martinet in morals as he was in his profession, and Aubrey had that behind him which he could not deny. He would not attempt to gloss it over, to make excuses for it. He would lay his life in this man's hand as if he had been his confessor. And surely, surely the acknowledged sin would find absolution, the extenuating circumstances would be considered, the lie with which that accusation was accompanied would recoil upon the accuser. The young man buoyed himself up with these thoughts through the long evening. He did not go out or to his club, or anywhere where he was known. In September there are not so many inducements to stray about London. He sat in his room and thought of Bee, and wrote little letters to her, which were a relief to his mind though he knew he could not send them. By this time he reflected they must have started. They were beginning their journey as he ended his. He hoped that Charlie, that lout, would have the sense to take care of his mother, to see that she suffered as little as possible, to prevent her from having any trouble—which I fear was not the view at all that Charlie took of his duty to his mother. Aubrey, like all outsiders, had a clearer view of Mrs. Kingsward's condition than her family had arrived at. He was very sorry for her, poor, delicate, tender woman—and grieved to the bottom of his heart that this trouble should have come upon her through him. Bee was different. There would be so many ways, please God, if all went well—and he could not bring himself to think that all would not go well—in which he could make it up to his Bee. Finally, he permitted himself to write a little letter to meet his darling on her return, and enclosed in it another to Mrs. Kingsward, directed to Kingswarden. They would receive it when they entered their house—and by that time, surely by that time, his letters would not be any longer a forbidden thing.

That morning it rained, and the London skies hung very low. The world had the effect of a room with a low roof, stifling and without air. He set out to walk to Colonel Kingsward's office. I forget whether the Intelligence Department of the War Office was in existence at that time, or if it has always been in existence only not so much heard of as in our vociferous days. If it did exist then, it was, of course, in Pall Mall, as we all know. Aubrey set out to walk, but soon recollected that muddy boots detracted from a man's appearance, especially in the eyes of a spick and span person like Colonel Kingsward, who never had a speck upon any garment, and accordingly he got into a hansom. It did not go any faster than the beating of his heart, and yet he could have wished that it should only creep along like the heavier cabs. He would have put off this interview now had he been able. To think that you are within an hour at most of the moment when your life shall be settled for you absolutely by another person's will, and that your happiness or unhappiness rest upon the manner in which he will look at the question, the perception he will have of your difficulties, the insight into your heart, is a terrible thing—especially if you know little of the person who has thus become endowed, as it were, with the power of life and death over you—do not know if his understanding is a large or limited one, if he has any human nature in him, or only mere conventionality and the shell of human nature. It is seldom, perhaps, that one man is thus consciously in the power of another—and yet it must come to that more or less, every day.

Colonel Kingsward was in his room, seated at his writing table with piles of books and maps, and masses of newspapers all round him. He was an excellent linguist, and there were French papers and German papers, Russian, Scandinavian—all kinds of strange languages and strange little broadsheets, badly printed, black with excessive ink, or pale with imperfect impression, on the floor and the table. He had a large paper knife at his hand in ivory, with the natural brown upon it, looking like a weapon which could cut a man, not to say a book, in pieces. He looked up with an aspect which Aubrey, whose heart was in his mouth, could not read—whether it was mere politeness or something more—and bade Mr. Leigh be seated, putting aside deliberately as he did so the papers with which he was engaged. And then he turned round with the air of a man who says: Now you have my entire attention—and looked Aubrey in the face. The young man was facing the light which came in from a large high window reaching nearly to the roof. The elder man had his back half turned from it, so that his regard was less easy to read. It was not quite fair. Aubrey had everything against him; his agitation, his anxiety, an expressive tell-tale face, and the light searching every change that took place in it; whilst his opponent was calm as his own paper knife, impassive, with a countenance formed to conceal his emotions, and the light behind him. It was not an equal match in any way.

"I have come direct from Cologne," Aubrey said.

"Ah, yes. I believe my wife says so in her letter."

"You have news from them to-day? I hope that Mrs. Kingsward is better."

"My wife never at any time speaks much of her health. She was a little fatigued and remained another day to rest."

"She is very delicate, sir," said Aubrey. He did not know why, unless it was reluctance to begin what he had to say.

"I am perfectly acquainted with Mrs. Kingsward's condition," said the Colonel, in a tone which was not encouraging. He added, "I don't suppose you took the trouble to come here, Mr. Leigh, in order to speak to me about my wife's health."

"No. It is true. I ought not to waste the time you have accorded me. I do not need to tell you, Colonel Kingsward, what I have come about."

"I think you do," said the Colonel, calmly. "My letter to my wife, which I believe she communicated to you, conveyed all I had to say on the matter. It was not written without reflection, nor without every possible effort to arrive at the truth. Consequently, I have no desire to re-open the subject. It is in my mind concluded and put aside."

"But you will hear me?" said Aubrey. "You have heard one statement, surely you will hear the other. No man is condemned unheard. I have come here to throw myself upon your mercy—to tell you my story. However prejudiced you may be against me—"

"A moment, Mr. Leigh. I have no prejudice against you. I am not the judge of your conduct. I claim the right to decide for my daughter—that is all. I have no prejudice or feeling against you."

"Colonel Kingsward," cried Aubrey, "for God's sake listen! Hear what I have to say!"

The Colonel looked at him again. Perhaps it was the passion of earnestness in the young man's face that touched him. Perhaps he felt that it was unwise to leave it to be said that he had not heard both sides. The end was that he waved his hand and said:

"My time is not my own. I have no right to spend it on merely private interests; but if you will make your story as short as possible I will hear what you have to say."

CHAPTER IX.

THE story which Aubrey Leigh had to tell was indeed made as short as possible. To describe the most painful crisis in your life, the moment which you yourself shudder to look back at, which awakens in you that fury of self-surprise, horror and wonder which a sudden departure from all the habits of your life brings after it when it is guilt, is not an easy thing; but it supplies terse expressions and rapidity of narration. There is no desire to dwell upon the details, and to tell a story so deeply affecting one's self to a politely unsympathetic listener who does not affect to be much interested or at all moved by the subtle self-defence which runs through every such statement, is still more conducive to brevity. Aubrey laid bare the tempest that had swept over him with a breathless voice and broken words. He could not preserve his equanimity, or look as if it were an easy thing for him to do. He made the most hurried description of the visitor who had taken possession of his house, saying not a word beyond the bare fact. It had been deeply embarrassing that she should be there, though at first in the melancholy of his widowerhood he had not thought of it, or cared who was in the house. Afterwards he was prevented from doing anything to disturb her by his promise to his dying wife. Then had come the anxiety about the baby, the wavering of that little life in which the forlorn young father had come to take a little pleasure. She had been very kind to the child, watching over it, and when the little thing died, when the misery of the fresh desolation, and the pity of it, and the overwhelming oppression of the sad house had quite overcome the spirit of its young master, then she had thrown herself upon him, with all the signs of a sudden passion of sympathy and tenderness. Had any confessor skilled in the accounts of human suffering heard Aubrey's broken tale he could have found nothing but truth in it, and would have recognised the subtle sequence of events which had led to that downfall. But Colonel Kingsward, though not unlearned in men, listened like a man of wood, playing with the large paper-knife, and never looking towards the penitent, who told his story with such a strain of the labouring breast and agonised spirit. Had a young officer in whom he had no particular interest thus explained and accounted for some dereliction of duty he might have understood or sympathised. But he had no wish to understand Aubrey; his only desire was to brush him off as quickly as possible, to be done with his ridiculous story, to hear of him no more. He might be as little guilty as he described himself. What then? Aubrey's character was nothing to Colonel Kingsward, except as it affected his daughter. He had cut him off from all connection with his daughter, and it was now quite immaterial to him whether the man was a weak fool or a deceiver. Probably from as much as he heard while thus listening as little as he could, Leigh was in the former class, and certainly he did not intend to take a weak fool, who had shown himself to be at the mercy of any designing woman, into his family as the husband of Bee. Give him the benefit of the doubt, and allow that it had happened so, that the woman was much more to blame than the man, and what then? A sturdy sinner on the whole was not less but more easily pardoned than a weak fool.

"This is all very well, Mr. Leigh," Colonel Kingsward said, "and I am sorry that you have thought it necessary to enter into these painful details. They may be quite true. I will not offend you by doubting that you believe them to be quite true. But how, then, do you account for the letter which my wife, I believe, showed you, and which came direct from the lady's own hand to mine?"

"The letter was a letter which I wrote to my wife two years ago. There had been discussions between us on this very subject. I promised, on condition that Miss Lance should leave us, to make such arrangements for her comfort as were possible to me—to settle a yearly income on her, enough to live on."

"Was that arrangement ever carried out?"

"No; my wife became ill immediately after. I found her on my return in Miss Lance's arms, imploring that so long as she lived her friend should not be taken from her. What could I do? And that prayer was changed on my poor Amy's deathbed to another—that I would never send Miss Lance away; that she should always have a home at Forest-leigh and watch over the child."

"I don't wish to arouse any such painful recollections—especially as they can be of no advantage to anyone—but how does this letter come to have the date of last Christmas, more than a year after Mrs. Leigh's death?"

"How can I tell that, sir? How can I tell how the devilish web was woven at all? The note had no date, I suppose, and the person who could use it for this purpose would not hesitate at such a trifle as to add a date."

"Mr. Leigh, I repeat the whole matter is too painful to be treated by me. But how is it, if you regarded this lady with those sentiments, that you should have in a moment changed them, and, to put the mildest interpretation upon your proceedings, thus put yourself in her power?"

The young man's flushed and anxious face grew deadly pale. He turned his eyes from the inquisitor to the high blank light pouring in from the large window. "God knows," he said, "that is what I cannot explain—or rather, I should say, the devil knows!" he cried with vehemence. "I was entirely off my guard—thinking, heaven knows, of nothing less."

"The devil is a safe sort of agency to put the blame on. We cannot in ordinary affairs accept him as the scapegoat, Mr. Leigh—excuse me for saying so. I will not refuse to say that I allow there may be excuses for you, with a woman much alive to her own interests and ready for any venture. You did write to her, however, on the day you left?"

"I wrote to her, telling her the arrangement I had proposed to my wife, in the very letter which she has sent to you—that I would carry it out at once, and that I hoped she would perceive, as I did, that it was impossible we should remain under the same roof, or, indeed, meet again."

"That was on what date?"

"The evening before my child's funeral. Next day, as soon as it was over, I left the house, and have never set foot in it again."

"Yet this lady, to whom you had, you say, sent such a letter, was at the funeral, and stood at the child's grave leaning on your arm."

"More than that," cried Aubrey, with a gasp of his labouring breath, "she came up to me as I stood there and put

her arm, as if to support me, within mine."

The Colonel could not restrain an exclamation. "By Jove," he said, "she is a strong-minded woman, if that is true. Do you mean to say that this was after she had your letter?"

"I suppose so. I sent it to her in the morning. I was anxious to avoid any scene."

"And then, on your way to London, on that day, you went to your solicitors, and gave instructions in respect to Miss Lance's annuity—which you say now had been determined on long before?"

"It was determined on long before."

"But never mentioned to any one until that time."

"I beg your pardon; on the day on which I wrote that letter to my wife I went direct to my lawyer and talked the matter over freely with Mr. Morell, who had known me all my life, and knew all the circumstances—and approved my resolution, as the best of two evils, he said."

"This is the most favourable thing I have heard, Mr. Leigh. He will, of course, be able to back you up in what you say?"

"Mr. Morell!" Aubrey sprang to his feet with a start of dismay. "I think," he cried, "all the powers of hell must be against me. Mr. Morell is dead."

They looked at each other for a moment in silence. A half smile came upon the Colonel's face, though even he was a little overawed by the despair in the countenance of the young man.

"I don't know that it matters very much," he said, "for, after all, Mr. Leigh, your anxiety to get rid of your wife's companion might have two interpretations. You might have been sincerely desirous to free yourself from a temptation towards another woman, which would have given Mrs. Leigh pain. A man does not sacrifice two hundred a year without a strong motive. And subsequent events make this a far more likely reason than the desire to get rid of an unwelcome inmate."

"I cannot tell whether my motive was likely or not. I tell you, sir, what it was."

"Ah, yes—but unfortunately without any corroboration—and the story is very different from the other side. It appears from that that you wished to establish relationship during your poor wife's life, and that it was the lady who was moved by pity for you in a moment of weakness—which is much more according to the rule in such matters."

"It is a lie!" Aubrey cried. "Colonel Kingsward, you are a man—and an honourable man. Can you imagine another man, with the same principles as yourself, guilty of such villainy as that? Can you believe—"

"Mr. Leigh," said the other, "it is unnecessary to ask me what I can believe; nor can I argue, from what I would do, as to what you would do. That may be of good Christianity, you know, but it is not tenable in life. Many men are capable enough of what I say; and, indeed, I do you the credit to believe that you were willing to keep the temptation at a distance—to make a sacrifice in order to ease the mind of your wife. I show a great deal of faith in you when I say that. Another man might say that Mrs. Leigh had exacted it from you as a thing necessary to her peace."

Aubrey Leigh rose up again, and began to pace the room from one side to the other. He could not keep still in his intolerable impatience and scorn of the net which was tightening about his feet. Anger rose up like a whirlwind in his mind; but to indulge it was to lose for ever the cause which, indeed, was already lost. When he had gained control over himself and his voice, he said, "We had neighbours; we had friends; our life was not lived in a corner unknown to the world. There is my mother; ask them—they all know—"

"Does anyone outside know what goes on between a husband and wife?" said Colonel Kingsward. "Such discussions do not go on before witnesses. If poor Mrs. Leigh—"

"Sir," cried Aubrey, stung beyond hearing, "I will not permit any man to pity my wife."

"It was beyond my province I allow, but one uses the word for those who die young. I don't know why, for if all is true that we profess to believe they certainly have the best of it. Well, if Mrs. Leigh, to speak by the book, had any such burden on her mind, and really felt her happiness to depend on the banishment of that dangerous companion, it is not likely that she would speak of it either to your neighbours or to your mother."

"Why not? My mother was of that mind, though not for that villainous reason; my mother knew, everybody knew—everybody agreed with me in wishing her gone. I appeal to all who knew us, Colonel Kingsward! There is not a friend I have who did not compassionate me for Amy's insensate affection. God forgive me that I should say a word against my poor little girl, but it was an infatuation—as all her friends knew."

"Don't you think we are now getting into the region of the extravagant?" Colonel Kingsward said. "I cannot send out a royal commission to take the evidence of your friends."

Aubrey had to pause again to master himself. If this man, with his contemptuous accents, his cool disdain, were not Bee's father!— but he was so, and, therefore, must not be defied. He answered after a time in a subdued voice. "Will you allow me—to send one or two of them to tell you what they know. There is Fairfield, with whom you are acquainted already, there is Lord Langtry, there is Vavasour, who was with us constantly—"

"To none of these gentlemen, I presume, would Mrs. Leigh be likely to unfold her most intimate sentiments."

"Two of them have wives," said Aubrey, determined to hold fast, "whom she saw familiarly daily—country neighbours."

"I must repeat, Mr. Leigh, I cannot send out a royal commission to take the evidence of your friends."

"Do you mean that you will not hear any evidence, Colonel Kingsward?—that I am condemned already?—that it does not matter what I have in my favour?"

Colonel Kingsward rose to dismiss his suitor. "I have already said, Mr. Leigh, that I am not your judge. I have no right to condemn you. Your account may be all true; your earnestness and air of sincerity, I allow, in a case in which I was not personally involved, would go far to making me believe it was true. But what then? The matter is this: Will I allow my daughter to marry a man of whom such a question has been raised? I say no: and there I am within my clear rights. You may be able to clear yourself, making out the lady to be a sort of demon in human shape. My friend, who saw her, said she was a very attractive woman. But really this is not the question. I am not a censor of public morals, and on the whole it is a matter of indifference to me whether you are guiltless or not. The sole thing is that I will not permit my daughter to put her foot where such a scandal has been. I have nothing to do with you but everything with her. And I think now that all has been said."

"That is, you will not hear anything more?"

"Well—if you like to put it so—I prefer not to hear any more."

"Not if Bee's happiness should be involved?"

"My daughter's happiness, I hope, does not depend upon a man whom she has known only for a month. She may think so now. But she will soon know better. That is a question into which I decline to enter with you."

"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love," said Aubrey, with a coarse laugh. He turned as if to go away. "But you do not mean that this is final, Colonel Kingsward— not final? Not for ever? Never to be revised or reconsidered— even if I were as bad as you think me?"

"How needless is all this! I have told you your character does not concern me—and I do not say that you are bad—or think so. I am sorry for you. You have got into a rather dreadful position, Mr. Leigh, for a young man of your age."

"And yet at my age you think I should be cut off for ever from every hope of salvation!"

"Not so; this is all extravagant—ridiculous! And if you will excuse me, I am particularly busy this morning, with a hundred things to do."

Poor Aubrey would have killed with pleasure, knocked down and trampled upon, the immovable man of the world who thus dismissed him; but to be humble, even abject, was his only hope. "I will try, then, to find some moment of leisure another time."

"It is unnecessary, Mr. Leigh. I shall not change my mind; surely you must see that it is better for all parties to give it up at once."

"I shall never give it up."

"Pooh! one nail drives out another. You don't seem to have been a miracle of constancy in your previous relationships. Good morning. I trust to hear soon that you have made as satisfactory a settlement of other claims."

CHAPTER X.

OTHER claims! What other claims? Aubrey Leigh went out of the office in Pall Mall with these words circling through his mind. They seemed to have nothing to do with that which occupied him, which filled every thought. His dazed memory and imagination caught them up as he went forth in the fury of suppressed anger, and the dizzy, stifled sensation of complete failure. He had felt sure, even when he felt least sure, that when it was possible to tell his tale fully, miserable story as it was, the man to whom he humbled himself thus, not being a recluse or a mere formalist—a man of the world—would at least, to some degree, understand and perceive how little real guilt there might be even in such a fault as he had committed. It was not a story which could be repeated in a woman's ears; but a man, who knew more or less what was in man—the momentary lapses, the sudden impulses, the aberrations of intolerable trouble, sorrow, and despair—Aubrey did not take into account the fact that there are some men to whom such a condition as that into which he himself had fallen in the desolation of his silent house—when death came a second time within the sad year, and his young soul felt in the first sensation of despair that he could not bear it; that he was a man signalled out by fate, to whom it was vain to struggle, to whom life was a waste and heaven a mockery—was inconceivable. Colonel Kingsward was certainly not a man like that. He would have said to himself that the mother being gone it was only a blessing and advantage that the child should go too, and he would have withdrawn himself decorously to his London lodgings and his club, and his friends would all have said that it was on the whole a good thing for him, and that he was young, and his life still before him. So, indeed, they had said of Aubrey, and so poor Aubrey had proved for himself. Had there not been that terrible moment behind him, that intolerable blackness and midnight of despair, in which any hand that gripped his could lead him till the light of morning burst upon him, and showed him whither in his misery he had been led!

Satisfy other claims? The words blew like a noxious wind through his brain. He laughed to himself softly as he went along. What claims had he to satisfy? He had done all that honour and scorn could do to satisfy the harpy who had dug her claws into his life. Should he try to propitiate her with other gifts? No, no! That would be but to prolong the scandal, to give her a motive for continuance, to make it appear that he was in her power. He was in her power, alas, fatally as it proved, if it should be so that she had made an end of the happiness of his life. She had blighted the former chapter of that existence, bringing out all that was petty in the poor little bride over whom she had gained so complete an ascendancy, showing her husband Amy's worst side, the aspect of her which he might never have known but for that fatal companion ever near. And now she had ruined him altogether—ruined him as in old stories the Pamelas of the village were ruined by a villain who took advantage of their simplicity. What lovely woman who had stooped to folly could be more ruined than this unhappy young man? He laughed to himself at this horrible travesty of that old familiar eighteenth century tale. This was the *fin de siècle* version of it, he supposed—the version in which it was the designing woman who seized upon the moment of weakness and the man who suffered shipwreck of everything in consequence. There was a horrible sort of ridicule in it which wrought poor Aubrey almost to madness. When the woman is the victim, however sorely she may be to blame for her own disgrace, a sort of pathos and romance is about her, and pity is winged with indignation against the man who is supposed to have taken advantage of her weakness. But when it is a man who is the victim! Then the mildest condemnation he can look for is the coarse laugh of contempt, the inextinguishable ridicule, to which even in fiction it is too great a risk to expose a hero. He was no hero—but an unhappy young man fallen into the most dreadful position in which man could be, shut out of all hope of ever recovering himself, marked by the common scorn—no ordinary sinner, a man who had profaned his own home, and all the most sacred prejudices of humanity. He had felt all that deeply when he rushed from his house, a man distraught not knowing where he went. And then morning and evening, and the dews and the calm, and the freshness and elasticity inalienable from youth had driven despair and horror away. He had felt it at last impossible that all his life—a life which he desired to live out in duty and kindness, and devotion to God and man—should be spoiled for ever by his momentary yielding to a horrible temptation. He had thought at first that he never could hold up his head again. But gradually the impression had been soothed away, and he had vainly hoped that such a thing might be left behind him and might be heard of no more.

Now he was undeceived—now he was convinced that for what a man does he must answer, not only at the bar of

God, where all the secrets of the heart are revealed, but also before men. There are times in which the former judgment is more easy to think of than the latter—for God knows all, everything that is in favour of the culprit, while men only know what is against him. A man with sorrow in his heart for all his shortcomings, can endure, upon his knees, that all-embracing gaze of infinite understanding and pity. But to stand before men who misconstrue, mis-see, misapprehend, how different a thing it is—who do not know the end from the beginning, to whom the true balance and perfect poise of justice is almost impossible—who can judge only as they know, and who can know only the husk and shell of fact, the external aspect of affairs by the side which is visible to them. All these thoughts went through Aubrey's mind as he went listlessly about those familiar streets in their autumnal quiet, no crowd about, nothing to interrupt the progress of the wayfarer. He went across the Green Park, which is brown in the decadence of summer, almost as solitary as if he had been in his own desolate glades at home. London has a soothing effect sometimes on such a still, sunny autumn day, when it seems to rest after the worry and heat and strain of all its frivolity and folly. The soft haze blurs all the outlines, makes the trees too dark and the sky too pale; yet it is sunshine and not fog which wraps the landscape, even that landscape which lies between Pall Mall and Piccadilly. It soothed our young man a little in the despair of his thoughts. Surely, surely at eight-and-twenty everything could not be over. Bee would in a year or two be the mistress of her own actions. She was not a meek girl, to be coerced by her father. She would judge for herself in such a dreadful emergency. After all that had passed, the whole facts of the case would have to be submitted to her, which was a thought that enveloped him as in flames of shame. Yet she would judge for herself, and her judgment would be more like that of heaven than like that of earth. A kind of celestial ray gleamed upon him in this thought.

And as for these other claims—well, if any claim were put forth he would not shrink—would not try to compromise, would not try to hide his shame under piles of gold. Now he had no motive for concealment, he would face it out and have the question set straight in the eye of day. To be sure, for a man to accuse a woman is against the whole conventional code of honour. To accuse all women is the commonplace of every day; but to put the blame of seduction upon one is what a man dare not do save in the solitude of his chamber—or in such a private inquisition as Aubrey had gone through that day. This is one of the proofs that there is much to be said on both sides, and that it is the unscrupulous of either side who has the most power to humble and to destroy. But the bravado did him good for the moment—let her make her claim, whatever that claim was, and he would meet it in the face of day!

Other ideas came rapidly into Aubrey's mind when he strolled listlessly into his club, and almost ran against the friend in whose house he had first met Colonel Kingsward, and through whom consequently all that had afterwards happened had come about. "Fairfield!" he cried, with a gleam of sudden hope in his eyes.

"Leigh! You here?—I thought you were philandering on the banks of—some German river or other. Well! and so I hear I have to congratulate you, my boy—and I'm sure I do so with all my heart—"

You might have done so a week ago, and I should have responded with all mine. But you see me fallen again on darker days. Fate's against me, it seems, in every way."

"Why, what's the matter?" cried his friend. "I expected to see you triumphant. What has gone wrong? Not settlements already, eh?"

"Settlements! They are free to make what settlements they like so far as I am concerned."

"Kingsward's a very cool hand, Aubrey. You may lose your head if you like, but he always knows what he is about. You are an excellent match—"

"You think so," said poor Aubrey, with a laugh. "Not badly off; a mild, domestic fellow, with no devil in me at all."

"I should not exactly say that. A man is no man without a spice of the devil. Why, what's the matter? Now I look at you, instead of a victorious lover, you have the most miserable hang-dog—"

"Hang-dog, that is it—a rope's end, and all over. Hang it, no! I am not going to give in. Fairfield, I don't want to speak disrespectfully of any woman."

"Is it Mrs. Kingsward who is too young, herself, to think of enacting the part of mother-in-law so soon as this?"

"Mrs. Kingsward is a sort of an angel, Fairfield, if it were not old-fashioned to say so—and, alas, I fear, she will not enact any part long, which is so much the worse for me."

"You don't say so! That pretty creature, with all her pretty ways, and her daughter just the same age as she! Poor Kingsward. Aubrey, if a man shows a little impatience with your raptures in such circumstances, I don't think you ought to be hard upon him."

"I don't believe he knows what are the circumstances, nor any of them. It is not from that cause, Fairfield. You know Miss Lance, poor Amy's friend—"

Once more he grew hot all over as he named her name, and turned his face from his friend's gaze.

"Remember her! I should think so, and all you had to bear on that point, old man. We have often said, Mary and I, that if ever there was a hero—"

"Fairfield! they have got up a tale that it was I who kept her at Forest-leigh against poor Amy's will, and that my poor wife's life was made miserable by my attentions to that fiend—." Fiend he would have said, but he changed it to "woman," which meant to him at that moment the same thing.

Fairfield stared for a moment—was he taking a new idea into his commonplace mind? Then he burst into a loud laugh. "You can call the whole county to bear witness to that," he cried. "Attentions! Well, I suppose you were civil, which was really more than anyone expected from you."

"You know, and everybody knows, what a thorn in the flesh it was. My poor Amy! Without that, there would have been no cloud on our life, and it all arose from her best qualities, her tender heart, her faithfulness—"

A dubious shade came over Fairfield's face. "Yes, no doubt; and Miss Lance's flattery and blandishments. Aubrey, I don't mind saying it now that you are well quit of her—that was a woman to persuade a fellow into anything. I should no more have dared to keep her—especially after—in my house, and to expose myself to her wiles—"

"They never were wiles for me," said Aubrey, again turning his head away. It was true, true—far more true than the fatal contradiction of it, which lay upon his heart like a stone. "I never came nearer to hating any of God's creatures than that woman. She made my life a burden to me. She took my wife from me—. She— I needn't get dithyrambic on the subject; you all know."

"Oh, yes, we all know; but you were too soft-hearted. You should have risked a fit of tears from poor Mrs. Leigh—excuse me for saying so now—and sent her away."

"I tried it a dozen times. Poor Amy would have broken her heart. She threatened even to go with her. And they say women don't make friendships with each other!"

Fairfield shrugged his shoulders a little. "I suffer myself from my wife's friends," he said; "there's always some 'dear Clara' or other putting the table out of joint, making me search heaven and earth when there's anybody to dinner to find an odd man. But Mary has some——" Sense, he was going to say, but stopped short. Mrs. Fairfield was one of those who had concluded long ago that dear Amy was a little goose, taken sad advantage of by her persistent friend.

"Fairfield," said Aubrey, "you could do me a great service if you would. Colonel Kingsward has just told me that he can't send out a royal commission to examine my friends on this subject. You see him sometimes, I suppose. I know you belong to one of his clubs. Still more, he's at his office all the morning, and you know him well enough to look in upon him there."

"Well?" said Fairfield, dubiously.

"Couldn't you stretch a point for my sake, and go—and tell him the real state of affairs in respect to Miss Lance, and how untrue it is, how ridiculously untrue, that she was kept at Forest-leigh by any will of mine? Why, it was a thing, as you have just said, that all the county knew! An infatuation—and nothing less than the bane of my whole married life."

"Yes, I know—everybody thought so," Mr. Fairfield said. That new idea—was it perhaps germinating faintly in his mind?—no one had thought of any other explanation, but yet——"

"If you were only to say so—only as much as that—that all my friends recognised the state of the case."

"I could say that," said Fairfield, with hesitation. "Don't think me unfriendly, Aubrey, but it's a little awkward for a man to interfere in another man's affairs, and it's not only your affairs that I know so well, but you see Kingsward's too——"

"I am aware of that, Fairfield; still, to break off what I believe in my heart would be for his daughter's happiness too——"

"To be sure there's the young lady to be taken into consideration," said Fairfield, dubiously.

It will be as well to carry this incident to its completion at once. Mr. Fairfield at the last allowed himself to be convinced, and he went that afternoon to the club, to which he still belonged by some early military experiences, and where Colonel Kingsward was one of those who ruled supreme. He knew exactly when to find him at the club, where he strolled in after leaving his office, to refresh himself with a cup of tea, or something else in its place. The intercessor went up to the table at which the Colonel sat with the evening paper, and conversed for a little on the topics of the day. After these had been run over, and the prospects of war slightly discussed—for Colonel Kingsward had not much respect for Mr. Fairfield's opinion on that subject—the latter gentleman said abruptly—

"I say, Kingsward, I am very sorry to hear there is some hitch in the marriage which I was so glad to hear of last week."

"Ah, oh! So Leigh has been with you, I presume?" the Colonel replied.

"Yes; and, upon my life, Colonel, there is not a word of truth in any talk you may have heard about that Miss Lance——. We all know quite well the whole business. You should hear Mary on the subject. Of course, he can't say to you, poor fellow, that his first wife was a little queer, and that that woman made her her slave."

"No; it wasn't to be expected that he would tell me that."

"But it's true. She got completely the upper hand of that poor little thing. The husband had no influence. I believe he hated her—like the devil."

"You think so," said the Colonel, with a strange smile, "yet it is a curious thing that he endured her all the same, and also that a wife should insist so in keeping another woman in her husband's constant company—and an attractive woman, as I hear."

"Oh! a devil of a woman," cried Fairfield. "I was telling Aubrey I should no more have ventured to expose myself to her blandishments——. One of those sort of women, you know, that you cannot abide, yet who can turn you round their little finger."

"And what did he say to that?" the Colonel asked, still with that smile.

"Oh, he said she never had any charm for him—and I believe it—for what with poor little Mrs. Leigh's whims and vagaries, and the other's flatteries and adulation and complete empire over her, his life was made a burden to him. You should hear Mary on that subject—none of the ladies could keep their patience."

"Yet it appears Mr. Aubrey Leigh kept his—— until he got tired," said the Colonel. "Believe me, Fairfield, when there is such an unnatural situation as that, there must be more in it than meets the eye."

Fairfield, a good, steady soul, who generally had his ideas suggested to him, went away very serious from that interview. It was very strange indeed that a woman should prefer her friend to her husband, and make things wretched for him in order to keep her comfortable—it was very curious that with a woman so much superior to Amy in the house, a woman of the kind that turn men's heads, that mild Aubrey Leigh, who was not distinguished for force of character, should have never sought a moment's relief with her from poor Mrs. Leigh's querulousness. Fairfield accelerated his departure by an hour or two in order not to meet Aubrey again before he had poured those strange doubts and suggestions into his own Mary's ears.

CHAPTER XI.

THE party of travellers whose progress had hitherto been like that of a party of pleasure, who had been interested in everything they saw, and hailed every new place with delight, as if that had been the haven of all their hopes, travelled home from Cologne in a very different spirit. For one thing, it could not be concealed that Mrs. Kingsward was ill, which was a thing that she herself and the whole family stoutly, one standing by another, had hitherto been able to deny. She had not gone far, not an hour's journey, when she had to abandon her seat by the window—where

it had always been her delight to "see the country," and point out every village to her children—and lie down upon the temporary couch which Moulsey prepared for her with shawls and cushions along one side of the carriage. She cried out against herself as "self-indulgent" and "lazy," but she did not resist this arrangement. It effectually took any pleasure that there might have been out of the journey: for Bee, as may be supposed, though she was not melancholy, and would not admit, even to Betty, in the closest confidence, that she was at all afraid of the ultimate issue, was certainly self-absorbed, and glad not to be called upon to notice the scenery, but allowed to subside into a corner with her own thoughts. Charlie was in the opposite corner, exceedingly glum, and not conversible. Bee would not speak to him or look at him, and even Betty, that little thing, had said, "Oh, Charlie, how could you be so nasty to Aubrey?" for her sole salutation that morning. He was not sure even that his mother, though he had stood on her side and backed her up, was pleased with him for it. She talked to him, it is true, occasionally, and made him do little things for her, but rather in the way in which a mother singles out the pariah of the family, the one who is boycotted for some domestic offence, to show him that all are not against him, than in the tone which is used to a champion and defender. So it was not wonderful that Charlie was glum; but to see him in one corner, biting or trying to bite the few hairs that he called his moustache, with his brows bent down to his chin, and his chin sunk in the collar of his coat—and Bee in another, very different—indeed, her face glorified with dreams, and her eyes full of latent light, ready to flash at out any moment—was not cheerful for the others.

Mrs. Kingsward looked at them from one to another, and at little Betty between busied in a little book, with that baffled feeling which arises in the mind of a delicate woman when the strong individualities and wills of her children become first developed before her, after that time of their youth when all were guided by her decision, and mamma's leave was asked for everything. How fierce, how self-willed, how determined in his opposition Charlie looked like his father, not to be moved by anything! And Bee, how possessed by those young hopes of her own, which the mother knew would be of no avail against the fiat gone forth against her! Mrs. Kingsward knew her husband better than her children did. She knew that having taken up his position he would not give in. And Bee, with all that light of resistance in her eyes—Bee as little willing to give in as he! The invalid trembled when she thought of the clash of arms that would resound over her head—of the struggle which would rend her cheerful house in two. She did not at all realise that the cheerful days of that house were numbered—that soon it would be reduced into its elements, as a somewhat clamorous, restless, too energetic brood of children, with a father very self-willed, who hitherto had known nothing of them but as happy and obedient creatures, whose individual determinations concerned games and lessons, and who, so far as the conduct of life was affected, were of no particular account. Mrs. Kingsward was not yet aware that this was the dolorous prospect before her household; she only thought, "How am I to manage them all?" and felt her heart fail before Charlie's ill humour and *parti pris*, and before the bright defiance in Bee's eyes. Poor Aubrey, whom she had learned to look upon as one of her own, half a son, and half a brother—poor Aubrey, who had gone so wrong, and yet had so many excuses for him, a victim rather than a seducer—what was happening to Aubrey this fine September morning? It made her heart sick in her bosom as she thought of all these newly-raised conflicting powers, and she so little able to cope with them. If she did not get strong soon, what would all these children do? Charlie would go back to college, and would be out of it. He had so strong a will, and was so determined to get on, that little harm would happen to him—and besides, he was entirely in accord with his father, which was a great matter. But Bee—Bee! It seemed to Mrs. Kingsward that it was on the cards that Bee might take matters into her own hands, and run away with her lover, if her father would not yield. What else was there for these young creatures? Mrs. Kingsward knew that she herself would have done so in the circumstances had *her* lover insisted; and she knew that he would no more have consented to such a sentence—never, never!—than he had done to anything he disliked all his life. And Bee was like him, though she had never hitherto been anything but an obedient child. Mrs. Kingsward could not help picturing to herself, as she lay there, the elopement—Bee's room found empty in the morning, the note left on the table, the so easy, so certain explanation, which already she felt herself to be reading. And then her husband's wrath, his unalterable verdict on the criminal "never to enter this house again!" Poor mother! She foresaw, as we all do, tortures for herself, which she was never to be called upon to bear.

As for Betty, it was the most tiresome journey in all her little experiences. A long journey was generally fun to Betty. The scuffle of getting away, of seeing that all the little packets were right, of abusing Moulsey for hiding away the luncheon basket under the rugs and the books in some locked bag, the trouble of securing a compartment, arranging umbrellas and other things in the vacant seats to make believe that every place was full, the watch at every station to prevent the intrusion of strangers, the running from one side to another to see the pretty village or old castle, or the funny people at the country stations and the queer names—the luncheon in the middle of the day, which was as good as a pic-nic—all these things much diverted Betty, who loved the rapid movement through the air, and to feel the wind on her face; but none of these delights were to be had to-day. She was in one of the middle places, between Charlie, so glum and in a temper, and Bee, lost in her own thoughts and without a word to say, and opposite to mamma, who was so much more serious than usual, giving little Betty a smile from time to time, but not able to speak loud enough to be heard through the din of the train. She tried to read her book but it was not a very interesting book, and it was short too, and evidently would not last out half the journey. Betty was the only member of the party who had a free mind. The commotion of the romance between Bee and Aubrey had been pure amusement to her. It would be a bore if it did not end in a speedy marriage, with all the excitement of the presents, the trousseau, the dresses (especially the bridesmaids' dresses), the wedding day itself, the increased dignity of Betty as Miss Kingsward, the pleasure of talking of "my married sister," the pleasure of visiting Bee, in her own house, and sharing all her grandeur as a county lady. To miss all this would be a real trial, but Betty had confidence in the fitness of things, and felt it was impossible that she should miss all this. And she was at ease in her little mind, and the present dreariness of this unamusing, unattractive journey hung all the more heavy upon her consciousness now.

They arrived next day, having slept at Brussels to break the journey for Mrs. Kingsward, and the Colonel met them, as in duty bound, at Victoria. He gave Charlie his hand, and allowed Bee and Betty to kiss him, but his whole attention, as was natural, was for his wife.

"You look dreadfully tired," he said, with that half-tone of offence in which a man shows his disappointment at the aspect of an invalid. "You must have been worried on the journey to look so tired."

"Oh, no, I have not been at all worried on the journey—they have all been so good, sparing me every fatigue; but it is a tiresome long way, Edward, you know."

"Yes, of course, I know: but I never saw you look so tired before." He cast a reproachful look round upon the

young people, who were all ready to stand on the defensive. "You must have bothered your mother to death," he said. "I am sorry I did not come out for her myself—undoing all the effect of her cure."

"Oh, you will see, I shall be all right when I get home," Mrs. Kingsward said, cheerfully. "As for the children, Edward, they have all been as good as gold."

"You had better see to the luggage and bring your sisters home in a cab. I can't let mamma hang about here," said the Colonel, in his peremptory way. "Moulsey will come with us. I suppose you three have brains enough to manage by yourselves?"

Thus insulting his grown-up children, among whom a flame of indignation lighted up, partially burning away their difficulties between themselves, Colonel Kingsward half carried his wife to the carriage. "I thought at first I should have waited at Kingswarden till you came back. I am glad I changed my mind and came back to Harley Street," he said.

"Oh, is it to Harley Street we are going?" said Mrs. Kingsward, faintly. "I had rather hoped for the country, Edward."

"You don't look much like another twenty miles of a journey," said her husband.

"Well, perhaps not. I own I shall be glad to be quiet," the poor lady said. What he wished had always turned out after a moment to be just what his wife wished for all the years of their union. She even meekly accepted the fact that the children—the nursery children, as they were called—the little ones, who were no trouble but only a refreshment and delight, would have been too much for her that first night. Secretly, she had been looking forward to the touch and sight of her placid smiling baby as the one thing that would do her good—and all those large wet kisses of Johnny and Tommy and Lucy and little Margaret, and the burst of delighted voices at the sight of mamma. "Yes, I believe it would have been too much for me," she said, with a look aside at Moulsey, who, as on many a previous occasion, would dearly have loved to box her master's ears. "And I *do* believe it would have been too much for me," Mrs. Kingsward added, when that confidential attendant put her to bed.

"Perhaps it would, ma'am," Moulsey said. "They would have made a noise, bless them—and baby will not go to anyone when he sees me—and altogether I shall be more fit for them, Moulsey, after a good night's rest—"

"If you get that, you poor dear," said Moulsey, under her breath. But her mistress did not hear that remark any more than many others which Moulsey made in her own mind, always addressed to that mistress whom she loved. "If he said dying would be good for you, you would say you were sure of it, and that was what you wanted most," the maid said within herself.

It must not, however, be supposed from this that Colonel Kingsward was not a good husband. He had always been like a lover, though a somewhat peremptory one, to his wife. And without him her young, gay, pleasure-loving ways, her love of life and amusement might have made her a much less successful personage, and not the example of every virtue that she was. Had Mrs. Kingsward had the upper hand, the family would have been a very different family, and its career probably a very broken, tumultuous, happy-go-lucky career. It was that strong hand which had controlled and guided her, which had been, as people say, the making of Mrs. Kingsward; and though she feared his severity in the present crisis, she yet felt the most unspeakable relief from the baffled, helpless condition in which she had looked at her children, feeling herself all unable to cope with them in the presence of papa.

"I wonder if he thinks we are cabbages," was Bee's indignant exclamation as he turned his back upon them.

"Apparently," said Charlie, coming a little out of his sullenness. "Look here, you girls, get into this omnibus—happily we've got an omnibus—with the little things, while I go to the Custom House to get the luggage through."

"Betty, you get in," said Bee. "I will go with you, Charlie, for I have got mamma's keys."

"Can't you give them to me?" Charlie cast a gloomy look about, thinking that Leigh might perhaps be somewhere awaiting a word, a thought which now for the first time traversed Bee's mind, too.

"Then, Betty, you had better go with him, for he doesn't know half the boxes," she said.

"Oh, you can come yourself if you like," said Charlie, feeling in that case that this was the safest arrangement after all.

"No, Betty had better go. Betty, you know Moulsey's box and that new basket that mamma brought me before we left the Baths."

"Come along yourself, quick, Bee."

"No, I shall stop in the omnibus."

"When you have made up your minds," cried Betty, who had slipped out of the vehicle at the first word. Betty thought it would be more fun to go through the Custom House than to wait all the time cooped up here.

And Bee had her reward; for Aubrey was there, waiting at a distance till the matter was settled. "I should have risked everything and come, even if the penalty had been a quarrel with Charlie," Aubrey said, "but I must not quarrel with anyone if I can help it. We shall have hard work enough without that."

"You have seen papa?"

"Yes, I have seen him: but I have not done myself much good, I fear," said Aubrey, shaking his head. "Bee, you won't give me up whatever they may say?"

"Give you up? Never, Aubrey, till you give me up!"

"Then all is safe, my darling. However things look now they can't hold out for ever. Lies must be found out, and then—in time—you will be able to act for yourself."

"Do you think papa will stand to it like that, Aubrey?"

Aubrey shook his head. He did not make any reply.

"Tell me. Is it a lie?" she said.

He bent down his head upon her hand, kissing it.

"Not all," he said, in an almost inaudible voice. "I said that—at Cologne——"

"I did not understand," said Bee. "No; it does not matter to me, Aubrey—not so very much; but if you promised ——"

"I never promised—never! My only thought was to escape——"

"Then I can't think what you have done wrong. Aubrey, is she tall, with dark hair, and beautiful dark eyes, and a way of looking at you as if she would look you through and through?"

"Bee!" he said, gripping her fast, as if someone had been about to decoy her away.

"And a mouth," said Bee, "that is very pretty, but looks as if it were cut out of steel? Then, I have seen her. She sat down by me one day in the wood, when I was doing that sketch, and gave me such clever hints, telling me how to finish it, till she made me hate it, don't you know. Is she horribly clever, and a good artist? and like that——"

"Bee! What did that woman say to you?"

"Nothing very much. Asked me about the people at the hotel, and if there were any Leighs—not you, she pretended, but the Leighs of Hurst-leigh, whom she knew. I thought it very strange at the time why she should ask about the Leighs without knowing anything—and then I forgot all about it. But to-day it came back to my mind, and I have been thinking of nothing else. Aubrey—she is older than you are?"

"Yes," he said.

"And she made you promise to marry her?" said Bee, half unconscious yet half conscious of that wile of the cross-examiner, coming back to the point suddenly.

"Never, Bee, never for one moment in my misery! That I should have to make such a confession to you!—but there was no promise nor thought of a promise. I desired nothing—nothing but to escape from her. You don't doubt my word, Bee?"

"No; I don't doubt anything you say. But I think she is a dreadful woman to get anybody in her power, Aubrey. My little drawing was for you. It was the place we first met, and she told me how to do it and make it look so much better. I am not very clever at it, you know; and then I hated the very sight of it, and tore it in two. I don't know why."

"I understand why. Bee, you will be faithful to me, whatever you are told?"

"Till I die, Aubrey."

"And never, never believe that for a moment my heart will change from you."

"Not till I hear it from yourself," she said, with a woeful smile. The despair in him communicated itself to her, who had not been despairing at all.

"Which will never be—and when you are your own mistress, my darling——"

"Oh, we shan't have to wait for that!" she cried, with a burst of her native energy. "Dear Aubrey, they are coming back; you must go away."

"Till we meet again, darling?"

"Till we meet again!"

CHAPTER XII.

BEE stole into her mother's room as she went upstairs before that first dinner at home which used to be such a joyous meal. How they had all enjoyed it—until now. The ease and space, the going from room to room, the delight in finding everything with which they were familiar, the flowers in the vases (never were any such flowers as those at home!), the incursions of the little ones shouting to each other, "Mamma's come home!" Even the little air of disorder which all these interruptions brought into the orderly house was delightful to the young people. They looked forward as to an ideal life, to beginning all their usual occupations again and doing them all better than ever. "Oh, how nice it is to be at home!" the girls had said to each other. Instead of those hotel rooms, which at their best are never more than hotel rooms, a *genre* not to be mistaken, how delightful was the drawing-room at home, with all its corners—Bee's little table where she muddled at her drawings, mamma's great basket of needlework where everything could be thrown under charitable cover, Betty's stool on which she sat at the feet of her oracle of the moment, whoever that might be, and all the little duties to be resumed—the evening papers arranged for papa (as if he had not seen enough of them in the daytime in his office!), the flowers to see after, the little notes to write, all the pleasant common-places of the home life. But to-night, for the first time, dinner was a silent meal, hurried over—not much better than a dinner at a railway station, with a sensation in it of being still on the road, of not having yet reached their destination. The drawing-room was in brown holland still, for they were all going on to Kingswarden to-morrow. The house felt formal, uninhabited, as if they had come home to lodgings. All this was bad enough; but the primary trouble of all was the fact that mamma was upstairs—gone to bed before dinner, too tired to sit up. Such a thing had never happened before. However tired she was, she had always so brightened up at the sensation of coming home.

And papa, though kind, was very grave. The happiness of getting his family back did not show in his face and all his actions as it generally did. Colonel Kingsward was very kind as a father, and very tender as a husband; the severity of his character showed little at home. His wife was aware of it, and so were the servants, and Charlie, I think, had begun to suspect what a hand of iron was covered by that velvet glove. But the girls had never had any occasion to fear their father. Bee thought that the additional gravity of his behaviour was owing to herself and her introduction of a new individual interest into the family; so that, notwithstanding a touch of indignation, with which she felt the difference, she was timid and not without a sense of guilt before her father. Never had she been rebellious or disobedient before; and she was both now, determined not to submit. This made her self-conscious and rather silent; she who was always overflowing with talk and fun and the story of their travels. Colonel Kingsward did not ask many questions about that. What he did ask was all about "your mother."

"She is not looking so well as when she went away," he said.

"Oh, papa, it's only because she's so tired," cried little Betty. Betty taking upon her to answer papa, to take the responsibility upon her little shoulders! But Bee felt as if she could not say anything.

"Do you really think so?" he said, turning to that confident little speaker—to Betty. As if Betty could know anything about it! But Bee seemed paralysed and could not speak.

She stole, as I have said, into her mother's room on her way upstairs, but she had hardly time to say a word when papa came in to see if Mrs. Kingsward had eaten anything, and how she felt now that she was comfortably

established in her own bed. It irritated Bee to feel herself thus deprived of the one little bit of possible expansion, and stirred her spirit. With her cheek to her mother's, she said in her ear, "Mamma, I saw Aubrey at the station," with a thrill of pleasure and defiance in saying that, though secretly, in her father's presence.

"Oh, Bee!" said Mrs. Kingsward, with a faint cry of alarm.

"And he told me," continued Bee, breathless in her whisper, "that papa was firm against us."

"Bee! Bee!"

"And we promised each other we should never, never give up, whatever anyone might say."

"Oh, child, how dare you, how dare you?" Mrs. Kingsward said.

How Bee's heart beat! What an enlivening, inspiriting strain of opposition came into her mind, making her cheeks glow and her eyes flame! The whisper was, perhaps, a child's device, perhaps a woman's weakness, but it exhilarated her beyond description to say all this in the very presence of her father. There was a sensation of girlish mischief in it as well as defiance, which relieved all the heavier sentiments that had weighed down her heart.

"What are you saying to your mother, Bee? She must not be disturbed. Run away and let her rest. If we are to go back to Kingswarden to-morrow she must get all the rest that is possible now."

"I was never the one to disturb mamma," said Bee, bestowing another kiss on her mother's cheek.

"Oh, be a good child, Bee!" pleaded Mrs. Kingsward, almost without sound; for by this time the Colonel was hovering over the bed, with a touch of suspicion, wondering what was going on between these two.

"Yes, mamma dear, always," said Bee, aloud.

"What is she promising, Lucy? And what were you saying to her? Bee should know better at her age than to disturb you with talk."

"Oh, nothing, Edward. She was only giving me a kiss, and I told her to be a good child—as I am always doing; thinking to be heard, you know, for so much speaking," the mother said, with a soft laugh.

"Bee has always been a sufficiently good child. I don't think you need trouble yourself on that point. The thing is for you to get well, my dear, and keep an easy mind. Don't trouble about anything; leave all that to me, and try and think a little about yourself."

"I always do, Edward," she said with a smile.

He shook his head, but agitation had brought a colour to her cheeks, and to persuade one's-self that it is only fatigue that makes a beloved face look pale is so easy at first, before any grave alarm has been roused. Yet, Colonel Kingsward's mind was not an easy one that night. He was *au fond*, a severe man, very rigid as to what he thought his duty, taking life seriously on the whole. His young wife, who loved pleasure, had made him far more a man of society than was natural or indeed pleasing to him; but he had thus got into that current which it is so difficult to get out of without a too stern withdrawal, and his large young family had warmed his heart and dressed his aspect in many smiles and graces which did not belong to him by nature. The mixture of the rigid and the yielding had produced nothing but good effects upon his character till now. But there is no telling what a man is till the first conflict of wills arises in his own household. Hitherto there had been nothing of the kind. His children had amused him and pleased him and made him proud. Their health, their prettiness, their infantile gaiety and delight in every favour accorded to them had been all so many tributes to his own supreme influence and power. Their very health was a standing compliment to his own health and vigour, from whom they took their excellent constitutions, and to the wonderful care and attention to every law of health which he enforced in his house. Not a drain escaped trapping, not a gas was left undisposed of where Colonel Kingsward was. He had every new suggestion in his nursery that sanitary science could bring up. "And look at the result!" he was in the habit of saying. Not a pale face, not a headache, not an invalid member there. And among the children he was as the sun in his splendour. Every delight rayed out from him. The hour of his coming home was watched for; it was the greatest treat for the little boys to go in the dogcart with Simmons, the groom, to fetch papa from the station, while the others assembled at the door as at a daily celebration to see him arrive. Charlie was now a man grown, but he was a good boy, full of all right impulses, and there had never been any difficulty with him.

Thus Colonel Kingsward had been kept from all knowledge of those contrarities of nature which appear even in the most favoured regions. He was of opinion that he surrounded his wife with every care, bore everything for her, did not suffer the winds of heaven to visit her cheek too roughly. And it was true. But he was not at all aware that she saved him anything, or that his joyful omnipotence and security from every fret and all opposition depended upon her more than on anything else in the world. He did not know the little inevitable jars which she smoothed away, the youthful wills growing into individuality which she kept in check. Which was a pity, for the strong man was thus deprived of the graces of precaution, and knew no more than the merest weakling what, as his children grow into men and women, every man has to face and provide against. If Colonel Kingsward was too arbitrary, too trenchant in his measures, too certain that there was no will but his own to be taken into account, the blame must thus be partially laid upon those natural fictions of boundless love and duty and sweet affectionate submission, which grow up in the nursery and reign as long as childhood lasts—until a more potent force of self or will or love, comes in to put the gentle dream to flight.

It was thus that Colonel Kingsward considered the matter about Bee. It had been, of course, necessary to cross Bee two or three times in her life before. It had been necessary, or at least he had thought it necessary, to send her to school; it had been thought expedient to keep her back a year longer than she wished from appearing in the world. These decisions had cost tears and a little struggle, but in a few days Bee had forgotten all about them—or so, at least, her father thought. And a lover—at nineteen—what was that but another plaything, a novelty, a compliment, such as girls love? How could it mean anything more serious? Why, Bee was a child—a little girl, an ornamental adjunct to her mother, a sort of reflection, not to be detached for a long time from that source of all that was delightful in her. Colonel Kingsward had felt with a delighted surprise that the child and the mother did "throw up" each other when he began to go out with them together. Bee's young beauty showing what mamma's had been, and Mrs. Kingsward's beauty (so much higher and sweeter than any girl's wild-rose bloom could be) showing what in the after days her child would grow to. To cut these two asunder for a stranger—another man, an intruding personality thrusting himself between the child and her natural allegiance—was oppressive in any shape. At the first word, indeed, and in the amusement furnished him by the letters that had been poured upon him, Colonel Kingsward's consent had been given almost without thought. Aubrey Leigh was a good match, he had a fine place, a valuable

estate, and was well spoken of among men. If Lucy was so absurd as to wish her daughter to marry; if Bee, the silly child, was so foolish as to think of leaving her father's house for another, that was probably as good a one as she could have chosen. I don't know if fathers generally feel it a sort of desecration when their young daughters marry. Some fathers do, and some brothers, as if the creature pure by nature from all such thoughts were descending to a lower place, and becoming such an one as themselves. Colonel Kingsward was not, perhaps, visionary enough for such a view, yet he was slightly shocked in his sentiment about the perfection of his own house by this idea on his child's part of leaving it for another. However, it was true he had a very large family, and to provide so well for one of them at the very outset of her career was a thing which was not to be despised.

But when the second chapter of this romance, all so simple, so natural in its first phase, opened out, and there appeared a dark passage behind—a woman wronged who had a claim upon the man, a story, a scandal—whether it were true or untrue!—Colonel Kingsward, in his knowledge of the world, knew that it did not so much matter whether a story was true or untrue. It stuck, anyhow; and years, generations after, when, if false, it had been contradicted and exploded, and acknowledged to be false, people still would shake their heads and say, "Wasn't there some story?" For this reason he was not very rigid about the facts, part of which, at least, the culprit admitted. There was a woman and there was a story, and all the explanations in the world could not do away with these. What did it matter about the man? He, Colonel Kingsward, was not Aubrey Leigh's keeper. And as for Bee, there would be some tears, no doubt, as when she was sent to school—a little passion of disappointment, as when she was kept back for a whole year, from seventeen to eighteen, in her "coming out"—but the tears and the passion once over, things would go on the same as before. The little girl would go back to her place, and all would be well.

This was the man's delusion, and perhaps it was a natural one, and he was conscious of wishing to do the best thing for her, of saving her from the after tortures which a wife has to endure whose husband has proclivities towards strange women, and capabilities of being "led away." That was a risk that he could understand much better than she could, at her age. The fellow might be proud of her, small blame to him—he might strive to escape from disgraceful entanglements by such an exceptionable connection as that of Colonel Kingsward, of Kingswarden, Harley Street, and the Intelligence Department; he might be very much in earnest and all that. He did not altogether blame the man; indeed, he was willing enough to allow that he was not a bad fellow, and that he was popular among his friends.

But these were not enough in the case of a girl like Bee. And it was certainly for her good that her father was acting. She had known the man a month, what could he be to her in so short a time? This is the most natural of questions, constantly asked, and never finding any sufficient answer. Why should a girl in three or four weeks be so changed in all her thoughts as to be ready to give up her father's house, the place in which she has all her associations, the company in which she has been so happy, and go away to the end of the world, perhaps with a man whom she has known only for a month? It is the commonest thing in the world, but also the most mysterious, and Colonel Kingsward refused to believe in it, as so many other fathers have done. Bee would cry, and her mother would console her. She would fly into a childish passion, and struggle against her fate—for a few days. She would swear that she would never, never give up that new plaything, and the joy of parading it before the other girls, who perhaps had not such toys to play with—but all that nonsense would give way in a little to firm guidance and considerate care, and the fresh course of amusement and pleasure which the winter would bring.

The winter is by no means barren to those who spend it habitually in town. It has many distractions. There is the theatre, there are Christmas gatherings without number, there are new dresses also to be got for the same, perhaps a pretty new bonnet or two thrown in by a penitent father, very sorry even in his own interests to give his little girl pain. If all these pleasant things could not make up for the loss of a man—of doubtful character, too—whom she had only known for a month, Colonel Kingsward felt that it would be a strange thing indeed, and altogether beyond his power to explain.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was not possible, however, to remove Mrs. Kingsward to Kingswarden next day. She was too much fatigued even to leave her bed, and the doctor who came to see her, her own familiar doctor who had sent her to Germany to the celebrated bath, looked a little grave when he saw the condition in which she had come home. "No fatigue, no excitement," was what he enjoined. She was to have nothing to excite, nothing to disturb her—to go to the country? Oh, yes, but not for some days. To see the children? Certainly, the children could not be kept from their mother; but all in moderation, with great judgment, not too long at a time, not too often. And above all she must not be worried. Nothing must be done, nothing said to cross or vex her. When he heard from the Colonel a very brief and studiously subdued version of a little family business which had disturbed her—"I need not keep any secrets from you, doctor. The fact is that someone wanted to marry my girl Bee, and that I made some discoveries about him which obliged me to withdraw my consent." The doctor formed his lips into a whistle, to which he did not give vent. "That accounts for it," he said.

"That accounts for—what?" cried Colonel Kingsward, not without irritation.

"For the state in which I find her. And mind my words, Kingsward, you'd better let your girl marry anybody that isn't a blackguard than risk that sort of shock with your wife. Never forget that her life—I mean to say that she's very delicate. Don't let her be worried—stretch a point—have things done as she wishes. You will find it pay best in the end."

"For once you are talking nonsense, my dear fellow," said Colonel Kingsward; "my wife is not a woman who has ever been set upon having her own way."

"Let her have it this time," said the doctor, "and you'll never repent it. If she wants Bee to marry, let her marry. Bee is a dear little thing, but her mother, Kingsward, her mother—is of far more consequence to you than even she —"

"That is a matter of course," said Colonel Kingsward. "Lucy is of more importance to me than all the world beside; but neither must I neglect the interests of my child."

"Oh, bother the child," cried the doctor, "let her have her lover; the mother is what you must think of now."

"You seem tremendously in earnest, Southwood."

"So I am—tremendously in earnest. And don't you work your mind on the subject, but do what I say."

"Do you mean to say that my wife is in a—state of danger?"

"I mean that she must be kept from worry—she must not be contradicted—things must not be allowed to go contrary to her wishes. Poor little Bee! I don't say you are to let her marry a blackguard. But don't worry her mother about it—that is the chief thing I've got to say."

"No, I shan't worry her mother about it," said the Colonel, shutting his mouth closely as if he were locking it up. When Dr. Southwood was gone, however, he stopped the two girls who were lingering about to know the doctor's opinion, and detaching Betty's arm from about Bee's waist drew his eldest daughter into his study and shut the door. "I want to speak to you, Bee," he said.

"Yes, papa." In this call to her alone to receive some communication, Bee, as may be imagined, jumped to a conclusion quite different from what her father intended, and almost for the moment forgot mamma.

"The doctor tells me that above everything your mother must be kept from worry. Do you understand? In the circumstances it is extremely important that you should know this."

"Papa," she cried, half in indignation half in disappointment, "do you think that I would worry her—in any circumstances?"

"I think that girls of your age often think that no affairs are so important as your own, and it is very likely that you may be of that opinion, and I wish you to know what the doctor says."

"Is mamma—very ill?" Bee asked, bewildered.

"He does not say so—only that she is not to be fretted or contradicted, or disturbed about anything. I feel it necessary to warn you, Bee."

"Why me above the rest?" she cried. "Am I likely to be the one to worry mamma?"

"The others have no particular affairs of their own to worry her with. There must be no private talks, no discussions, no endeavours to get her upon what you may suppose to be your side."

Bee gave her father a glance of fire, but she felt that a little prudence was necessary, and kept the tumult of feeling which was within her as much as possible in her own breast. "I have always talked to mamma of everything that was in my mind," she said, piteously. "I don't know how I am to stop. She would wonder so if I stopped talking; and how can I talk to her except of things that are in my mind?"

"You must learn," said the Colonel, "to think of her more than of yourself." He did not at all mean to prescribe to her a course of conduct more elevated than that he meant to pursue himself, but then it was only in action that he meant to carry out his purposes, he was not afraid of committing himself in speech.

Bee looked at him again with a gaze that asked a great many questions, but she only answered, "I will try my very best, papa."

"If you do, I am sure you will succeed, my dear," he said, in a gentler tone.

"Is that all?" she asked, hesitating.

"That is all I want with you just now."

Bee turned away towards the door, and then she paused and made a step back.

"Papa!"

"Yes, Bee."

"Would you mind telling me—I will not say a word to her—but oh, please tell me—"

"What is it?" said the Colonel. He went to his writing table, and sitting down began to turn over his papers. His tone was slightly impatient, his eyebrows slightly raised, as if in surprise.

"Papa, you must know what it is. I know that you have seen—Mr. Leigh!"

"How do you know anything about it? What have you to do with whom I have seen? Run away. I do not mean to enter into any explanations on this subject with you."

"Then with whom will you enter into explanations? You cannot speak to mamma; she must not be worried. Papa, I am not a little girl now, to be told to run away."

"You seem to be determined not to lose a moment in telling me so."

"I should not have told you so," said Bee, looking at him over the high back of his writing-table, "if you had not told me I was not to talk to mamma."

He looked up at her, and their eyes met; both of them keenly, fiercely blue, lit up with fires of combat. It is often imagined that blue eyes are the softest eyes—but not by those who are acquainted with the kind which belonged to the Kingswards, which might have been called sapphires, if sapphires ever flash and cut the air as diamonds do. They were not either so dark as sapphires—they were like nothing but themselves, two pairs of blue eyes that might have been made to order, so like were they to each other, and both blazing across that table as if they would have set the house on fire.

"That's an excellent point," he said. "I can't deny it. What made you so terrifically clever all at once?"

There is nothing more stinging than to be called clever in the midst of a discussion. Bee's eyes seemed to set fire to her face, at least, which flashed crimson upon her father's startled sight.

"When one has someone else to think of, someone's interests to take care of—"

"Which are your own interests—and vastly more important than anything which concerns your father and mother."

"I never said so—nor thought so, papa—but if they are different from yours, that's no reason," said Bee, bold in words but faltering in manner, "is it, why I should not think of them, if, as you say, they're my own interests, papa?"

"You are very bold, Bee."

"What am I to do if I have no one to speak for me? Papa, Aubrey—"

"I forbid you to speak with such familiarity of a man whom you have nothing to do with, and whom you scarcely know."

"Papa, Aubrey—" cried Bee, with astonishment.

Colonel Kingsward jumped up from his table in a fury of impatience. "How dare you come and besiege me here in my own room with your Aubrey?—a man whom you have not known a month; a stranger to the family."

"Papa, you must let me speak. You allowed me to be engaged to him. If you had said 'no' at first, there might, perhaps, have been some reason in it."

"Perhaps—some reason!" he repeated, with an angry laugh.

"Yes, for even then it was not your own happiness that was in question. It was I, after all, that was to marry him."

"And you think that is a reason for defying me?"

"It is always said to be a reason—not for defying anybody—but for standing up for what you call my own interests, papa—when they are somebody else's interests as well. You said we might be engaged—and we were. And how can I let anyone, even you, say he is a stranger? He is my *fiancé*. He is betrothed to me. We belong to each other. Whatever anyone may say, that is the fact," cried Bee, very rapidly, to get it all out before she was interrupted.

"It is not at all a cheerful or pleasant fact—if it changes my little Bee, whom I thought I knew, to this flushed and brazen woman, fighting for her—Go, child, and don't make an exhibition of yourself. Your mother's daughter! It is not credible—to assault me, your father, in my own room, for the sake of—"

"Papa! don't you remember that it is said in the Bible you are not to provoke your children to wrath? Mamma would have stood up for you, I suppose, when she was engaged to you. I may be flushed," cried Bee, putting her hands to her blazing cheeks, "how could I help it? Forced to talk to you, to ask you—on a subject that gives you a right to speak to me, your own child, like that—"

"I am glad you think I have a right to speak as the circumstances demand to my own child," said the Colonel, cooling down; "but why you should be forced, as you say, to take up such an unbecoming and unwomanly position is beyond my guessing."

"It is because I have no longer mamma to speak for me," Bee said.

The creature was not without skill. Now she came back to the point that was not to be gainsaid.

"We have had quite enough of this," Colonel Kingsward replied. "Your mother, as you are quite aware, never set up her will against mine. She was aware, if you are not, that I knew the world better than she did, and was more competent to decide. Your mother would never have stood up to me as you have done."

"It would have been better, perhaps, sometimes, if she had," cried Bee, carried away by the tide of her excitement. Colonel Kingsward was so astounded that he had scarcely power to be angry. He gazed at his excited child with a surprise that was beyond words.

"Oh, papa, papa! Forgive me! I never meant that; it came out before I was aware."

"The thought must have been there or it could not have come out," he said.

"Oh, no; there was no thought there. It may be so with you, but not with us, papa. Words come into our mouths. We don't think them; we don't mean to say—they only seem to—hook on to—something that went before; and then they come out with a crash. Oh, forgive me, forgive me, papa!"

"I suppose," he said, with a half laugh, "that may be taken as a woman's exposition of her own style of argument."

"Don't call me a woman," she said, with her soft small voice, aggrieved and wounded, drawing closer to him. "Oh, papa! I am only your little girl after all."

"A naughty little girl," he said, shaking his head.

"And without mamma to speak for me," added Bee.

The Colonel laughed aloud. "You wily little natural lawyer!" he said; but immediately became very grave, for underneath this burst of half angry amusement Bee had given him a shock she did not know of. All unaware of the edge of the weapons which she used with a certain instinctive deftness, it did not occur to her that these words of hers might penetrate not only deeper than she thought, but far deeper than her own thoughts had ever gone. His wife's worn face seemed suddenly to appear before Colonel Kingsward's eyes in a light which he had never seen before, and the argument which this child used so keenly, yet so ignorantly, pierced him like a knife. "Without mamma to speak for me!" These words sounded very simple to Bee, a mischievous expedient to trap him in the snare he had laid for her. But if the time should ever come when they should be true! The Colonel was struck down by that arrow flown at a venture. He went back to his table subdued, and sat down there. "That will do," he said, "that will do. Now run away and leave me to my work, Bee."

She came up to him and gave him a timid kiss, which the Colonel accepted quietly in the softening of that thought. She roamed about the table a little, flicking off an imperceptible speck of dust with her handkerchief, arranging some books upon the upper shelf of his bureau, sometimes looking at him over that row of books, sometimes lingering behind him as if doing something there. He did not interfere with her movements for a few minutes, in the *attendrissement* of his thoughts. Without a mother to speak for her! Poor little girl, if that should ever be so! Poor little children unconscious in their nursery crying for mamma; and, oh, worse than all, himself without his Lucy, who had made all the world sweet to him! He was a masterful man, who would stand to his arms in any circumstances, who would not give in even if his heart was broken; but what a strange, dull, gloomy world it would be to him if the children had no mother to speak for them! He made a sudden effort to shake off that thought, and the first thing that recalled him to himself was to hear Bee, having no other mischief, he supposed, to turn her hand to, heaping coals upon the little bit of fire which had been lighted for cheerfulness only.

"Bee," he cried, "are you still there? What are you doing? The room is like an oven already, and you are making up a sort of Christmas fire."

"Oh, I am so sorry—I forgot," cried Bee, putting down the shovel hastily. "I thought it wanted mending—for you always like a good fire."

"Not in September," he said, "and such weather; the finest we have had since July. Come, cease this fluttering about—you disturb me—and I have a hundred things to do."

"Yes, papa." Bee's little figure stole from behind him in the meekest way. She stopped in her progress towards the door to give a touch to the flowers on a side table; and then she went slowly on, going out. She had got her hand upon the handle of the door, and Colonel Kingsward thanked heaven he had got rid of her for the moment, when she turned round, eyeing him closely again though keeping by that means of escape. "Papa," she said, softly, "after all the talk we have been having—you perhaps don't remember that—you have never—answered my question yet."

"What question?" he said sharply.

Bee put her hands together like a child, she looked at him beseechingly, coaxingly, like that child returning to its point, and then she said still more softly, "About Aubrey, dear papa!"

CHAPTER XIV.

I WILL not attempt to follow in detail the course of that autumn. It was a fine season, and Mrs. Kingsward was taken to her home in the country and recovered much of her lost health in the serene ending of the month and the bright days of October, which was a model October—everything that month ought to be. The trees had scarcely begun to take any autumnal colouring upon them when they reached Kingswarden—a house which stood among the Surrey hills; an old house placed not as modern houses are, pitched upon hillsides, or at points where there is "a view." The old Kingswards had been moved by no such ridiculous modern sentiments. They had planted their mansion in a sheltered spot, where it would be safe from the winds that range over the country and all the moorland heights. The gates opened upon a wild country road with an extravagant breadth of green pathway and grassy bank on either side—enough to have made a farmer swear, but very pleasant to the eye and delightful to a horse's feet, as well as to the pedestrians, whether they were tramps or tourists, who walked or rode on bicycles—the latter class only—from London to Portsmouth. The house was old, red, and straggling, covered with multitudes of creepers. Sheets of purple clematis—the Jackmanni, if anybody wishes to know; intolerable name for such a royal garment of blossom—covered half-a-dozen corners, hanging down in great brilliant wreaths over old ivy and straggling Virginia creeper and the strong stalks of the climbing roses, which still bore here and there a flower. Other sheets of other flowers threw themselves about in other places as if at their own sweet will, especially the wild exuberance of the Traveller's Joy; though I need not say that this wildness was under the careful eye of the gardener, who would not let it go too far. I cannot attempt to tell how many other pleasant and fragrant and flowery things there were which insisted on growing in that luxurious place, even to the fastidious Highland creeper, which in that autumn season was the most gay, luxuriant, and delightful of all. The flowers abounded like the children, not to be checked, as healthy and as brilliant, in the fine, peaty soil and pure air. The scent of the mignonette, which in this late season straggled anywhere, seemed to fill half the country round. The borders were crowned with those autumn flowers which make up as well as they can for their want of sweetness by lavish wealth of colour—the glowing single dahlias, which this generation has had the good sense to re-capture from Nature after the quilled and rosetted artificial things which the gardeners had manufactured out of them, and the fine scarlet and blue of the salvias, and the glory of all those golden tribes of the daisy kind that now make our borders bright, instead of the old sturdy red geranium, which once sufficed for all the supplies of autumn, an honest servant but a poor lord. I prefer the sweetness of the Spring, when every flower has a soul in it, and breathes it all about in the air, that is full of hope. But as it cannot always be Spring, that triumph of bright hues is something to mask the face of winter with until the time when the tortured and fantastic chrysanthemum reigns alone.

This was the sort of garden they had at Kingswarden; not shut off in a place by itself, but bordering all the lawns, which were of the velvet it takes centuries to perfect. The immediate grounds sloped a little to the south, and beyond them was a very extensive, if somewhat flat, prospect, ending on the horizon in certain mild blue shadows which were believed to be hills. There was not much that could be called a park at Kingswarden. The few farms which Colonel Kingsward possessed pressed his little circle of trees rather close; but as long as the farms were let the family felt they could bear this. It gave them a comfortable feeling of modest natural wealth and company; the yeomen keeping the squire warm, they in their farmsteadings, he in the hall.

And the autumn went on in its natural course, gaining colour as it began to lose its greenness and the days their warmth. The fruit got all gathered in after the corn, the apple trees that had been such a sight, every bough bent down with its balls of russet or gold, looked shabby and worn, their season done, the hedges ran over with their harvest, every kind of wild berry and feathery seedpod, wild elderberries, hips and haws, the dangerous unwholesome fruit of the nightshade, the triumphant wreaths of bryony of every colour, green, crimson, and purple. The robins began to appear about Kingswarden, hopping about the lawns, and coming very near the dining-room windows after breakfast, when the little tribe of the nursery children had their accustomed half-hour with mamma, and delighted in nothing so much as to crumble the bread upon the terrace and tempt the redbreasts nearer and nearer. When, quite satisfied and comforted about his wife's looks, Colonel Kingsward went off to the shooting, this little flock of children trailed after mamma wherever she went, a little blooming troop. By this time Charlie had gone back to Oxford, and the little ones liked to have the run of the lawns outside and the sitting rooms within, with nothing more alarming than Betty to keep them in order. It is to be feared that the relaxation of discipline which occurred when papa was absent was delightful to all those little people, and neither was Mrs. Kingsward sorry now and then to feel herself at full ease—with no necessity anywhere of further restraint than her own softened perceptions of family decorum required. It was a moment in which, if that could be said, she was self-indulgent—sometimes not getting up at her usual hour, but taking her breakfast in her room, with clusters of little boys and girls all over her bed, and over the carpet, sharing every morsel, climbing over her in their play. And when she went out to drive she had the carriage full of them; and when she took her stroll about the grounds they were all about, shouting and racing, nobody suggesting that it would be "too much for her," or sending them off because they disturbed mamma. She was disturbed to her heart's content while the Colonel was away. She said, "You know this is very nice for a time, but it would not do always," to her elder daughter: but I think that she saw no necessity, except in the return of her husband, why it should not do, and she enjoyed herself singing to them, dancing (a very little) with them, playing for them as only the mother of a large family ever can play, that simple dance music which is punctuated and kept in perfect time by her heart as much as by her ear. For myself, I know the very touch upon the piano of a woman who is the orchestra of the children, who makes their little feet twinkle to the music. There is no band equal to it for harmony, and precision, and go. They enjoyed the freedom of having no one to say, "Hush, don't

make such a noise in the house," of the absence of all the disturbable people, "the gentlemen," as the servants plainly said, "being away" more, Mrs. Kingsward sometimes thought, with a faint twinge of conscience, than it was right they should enjoy anything in the absence of papa. Charlie was quite as bad as papa, and declared that they made his head ache, and that no fellow could work with such a row going on; it made the little carnival all the more joyous that he was out of the way.

Bee had spent the six weeks since their return in a sort of splendour of girlish superiority and elation, of which her mother had not been unobservant, though nothing had been said between them. I am not sure that Bee did not enjoy the situation more than if Aubrey had been at Kingswarden wooing her all day long, playing tennis with her, riding with her—in every way appearing as her accepted lover. Circumstances had saved her from this mere vulgarity of beatitude, and she felt that in the very uncertainty of their correspondence, which was private—almost secret, and yet not clandestine—there was a wonderful charm, a romance and tinge of the unhappy and desperate, while yet everything within herself was happy and triumphant. It had never been said, neither by the Colonel nor by his wife (who had said nothing at all), that Bee was not to write letters to Aubrey nor to receive letters from him. I cannot imagine how Colonel Kingsward, in bidding her understand that all was over between Aubrey and herself, did not make a condition of this. But probably he thought her too young and simple to maintain any such correspondence, and her lover too little determined, too persuadeable, to begin it. When Bee had received her lover's first letter it had been under her father's very eyes. It had come at breakfast between two girl-epistles, and Colonel Kingsward would not have been guilty of the pettiness of looking at his daughter's correspondence for any inducement yet before him. She had the tremendous thrill and excitement of reading it in his very sight, which she did not hesitate to do, for the sake of the bravado, feeling her ears tingle and the blood coursing in her veins, never imagining that he would not observe, and setting her young slight strength like a rock in momentary expectation of a question on the subject. But no question came. Colonel Kingsward was looking at the papers, and at the few letters which came to him at his house. The greater part of his correspondence went to the office. He took it very quietly, and he never remarked Bee at all, which was little less than a miracle, she thought. And it was very well for her that this was one of the mornings on which mamma did not come downstairs.

This immense excitement was a little too strong for ordinary use, and Bee so arranged it afterwards that her letters came by a later post, when she could read them by herself in her room. The servants knew perfectly well of this arrangement—the butler who opened the post bag at Kingswarden, and the maid who carried Miss Bee's letters upstairs—but neither father nor mother thought of it. That is, I will not answer for Mrs. Kingsward. She perhaps had her suspicions; but, if her husband did not forbid correspondence, she said to herself that it was not her business to do so. It seemed to her that nothing else could keep Bee so bright. Her disappointment, the shock of the severance, must have affected her otherwise than appeared if she had not been buoyed up by some such expedient. As for the Colonel, he thought nothing about it. He thought that, as for love, properly so called, the thing was preposterous for a girl of her years, and that the foolish business had been all made up of imaginative novelty, and the charm of the position, which had flattered and dazzled the girl. Now that she had returned to all her old associations and occupations, the pretty bubble had floated away into the air. It had not been necessary even to burst it—it had dispersed of itself, as he said to himself he always knew it would. Thus he deceived himself with the easiest mind and did not interfere.

Mrs. Kingsward had come upon her daughter seated out on the lawn under the great walnut tree, reading one of these letters, one morning when she had gone out earlier than usual, on an exceptionally fine day. Bee had thrust it away hastily into her pocket and came forward with burning cheeks when she heard her mother's voice—but it was not till some time later that Mrs. Kingsward spoke. The day had kept up its morning promise. It was one of those warm days that sometimes come in October, breathing the very spirit of that contented season, when all things have come to fruition and the work of the year is done, and its produce garnered into the barns. Now we may sit and rest, is the sentiment of the much toiling earth—all the labour being over, the harvest done, and no immediate need yet to rise again and plough. The world hangs softly swaying in space, the fields are fallow, the labourer rests. The sunshine lay warm upon the velvet grass, the foliage, thinned by one good blast a week ago, gave just shade enough, not too much; the tea-table was set out upon the lawn—the little horde had gone off shouting and skirmishing through the grounds, Betty at the head of them, supposed captain and controller, virtually ringleader, which comes to much the same thing. The air so hushed and silent in itself, half drowsy with profound peace, was just touched and made musical by their shouts, and Bee and her mother, with this triumphant sound of a multitude close by, were alone.

"Bee," Mrs. Kingsward said, "I have long wanted an opportunity to speak to you."

"Yes, mamma," she said, looking up with a rush of blood to her heart, feeling that the moment had come. But she would not have been Bee if she had not put a little something of her own into the thick of the crisis. "There were plenty of opportunities—we have been together all day."

"You know what I mean," said Mrs. Kingsward. "Bee, I saw you reading a letter this morning."

"Yes, mamma."

"Who was it from?"

Bee looked her mother in the face. "I have never made any secret of it," she said. "I have read them openly before papa—I never would pretend they were anything different. Of course it was from Aubrey, mamma."

"Oh, Bee!" said her mother. "You have never told me what your father said to you that morning. He told me that it was all over and done with—that he would never listen to another word on the subject."

"That was what he told me."

"Oh, Bee, Bee! and yet——"

"Stop a moment, mamma! He never said I was not to write; he never said there was to be no correspondence. Had he said so, I should have, at least, considered what it was best to do."

"Considered what was best! But you were not the judge. I hope you would have obeyed your father, Bee."

"I cannot say, mamma. You must remember that it is my case and not his. I don't know what I should have done. But it was not necessary, for he said nothing about it."

"Bee, my dear child, he may have said nothing; but you know very well that when he said it was entirely broken off he meant what he said."

"Papa is very capable of saying what he means," said Bee. "I did not think it was any business of mine to inquire what might be his secret meaning. Mamma, dear, don't be vexed; but, oh, that would have been too hard! And for Aubrey, too."

"I think much less of Aubrey that he should carry on a clandestine correspondence with a girl like you."

"Clandestine!" cried Bee, with blazing eyes. "No more clandestine than your letters that come by the post with your own name upon them. If Aubrey did not scorn anything that is clandestine, I should. There is nothing like that between him and me."

"I never supposed you would be guilty of any artifice, Bee; but you are going completely against your father—making a fool of him, indeed—making it all ridiculous—when you carry on a correspondence, as if you were engaged, after he has broken everything off."

"I am engaged," said Bee, very low.

"What do you say? Bee, this is out of the question. I shall have to tell your father when he comes back. "Oh! child, child, how you turn this delightful time into trouble. I shall be obliged to tell your father when he comes back."

"Perhaps it will be your duty, mamma," said Bee, the colour going out of her face; "and then I shall have to consider what is mine," she said.

"Oh, Bee, Bee! Oh! how hard you make it for me. Oh! how I wish you had never seen him, nor heard of him," Mrs. Kingsward cried.

CHAPTER XV.

THIS communication made a little breach between Bee and her mother and planted a thorn in Mrs. Kingsward's breast. She had been getting on so well; the quiet (which meant the riot of the seven nursery children and all their troublesome ways) had been doing her so much good, and the absence of every care save that Johnny should not take cold, and Lucy eat enough dinner—that it was hard upon her thus to be brought back in a moment to another and a more pressing kind of care. However, after an hour or two's estrangement from Bee, which ended in a fuller expansion than ever of sympathy between them—and a morning or two in which Mrs. Kingsward remembered as soon as she awoke that it would be her duty to tell her husband and break up the pleasant peace and harmony of the household—the sweetness of that *dolce far niente* swept over her again and obliterated or at least blurred the outline of all such troublous thoughts. Colonel Kingsward sent a hasty telegram to say that he was going on somewhere else for another ten days' shooting, and that, though she exclaimed at first with a countenance of dismay, "Oh, children, papa is not coming home for another week!" in reality gave a pang of relief to her mind. Gliding into her being, she scarcely knew how, was an inclination to take every day as it came without thinking of to-morrow—which was perfectly natural, no doubt, and yet was an unconscious realisation of the fact, which as yet she had never put into words, nor had suggested to her, that those gentle days were numbered. Her husband's delay was in one way like a reprieve to her. She had, like all simple natures, a vague faith in accident, in something that might turn up—"perhaps the world may end to-night"—something at least might happen in another ten days to make it unnecessary for her to disturb the existing state of affairs and throw new trouble into the house. She did not waver at first as to her duty, though nothing in the world could be more painful; and Bee did not say a word to change her mother's resolution. Bee had always been aware that as soon as it was known the matter must come to another crisis—and the scorn with which she regarded the idea of doing anything clandestine prevented her even from asking that her secret should be kept. It was not in her mind but in her mother's that those faint doubtings at last arose—those half entertained thoughts that a letter or two could do no harm; that the correspondence would drop of itself when it was seen between the two that there was no hope in it; and that almost anything would be better than a storm of domestic dispeace and the open rebellion in which Mrs. Kingsward felt with a shudder Bee would place herself. How are you to break the will of a girl who will not be convinced, who says it is not your, but her affair?

No doubt that was true enough. It was Bee, not Colonel Kingsward, whose happiness was concerned. According to all the canons of poetry and literature in general, which in such matters permeate theoretically the general mind when there is no strong personal instinct to crush them, Bee had right on her side—and her mother's instinct was all on the side of poetry and romance and Bee. She had not the courage to cut short that correspondence, not clandestine though unrevealed, which kept the girl's heart alive, and was not without attractions to the mother also, into whose ear it might be whispered now and then (with always a faint protest on her part) that Aubrey had better hopes, that he had a powerful friend who was going to speak for him. If they really meant to be faithful to each other—and there was no doubt that was what they meant—they must win the day in the end; and what harm would it do in the meantime that they should hear of each other from time to time? Whereas, if she betrayed the secret, there would at once be a dreadful commotion in the house, and Bee would confront her father and tell him with those blazing eyes, so like his, that it was her affair. Mrs. Kingsward knew that her husband would never stoop to the manœuvre of intercepting letters, or keeping a watch upon those that his daughter received; and what can you do to a girl who says that? She shrank more than any words could say from the renewal of the conflict. She had been so thankful to believe that it had passed over and all things settled into peace while she was ill. Now that she was better her heart sank within her at the thought of bringing it all on again, which would also make her ill again she was convinced. Yet, at the same time, if she could not persuade Bee to give it up of herself (of which there was no hope whatever), then she must, it was her duty, inform her husband. But her heart rose a little at that ten days' reprieve. Perhaps the world might end to-night. Something might happen to make it unnecessary in those ten days.

And something did happen, though not in any way what Mrs. Kingsward could have wished.

Colonel Kingsward's return was approaching very near when on one of those bright October afternoons a lady from the neighbourhood—nay, it was the clergywoman of the parish, the Rector of Kingswarden's wife, the very nearest of all neighbours—came to call. She had just returned from that series of visits which in the autumn is—with all who respect themselves—the natural course of events. Mrs. Chichester was a woman of good connection, of "private means," and more or less "in society," so that she carried out this programme quite as if she had been a great lady. She had an air of importance about her, which seemed to shadow forth from her very entrance something that she had to say—an unusual gravity, a look of having to make up her mind to a certain action which was not without difficulty. There passed a glance between Mrs. Kingsward and Bee, in which they said to each other, "What

is it this time?" as clearly as words could have said; for, to be sure, they were well acquainted with this lady's ways. She sat for a little, and talked of their respective travels since they had last met; and of the pleasant weeks she had passed at Homburg, where so many pleasant people were always to be met after the London season; and then she lightly touched on the fact that she had come over early in September, and since then had been staying at a number of country places, with the dear Bishop, and at Lady Grandmaison's, and with old Sir Thomas down in Devonshire, and so on.

"Or," she concluded, with a disproportionate emphasis on that apparently unimportant word, "I should have been to see you long ago."

There was a significance in this which again made Mrs. Kingsward and Bee exchange a look—a laughing glance—as of those who had heard the phrase before. When, however, she had asked some questions about Mrs. Kingsward's health, and expressed the proper feeling—sorry to hear she had been so poorly; delighted that she was so much better—Mrs. Chichester departed from her established use and wont. Instead of beginning upon the real object of her visit, after she had taken her cup of tea, with a "Now," (also very emphatic) "I want to interest you in something I have very much at heart,"—which was generally a subscription, a society, a bazaar, a missionary meeting, or something of the sort—Mrs. Chichester bent forward and said, in a half whisper, "I have something I want very much to talk to you about. Could I speak to you for a moment—alone?"

Bee was much surprised, but took her part with promptitude. "You want to get rid of me," she said. "I shall go out on to the terrace, mamma, and you can call me from the window when you want me. I shall be sure to hear."

There was another look between them, always with a laugh in it, as she stepped out of the open window, with a book in her hand, a look which repeated, "What can it be, now?" with the same amusement as at first, but with more surprise. Bee made a circuit round the lawn with her book, one finger shut in it to mark the place; looking at the flowers, as one does who knows every plant individually, and notes each bud that is opening, and which are about to fall. She calculated within herself how long the dahlias would last, and that the Gloire de Dijon roses must be cut tomorrow, as she pursued her way towards the walnut tree, under which she meant to place herself. But Bee had not been there many minutes before she felt a little shiver creep over her. It was getting rather cold in this late October to sit out of doors, when the sun was already off the garden, and she had, as girls say, "nothing on." She got up again, and made her way round to a garden bench which was set against the wall of the house, at the spot where the sunshine lasted longest. There was still a level ray of ruddy light pouring on that seat, and Bee forgot, or rather never thought, that it was close to the drawing-room window. Her mind was not much exercised about Mrs. Chichester's secret, which probably concerned the mothers and babies of the parish, and which she certainly had no curiosity to hear. Besides, no doubt, the visitor had told by this time all the private details there were to tell. Bee sat down upon the bench, taking no precautions to disguise the sound of her footsteps, and opened her book. She was not an enthusiastic student, though she liked a novel as well as anyone; but her eyes strayed from it to the great width of the horizon in front of her, and the ruddy glory in the west, in which was just about to disappear that last long golden ray of the sun.

Then she heard a low cry—an exclamation, stifled, yet full of horror. Was it mamma? What could the clergywoman be saying to bring from mamma's lips such a cry? Bee—I cannot blame her—pricked up her ears. Mrs. Kingsward was not strong enough to be disturbed by horrors with which she had nothing to do.

"Oh, I cannot believe it; I cannot believe it!" she said.

"But," said the other voice, with that emphasis at which Bee had laughed so often, "I can assure you it is true. I saw him myself shaking hands with the woman at the station. I might not have believed Miss Tatham's story, but I saw with my own eyes that it was Mr. Leigh. I had met him at Sir Thomas's the year before—when he was still in deep mourning for his wife, you know."

"Mr. Leigh! So it was something about Aubrey! Then it was Bee's business still more than her mother's, and she listened without any further thought.

"But," said Mrs. Kingsward, as if taking courage, "you must be mistaken; oh, not about seeing him shake hands with a woman—why shouldn't he shake hands with a woman? He is very friendly with everybody. Perhaps he knew her, and there is nothing to find fault with in that."

"Now," said Mrs. Chichester, solemnly, "should I have mentioned it had it been confined to that? I only told you of that as a proof. The thing is that he put in this woman—a common woman, like a servant—into a sleeping carriage—you know what those sleeping carriages cost; a perfect fortune; far too much for any comfort there is in them—in the middle of the night, with her two children. The woman behaved quite nicely, Miss Tatham says, and looked shocked to be put in with a lady, and blushed all over her face, and told that ridiculous story to account for it. Poor thing! One can only be sorry for her. Probably some poor thing deceived, and thinking she was to be made a lady of. But I know what you must think of the man, Mrs. Kingsward, who could do such a thing on his way from staying with your own family, even if there had been no more in it than that."

"But Mr. Leigh is very kind—kind to everybody—it might have been nothing but charity."

"Charity—in an express train sleeping carriage! Well, I confess I never heard of charity like that. Gentlemen generally know better than to compromise themselves for nothing in that sort of way. They are more afraid of risking themselves in railway carriages and that kind of thing than girls are—much more afraid. And if you remember, Mrs. Kingsward, what kind of reputation Mr. Leigh had in his poor wife's time—keeping that Miss Lance all the time in her very house under her eyes."

"I have always heard that it was Mrs. Leigh who insisted upon keeping Miss Lance—"

"Is it likely?" said Mrs. Chichester. "I ask you, knowing what you do of human nature? And then a thing to happen like this on his very way home—when he had just left you and poor little Bee. Oh, it is shameless, shameless! I could not contain myself when I heard of it. And then it was said that the Colonel had broken off the engagement, and I thought it would be a comfort to you to know that other things were occurring every day, and that it was the only thing to do."

"It is no comfort to me—and I cannot—I cannot believe it!"

"Dear Mrs. Kingsward, you always take the best view; but if you had seen him, as I did, holding the woman's hand, bending over her with such a look!—I was afraid he would kiss her, there, before everybody. And I, knowing of the engagement, and that he had just left you—before Miss Tatham said a word—I sat and stared, and couldn't

believe my eyes. It was the tenth of September, and he had left Bee, hadn't he, the night before?"

"I never remember dates," said Mrs. Kingsward, querulously.

"I do," replied the visitor, "and I took the trouble to find out. At least, I found out by accident, through someone who saw him at the club, and who had just discovered the rights of that story about Miss Lance. Oh, I trust you will not be beguiled by his being a good *parti*, or that sort of thing, to trust dear Bee in such hands! Marriage is always rather a disenchantment; but think what it would be in such a case—a man that can't be trusted to travel between Cologne and London without——"

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" said Mrs. Kingsward; and Bee heard that her mother had melted into tears.

"That is as good as saying you don't believe me, who saw it with my own eyes," said the visitor, getting up. "Indeed, I didn't mean at all to distress you, for I thought that, as everything was broken off—I thought only if you had any doubts, as one has sometimes after one has settled a thing—that to know he was a man like that, with no respect for anything, who could leave his *fiancée*, and just plunge, plunge—there is no other word for it——"

It was evident that Mrs. Kingsward, reduced to helplessness, here made no effort either to detain her visitor or to contradict her further, or indeed to make any remark. There was a step or two across the room, and then Mrs. Chichester said again—"Good-bye, dear. I am very sorry to have distressed you—but I couldn't leave you in ignorance of such a thing for dear Bee's sake; that is the one thing to be thankful for in the whole matter, that Bee doesn't seem to mind a bit! She looks just as bright and just as nice as if nothing had happened. She can't have cared for him! Only flattered, I suppose, and pleased to have a proposal—as those little things are, poor things. We should all thank heaven on our knees that there's no question of a broken heart in Bee's case——"

She might not have been so sure of that had she seen the figure which came through the window the moment the door had closed upon her—Bee with her blue eyes blazing wildly out of her white face, and strange passion in every line both of features and form.

"What is the meaning of it?" she said, briefly, with dry lips.

"Oh, Bee, you have heard it all!"

"I have heard enough—what does it mean, mamma?"

Mrs. Kingsward roused herself, dried her eyes, and went forward to Bee with outstretched arms; but the girl turned away. "I don't want to be petted. I want to know what—what it means," she said.

"I don't believe it," cried Mrs. Kingsward.

"Give a reason; don't say things to quiet me. Oh, keep your arms away, mamma! Don't pet me as if I wanted that! Why don't you believe it? And if you did believe it—what does it mean—what does it mean?"

CHAPTER XVI.

BEE'S look of scared and horrified misery was something new in Mrs. Kingsward's experience. The girl had not known any trouble. Her father's rejection of her lover and the apparent break between them had been in reality only another feature in the romance. She had almost liked it better so. There had been no time to pine, to feel the pain of separation. It was all the more like a poem, like what every love story should be, that this breaking off should have come.

And now, all at once, without any warning! The worst of it was that Bee had only heard a part of the story, the recapitulation of it. Mrs. Chichester had given the accused more or less fair play. She had given an imperfect account of the explanation, the story the woman had told—as was almost inevitable to a third party, but she had given it to the best of her ability, not meaning to deceive, willing enough that he should have the benefit of the doubt, or perhaps that the judgment upon him should be all the more hard, because of his attempt to mingle deceit with his sin, and throw dust in the eyes of any possible spectators. This was the way in which it had appeared to herself, but she was not unfair. She told the story which had been told to the astonished lady upon whose solitude the little party had been obtruded in the middle of the night, and who had heard it perhaps even imperfectly at first hand mingled with the jolting and jarring of the train and the murmur of the children. And yet Mrs. Chichester had repeated it honestly.

But Bee had not heard that part of the tale. She had heard only the facts of the case which had presented to her inexperienced young mind the most wild and dreadful picture. Her lover, who had just left her, whom she had promised to stand by till death, suddenly appeared to her in the pale darkness of the midnight with a woman and children hanging on to him—belonging to him, as appeared. Where had he met them? How had he arranged to meet them? When her hand had been in his, when he had been asking from her that pledge till death, had he just been arranging all that—giving them that rendezvous—settling how they were to meet, and where? A horror and sickness came over poor Bee. It made her head swim and her limbs tremble. To leave her with her pledge in his ears, and to meet, perhaps at the very outset of his journey, the woman with the children—a common sort of woman, like a servant. As if that made any difference! If she had been a duchess it would have been all the same. He must have met her fresh from Bee's presence, with his farewell to the girl whom he had pretended to love still on his lips. She could not think so clearly. Was this picture burnt in upon her mind? She seemed to see the dim, half-lighted carriage, and Aubrey at the door putting the party in. And then at Dover, in the daylight, shaking hands with his companion, bending over her as if he meant to kiss her! These two pictures took possession of Bee's mind completely. And all this just when he had left Bee—between his farewell to her and his interview with her father! If she had heard of the story which the woman had told to the startled Miss Tatham in the dim sleeping carriage, from which, looking out, she had recognised Aubrey Leigh, it might have made a difference. But that story had not been told in Bee's hearing. And Mrs. Kingsward did not know this, but supposed she had heard the whole from beginning to end.

Bee's mother, to tell the truth, after the first shock, was glad of that unconscious eaves-dropping on Bee's part; for how could she have told her? Indeed, the story was too gross, too flagrant to be believed by herself. She felt sure that there must be some explanation of it other than the vulgar one which was put upon it by these ladies; but she knew very well that the same interpretation would be put upon it by her husband, and many other people to whom Aubrey's innocent interference in such a case would have seemed much less credible than guilt. Guilt is the thing that generally rises first as the explanation of everything, to the mind, both of the man and woman of the world. The

impossibility of a man leaving a delicate flower of womanhood like Bee, whose first love he had won, in order to fall back at once into the bonds of a common intrigue, and provide for the comfort of his paramour, who had been waiting for him on the journey, would not prove so great to most people as the impossibility that he, as a stranger, would step out of his way to succour a poor little mother and children whom he had never seen before, and risk thereby a compromising situation.

The latter was the thing which would have seemed unutterably ridiculous and impossible to Colonel Kingsward. A first-class sleeping carriage secured for a mere waif upon his way, whom he had never seen before and never would see again! The fellow might be a fool, but he was not such a fool as that. Had the woman even been old and ugly the Colonel would have laughed and shrugged his shoulders at Aubrey's bad taste; but the woman was pretty and young. A long-standing affair, no doubt; and, of course, it was quite possible, nay likely, that she was being sent, poor creature, to some retreat or other, where she would be out of the way with her children.

Mrs. Kingsward knew, as if she had heard him say these words, how her husband would speak. And who was she, with not half his experience of the world, to maintain a different opinion? Yet she did so. She thought it was like Aubrey to turn the poor woman's lingering, melancholy journey into a quick and comfortable one, out of pure kindness, without thought of compromising himself any more than of having any recompense for what he did. But she did not know that Bee knew nothing of this explanation of the story. When she found that her child evidently thought nothing of that, but received at once the darker miserable tale into her mind, she was startled, but not perhaps astonished. Bee was young to think the worst of anybody, but at the same time it is by far the commonest way of thinking, and the offence was one against herself, which gives a sharper edge to everything. And then she knew what was going on in Bee's mind chiefly by guesswork, for the girl said little. The colour went out of her face, her eyes sometimes gave a gleam of their old fire, but mostly had a strange set look, as if they were fixed on something not visible to the ordinary spectator. She sat all the evening through and never spoke. This was not so noticeable while the children were still about with their perpetual flow of observations and flood of questions; but when they went off in detachments to bed, and the two elder girls were left alone with their mother, Bee's silence fell upon the others like a cloud. Betty, who knew nothing, after a few minutes rushed away upstairs to find refuge in the nursery, and then Mrs. Kingsward was left alone, face to face with this silent figure, so unlike Bee, which neither moved nor spoke. She had scarcely the courage to break the dreadful silence, but yet it had to be broken. Poor Mrs. Kingsward's heart began to beat violently against her breast as it had not done since her return home.

"Bee!" she said. "Bee!"

Already the pumping of her heart had taken away her breath.

"Yes, mamma."

"Oh! Bee, what—what are you going to do?"

"To do, mamma?"

"Oh! don't repeat my words after me, but give me some sort of an answer. Betty may be back again in a moment. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" the girl said, in a low voice.

"I can't suppose but that you have been thinking about it—what else could you be thinking of, poor child? For my part, I don't believe it. Do you hear me, Bee?"

"Yes—I heard you say that before, mamma."

"And that is all you think of what I say! My darling, you can't remain like this. The first thing your father will ask will be, 'What has happened?' I cannot bear that you should give up—without a word."

Mrs. Kingsward had disapproved of the correspondence, had felt that it would be incumbent upon her to tell her husband of it, but yet in this unforeseen emergency she forgot all that.

"Without a word! What words could I say? You don't suppose I could discuss it with him—ask if it was true? If it's true, there isn't a word to say, is there? And if it isn't true it would be an insult to ask him. And so one way or another it is all just done with and over. And I wish you would leave me quiet, mamma."

"Done with and over! Without a word—on a mere story of something that took place on a journey!"

"Oh! leave me quiet, mamma. Do you think I need to be reminded of that journey? As if I did not see it, and the lamps burning, and hear the very wheels!"

"Bee, dear, how can I leave you quiet? Do you mean just to let it break off like that, without a word, without giving him the chance to explain?"

"I thought," said Bee, with a faint satirical smile, for, indeed, her heart was capable of all bitterness, "that it was broken off completely by papa, and all that remained was only—what you called clandestine, mamma."

"I did not call it clandestine. I knew you would do nothing that was dishonourable. And it is true that it was—broken off. But, Bee! Bee! you don't seem to feel the dreadful thing this is. After all that has passed, to let it drop in a moment, without saying a word!"

"I thought it was what I ought to have done, as soon as papa's will was made known."

"Oh! Bee, you will drive me mad. And I have got no breath to speak. So you ought, perhaps—but you have not, when perhaps there was a reason. And now, for a mere chance story, and without giving him—an opportunity—to speak for himself."

Bee raised her face, now crimson as it had before been pale.

"How could I put any questions on such a thing? How could it be discussed between him and me? To think of it is bad enough, but to speak of it—mamma! How do I know, even, what words to say?"

"In that case, every engagement would be at the mercy of any slanderer, if the girl never could bring herself to ask what it meant."

"I am not any girl," cried poor Bee, with a quiver of her lip. "I am just myself. I don't think very much of myself any more than you do, but I can't change myself. Oh, let me alone, let me alone, mamma!"

Mrs. Kingsward was very much excited. Her nostrils grew pinched and dilated in the struggle for breath; her lips were open and panting from the same cause. She was caught in that dreadful contradiction of sentiment and feeling which is worse than any unmingled catastrophe. She had been rent asunder before this by her desire to

shield her daughter, yet the sense of her duty to her husband remained, and now it was the correspondence which she seemed to be called upon to defend almost at peril of her life; that actually clandestine, at least secret correspondence, of which she could not approve, which she was bound to cut short. And yet to cut it short like this was something which she could not bear. She threw aside the work with which she had been struggling and fixed her eyes on Bee, who did not look at her nor see how agitated her expression was.

"If you can do this, I can't," she said. "I will write to him. The other dreadful story may be true, for anything I know. And that, of course, is enough. But this one I don't believe, if an angel from Heaven told it me. He shall at least have the chance of clearing himself!"

"I don't know," said Bee, "what the other dreadful story was. I thought it was only pretending to love—some other woman; and then—pretending to love *me*"—she broke off into a little hoarse laugh. The offence of it was more than Bee could bear. The insult—to suffer (she said to herself) was one thing—but to be insulted! She laughed to think what a fool she had been; how she had been taken in; how she had said—oh, like the veriest credulous fool—"Till death."

"He was not pretending to love you. What went before I know not, but with you he was true."

"One before—and one after," said Bee, rising in an irrepressible rage of indignation. "Oh, mamma, how can we sit quietly and discuss it, as if—as if it were a thing that could be talked about? Am I to come in between—two others—two—I think it will make me mad," the girl cried, stamping her foot. How does a man dare to do that—to insult a girl—who never sought him nor heard of him, wanted nothing of him—till he came and forced himself into her life!"

"Oh! Bee, my darling," cried the mother, going up to her child with outstretched arms.

"Don't touch me, don't touch me, don't pet me; I cannot bear it. Let me stand by myself. I am not a little thing like Lucy to be caught up and kissed till I forget. I don't want to forget. There is nothing that can ever be done to me, if I were to live to an hundred, to put this out of my head."

"Bee, be patient with me for a moment. I have lived longer than you have. What went before could be no offence to you, whatever it was. It might be bad, but it was no offence to you. And this—I don't believe it—"

Bee was far too much self-absorbed to see the labouring breath, the pink spot on each cheek, the panting which made her mother's fine nostrils quiver and kept her lips apart, or that she caught at the back of a chair to support herself as she stood.

"I don't know why—you shouldn't believe it. I don't believe it; I see it, I hear it," cried Bee. "It's like a story—and I thought these things were always stories, things made up to keep up the interest in a book—I'm the—deceived heroine, the one that's disappointed, don't you know, mamma? We've read all about her dozens of times. But she generally makes a fuss over it," the girl said, with her suffocating laugh. "I shall make—no fuss—Mamma! What is the matter, mamma?"

Nothing more was the matter than the doctor could have told Mrs. Kingsward's family long ago—a spasm of the heart. She stumbled backward to the sofa, and flung herself down before consciousness forsook her. Did consciousness forsake her at all? Bee rushing to the bell, making its violent sound peal through the house, then flinging herself at her mother's feet, and calling to her in the helplessness of utter ignorance, "Mamma, mamma!" did not think that she was unconscious. Broken words fell from her in the midst of her gasps for breath, then there was a moment of dread stillness. By this time the room seemed to be full of people—Bee did not know who was there—and then there suddenly appeared out of the mist Moulsey with a glass and teaspoon in her hands.

"Go away, all of you," cried Moulsey, "she'll be better directly—open all the windows and take a fan and fan her, Miss Bee."

The blast of the cold October night air came in like a flood, Bee seemed to come out of a horrible dream in the waft of air brought by the fan which she was herself waving to and fro—and in a little time, as Moulsey said, Mrs. Kingsward was better. The labouring breath which had come back after that awful moment of stillness gradually calmed down and became softer with an occasional long drawn sigh, and then she opened her eyes and said, with a faint smile, "What is it? What is it?" She looked round her for a moment puzzled—and then she said, "Ah! you are fanning me," with a smile to Bee, but presently, "How cold it is! I don't think I want to be fanned, Moulsey."

"No, ma'am, not now. And White is just a-going to shut all the windows. The fire was a bit too hot, and you know you never can bear it when the room gets too hot."

"No, I never can bear it," Mrs. Kingsward said, in a docile tone. She followed the lead of any suggestion given to her. "I must have got faint—with the heat."

"That was just it," said Moulsey. "When you have a fire in the drawing-room so early it looks so cheerful you're apt to pile it too high without thinking—for it ain't really cold in October, not cold enough to have a fire like that. You want it for cheerfulness, ma'am, more than for heat. A big bit of wood that will make a nice blaze, and very little coal, as is too much for the season, is what your drawing-room fire should be."

Mrs. Kingsward gradually came to herself during this long speech, which no doubt was what Moulsey intended. But she said she felt a little weak, and that she would keep on the sofa until it was time to go to bed. The agitation she had gone through seemed to have passed from her mind. "Read me a little of that story," she said, pointing to a book on the table. "We left off last night at a most interesting part. Read me the next chapter, Bee."

Bee sat down beside her mother's sofa and opened the book. It was not a book of a very exciting kind it may be supposed, when it was thus read a chapter at a time, without any one of the party opening it from evening to evening to see how things went on. But as it happened at this point of the story, the heroine had found out that her lover was not so blameless as she thought, and was making up her mind to have nothing to do with him. Bee began to read with an indignation beyond words for both hero and heroine, who were so pale, so colourless, beside her own story. To waste one's time reading stuff like this, while the tide of one's own passion was ten times stronger! She did not think very much of her mother's faint. It was, no doubt, the too large fire, as Moulsey said.

END OF FIRST VOLUME.

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

ali the *wohlgeborne*=> all the *wohlgeborne* {pg 13}

goose' to me," said Betty=> goose' to me," said Betty {pg 26}

Will gou go=> Will you go {pg 90}

consent had been been given=> consent had been given {pg 197}

down ths shovel hastily=> down the shovel hastily {pg 217}

her husband aud break up=> her husband and break up {pg 235}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SORCERESS; V. 1 OF 3 ***

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