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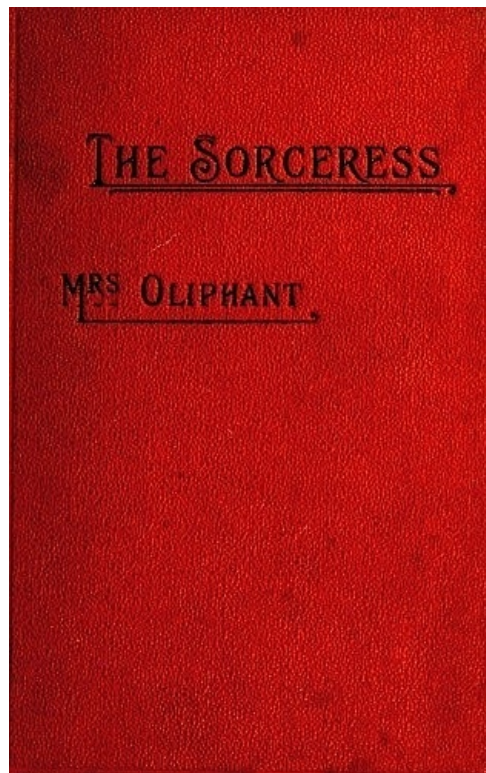
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SORCERESS, V. 2 OF 3 ***

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.

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THE SORCERESS.

CHAPTER I.

IT was perhaps a very good thing for Bee at this distracting and distracted moment of her life, that her mother's illness came in to fill up every thought. Her own little fabric of happiness crumbled down about her ears like a house of cards, only as it was far more deeply founded and strongly built, the downfall was with a rumbling that shook the earth and a dust that rose up to the skies. Heaven was blurred out to her by the rising clouds, and all the earth was full of the noise, like an earthquake, of the falling walls. She could not get that sound out of her ears even in Mrs. Kingsward's sick room, where the quiet was preternatural, and everybody spoke in the lowest tone, and every step was hushed. Even then it went on roaring, the stones and the rafters flying, the storms of dust and ruin blackening the air, so that Bee could not but wonder that nobody saw them, that the atmosphere was not thick and stifling with those *debris* that were continually falling about her own ears. For everything was coming down; not only the idol and the shrine he abode in, but heaven and earth, in which she felt that no truth, no faith, could dwell any longer. Who was there to believe in? Not any man if not Aubrey; not any goodness, any truth, if not his—not anything! For it was without object, without warning, for nothing at all, that he had deserted her, as if it had been of no importance: with the ink not dry on his letter, with her name still upon his lips. A great infidelity, like a great faith, is always something. It is tragic, one of the awful events of life in which there is, or may be, fate; an evil destiny, a terrible chastisement prepared beforehand. In such a case one can at least feel one's self only a great victim, injured by God himself and the laws of the universe, though that was not the common fashion of thought then, as it is now-a-days. But Bee's downfall did not mean so much as that it was not intended by anyone—not even by the chief worker in it. He had meant to hold Bee fast with one hand while he amused himself with the other. Amused himself—oh, heaven! Bee's heart seemed to contract with a speechless spasm of anguish and rage. That she should be of no more account than that! Played with as if she were nobody—the slight creature of a moment. She, Bee! She, Colonel Kingsward's daughter!

At first the poor girl went on in a mist of self-absorption, through which everything else pierced but dully, wrapped up and hidden in it as in the storm which would have arisen had the house actually fallen about her ears, perceiving her mother through it, and the doctor, and all the accessories of the scene—but dimly, not as if they were real. When, however, there began to penetrate through this, strange words, with strange meanings in them: "Danger"—danger to whom?—"Strength failing"—but whose strength?—a dull wonder came in, bringing her back to other thoughts. By-and-by, Bee began to understand a little that it was of her mother of whom these things were being said. Her mother? But it was not her mother's house that had fallen; what did it mean? The doctor talked apart with Moulsey, and Moulsey turned her back, and her shoulders heaved, and her apron seemed to be put to her eyes. Bee, in her dream said, half aloud, "Danger?" and both the doctor and Moulsey turned upon her as if they would have killed her. Then she was beckoned out of the room, and found herself standing face to face with that grave yet kindly countenance which she had known all her life, in which she believed as in the greatest authority. She heard his voice speaking to her through all the rumbling and downfall.

"You must be very courageous," it said, "You are the eldest, and till your father comes home——"

What did it matter about her father coming home, or about her being the eldest? What had all these things to do with the earthquake, with the failure of truth, and meaning, and everything in life? She looked at him blankly, wondering if it were possible that he did not hear the sound of the great falling, the rending of the walls, and the tearing of the roof, and the choking dust that filled all earth and heaven.

"My dear Beatrice," he said, for he had known her all his life, "you don't understand me, do you, my poor child?"

Bee shook her head, looking at him wistfully. Could he know anything more about it, she wondered—anything that had still to be said?

He took her hand, and her poor little hand was very cold with emotion and trouble. The good doctor, who knew nothing about any individual cause little Bee could have for agitation, thought he saw that her very being was arrested by a terror which as yet her intelligence had not grasped; something dreadful in the air which she did not understand. He drew her into the dining-room, the door of which stood open, and poured out a little wine for her. "Now, Bee," he said, "no fainting, no weakness. You must prove what is in you now. It is a dreadful trial for you, my dear, but you can do a great deal for your dear mother's sake, as she would for yours."

"I have never said it was a trial," cried Bee, with a gasp. "Why do you speak to me so? Has mamma told you? No

one has anything to do with it but me."

He looked at her with great surprise, but the doctor was a man of too much experience not to see that here was something into which it was better not to inquire. He said, very quietly, "You, as the eldest, have no doubt the chief part to play; but the little ones will all depend upon your strength and courage. Your mother does not herself know. She is very ill. It will require all that we can do—to pull her through."

Bee repeated the last words after him with a scared look, but scarcely any understanding in her face—"To pull her—through?"

"Don't you understand me now? Your mother—has been ill for a long time. Your father is aware of it. I suppose he thought you were too young to be told. But now that he is absent, and your brother, I have no alternative. Your mother is in great danger. I have telegraphed for Colonel Kingsward, but in the meantime, Bee—child, don't lose your head! Do you understand me? She may be dying, and you are the only one to stand by her, to give her courage."

Bee did not look as if she had courage for anyone at that dreadful moment. She fell a-trembling from head to foot and fell back against the wall where she was standing. Her eyes grew large, staring at him yet veiled as if they did not see—and she stammered forth at length, "Mother, mother!" with almost no meaning, in the excess of misery and surprise.

"Yes, your mother; whatever else you may have to think of, she is the first consideration now."

He went on speaking, but Bee did not hear him; everything floated around her in a mist. The scenes at the Bath, the agitations, Mrs. Kingsward's sudden pallors and flushings, her pretence, which they all laughed at, of not being able to walk; her laziness, lying on the sofa, the giddiness when she made that one turn with Charlie, she who had always been so fond of dancing; the hurry of bringing her to Kingswarden when Bee had felt they would have been so much better in London, and her strange, strange new fancy, mutely condemned by Bee, of finding the children too much for her. Half of these things had been silently remarked and disapproved of by the daughters. Mamma getting so idle—self-indulgent almost, so unlike herself! Had they not been too busily engaged in their own affairs, Bee and Betty would both have been angry with mamma. All these things seem to float about Bee in a mist while she leaned against the wall and the doctor stood opposite to her talking. It was only perhaps about a minute after all, but she saw waving round her, passing before her eyes, one scene melting into another, or rather all visible at once, innumerable episodes—the whole course of the three months past which had contained so much. She came out of this strange whirl very miserable but very quiet.

"I think it is chiefly my fault," she said, faltering, interrupting the doctor who was talking, always talking; "but how could I know, for nobody told me? Doctor, tell me what to do now? You said we should—pull her through."

She gave him a faint, eager, conciliatory smile, appealing to him to do it. Of course he could do it! "Tell me—tell me only what to do."

He patted her kindly upon the shoulder. "That is right," he said. "Now you understand me, and I know I can trust you. There is not much to do. Only to be quiet and steady—no crying or agitation. Moulsey knows everything. But you must be ready and steady, my dear. Sit by her and look happy and keep up her courage—that's the chief thing. If she gives in it is all over. She must not see that you are frightened or miserable. Come, it's a great thing to do for a little girl that has never known any trouble. But you are of a good sort, and you must rise to it for your mother's sake."

Look happy! That was all she had to do. "Can't I help Moulsey," she asked. "I could fetch her what she wants. I could—go errands for her. Oh, doctor, something a little easier," cried Bee, clasping her hands, "just at first!"

"All that's arranged," he said, hastily, "Come, we must go back to our patient. She will be wondering what I am talking to you about. She will perhaps take fright. No, nothing easier, my poor child—if you can do that you may help me a great deal; if you can't, go to bed, my dear, that will be best."

She gave him a look of great scorn, and moved towards her mother's room, leading the way.

Mrs. Kingsward was lying with her face towards the door, watching, in a blaze of excitement and fever. Her eyes had never been so bright nor her colour so brilliant. She was breathing quickly, panting, with her heart very audible to herself, pumping in her ears, and almost audible in the room, so evident was it that every pulse was at fever speed. "What have you been telling Bee, doctor? What have you been telling Bee? What——" When she had begun this phrase it did not seem as if she could stop repeating it again and again.

"I have been telling her that she may sit with you, my dear lady, on condition of being very quiet, very quiet," said the doctor. "It's a great promotion at her age. She has promised to sit very still, and talk very little, and hush her mamma to sleep. It is you who must be the baby to-night. If you can get a good long quiet sleep, it will do you all the good in the world. Yes, you may hold her hand if you like, my dear, and pat it, and smooth it—a little gentle mesmerism will do no harm. That, my dear lady, is what I have been telling Miss Bee."

"Oh, doctor," said Mrs. Kingsward, "don't you know she has had great trouble herself, poor child? Poor little Bee! At her age I was married and happy; and here is she, poor thing, plunged into trouble. Doctor, you know, there is a—gentleman——"

Mrs. Kingsward had raised herself upon her elbow, and the panting of her breath filled all the room.

"Another time—another time you shall tell me all about it. But I shall take Miss Bee away, and consign you to a dark room, and silence, if you say another word——"

"Oh, don't make my room dark! I like the light. I want my child. Let me keep her, let me keep her! Who should—comfort her—but her mother?"

"Yes, so long as you keep quiet. If you talk I will take her away. Not a word—not a word—till to-morrow." In spite of himself there was a change in the doctor's voice as he said that word—or Bee thought so—as if there might never be any to-morrow. The girl felt as if she must cry out, shriek aloud, to relieve her bursting brain, but did not, overborne by his presence and by the new sense of duty and self-restraint. "Come now," he went on, "I am very kind to let you have your little girl by you, holding your hand—don't you think so? Go to sleep, both of you. If you're quite, quite, quiet you'll both doze, and towards the morning I'll look in upon you again. Now, not another word. Good-night, good-night."

Bee, whose heart was beating almost as strongly as her mother's, heard his measured step withdraw on the soft carpets with a sense of wild despair, as if the last hope was going from her. Her inexperienced imagination had

leaped from complete ignorance and calm to the last possibilities of calamity. She had never seen death, and what if that awful presence were to come while she was alone, incapable of any struggle, of giving any help. She listened to the steps getting fainter in the distance with anguish and terror unspeakable. She clasped her mother's hand tightly without knowing it. That only aid, the only man who could do anything, was going away—deserting them—leaving her alone in her ignorance to stand between her mother and death. Death! Every pulse sprang up and fluttered in mortal terror. And she was put there to be quiet—ready and steady, he had said—to look happy! Bee kept silent; kept sitting upon her chair; kept down her shriek after him with a superhuman effort. She could do no more.

"Listen—he's talking to Moulsey now," said Mrs. Kingsward, "about me; they're always—whispering, about me—telling the symptoms—and how I am. That is the worst of nurses—"

"Mamma! Oh, don't talk, don't talk!" cried Bee; though she was more comforted than words can tell by the sound of her mother's voice.

"Whispering: can't you hear them? About temperature—and things. I can bear talking—but whispering. Bee—don't you hear 'em—whis—whispering—"

"Oh, mamma," cried Bee, "I love to hear you speak! But don't, don't, don't, or they'll make me go away."

"My baby," said the mother, diverted in her wandering and weakness to a new subject, "my little thing! He said we were to go to sleep. Put your head there—and I'll sing you—I'll sing you—to sleep—little Bee, little Bee, poor little Bee!"

CHAPTER II.

THIS night was the strangest in Bee Kingsward's life. She had never known what it was to remain silent and awake in the darkness and warmth of a sick room, which of itself is a strange experience for a girl, and shows the young spirit its own weakness, its craving for rest and comfort, the difficulty of overcoming the instincts of nature—with such a sense of humiliation as nothing else could give. Could you not watch with me one hour? She believed that she had lain awake crying all night when her dream of happiness had so suddenly been broken in upon at Cologne; but now, while she sat by her mother's side, and the little soft crooning of the song, which Mrs. Kingsward supposed herself to be singing to put her child to sleep, sank into a soft murmur, and the poor lady succeeded in hushing herself into a doze by this characteristic method. Bee's head dropped too, and her eyelids closed. Then she woke, with a little shiver, to see the large figure of Moulsey like a ghost by the bed, and struggled dumbly back to her senses, only remembering that she must not start nor cry to disturb Mrs. Kingsward, whose quick breathing filled the room with a sensation of danger and dismay to which the girl was sensible as soon as the film of sleep that had enveloped her was broken. Mrs. Kingsward's head was thrown back on the pillow; now and then a faint note of the lullaby which she had been singing came from the parted lips, through which the hot, quick breath came so audibly. Now and then she stirred in her feverish sleep. Moulsey stood indistinguishable with her back to the light, a mass of solid shadow by the bedside. She shook her head. "Sleep's best," she said, in the whisper which the patient hated. "Sleep's better than the best of physic." Bee caught those solid skirts with a sensation of hope, to feel them so real and substantial in her hand. She did not care to speak, but lifted her face, pale with alarm and trouble, to the accustomed nurse. Moulsey shook her head again. It was all the communication that passed between them, and it crushed the hope that was beginning to rise in Bee's mind. She had thought when she heard the doctor go away that death might be coming as soon as his back was turned. She had felt when her mother fell asleep as if the danger must be past. Now she sank into that second stage of hopelessness, when there is no longer any immediate panic, when the unaccustomed intelligence dimly realises that the sufferer may be better, and may live through the night, or through many nights, and yet there may be no real change. Very dim as yet was this consciousness in Bee's heart, and yet the first dawning of it bowed her down.

In the middle of the night—after hours so long!—more like years, when Bee seemed to have sat there half her life, to have become used to it, to be uncertain about everything outside, but only that her mother lay there more ill than words could say—Mrs. Kingsward awoke. She opened her eyes without any change of position with the habit of a woman who has been long ill, without acknowledging her illness. It was Moulsey who saw a faint reflection of the faint light in the softly opening eyes, and detected that little change in the breathing which comes with returning consciousness. Bee, with her head leant back upon her chair and her eyes closed, was dozing again.

"You must take your cordial, ma'am, now you're awake. You've had such a nice sleep."

"Have I? I thought I was with the children and singing to baby. Who's this that has my hand—Bee?"

"Mamma," cried the girl, with a little start, and then, "Oh! I have waked her, Moulsey, I have waked her!"

"Is this her little hand? Poor little Bee! No, you have not waked me, love; but why, why is the child here?"

"The doctor said she might stay—to send for him if you wanted anything—and—and to satisfy her."

"To satisfy her, why so, why so? Am I so bad? Did he think I would die—in the night?"

"No, no, no," said Moulsey, standing by her, patting her shoulder, as if she had been a fretful child. "What a thing to fancy! As if he'd have sent the child here for that!"

"No," said the poor lady, "he wouldn't have sent the child, would he—not the child—for that—to frighten her! But Bee must go to bed. I'm so much better. Go to bed. Moulsey; poor Moulsey, never tires, she's so good. But you must go to bed."

"Oh, mother, let me stay. When you sleep, I sleep too; and I'm so much happier here."

"Happier, are you? Well—but there was something wrong. Something had happened. What was it that happened? And your father away! It never does for anything to happen when—my husband is away. I've grown so silly. I never know what to do. What was it that happened, Bee?"

"There was—nothing," said Bee, with a sudden chill of despair. She had forgotten everything but the dim bed-chamber, the faint light, the quick, quick breathing. And now there came a stab at her poor little heart. She scarcely knew what it was, but a cut like a knife going to the very centre of her being. Then there came the doctor's words, as if they were written in light across the darkness of the room—"Ready, and steady." She said in a stronger voice, "You have been dreaming. There was nothing, mamma."

Mrs. Kingsward, who had raised herself on her elbow, sank back again on her pillow.

"Yes," she said, "I must have been dreaming. I thought somebody came—and told us. Dreams are so strange. People say they're things you've been—thinking of. But I was not thinking of that—the very last thing! Bee, it's a pity—it's a great pity—when a woman with so many children falls into this kind of silly, bad health."

"Oh, mamma," was all that poor Bee could say.

"Oh—let me alone, Moulsey—I want to talk a little. I've had such a good sleep, you said; sometimes—I want to talk, and Moulsey won't let me—nor your father, and I have it all here," she said, putting her hand to her heart, "or here," laying it over her eyebrows, "and I never get it out. Let me talk, Moulsey—let me talk."

Bee, leaning forward, and Moulsey standing over her by the bedside, there was a pause. Their eyes, accustomed to the faint light, saw her eyes shining from the pillow, and the flush of her cheeks against the whiteness of the bed. Then, after a while, there came a little faint laugh, and, "What was I saying?" Mrs. Kingsward asked. "You look so big, Moulsey, like the shadows I used to throw on the wall to please the children. You always liked the rabbit best, Bee. Look!" She put up her hands as if to make that familiar play upon the wall. "But Moulsey," she added, "is so big. She shuts out all the light, and what is Bee doing here at this hour of the night? Moulsey, send Miss Bee to bed."

"Oh, mother, let me stay. You were going to tell me something."

"Miss Bee, you must not make her talk."

"How like Moulsey!" said the invalid. "Make me talk! when I have wanted so much to talk. Bee, it's horrid to go on in this silly ill way, when—when one has children to think of. Your father's always good—but a man often doesn't understand. About you, now—if I had been a little stronger, it might have been different. What was it we heard? I don't think it was true what we heard."

"Oh, mamma, don't think of that, now."

"It is *so* silly, always being ill! And there's nothing really the matter. Ask the doctor. They all say there's nothing really the matter. Your father—but then he doesn't know how a woman feels. I feel as if I were sinking, sinking down through the bed and the floor and everything, away, I don't know where. So silly, for nothing hurts me—I've no pain—except that I always want more air. If you were to open the window, Moulsey; and Bee, give me your hand and hold me fast, that I mayn't sink away. It's all quite silly, you know, to think so," she added, with again a faint laugh.

Bee's eyes sought those of Moulsey with a terrified question in them; the great shadow only slightly shook its head.

"Do you remember, Bee, the picture—we saw it in Italy, and I've got a photograph—where there is a saint lying so sweetly in the air, with angels holding her up? They're flying with her through the blue sky—two at her head, and other two—and her mantle so wrapped round her, and she lying, oh! so easy, resting, though there's nothing but the air and the angels. Do you remember, Bee?"

"Yes, mamma. Oh, mamma, mamma!"

"That's what I should like," said Mrs. Kingsward; "it's strange, isn't it? The bed's solid, and the house is solid, and Moulsey there, she's very solid too, and air isn't solid at all. But there never was anybody that lay so easy and looked so safe as that woman in the air. Their arms must be so soft under her, and yet so strong, you know; stronger than your father's. He's so kind, but he hurries me sometimes; and soft—you're soft, Bee, but you're not strong. You've got a soft little hand, hasn't she, Moulsey? Poor little thing! And to think one doesn't know what she may have to do with it before she is like me."

"She'll have no more to do with it, ma'am, than a lady should, no more than you've had. But you must be quiet, dear lady, and try and go to sleep."

"I might never have such a good chance of talking to her again. The middle of the night and nobody here—her father not even in the house. Bee, you must try never to begin being ill in any silly way, feeling not strong and that sort of foolish thing, and say out what you think. Don't be frightened. It's—it's bad for him as well as for you. He gets to think you haven't any opinion. And then all at once they find out—And, perhaps, it's too late—"

"Mamma, you're not very ill? Oh, no; you're looking so beautiful, and you talk just as you always did."

"She says am I very ill, Moulsey? Poor little Bee! I feel a great deal better. I had surely a nice sleep. But why should the doctor be here, and you made to sit up, you poor little thing. Moulsey, why is the doctor here?"

"I never said, ma'am, as he was here. He's coming round first thing in the morning. He's anxious—because the Colonel's away."

"Ah! you think I don't know. I'm not so very bad; but he thinks—he thinks—perhaps I might die, Bee."

"Mamma, mamma!"

"Don't be frightened," said Mrs. Kingsward, drawing the girl close to her. "That's a secret; he doesn't think I know. It would be a curious, curious thing, when people think you are only ill to go and die. It would surprise them so. And so strange altogether—instead of worries, you know, every day, to be all by yourself, lying so easy and the angels carrying you. No trouble at all then to think whether he would be pleased—or anything; giving yourself to be carried like that, like a little child."

"But mamma," cried Bee, "you could not, would not leave us—you wouldn't, would you, mamma?—all the children, and me; and I with nobody else, no one to care for me. You couldn't, mother, leave us; you wouldn't! Say you wouldn't! Oh! Moulsey! Moulsey! look how far away she is looking, as if she didn't see you and me!"

"You forget, Bee," said Mrs. Kingsward, "How easy it looked for that saint in the picture. I always liked to watch the birds floating down on the wind, never moving their wings. That's what seems no trouble, so easy; not too hot nor too cold, nor tiring, neither to the breath nor anything. I shouldn't like to leave you. No—But then:" she added, with a smile, "I should not require to leave you. I'd—I'd—What was I saying? Moulsey, will you please give me some—more—"

She held out her hand again for the glass which Moulsey had just put down.

"It makes me strong—it makes me speak. I'm—sinking away again, Bee. Hold me—hold me tight. If I was to slip away—down—down—down—to the cellars or somewhere." The feeble laugh was dreadful for the listeners to hear.

"Run," cried Moulsey, in Bee's ear, "the doctor—the doctor! in the library."

And then there was a strange phantasmagoria that seemed to fill the night, one scene melting into another. The

doctor rousing from his doze, his measured step coming back; the little struggle round the bed; Moulsey giving place to the still darker shadow; the glow of Mrs. Kingsward's flushed and feverish countenance between; then the quiet, and then again sleep—sleep broken by feeble movements, by the quick panting of the breath.

"She'll be easier now," the doctor said. "You must go to bed, my dear young lady. Moulsey can manage for the rest of the night."

"Doctor," said Bee, with something in her throat that stopped the words, "doctor—will she—must she? Oh, doctor, say that is not what it means? One of us, it would not matter, but mother—mother!"

"It is not in our hands," the doctor said. "It is not much we can do. Don't look at me as if I were God. It is little, little I can do."

"They say," cried poor Bee, "that you can do anything. It is when there is no doctor, no nurse that people—Oh, my mother—my mother! Doctor, don't let it be."

"You are but a child," said the doctor, patting her kindly on the shoulder, "you've not forgotten how to say your prayers. That's the only thing for you to do. Those that say such things of doctors know very little. We stand and look on. Say your prayers, little girl—if they do her no good, they'll do you good. And now she'll have a little sleep."

Bee caught him by the arm. "Sleep," she said, looking at him suspiciously. "Sleep?"

"Yes, sleep—that may give her strength for another day. Oh, ask no more, child. Life is not mine to give."

What a night! Out of doors it was moonlight as serene as heaven—the moon departing in the west, and another faint light that was day coming on the other side, and the first birds beginning to stir in the branches; but not even baby moving in the house. All fast asleep, safe as if trouble never was, as if death could not be. Bee went upstairs to her chill, white room, where the white bed, unoccupied, looked to her like death itself—all cold, dreadful, full of suggestion. Bee's heart was more heavy than could be told. She had nothing to fall back upon, no secret strength to uphold her. She had forgotten how wretched she had been, but she felt it, nevertheless, behind the present anguish. Nevertheless, she was only nineteen, and when she flung herself down to cry upon her white pillow—only to cry, to get her passion out—beneficent nature took hold of the girl and made her sleep. She did not wake for hours. Was it beneficent? For when she was roused by the opening of the door and sat up in her bed, and found herself still dressed in her evening frock, with her little necklace round her throat, there pressed back upon Bee such a flood of misery and trouble as she thought did not exist in the world.

"Miss Bee, Miss Bee! Master's come home. He's been travelling all night—and I dare not disturb Mrs. Moulsey in Missis's room; and he wants to see you this minit, please. Oh, come, come, quick, and don't keep the Colonel waiting," the woman said.

Half awakened, but wholly miserable, Bee sprang up and rushed downstairs to her father. He came forward to meet her at the door, frowning and pale.

"What is this I hear?" he said. "What have you been doing to upset your mother? She was well enough when I went away. What have you been doing to your mother? You children are the plague of our lives!"

CHAPTER III.

THE week passed in the sombre hurry yet tedium of a house lying under the shadow of death—that period during which when it is night we long for morning, and when it is morning we long for night, hoping always for the hope that never comes, trembling to mark the progress which does go on silently towards the end.

Colonel Kingsward was rough and angry with Bee that first morning, to her consternation and dismay. She had never been the object of her father's anger before, and this hasty and imperious questioning seemed to take all power of reply out of her. "What had she been doing to her mother?" She! to her mother! Bee was too much frightened by his threatening look, the cloud on his face, the fire in his eyes, to say anything. Her mind ran hurriedly over all that had happened, and that last terrible visit, which had changed the whole aspect of the earth to herself. But it was to herself that this stroke of misfortune had come, and not to her mother. A gleam of answering anger came into Bee's eyes, sombre with the unhappiness which had been pushed aside by more immediate suffering, yet was still there like a black background, to frame whatever other miseries might come after. As for Colonel Kingsward, it was to him, as to so many men, a relief to blame somebody for the trouble which was unbearable. The blow was approaching which he had never allowed himself to believe in. He had blamed his wife instinctively, involuntarily, at the first hearing of every inconvenience in life; and it had helped to accustom him to the annoyance to think that it was her fault. He had done so in what he called this unfortunate business of Bee's, concluding that but for Mrs. Kingsward's weakness, Mr. Aubrey Leigh and his affairs would never have become of any importance to the family. He had blamed her, too, and greatly, for that weakening of health which he had so persistently endeavoured to convince himself did not mean half so much as the doctors said. Women are so idiotic in these respects. They will insist on wearing muslin and lace when they ought to wear flannel. They will put on evening dresses when they ought to be clothed warmly to the throat, and shoes made of paper when they ought to be solidly and stoutly shod, quite indifferent to the trouble and anxiety they may cause to their family. And now that Mrs. Kingsward's state had got beyond the possibility of reproach, he turned upon his daughter. It must be her fault. Her mother had been better or he should not have left her. The quiet of the country was doing her good; if she had not been agitated all would have been well. But Bee, with all her declarations of devotion to her mother; Bee, the eldest, who ought to have had some sense; Bee had brought on this trumpery love business to overset the delicate equilibrium which he himself, a man with affairs so much more important in hand, had refrained from disturbing. It did him a little good, unhappy and anxious as he was, to pour out his wrath upon Bee. And she did not reply. She did not shed tears, as her mother had weakly done in similar circumstances, or attempt excuses. Even if he had been sufficiently at leisure to note it, an answering fire awoke in Bee's eyes. He had not leisure to note, but he perceived it all the same.

Presently, however, every faculty, every thought, became absorbed in that sick chamber; things had still to be thought of outside of it, but they seemed strange, artificial things, having no connection with life. Then Charlie was summoned from Oxford, and the younger boys from school, which increased the strange commotion of the house, adding that restless element of young life which had no place there, nothing to do with itself, and which roused an

almost frenzied irritation in Colonel Kingsward when he saw any attempt on the part of the poor boys to amuse themselves, or resume their usual occupations. "Clods!" he said; "young brutes! They would play tennis if the world were falling to pieces." And again that glance of fire came into Bee's eyes, marked unconsciously, though he did not know he had seen it, by her father. The boys hung about her when she stole out for a little air, one at each arm. "How is mother, Bee? She's no worse? Don't you think we might go over to Hillside for that tournament? Don't you think Fred might play in the parish match with Siddemore? They're so badly off for bowlers. Don't you think——"

"Oh, I think it would be much better for you to be doing something, boys; but, then, papa might hear, and he would be angry. If we could but keep it from papa."

"We're doing mother no good," said Fred.

"How could we do mother good? Why did the governor send for us, Bee, only to kick our heels here, and get into mischief? A fellow can't help getting into mischief when he has nothing to do."

"Yes," repeated Fred, "what did he send for us for? I wish mother was better. I suppose as soon as she's better we'll be packed off again."

They were big boys, but they did not understand the possibility of their mother not getting better, and, indeed, neither did Bee. When morning followed morning and nothing happened, it seemed to her that getting better was the only conclusion to be looked for. If it had been Death that was coming, surely it must have come by this time. Her hopes rose with every new day.

But Mrs. Kingsward had been greatly agitated by the sight of Charlie when he was allowed to see her. "Why has Charlie come home?" she said. "Was he sent for? Was it your father that brought him? Charlie, my dear, what are you doing here? Why have you come back? You should have been going on with—— Did your father send for you? Why—why did your father send for you, my boy?"

"I thought," said Charlie, quite unmanned by the sight of her, and by this unexpected question, and by all he had been told about her state, "I thought—you wanted to see me, mother."

"I always like to see you—but not to take you away from—— And why was he sent for, Moulsey? Does the doctor think?—does my husband think?——"

Her feverish colour grew brighter and brighter. Her eyes shone with a burning eagerness. She put her hot hand upon that of her son. "Was it to say good-bye to me?" she said, with a strange flutter of a smile.

At the same time an argument on the same subject was going on between the doctor and the Colonel.

"What can the children do in a sick room? Keep them away. I should never have sent for them if you had consulted me. It is bad enough to have let her see Charlie, summoned express—do you want to frighten your wife to death?"

"There can be no question," said the Colonel, "if what you tell me is true, of frightening her to death. I think, Benson, that a patient in such circumstances ought to know. She ought to be told——"

"What?" the doctor said, sharply, with a harsh tone in his voice.

"What? Do you need to ask? Of her state—of what is imminent—that she is going to——"

Colonel Kingsward loved his wife truly, and he could not say those last words.

"Yes," said the doctor, "going to——? Well, we hope it's to One who has called her, that knows all about it, Kingsward. Doctors are not supposed to take that view much, but I do. I'd tell her nothing of the sort. I would not agitate her either with the sight of the children or those heathenish thoughts about dying. Well, I suppose you'll take your own way, if you think she's in danger of damnation; but you see I don't. I think where she's going she'll find more consideration and more understanding than ever she got here."

"You are all infidels—every one of you," said Colonel Kingsward; "you would let a soul rush unprepared into the presence of——"

"Her Father," said Doctor Benson. "So I would; if he's her Father he'll take care of that. And if he's only a Judge, you know, a Judge is an extraordinarily considerate person. He leaves no means untried of coming to a right decision. I would rather trust my case in the hands of the Bench than make up my own little plea any day. And, anyhow you can put it, the Supreme Judge must be better than the best Bench that ever was. Leave her alone. She's safer with Him than either with you or me."

"It's an argument I never would pardon—in my own case. I shudder at the thought of being plunged into eternity without the time to—to think—to—to prepare——"

"But if your preparations are all seen through from the beginning? If it's just as well known then, or better, what you are thinking, or trying to think, to make yourself ready for that event? You knew yourself, more or less, didn't you, when you were in active service, the excuses a wretched private would make when he was hauled up, and how he would try to make the worse appear the better cause. Were you moved by that, Colonel Kingsward? Didn't you know the man, and judge him by what you knew?"

"It seems to me a very undignified argument; there's no analogy between a wretched private and my—and my—and one of us—at the Judgment Seat."

"No—it's more like one of your boys making up the defence—when brought before you—and the poor boy would need it too," Dr. Benson added within himself. But naturally he made no impression with his argument, whether it was good or bad, upon his hearer. Colonel Kingsward was in reality a very unhappy man. He had nobody to blame for the dreadful misfortune which was threatening him except God, for whom he entertained only a great terror as of an overwhelming tyrannical Power ready to catch him at any moment when he neglected the observances or rites necessary to appease it. He was very particular in these observances—going to church, keeping up family prayers, contributing his proper and carefully calculated proportion to the charities, &c. Nobody could say of him that he was careless or negligent. And now how badly was his devotion repaid!—by the tearing away from him of the companion of his life. But he felt that there was still much more that the awful Master of the Universe might inflict, perhaps upon her if she was not prepared to meet her God. He was wretched till he had told her, warned her, till she had fulfilled everything that was necessary, seen a clergyman, and got herself into the state of mind becoming a dying person. He had collected all the children that she might take leave of them in a becoming way. He had, so far as he knew, thought of everything to make her exit from the world a right one in all the forms—and now to be told that he was not to agitate her, that the God whom he wished to prepare her to meet knew more of her and understood her

better than he did! Agitate her! When the alternative might be unspeakable miseries of punishment, instead of the acquittal which would have to be given to a soul properly prepared. These arguments did not in the least change his purpose, but they fretted and irritated him beyond measure. At the bottom of all, the idea that anybody should know better than he what was the right thing for his own wife was an intolerable thought.

He went in and out of her room with that irritated, though self-controlled look, which she knew so well. He had never shown it to the world, and when he had demanded of her in his angry way why this was and that, and how on earth such and such things had happened, Mrs. Kingsward had till lately taken it so sweetly that he had not himself suspected how heavy it was upon her. And when she had begun to show signs of being unable to bear the responsibility of everything in earth and heaven, the Colonel had felt himself an injured man. There were signs that he might eventually throw that responsibility on Bee. But in the meantime he had nobody to blame, as has been said, and the burden of irritation and disturbance was heavy upon him.

The next morning after his talk with Dr. Brown he came in with that clouded brow to find Charlie by her bedside. The Colonel came up and stood looking at the face on the pillow, now wan in the reaction of the fever, and utterly weak, but still smiling at his approach.

"I have been telling Charlie," she said, in her faint voice, "that he must go back to his college. Why should he waste his time here?"

"He will not go back yet," said Colonel Kingsward; "are you feeling a little better this morning, my dear?"

"Oh, not to call ill at all," said the sufferer. "Weak—a sort of sinking, floating away. I take hold of somebody's hand to keep me from falling through. Isn't it ridiculous?" she said, after a little pause.

"Your weakness is very great," said the husband, almost sternly.

"Oh, no, Edward. It's more silly than anything—when I am not really ill, you know. I've got Charlie's hand here under the counterpane," she said again, with her faint little laugh.

"You won't always have Charlie's hand, or anyone's hand, Lucy."

She looked at him with a little anxiety.

"No, no. I'll get stronger, perhaps, Edward."

"Do you feel as if you were at all stronger, my dear?"

She loosed her son's hand, giving him a little troubled smile. "Go away now, Charlie dear. I don't believe you've had your breakfast. I want to speak to—papa." Then she waited, looking wistfully in her husband's face till the door had closed. "You have something to say to me, Edward. Oh, what is it? Nothing has happened to anyone?"

"No, nothing has happened," he said. He turned away and walked to the window, then came back again, turning his head half-way from her as he spoke. "It is only that you are, my poor darling—weaker every day."

"Does the doctor think so?" she said, with a little eagerness, with a faint suffusion of colour in her face.

He did not say anything—could not perhaps—but slightly moved his head.

"Weaker every day, and that means, Edward!" She put out her thin, hot hands. "That means——"

The man could not say anything. He could do his duty grimly, but when the moment came he could not put it into words. He sank down on the chair Charlie had left, and put down his face on the pillow, his large frame shaken by sobs which he could not restrain.

These sobs made Mrs. Kingsward forget the meaning of this communication altogether. She put her hands upon him trying to raise his head. "Edward! Oh, don't cry, don't cry! I have never seen you cry in all my life. Edward, for goodness' sake! You will kill me if you go on sobbing like that. Oh, Edward, Edward, I never saw you cry before."

Moulsey had darted forward from some shadowy corner where she was and gripped him by the arm.

"Stop, sir—stop it," she cried, in an authoritative whisper, "or you'll kill her."

He flung Moulsey off and raised his head a little from the pillow.

"You have never seen me with any such occasion before," he said, taking her hands into his and kissing them repeatedly.

He was not a man of many caresses, and her heart was touched with a feeble sense of pleasure.

"Dear!" she said softly, "dear!" feebly drawing a little nearer to him to put her cheek against his.

Colonel Kingsward looked up as soon as he was able and saw her lying smiling at him, her hand in his, her eyes full of that wonderful liquid light which belongs to great weakness. The small worn face was all illuminated with smiles; it was like the face of a child—or perhaps an angel. He looked at first with awe, then with doubt and alarm. Had he failed after all in the commission which he had executed at so much cost to himself, and against the doctor's orders? He had been afraid for the moment of the sight of her despair—and now he was frightened by her look of ease, the absence of all perturbations. Had she not understood him? Would it have to be told again, more severely, more distinctly, this dreadful news?

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. KINGSWARD said nothing of the communication her husband had made to her. Did she understand it? He went about heavily all day, pondering the matter, going and coming to her room, trying in vain to make out what was in her mind. But he could not divine what was in that mind, hidden from him in those veils of individual existence which never seemed to him to have been so baffling before. In the afternoon she had heard, somehow, the voices of the elder boys, and had asked if they were there, and had sent for them. The two big fellows, with the mud on their boots and the scent of the fresh air about them, stood huddled together, speechless with awe and grief, by the bedside, when their father came in. They did not know what to say to their mother in such circumstances. They had never talked to her about herself, but always about themselves; and now they were entirely at a loss after they had said, "How are you, mamma? Are you very bad, mamma? Oh, I'm so sorry;" and "Oh, I wish you were better." What could boys of twelve and fourteen say? For the moment they felt as if their hearts were broken; but they did not want to stay there; they had nothing to say to her. Their pang of sudden trouble was confused with shyness and awkwardness, and their consciousness that she was altogether in another atmosphere and another world. Mrs.

Kingsward was not a clever woman, but she understood miraculously what was in those inarticulate young souls. She kissed them both, drawing each close to her for a moment, and then bade them run away. "Were you having a good game?" she said, with that ineffable, feeble smile. "Go and finish it, my darlings." And they stumbled out very awkwardly, startled to meet their father's look as they turned round, and greatly disturbed and mystified altogether, though consoled somehow by their mother's look.

They said to each other after a while that she looked "jolly bad," but that she was in such good spirits it must be all right.

Their father was as much mystified as they; but he was troubled in conscience, as if he had not spoken plainly enough, had not made it clear enough what "her state" was. She had not asked for the clergyman—she had not asked for anything. Was it necessary that he should speak again? There was one thing she had near her, but that so fantastic a thing!—a photograph—one of the quantities of such rubbish the girls and she had brought home—a woman wrapped in a mantle floating in the air.

"Take that thing away," he said to Moulsey. It irritated him to see a frivolous thing like that—a twopenny-halfpenny photograph—so near his wife's bed.

"Don't take it away," she said, in the whisper to which her voice had sunk; "it gives me such pleasure."

"Pleasure!" he cried; even to speak of pleasure was wrong at such a moment. And then he added, "Would you like me to read to you? Would you like to see—anyone?"

"To see anyone? Whom should I wish to see but you, Edward, and the children?"

"We haven't been—so religious, my dear, as perhaps we ought," stammered the anxious man. "If I sent for—Mr. Baldwin perhaps, to read the prayers for the sick and—and talk to you a little?"

She looked at him with some wonder for a moment, and then she said, with a smile, "Yes, yes; by all means, Edward, if you like it."

"I shall certainly like it, my dearest; and it is right—it is what we should all wish to do at the——" He could not say at the last—he could not say when we are dying—it was too much for him; but certainly she must understand now. And he went away hurriedly to call the clergyman, that no more time might be lost.

"Moulsey," said Mrs. Kingsward, "have we come then quite—to the end now?"

"Oh, ma'am! Oh, my dear lady!" Moulsey said.

"My husband—seems to think so. It is a little hard—to leave them all. Where is Bee?"

"I am here, mamma," said a broken voice; and the mother's hand was caught and held tight, as she liked it to be. "May Betty come too?"

"Yes, let Betty come. It is you I want, not Mr. Baldwin."

"Mr. Baldwin is a good man, ma'am. He'll be a comfort to them and to the Colonel."

"Yes, I suppose so; he will be a comfort to—your father. But I don't want anyone. I haven't done very much harm —"

"No! oh, no, ma'am, none!" said Moulsey, while Betty, thrown on her knees by the bedside, tried to smother her sobs; and Bee, worn out and feeling as if she felt nothing, sat and held her mother's hand.

"But, then," she said, "I've never, never, done any good."

"Oh! my dear lady, my dear lady! And all the poor people, and all the children."

"Hush! Moulsey. I never gave anything—not a bit of bread, not a shilling—but because I liked to do it. Never! oh, never from any good motive. I always liked to do it. It was my pleasure. It never cost me anything. I have done no good in my life. I just liked the poor children, that was all, and thought if they were my own— Oh, Bee and Betty, try to be better women—different from me."

Betty, who was so young, crept nearer and nearer on her knees, till she came to the head of the bed. She lifted up her tear-stained face, "Mother! oh, mother! are you frightened?" she cried.

Mrs. Kingsward put forth her other arm and put it freely round the weeping girl. "Perhaps I ought to be, perhaps I ought to be!" she said, with a little thrill and quaver.

"Mother," said Betty, pushing closer and closer, almost pushing Bee away, "if I had been wicked, ever so wicked, I shouldn't be frightened for you."

A heavenly smile came over the woman's face. "I should think not, indeed."

And then Betty, in the silence of the room, put her hands together and said very softly, "Our Father, which art in Heaven—"

"Oh, children, children," cried Moulsey, "don't break our hearts! She's too weak to bear it. Leave her alone."

"Yes, go away, children dear—go away. I have to rest—to see Mr. Baldwin." Then she smiled, and said in gasps, "To tell the truth—I'm—I'm not afraid; look—" She pointed to the picture by her bedside. "So easy—so easy! Just resting—and the Saviour will put out his hand and take me in."

Mr. Baldwin came soon after—the good Rector, who was a good man, but who believed he had the keys, and that what he bound on earth was bound in Heaven—or, at least, he thought he believed so—with Colonel Kingsward, who felt that he was thus fulfilling all righteousness, and that this was the proper way in which to approach the everlasting doors. He put away the little picture in which Catherine of Siena lay in the hold of the angels, in the perfect peace of life accomplished, the rest that was so easy and so sweet—hastily with displeasure and contempt. He did not wish the Rector to see the childish thing in which his wife had taken pleasure, nor even that she had been taking pleasure at all at such a solemn moment; even that she should smile the same smile of welcome with which she would have greeted her kind neighbour had she been in her usual place in the drawing-room disturbed her husband. So near death and yet able to think of that! He watched her face as the Rector read the usual prayers. Did she enter into them—did she understand them? He could scarcely join in them himself in his anxiety to make sure that she felt and knew what was her "state," and was preparing—preparing to meet her God. That God was awaiting severely the appearance of that soul before him, the Colonel could not but feel. He would not have said so in words, but the instinctive conviction in his heart was so. When she looked round for the little picture it hurt him like a sting. Oh, if she would but think of the things that concerned her peace—not of follies, childish distractions, amusements for the fancy. On her side, the poor lady was conscious more or less of all that was going on, understood here and

there the prayers that were going over her head, prayers of others for her, rather than anything to be said by herself. In the midst of them, she felt herself already like St. Catherine, floating away into ineffable peace, then coming back again to hear the sacred words, to see the little circle round her on their knees, and to smile upon them in an utter calm of weakness without pain, feeling only that they were good to her, thinking of her, which was sweet, but knowing little more.

It was the most serene and cloudless night after that terrible day. A little after Colonel Kingsward had left the room finally and shut himself up in his study, Moulsey took the two girls out into the garden, through a window which opened upon it. "Children, go and breathe the sweet air. I'll not have you in a room to break your hearts. Look up yonder—yonder where she's gone," said the kind nurse who had done everything for their mother. And they stole out—the two little ghosts, overborne with the dreadful burden of humanity, the burden which none of us can shake off, and crept across the grass to the seat where she had been used to sit among the children. The night was peace itself—not a breath stirring, a young moon with something wistful in her light looking down, making the garden bright as with a softened ethereal day. A line of white cloud dimly detached from the softness of the blue lay far off towards the west amid the radiance, a long faint line as of something in the far distance. Bee and Betty stood and gazed at it with eyes and hearts over-charged, each leaning upon the other. Their young souls were touched with awe and an awful quiet. They were too near the departure to have fallen down as yet into the vacancy and emptiness of re-awakening life. "Oh," they said, "if that should be her!" And why should it not be? Unless perhaps there was a quicker way. They watched it with that sob in the throat which is of all sounds and sensations the most overwhelming. It seemed to them as if they were watching her a little further on her way, to the very horizon, till the soft distance closed over, and that speck like a sail upon the sea could be seen no more. And when it was gone they sank down together upon her seat, under the trees she loved, where the children had played and tumbled on the grass about her, and talked of her in broken words, a little phrase now and then, sometimes only "Mother," or "Oh, mamma, mamma," now from one, now from another—in that first extraordinary exaltation and anguish which is not yet grief.

They did not know how long they had been there when something stirred in the bushes, and the two big boys, Arthur and Fred, came heavily into sight, holding each other by the arm. The boys were bewildered, heavy and miserable, not knowing what to do with themselves nor where to go. But they came up with a purpose, which was a little ease in the trouble. It cost them a little convulsion of reluctant crying before they could get out what they had to say. Then it came out in broken words from both together. "Bee, there's someone wants to speak to you at the gate."

"Oh! who could want to speak to me—to-night? I cannot speak to anyone; you might have known."

"Bee," said Arthur, the eldest, "it isn't just—anyone; it's—we thought you would perhaps—"

"He told us," said Fred, "who he was; and begged so hard—"

Then there came back upon poor Bee all the other trouble that she had pushed away from her. Her heart seemed to grow hard and cold after all the softening and tenderness of this dreadful yet heavenly hour. "I will see no one—no one," she said.

"Bee," said the boys, "we shut the gate upon him; but he took hold of our hands, and—and cried, too." They had to stop and swallow the sob before either could say any more. "He said she was his best friend. He said he couldn't bear it no more than us. And if you would only speak to him."

Bee got up from her mother's seat; her poor little heart swelled in her bosom as if it would burst. Oh! how was she to bear all this—to bear it all—to have no one to help her! "No, no, I will not. I will not!" she said.

"Oh, Bee," cried Betty, "if it is Aubrey—poor Aubrey! She was fond of him. She would not like him to be left out. Oh, Bee, come; come and speak to him. Suppose one of us were alone, with nobody to say mother's name to!"

"No, I will not," said Bee. "Oh! Betty, mother knows why; she knows."

"What does she know?" cried Betty, pleading. "She was fond of him. I am fond of him, without thinking of you, for mother's sake."

"Oh, let me go! I am going in; I am going to her. I wish, I wish she had taken me with her! No, no, no! I will never see him more."

"I think," said Betty to the boys, pushing them away, "that she is not quite herself. Tell him she's not herself. Say she's not able to speak to anyone, and we can't move her. And—and give poor Aubrey—oh, poor Aubrey!—my love."

The boys turned away on their mission, crossing the gravel path with a commotion of their heavy feet which seemed to fill the air with echoes.

Colonel Kingsward heard it from his study, though that was closed up from any influence outside. He opened his window and came out, standing a black figure surrounded by the moonlight. "Who is there?" he said. "Are there any of you so lost to all feeling as to be out in the garden, of all nights in the world on this night?"

CHAPTER V.

AUBREY LEIGH had been living a troubled life during the time which had elapsed since the swallowing up in the country of the family in which he had become so suddenly interest, of which, for a short time, he had felt himself a member, and from which, as he felt, he could never be separated, whatever arbitrary laws might be made by hits head. When they disappeared from London, which was done so suddenly, he was much cast down for the moment, but, as he had the fullest faith in Bee, and was sustained by her independence of character and determined to stand by him whatever happened, he was, though anxious and full of agitation, neither despairing nor even in very low spirits. To be sure there were moments in which his heart sank, recalling the blank countenance of the father, and the too gentle and yielding disposition of the mother, and Bee's extreme youth and habits of obedience to both. He felt how much there was to be said against himself—a man who had been forced into circumstances of danger which nobody but himself could fully understand, and against which his whole being had revolted, though he could say but little on the subject. And, indeed, who was to understand that a man might yield to a sudden temptation which he despised and hated, and that he could not even explain that this was so, laying the blackest blame upon another—to a man,

and still less to a woman; which last was impossible, and not even to be thought of. He might tell it, perhaps, to his mother, and there was a possibility of help there; though even there a hundred difficulties existed. But he was not wound up to that last appeal, and he felt, at first, but little fear of the eventual result. He was assured of Bee's faithfulness, and how could any parent stand out against Bee? Not even, he tried to persuade himself, the stern Colonel, who had so crushed himself. And she had received his first letters, and had answered them, professing her determination never to be coerced in this respect.

He was agitated, his life was full of excitement, and speculation, and trouble. But this is nothing dreadful in a young man's life. It was perhaps better, more enlivening, more vivid, than the delights of an undisturbed love-making, followed by a triumphant marriage. It is well sometimes that the course of true love should not run smooth. He thought himself unhappy in being separated from Bee; but the keen delight of her determination to stand by him for good or evil, her faith in him, her championship, and the conviction that this being so all must come right in the end, was like a stream of bright fresh water flowing through the somewhat sombre flat of his existence. It had been very sombre in the early days of what people thought his youthful happiness—very flat, monotonous, yet with ignoble contentions in it. Bee's sunshiny nature, full of lights and shadows, had changed the whole landscape, and now the excitement of this struggle for her, changed it still more. It might be a hard battle, but they would win in the end. Whether he, a somewhat unlucky fellow, would have done so was very doubtful—but for her the stars would fight in their courses. Everything would be overturned in the world, rather than that Bee should be made miserable, and since she had set her dear heart on him, on his behalf too the very elements would fight, for how otherwise could Bee be made happy? The argument was without a flaw.

This was his reasoning, never put, I need not say, into any formula of words, yet vaguely believed in, and forming a source of the brightest exhilaration in his life, rousing all combative influences by the power of that hope of success which was a certainty in such a case. This exhilaration was crossed by the blackest of disappointments, and threatened to become despair when for days he had no sign of existence from Bee: but that after all was only a keener excitement—the sting of anxiety which makes after satisfaction more sweet. And then he was consoled to hear of Mrs. Kingsward's illness, which explained everything. Not that Aubrey was selfish enough to rejoice in that poor lady's suffering. He would have been shocked and horrified by the thought. But then it was no unusual thing for Mrs. Kingsward to be ill; it is not unusual, a young man so easily thinks, for any middle-aged person to be ill—and in so many cases it does not seem to do them much harm; whereas it did him much good—for it explained the silence of Bee!

And then it came to Aubrey's ears that Mrs. Kingsward was very ill—worse than she had ever been before; and then that all the family had been summoned that she was dying. Such rumours spread like wildfire—they get into the air—nobody knows how they come. He went down to the village nearest Kingswarden, and found a lodging there, when this news reached him, and endeavoured to send a note to Bee, to let her know he was at hand. But in the trouble of the house this note, sent by a private hand—always in these days an unsafe method—was somehow lost and never reached her. He hung about the house in the evenings, avoiding on various occasions an encounter with Charlie, who was not friendly, and with the Colonel, who was his enemy. These two were the only members of the family visible outside the gates of Kingswarden—until he managed to identify the two boys, whose disconsolate wanderings about pointed them out to him, and who did not know, therefore had no hostility or suspicion of the stranger who inquired after their mother so anxiously. Everybody inquired after their mother. It was nothing strange to them to be stopped on the road with this question. It was thus at last, hearing the final blow had fallen, Aubrey had ventured to send a message, to ask for a word from Bee. The thought of what the girl must be suffering in her first grief, and to feel himself so near her—almost within hearing—yet altogether shut out, was more than he could bear. He pushed in within the gate, into the shelter of the shrubbery, and there he stopped short, bound by invisible restraints. It was the home of his love, and yet it was the house of his enemy. He could not take advantage of the darkness of the night and of the misery of the moment to violate the sanctuary of a man soul-stricken by such trouble. But from where he stood he could see the little group of shadows under the tree. And how could he go away and not say a word to her—not take her in his arms, tell her his heart was with her, and that he was a mourner too? "Ask Bee to speak to me. Ask her to speak to me—only for a moment. I am Aubrey Leigh," he said to the two brothers, taking an arm of each, imploring them. The boys did not know much about Aubrey Leigh, but still they had heard the name. And they were overawed by his earnestness; the sound of his voice which, full of passion and feeling as it was, was strange to their undeveloped consciousness. They took his message, as we have seen, and then there came a mysterious moment which Aubrey could not understand. He could not hear what was said, but he was conscious of a resistance, of denial, and that Bee did not make a step towards him; that she recoiled rather than advanced. Though he could scarcely see anything distinctly, he could see that—that there was no impulse towards him, but rather the reverse; that Bee did not wish to come. And then the harsh voice of the Colonel broke the spell of the quiet, of the mournful, tranquil night, which it was so easy for a roused imagination to think was penetrated, too, by the sentiment of sorrow and of peace. The Colonel's voice put every gentler vision to flight. "Is it possible that any of you are out here in the garden—of all nights in the world on this night?" Oh! the very night of all nights to be there—in the first awe and silence, watching her pass, as it were, to the very gates of Heaven! Perhaps, it was unawares from Bee's mind that this idea came to his—"to watch her ascending, trailing clouds of glory," as the poet said; but that was the spirit coming and not going. These thoughts flew through his mind in the shock and irritation of the Colonel's voice. And then the shadows under the tree seemed to fly away and disperse, and silence fell upon all around, the great ghostly trees standing up immovable like muffled giants in the moonlight, their shadows making lines and heavy clumps of blackness on the turf, the late roses showing pale in the distance, the garden paths white and desolate. A moment more, and the harsh sound, almost angry, of the Colonel's window shutting, of bolts and bars, and a final closing up of everything came unkindly upon the hushed air. And then the moonlight reached the shut up house, all unresponsive, with death in it, with one faint light burning in the large window upstairs, showing where the gentle inmate lay who needed light no more. Strange prejudice of humanity that put out all the lights for sleep, but surrounds death with them, that no careless spirit may mistake for a common chamber the place where that last majesty lies.

Aubrey stood alone in this hushed and silent world. His heart was as heavy as a stone, heavy with grief for the friend who had passed for ever out of his life. He had not known perhaps till now what he too had lost—a friend, who would not have forsaken him not a very strong champion to fight for him; but a friend that never, whatever might be said, would have refused to hear him, refused to give him her sympathy. Had Bee, his own Bee, refused? The young

man was bewildered beyond the power of thought. Was it his fault to have come too soon? Was it an outrage to be there on the night of the mother's death? But there was no outrage in his thoughts, not even any selfishness. It was her he had been thinking of, not himself; that she might feel there was someone whose thoughts were all hers, who was herself, not another, feeling with her, mourning with her, her very own to take the half of her burden. He had felt that he could not be far away while Bee was in trouble—that even to stand outside would be something, would somehow lighten her load, would make her feel in the very air a consciousness of the mighty love that would

cleave in twain
The lading of a single pain
And part it giving half to him.

His heart, which had so gone out to her, seemed to come back confused, with all the life out of it, full of wonder and dismay. Had she rejected him and his sympathy? Was it the fault of the others, the boys who did not know what to say? Was she angry that he should come so soon? But it was now, immediately on the very stroke of the distress, that love should come. He stood for a long time silent, bewildered, not knowing what to think. Was it possible that she could have misunderstood him, have thought that he had come here only to beguile her into his arms, to take advantage of an opportunity? It pained poor Aubrey to the heart to think that she might have thought so. Ah! Mrs. Kingsward would not have done it, would not have let Bee do it. But she lay there, where the light was, never to say anything more: and Bee—Bee!

He got out of the little park that surrounded Kingswarden by the stile near the village, some time after, he did not know how long. He thought it was in the middle of the night. The moon had set, everything was dark, and all the cottagers asleep. But time is long to watchers unaccustomed to long vigils, and the lights were not out at the small inn in the village where he was lodging. He found the master of the house and his wife talking at the door in subdued tones, over the event of the evening. "She was always a weakly body, but she'll be sore missed," the woman said. "She kept everything going. The Colonel, he'll not have a servant left as will put up with him in three months. You take my word. She kept all straight. Lord, that's how women mostly is—no account as long as they're living—and then you finds the want o' them when they're gone."

"Here you are, mister," said the landlord; "we thought as you was lost. It was a fine night, tempting for a walk. But it's clouding over now."

"Oh, no, sir, nought of the sort," said the woman. "My master here, he never goes to bed afore the middle of the night, he don't, and it's an excuse for not getting up in the mornin'. But you'll have to be early to-morrow, Gregg, you take my word, for there'll be undertakers' men and that sort down from London, and I'll not be bothered with them, mind you that."

"I suppose you're right this time," said the man. "They drinks a deal to keep up their spirits, being as it is a kind of depressing trade."

"If I hear you laugh again like that!—and the missis lying in her coffin! Don't you think, sir, as he's got no feeling. He puts it off like with a laugh not to cry. I was kitchen-maid up there, and he was groom in the old days, and many and many's the kindness she done to me and mine. Oh, and such a pretty lady and sweet—and a young family left just at the ages that most need a mother's care."

"They're all ages, Molly, if you come to that."

"Well, and don't they want a mother's care at all ages? What would you do with my children if I was took, John Gregg? And the Colonel, he's just a helpless man like you are. The only hope is as Miss Bee will turn out like her mother. I always thought she favoured Missis, though some said it was the Colonel she was like. It's a dreadful charge for her, poor thing, at her age; but if she takes after the Missis there will be some hope for them," the woman said.

"I thought as Miss Bee was going to be married?" said the landlord.

"Oh, that's all broken off," she said, "and a good thing too, seeing what's happened, for what could ever little Miss Betty do?"

Aubrey, who had lingered listening, went slowly up the narrow wooden stair to his shabby little room as the pair locked the door and put out their lights. He heard them carrying on the conversation in the kitchen underneath for a few minutes before they, too, in their turn clambered upstairs to bed. "Oh, that's all broken off, and a good thing too." He kept saying these words over and over miserably, as if they had been the chorus of some dreadful song of fate.

CHAPTER VI.

AUBREY stayed at the village public-house day after day, hoping for some sign or message. He wrote to Bee, this time by the post; but he had no better success. Was it only because of her grief that she took no notice? Terrible as that grief must be, and rigorous as evidently were the rules of the closed-up house, from which no one came forth, even for a mouthful of air, it did not seem to him that this was reason enough for putting him from her—he who was to share her life, and whose sympathy was so full and overflowing. Surely it was the moment when all who loved her should gather round her, when she most wanted solace and support. It could not be that her heart was so wrapped up in sorrow that she should push from her the man who had the best right to share her tears—whom her mother approved and liked, whose acceptance she had ratified and confirmed. It could not be that. He felt that, had he been in the same circumstances, his cry would have been for Bee to stand by him, to comfort him. Was she so different, or was she overwhelmed by what was before her—the charge of her father's house, the dreadful suggestion that it was to him and the children she should dedicate herself henceforward, giving up her own happiness? It seemed to Aubrey, after long thinking, that this must be the cause of her silence; the burden which surely was not for her young shoulders, which never could be intended for her, must have come down upon her, crushing her. She was the eldest girl. She must have, like so many girls, an exaggerated sense of what was her duty. Her duty! Could anything be more fantastic, more impossible? To take her mother's place—and her mother had been killed by it!—to humour the stern father—to take care of the tribe of children, to be their nurse, their ruler—everything that a creature of

nineteen could not, should not be! And for this she would throw aside her own life—and him, whose life it was also. He would never, never consent to such a sacrifice, he said to himself. Bee was not soft and yielding, like their mother. She was a determined little thing. She would stand to it, and sacrifice him as she sacrificed herself, unless he made a bold stand from the first. No, no, no! Whatever was to be done, that must not be done. He would not have it—he must let her know from the very first—if it were not that she knew already, and that this was the reason why she was silent, feeling that if ever they met she could not hold out against him. Poor little Bee! Poor, poor little Bee! Her mother dead, and her father so stern; and thinking it her duty—her duty, God bless her!—to take all that household upon her little shoulders. The tears came into his eyes with a sudden softening. She thought it better to keep him at arm's length, the darling, knowing that she never could stand against him, that he would never, never consent; the little, sublime, unreasonable girl! The things they took into their heads, these inexperienced, generous creatures! But, thank heaven, he was here; even though she held him at bay—here, to make all right.

The reader knows that poor Bee was not actuated by such lofty feelings, but then Aubrey had no knowledge in his mind of that strange story which had destroyed her faith in him. When a man is guilty he knows all that can be brought against him, in which, in its way, there is a certain advantage. He cannot be taken by surprise. He knows that this or that is lying ready like a secret weapon apt to be picked up by any man who may wish to do him harm. But the innocent man has not that safeguard. It is not likely to occur to him that harmless circumstances may be so twisted as to look like guilt. For his own part he had forgotten all about that little episode on the railway—or if he remembered it, it was with a smile and a glow of momentary pleasure, to think how, with a little money—so small a matter—he had been able to make comfort take the place of misery to the poor little family, whom perhaps he would never have noticed at all had not his thoughts been full of Bee. He had done that for her with the feeling with which he might have given her an ornament or a basket of flowers; the only drawback to the pleasure of it being that he could not tell her off-hand, and get the smile of thanks she would give him for it—far more than he deserved, for he liked doing it—kindness coming natural to this young man. It was hard on Aubrey in the complications of fate that this innocent, nay praiseworthy, incident should be made the occasion of his trouble. But he had no suspicion of it—forgot the fact, indeed, altogether—and would have laughed at the idea that such an accidental occurrence could in any way influence his fate.

He went to the funeral, unnoticed in the crowd of people who were there—some for love and some for conventional necessity, but almost all with a pang of natural sympathy to see the train of children who followed their mother to her last rest. The Colonel, rigid in all things, had insisted at last, that all, except the very youngest, should be there—having wavered for a moment whether it would not be more in order that the girls should remain at home, and only the boys be present at the melancholy ceremony. To see the little wondering faces two-and-two that followed the elder children up the aisle, and were installed in the mourners' places, some of them scarcely tall enough to see over the edge of the pew, brought many a gush of tears to sympathetic eyes. Bee and Betty, the two inseparable “eldest,”—slim, black figures—drooping under the heavy veils that covered them from the daylight, almost touched Aubrey with their clinging black garments as they passed. Did they see him? He saw, wherever he was, at whatever distance, any movement they made. He saw that Bee never raised her head; but Betty was younger, and less self-restrained—that she had seen him at least he felt sure. And he felt the Colonel's eyes upon him, penetrating the thickest of the crowd. Colonel Kingsward had a glance that saw everything. He was a man bereaved, the light of his eyes taken from him, and the comfort of his life—and yet he saw everything at his wife's funeral, saw and noted the faces that were dull and tired of the tension, and those that were alive with sympathy—making notes for or against them in his memory, and, above all, he saw Aubrey Leigh. Charlie saw him more accidentally, without any conscious observation, and the boys who had cried all they were capable of, and now could not help their eyes straying a little, conscious of the spectacle, and of the important part they played in it, everybody looking at them. All of them saw him, but Bee. Was it only Bee who was so little in sympathy with him that she did not know he must be there?

He went back to his lodging a little angry through his emotion. It was too much. Even in the interval between her mother's death and funeral he felt that a girl who loved him should not be so obdurate as that, and he listened with a very sombre face to all the landlady's discussion of the proceedings. “It was a shame,” she said, “to bring those little children there, not much more than babies—what could they know? I'd have kept them safe in the nursery with some quiet game to play, the poor little innocents! And so would Missis. Missis would have thought what was best for them, not for making a display. But God knows what will become of them children now.”

“What should become of them?” said the husband. “They'll get the best of everything and servants to wait on them hand and foot. The Colonel, he ain't like a poor man who could do nothing for them. When the mother's gone the children had better go too—in a poor man's house.”

“It's little you know about it,” said the woman with contempt. “Rich house or poor house, it don't make no such great difference. Nurses is a long way different from mothers. Not as I'm saying a word against Sarah Langridge, as is a good honest woman, that would wrong her master not by a candle end or a boot lace, not she. But that's not like being a mother. The Lord grant that if I die and there's a baby it may go too, as you say. You're more than a nurse, you're their father, and you're part of them; but Lord forbid that I should leave a poor little baby on your hands.”

The man turned on his heel with a tremulous laugh. “Well, I ain't wishing it, am I?” he said.

“But,” said Aubrey, “there are the—elder sisters—the young ladies.”

“Miss Bee! Lord bless us, sir, do ye know the age that child is? Nineteen, and no more. Is that an age to take the charge of a nursery full of children? Why, her mother was but forty as has been laid in her grave to-day. I wish to goodness as that marriage hadn't been broke off. He was a widower—and I don't much hold with widowers—but I wish that I could give him a sign to come back, if he has any spirit in him, and try and get that poor young lady away.”

“If he has been sent about his business,” said Aubrey, forcing a smile, “he could have no right to come back.”

“I don't know whose fault it was,” said the landlady. “None o' missis's, you take my word; but, Lord, if a gentleman loves a young lady, what's to hinder him putting his pride in his pocket? A man does when he's real fond of a woman in our rank of life.”

“I don't know about that,” said her husband. “If I had been sent away with a cuff on the side of my head, blessed if I'd ever have come back.”

“You're a poor lot, all of you,” the woman said.

Aubrey could not but smile at the end of the argument, but he asked himself when he was alone—Was he a poor lot? Was he unwilling to put his pride in his pocket? Walking about his little room, turning over and over the circumstances, remembering the glare from Colonel Kingsward's eye, which had recognised him, he at last evolved out of his own troubled feelings and imagination the idea that it was his part to offer sympathy, to hold out an olive branch. Perhaps, after all, the stern man's heart was really touched; perhaps it would soothe him in his grief to hear that "when the eye saw her, then it blessed her," which was Aubrey's sincere feeling at this moment in respect to Bee's mother. It seemed to him that it was best to act upon this impulse before other arguments came in; before the sense of wounding and pain in Bee's silence got the upper hand. He spent most of the afternoon in writing a letter, so carefully put together, copied over and over again, that there might be nothing in it to wound the most sensitive feelings; offering to Colonel Kingsward his profound sympathy, telling him with emotion of her kindness to himself, her sweetness, her beauty, with that heightening of enthusiastic admiration, which, if it is permissible anywhere, is so over a new-made grave. And at the end he asked, with all the delicacy he could, whether in these new circumstances he might not ask a hearing, a renewed consideration, for her dear sake who had been so good to him, and who was gone.

I am not sure that his judgment went fully with this renewed effort, and his landlady's remarks were but a poor reason for any such step. But his heart was longing after Bee, angry with her, impatient beyond words, disturbed, miserable, not knowing how to support the silence and separation while yet so near. And to do something is always a relief, even though it may be the worst and not the best thing to do. In the evening after dark, when there was no one about, he went up to Kingswarden, and himself put his letter into the hands of the butler, who did not know him, and therefore knew no reason why the letter should either be carried in haste to his master or delayed. Aubrey heard that the young ladies were quite as well as could be expected, and the Colonel very composed, considering—and then he returned to the village. How silent the house was! Not a creature about, and how disturbing and painful to the anxious spirit even the simple noises and commotion of the village street.

Next morning a letter came, delivered by the postman, from Kingswarden. It contained only a few words.

"Colonel Kingsward is obliged to Mr. Aubrey Leigh for his message of sympathy, but, on consideration of the whole circumstances, thinks it better that no pretence at intercourse should be resumed. It could be nothing but painful to both parties, and Colonel Kingsward, with his compliments, takes the liberty to suggest that Mr. Aubrey Leigh would do well to remain in the neighbourhood as short a time as suits his convenience.

"Kingswarden, October 15."

Inside were the two or three notes which Aubrey on different occasions—twice by post and once by a private messenger—had sent to Bee. They had not been opened. The young man's colour rose with a fiery indignation—his heart thumped in his ears. This was an explanation of which he had not thought. To keep back anyone's letters had not occurred to him as a thing that in the end of the eighteenth century any man would dare to do. It seemed to bring him back face to face with old-fashioned, forgotten methods, of all sorts of antiquated kinds. He put down the papers on the table with a sort of awe. How was he to struggle against such ways of warfare? Bee might think he had not written at all—had shown no sympathy with her in her trouble. How likely that it was this that had made her angry, that kept her from saying a word, from vouchsafing a look! She might think it was he who was deficient, who showed no feeling. What was he to do? The landlady coming up with his breakfast broke in upon this distracting course of thought.

"I didn't know, sir, as you were acquainted with the Colonel's family," the woman said.

"A little," said poor Aubrey. The letters were all lying on the table, giving to a sharp observer a very good clue to the position. Mrs. Gregg had noted the unopened letters returned to him in the Colonel's enclosure at the first glance.

"You didn't ought to have let us talk. Why, we might have been saying, without thinking, some ill of the Colonel or of Miss Bee."

He smiled, though with little heart. "You were once in their service," he said, "do you ever go there now?"

"Oh, yes, now and again," said Mrs. Gregg. "Sarah Langridge, as is in the nursery, is a cousin of mine, and I do go just to see them all now and again."

"Would you venture to take a letter from me to—Miss Kingsward?"

"Sir," said Mrs. Gregg, "is it about the marriage as was broke off? Is it?" she added quickly, as he answered her by nodding his head, "likely to come on again? That's what I want to know."

"If it does not," said Aubrey, "it will not be my fault."

"Then I will and welcome," the landlady said. "It's natural I should want to go the day after the funeral, to see about everything. Give me your letter, sir, and I'll get it put safe into Miss Bee's own hands."

All that he sent was half-a-dozen words of appeal.

"Bee, these have been sent back to me. Was it by your will? I have been here since ever I heard of her illness, longing to be with you, to tell you what I felt for her and you. And you would not speak to me! Bee, dearest, say you did not mean it. Tell me what I am to do.

"A.L."

How long the woman was in getting ready—how long in going! Before she came back it was almost night again of the lingering, endless day. She brought him a little note, not returning the enclosures—that was always something—with a reproach. "Oh, sir, and you very near got me into terrible trouble! I'll never, never carry anything from you again." The note was still shorter than his own:—

"It was not by my will. I have never seen them till now. But please—please let this be the last. We can't meet again. There can never more be anything between us—not from my father's will, but my own. And this for ever—and your own heart will tell you why.

"My own heart will tell me why! My heart tells me nothing—nothing!" poor Aubrey said to himself in the silence of his little room. But there was little use in repeating it to himself, and there was no other ear to hear.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was with a sort of stupified bewilderment that Aubrey read over and over the little letter of Bee's. Letter! To call it a letter. Those straggling lines without any beginning, no name of him to whom they were addressed, nothing even of the most superficial courtesy, nothing that marked the link that had been—unless it were, perhaps, the abruptness, the harshness, which she would have used to no other. This was a kind of painful comfort in its way, when he came to think of it. To nobody but him would she have written so—this was the little gleam of light. And she had retained his letters, though she had forbidden him from sending more. These lights of consolation leaped into his mind with the first reading, but the more he repeated that reading, the darker grew the prospect, and the less comfort they gave him. "Not by my father's will, but my own; and your own heart will tell you why." What did she mean by his own heart? She had begun to write conscience, and then drew her pen through it. Conscience! What had he done? What had he done? The real trouble of his life Bee had forgiven. Her father had stood upon it, and nothing had changed his standing ground so far as the Colonel was concerned; but Bee, who did not understand—how should any girl understand?—had forgiven him, had flung his reproach away and accepted him as he was. How was it that she should thus go back on her decision now? "Not my father's will, but mine. And your conscience will tell you why." Aubrey's conscience reproached him with nothing, with no thought of unfaithfulness to the young and spotless love which had re-created his being. He had never denied the old reproach. But what was it, what was it which she bid him to remember, which would explain the change in her? "Your heart will tell you why"—why his heart? and what was there that could be told him, which could explain this? He walked about his little room all night, shaking the little rickety little house with his tread, asking himself, "What was it, what was it?" and finding no answer anywhere.

When he got up from a troubled morning sleep, these disturbed and unrefreshing slumbers, full of visions which turn the appearance of rest into the most fatiguing of labour, Aubrey formed a resolution, which he said to himself he should perhaps have carried out from the first. He had an advocate who could take charge of his cause without any fear of betrayal, his mother, and to her he would go without delay. Of all things in the world to do, after the reception of Bee's note, giving in was the last thing he could think of. To accept that strange and agitated decision, to allow that there was something in his own heart that would explain it to him, was what he would not and could not do. There was nothing in his own consciousness, in his heart or conscience, as she had said, that could explain it. Nothing! It was not to his credit to accept such a dismissal, even if he had been unaffected by it. He could not let a mystery fall over this, leaving it as one of those things unexplained which tear life in pieces. That would be mere weakness, not the mode of action of a man of sense who had no exposure to face. But if his letters were intercepted—miserable folly!—by the father, a man of the world who ought to have known that such proceedings were an anachronism—and rejected by herself, it was little use that he should continue writing. Against two such methods of silencing him no man could contend. But there was still one other great card to play. He went out and took a last view of the sheltered and flowery dwelling of Kingswarden, as it could be seen among the trees at one part of the road. The windows were open and all the blinds drawn up. The house had come back out of the shadow of death into the every-day composure of living. White curtains fluttered in the wind at the upper windows. The late climbing roses and pretty bunches of clematis seemed again to look in. It was still like summer, though the year was waning, and the sun still shone, notwithstanding all sorrow. Aubrey saw no one, however, but a housemaid, who paused as she passed to put up a window, and looked out for a moment. That was all. He had not the chance of seeing any face that he wished to see. In the village he met the two boys, who recognised him sheepishly with their eyes, and a look from one to another, but were about to shuffle past, Reginald on the heels of Arthur, to escape his notice—when he stopped them, which was a fact they were unprepared for, and had not calculated how to meet. He told them that he was going away, a definite fact upon which they seized eagerly. "Oh, so are we," they said, both together, one of them adding the explanation that there was always something going on at school. "And there's nothing to do here," the other added. "I hope we'll, sometime or other, know each other better," said Aubrey, at which the boys hung their heads. "There is a good deal of shooting down at my little place," he added. He was not above such a mean act; whereupon the two heads raised themselves by one impulse, as if they had been upon wires, and two pairs of eyes shone. "Try if you can do anything for me, and I'll do everything I can for you," this insidious plotter said. The boys shook hands with him with a warmth which they never expected to have felt for any such "spoon," and said to each other that he didn't seem such a bad fellow at bottom—as if they had searched his being through and through. Mr. Leigh met Charlie when on his way to the railway station, but he had no encouragement to say anything to Charlie. They passed each other with a nod, very surly on Charlie's part, whose anger at the sight of him—as if that man had anything to do with *our* trouble—was perhaps not so unnatural. Charlie, too, was going back to Oxford next day, and thankful to be doing so, out of this dreary place, where there was nothing to do.

It was the afternoon of the next day when Aubrey arrived at his mother's house. It was at some distance from his own house, much too far to drive, and only to be got at by cross-country railways, with an interval of an hour or two of waiting at several junctions, facts which he could not help remembering his poor little wife and her companion had congratulated themselves upon in those old, strange days, which had disappeared so entirely, like a tale that is told. He wondered whether she would equally think it an advantage—if she ever was the partner of his home. There seemed to him now something wrong in the thought, a mean sort of petty feeling, unworthy of a fine nature. He wondered if Bee—Bee! How unlikely it was that she would ever consider that question, or know anything further about his house or his ways of living—she who had thrust him away from her at the very moment when her heart ought to have been most soft—when love was most wanted to strengthen and uphold. Not her father's will, but her own. And your own heart will explain it. His own heart! in which there was nothing but truth and devotion to her.

He arrived thus at his mother's house very depressed in spirits. Mrs. Leigh was not the ordinary kind of mother for a young man like Aubrey Leigh. She was not one of those mothers wholly wrapped up in their children, who are so general. She had all along made an attempt at an independent life of her own. When Aubrey married she was still

a comparatively young woman, by no means disposed to sink her identity in him or his household. Mrs. Aubrey Leigh might possess the first place in the family as the queen regnant, but Mrs. Leigh, in her personality a much more important person, had no idea of being swamped, and giving up her natural consequence. She was still a considerable person, though she was not rich, and inhabited only a sort of jointure-house, a "small place" capable of holding very few visitors. Aubrey was her only son, and she was, of course, very fond of him—*of course*, she was very fond of him—but she had no intention of sinking into insignificance or living only in the reflection of Aubrey, still less of his wife.

Hurstleigh, where Mrs. Leigh lived, was near the sea, and near also to the county town, which was a brisk and thriving seaport. It was an old house that had known many fluctuations, an ancient manor house, inhabited once by the Leighs when they were of humbler pretensions than now; then it became a farm-house, then was let to a hunting man, who greatly enlarged the stables; and now it was a jointure-house, the stables veiled by a new wing, the place in that trim order which denotes a careful master, and more particularly mistress; with large lattice windows, heavy mullions, and a terrace with stone balustrades running all the length of the house. Mrs. Leigh generally sat in a room opening upon this terrace, with the windows always open, except in the coldest weather, and there it was that Aubrey made his way, without passing through the house. His mother was sitting at one of her favourite occupations—writing letters. She was one of those women who maintain a large correspondence, chiefly for the reason that it amuses them to receive letters and to feel themselves a centre of lively and varied life; besides that, she was considered a very clever letter writer, which is a temptation to everyone who possesses, or is supposed to possess, that qualification. She rose quickly, with a cry of "Aubrey!" in great surprise.

"You are the last person I expected to see," she said, when she had given him a warm welcome. "I saw the death in the papers, and I supposed, of course, you would be there."

"I have just come from Kingswarden," he said, with a little nod of his head in assent; "and yet I was not there."

"Riddle me no riddles, Aubrey, for I never was good at guessing. You were there and yet you were not there?"

"I am afraid—I am no longer a welcome visitor, mother," he said, with a faint smile.

"What!" Mrs. Leigh's astonishment was so great that it seemed to disturb the afternoon quiet which reigned over the whole domain. "What! Why, Aubrey! It was only the other day I heard of your engagement."

"It is quite true, and yet it has become ancient history, and nobody remembers it any more."

"What do you mean?" she cried. "My dear Aubrey, I do not understand you. I thought you were dangling about after your young lady, and that this was the reason why I heard so little of you; and then I was much startled to see that announcement in the papers. But you said she was always delicate. Well, but what on earth is the meaning of this other change?"

"I told you, mother. For some time I was but half accepted, pending Colonel Kingsward's decision."

"Oh, yes; one knows what that sort of thing means! And then Colonel Kingsward generously consented—to one of the best matches in England—in your condition of life."

"I am not a young duke, mother."

"No, you are not a young duke. I said in your condition of life, and the Kingswards are nothing superior to that, I believe. Well—and then? That was where your last letter left me."

"I am ashamed not to have written, mother; but it wasn't pleasant news—and I always hoped to change their mind."

"Well? I suppose there was some cause for it?" she said, after waiting a long minute or two for his next words.

He got up and walked to the window, which, as has been intimated, was also a door opening and leading out on to the terrace. "May I shut this window?" he said, turning his back on her; and then he added, still keeping that attitude, "it was of course because of that old affair."

"What old affair?"

"You generally understand at half a word, mother; must I go into the whole nauseous business?"

She came up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Miss Lance," she said.

"What else? I haven't had so many scandals in my life that you should stand in any doubt."

"Scandals!" she exclaimed; and again was silent for a moment. "Aubrey, explain it to me a little. How did that business come to their ears?"

"Oh, in the easiest way, the simplest way!" he cried, "The injured woman called on the father of the girl who was going to be given to such a reprobate as me." He laughed loudly and harshly, preserving the most tragic face all the time.

"The injured woman! Good heavens! And was the man such an ass—such an ass——?"

"He is not an ass, mother; he is a model of every virtue. My engagement, if you like to call it so, lasted about a week, and then I was suddenly turned adrift."

"Aubrey, when did all this happen?"

"I suppose about three weeks ago. Pardon me, mother, for not having written, but I had no heart to write. I left them at Cologne, and travelled home by myself, and the first thing I did, of course, was to go and see Colonel Kingsward."

"Well?"

"No, it wasn't well at all. He refused to listen to me. Of course, I got it out from my side as well as I could, but it made no difference. He would not hear me. He would understand no excuse."

"And the ladies?"

"Mrs. Kingsward was too gentle and yielding. She never opposed him, and—"

"Aubrey, the girl whom you loved, and had such faith in—Bee, don't you call her?"

"Bee—stood by me, mother; never hesitated, gave me her hand, and stood by me."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Leigh, with a little sigh of relief, "then that's all right. The father will soon come round—"

"So I should have said yesterday. I left them in that full faith. But since they came back to Kingswarden something has happened. I wrote to her, but I got no answer—I supposed it was her mother's illness—now I have

found that he stops my letters; but something far worse—wait a moment—she, Bee herself, wrote to me yesterday, dismissing me without a word of explanation—declaring she did it by her own will, not her father's—and adding, my conscience would tell me why."

Mrs. Leigh looked her son straight in the face for a full minute. "Aubrey—and does your conscience tell you why?"

"No, mother. I am too bewildered even to be able to think—I have not an idea what she means. She knew all there was to know—without understanding it in the least, it needn't be said—and held fast to her word; and now I know no more what she means than you do. Mother, there's only one thing to be done—you must take it in hand."

"I— take your love affairs in hand!" she said.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT though Mrs. Leigh said this it is by no means certain that she meant it even at the first moment. It is only a very prudent woman who objects to being asked to interfere in a young man's love affairs. Generally the request itself is a compliment, and not less, but perhaps more so, when made to a mother by her son. And Mrs. Leigh, though a sensible and prudent person enough in ordinary affairs, did not attain to the height of virtue above indicated. When she went upstairs to change her gown for dinner, after talking it over and over with Aubrey in every possible point of view, her mind, though she had not yet consented in words, had begun to turn over the best methods of opening the question with the Kingswards, and what it would be wisest in the circumstances to do. That Aubrey should be beaten, that he should have to give up the girl whom he loved, and of whom he gave so exalted a description, seemed the one thing that must not be permitted to be. Mrs. Leigh was very anxious that her son should marry, if it were only to wipe out the episode of that little, silly Amy, who was fonder of her friend than of her husband; and the half ludicrous, half tragic chapter of *that* woman, staying on, resisting all efforts to dislodge her for so long, until she had as she thought acquired rights over the poor young man, who was not strong-minded enough to turn her out of his house. To obliterate these circumstances from the mind of the county altogether, as could only be done by a happy and suitable marriage, Mrs. Leigh would have done much, and, to be sure, her son's happiness was also dear to her. Poor Aubrey! His first adventure into life had not been a happy one, and his descriptions of Bee and all her belongings had been full of a young lover's enthusiasm, not tame and tepid as she had always felt his sentiments towards Amy to be. What would it be best to do if I really undertake this business, she said to herself. Herself replied that it was not a business for her to meddle with, that she would do no good, and many other dissuasions of the conventional kind; but, when her imagination and feelings were once lit up, Mrs. Leigh was not a woman to be smothered in that way. After dinner, without still formally undertaking the mission, she talked with Aubrey of the best ways of carrying it out. If she did interfere, how should she set about it? "Mind, I don't promise anything, but supposing——" Should she write? Should she go? Which thing would it be best to do? If she made up her mind to go, should she write beforehand to warn them? What, on the whole, would it be most appropriate to do?

The method finally decided upon between them—"if I go—but I don't say that I will go—" was that Mrs. Leigh should first, without warning or preparation, endeavour to see Bee, and ascertain whether any new representations had been made to her to change her mind; and then, according to her success or non-success with Bee, decide whether she should ask an interview with her father. Aubrey slept under his mother's roof with greater tranquility and refreshment than he had known for some time, and with something of the vague hope of his childhood that she could set everything right, do away with punishment or procure pleasure, when she took it in hand. It had always been so in the childish days, which seemed to come near him in the sight of the old furniture, the well-known pictures and ornaments and curiosities which Mrs. Leigh had brought with her when she settled in this diminished house. How well he remembered them all!—the old print of the little Samuel on his knees, the attitude of which he used half-consciously to copy when he said his prayers; the little old-fashioned books in blue and brown morocco on the shelves, the china ornaments on the mantel-piece. He smiled at their antiquity now-a-days, but he had thought them very grand and imposing once upon a time.

In the morning Mrs. Leigh coquetted a little, or else saw the whole subject in a colder light. "Don't you think it is possible that I might do more harm than good," she said; "things might settle of themselves if you only give them a little time. Colonel Kingsward would come to his senses, and Miss Bee—"

"Mother," cried Aubrey, pale with alarm, "on the contrary. Do you forget the circumstances? Mrs. Kingsward is dead, there is a large family of little children, and Bee is of the race of the Quixotes. Don't you see what will happen? She will get it into her mind, and everybody will persuade her, that as the eldest daughter she is wanted at home. It will be impressed upon her on all sides, and unless there is a strong influence to counteract it, and at once, Bee is lost to me for ever."

"My dear, don't be so tragical. These dreadful things don't happen in our days."

"You may laugh, mother, but it is no laughing matter to me."

"I don't laugh," she said. "I see the strength of your argument; but, my dear boy, nothing will be so effectual in showing your Bee the happiness that is awaiting her as a little trial of the troubles of a large family on her shoulders. I know what it is."

Aubrey sprang from his seat though it was in the middle of his breakfast. "Mother," he said, "there is one thing that I believe you will never know—and that is, Bee. The burden is exactly what will hold her fast beyond any argument—the sense of duty—the feeling that she is bound to take her mother's place."

What was in Mrs. Leigh's mind was the thought: Ah, that's all very well at first, till she has tried it. But what she said was: "I beg your pardon, Aubrey. Of course, that is a much more elevated feeling. Sit down, my dear, and take your breakfast. It is not my fault that I don't know Bee."

Upon which Aubrey had to beg her pardon and sit down, commiserating her for that deficiency, which was indeed her misfortune and not her fault.

At the end Mrs. Leigh was wound up to take the strongest step possible. She joined her son in London after about a week had elapsed. He chafed at the delay, but allowed that to leave Bee in quiet for a few days after all the storms that had gone over her head was necessary. Mrs. Leigh went down early on a bright October morning to

Kingswarden with much more excitement than she had expected to feel. She was herself inclined to take a lighter view, to laugh at the idea of interrupted letters or parental cruelty, and to believe that poor Bee was worn out, her nerves all wrong, and possibly her temper affected by the irritability which is so apt to accompany unaccustomed grief, and that in a little time she would of herself come round. Seeing, however, that these suggestions only made Aubrey angry, she had given them up, and was in fact more influenced than she cared to show by his emotion and anxiety when she thus sallied forth into the unknown to plead her son's cause. They had ascertained that Colonel Kingsward had returned to his office, so the coast was clear. Only the two girls and the little children were at home. Mrs. Leigh said to herself as she walked to the gate that it was a shame to take the little girl, poor little thing, thus unprotected, with nobody to stand by her. If it were not that it was entirely for her good—nobody that knew Aubrey would deny that he would make the best husband in the world, and surely to have a good house of her own, and a good husband, and distinct place in the world was better than to grow to maturity a harassed woman at the head of her father's house, acting mother to a troop of children who would not obey her, nor even be grateful for her kindness to them. Surely there could not be two opinions as to what it would be best for the girl to do. Yet she felt a little like a wolf going down into the midst of the lambkins when she opened the unguarded gate.

Mrs. Leigh was a clever woman, and a woman of the world. She had a great deal of natural understanding, and a considerable knowledge of life, but she was not unlike in appearance the ordinary British matron, who is not much credited with these qualities. That is to say, she was stout—which is a calamity common with the kind. She had white hair, considerably frizzed on the top of the forehead, as it is becoming to white hair to be, and dark eyes and good complexion. These things were in her favour; still, it is impossible to deny that when Bee and Betty saw coming towards them, following the footman across the lawn, a stout figure, not very tall, nor distinguishable from various ladies in both country and town whom they knew, and with the natural impertinence of youth set down as bores, they had both a strong revolt in their minds against their visitor. "Oh, who is it—who is it?" they said to each other. "Why did James let her in? Why did he let anyone in?"

It was a warm morning, though the season was far advanced, and they were seated again on that bench under the tree where they had watched the white cloud floating away on the night of their mother's death. They went there instinctively whenever they went out. "Mother's tree," they began to call it, and sat as she had been used to do, with the children playing near, and nurse walking up and down with the baby in her arms. They had been talking more that morning than ever before. It was little more than a week since Mrs. Kingsward's funeral, but they were so young that their hearts now and then for a moment burst the bondage of their sorrow, and escaped the length of a smile or two. It was not much; and, to be sure, for the children's sake it was indispensable that they should not be crying and miserable always, as at first they had felt as if they must continually be. But it was another thing to receive visitors and have perhaps to answer questions about the circumstances of their loss.

"Mrs.—? what did James say?" Neither of them were sure, though a thrill ran through Bee's veins. It was a stranger. Who could it be?

"I have to apologise for coming—without knowing you—and at such a time," said Mrs. Leigh, making a little pause till the nurse had got to the end of the gravel walk with the baby, and James was out of hearing. "It is you who are Bee, is it not?" she said, suddenly taking the girl's hands. "I am the mother of Aubrey Leigh."

All the colour went out of Bee's face; she drew away her hands hurriedly, and dropped upon her mother's seat. She felt that she had no power to say a word.

"Oh, I thought it was Mrs. Leigh he said," cried Betty, "but I could not suppose—oh, Mrs. Leigh, whatever Bee may say, I am so glad, so glad to see you—perhaps you will be able to make things right."

"I hope I shall," said Mrs. Leigh, "and I shall always be obliged to you, my dear, for giving me your countenance. But your sister does not look as if she meant to let me put things right."

"I am sorry if I seem rude," said Bee, gathering herself together, "but—I don't think that papa would like us to receive visitors."

"I am not a common visitor," said Mrs. Leigh. "I hope you will do me the credit to think that it is with a very different feeling I come. I am very, very sorry for you, so young as you are—more sorry than I can say. And, Bee, if indeed I am to hope to be one day your mother—"

Bee did not speak; but she fixed her blue eyes upon her visitor with a sort of entreaty to be left alone, and mournfully shook her head.

"We can't think just now of that name," said little Betty, with the tears standing in her eyes.

"My dear children, I came to try to comfort you, not to open your wounds. Dear," she said, putting her hand on Bee's shoulder, "you would not see Aubrey, nor let him have a word from you. But he said you had heard everything an evil woman could say, and did not give him up for that—and he is heart-broken. He thought perhaps you would tell me if he had done anything to displease you—or if it was only the effect of your grief, to which he would be submissive at once. All he wanted was to share your trouble, my dear child."

This was not at all what Mrs. Leigh intended to say. She had meant to represent her visit as one of sympathy solely, without at first referring to the hard case of Aubrey; but Bee's looks had confused even this experienced woman. The girl's pale face put on an expression of determined decision, or rather of that blank of resistance to entering upon the question, which is a kind of defence which it is almost impossible to break down.

"I would rather, if you please, not say anything of Mr. Leigh."

"Dear child! Do not take that tone. If he has done anything that does not please you, how is he ever to clear himself if you will not tell him what it is."

"She is like this all the time," cried Betty; "she will not say what is wrong—and yet she is just as miserable herself as anyone could be."

Bee gave her sister a look in which Mrs. Leigh, closely watching, saw the lightening of the glance, the brilliancy and splendour of the blue eyes of which Aubrey had raved. Poor little Betty was illuminated as if with a great flame. It was all that she could do to restrain a very inappropriate smile. "You know nothing, and how do you dare to say anything?" Bee said.

"I am sure that Bee is just," said the older lady. "She would not condemn anyone unheard. Aubrey Leigh is my son, but we have been separated for many years, and I think I judge him impartially. He does not always please me, and I am sure that at some time or other he has much displeased you. Your eyes tell me, though you have not said a

word. But, my dear, I have never, since he was a child, found him out in anything except the one thing you know, in which he was so sorely, sorely tried. He has always been kind. He gets into trouble by his kindness as other men do by ill-behaviour. I don't know what you have against him, but I feel sure that he will clear himself if you will let him speak. Bee——"

"I do not want," cried Bee, "to seem rude. Oh, I don't want to be rude! I am sure, quite sure, that you are kind; but I have nothing to say, oh! nothing to say to anyone. I am not able to discuss any subject, or enter into things. I have a great deal to think of, for I am the eldest and it will not do for me to—to break down, or to have any more to bear. I am very, very sorry—and you are so kind. But I must go in now—I must go in now."

"Bee, Bee——"

"You can stay, Betty, and talk to the lady. You can stay, but—oh, forgive me—I cannot—cannot help it! I must go in now."

This was the end of Mrs. Leigh's embassy. She had a long talk with Betty, who was but too glad to pour into this kind woman's bosom all her troubles. Betty could not tell what had happened to Bee. She was not the Bee of old, and she did not know what it was that had happened about Aubrey, or if Bee had heard anything against him. She was as much in the dark as Mrs. Leigh herself. But she made it very evident that Bee had a grievance, a real or supposed ground of complaint which made her very angry, and which she resented bitterly. What was it? But this Betty did not know.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. LEIGH went back to her son with a sense of humiliation which was rare in her consciousness. She had been completely unsuccessful, which was a thing which had very rarely happened to her. She had expected if she got admission at all that anything which so young a girl might have on her mind must have burst forth and all have been made clear. She had expected at once to overawe and to soothe a young creature who loved Aubrey, and who had some untold grievance against Aubrey. But she was not prepared for the dual personality, so to speak, of Bee, or the power she had of retreating, herself, and leaving her little sister as her representative to fulfil all necessary civilities without the power of betraying anything that the visitor wanted to know. She went back to town very angry with Bee; turned against her; very little disposed to sympathise with Aubrey, which she had so freely done before. "My dear boy," she said, "you have made a mistake, that's all. The elder sister has a temper like her father. Everybody will tell you that Colonel Kingsward is a sharp-tempered man. But Betty is a little darling. It is she that should have been the mistress of Forest-leigh."

In answer to this, Aubrey simply turned his back upon his mother. He was deeply disappointed, but this speech turned his disappointment into a kind of rage. She had mismanaged the whole matter. That was as clear as daylight, and such a suggestion was an added insult. Betty! a child—a little girl—a nobody. His Bee seemed to tower over her in his imagination, so different, so high above her, another species. It was some minutes before he could trust himself to speak.

"Of course, you think me a fool," said Mrs. Leigh, "and so I am, to tell a young man that there is another in the world equal to the object of his fancy."

"Mother," said Aubrey, in a choked voice, "you mistake the matter altogether. That is not what is in question. What I want to know is, what has been said against me, what new thing she has heard, or in what new light she has been taught to see me. You might as well suggest," he cried, angrily, "that another person might have been better in your place—as in hers."

"If that is all I don't mind allowing it," said Mrs. Leigh, with an aggravation peculiar to mothers. "You might have had some one who would have been, all round, of more use to you as a mother—only it's a little late to think of that. However, without any persiflage, here is one thing evident, that she has some grievance against you, something new, something definite, which she believes you to be conscious of, which she is too proud to discuss—I suppose?" said Mrs. Leigh, looking at him with the look of the too-profoundly experienced, never sure how far human weakness may go.

"Mother!" Aubrey cried. He was as indignant as she was unassured.

"Well, my dear, don't be angry. I am not imagining anything. I only ask whether you are quite sure that there is nothing which might be twisted into a new accusation against you? There might be many incidents, in which you were quite blameless, which an enemy might twist—"

"You need not be melo-dramatic, mother. I have nothing in the world that could be an enemy—so far as I know."

"Oh, as for that, there are people who make up stories out of pure devilry. And I had no intention of being melo-dramatic," said Mrs. Leigh with displeasure. She added, after a moment, "Examine—I don't say your conscience, which probably has nothing to do with it—but what has occurred for the last six months? See if there is anything which admits of a wrong interpretation, which could be, as I say, twisted."

Aubrey paused a moment to attempt to do as she said, but the little episode of the railway station, the poor woman and her babies, he did not think of. If truth must be told, he thought that incident was one of the most creditable things in his life. He felt a little pleased with himself when he thought of it. It was one of those things which to mention might seem like a brag of his own generosity. He felt that it was really one of the few incidents in his life which modesty kept him from telling, one of the things in which the right hand should not know what the left hand did. Had he thought of it that would have been his feeling; but when he was asked suddenly to endeavour to recollect something which might be twisted to his disadvantage, naturally this good deed—a deed of charity if ever one was—did not come into his mind at all. He shook his head. "You know whether I am that kind of man, mother."

"Don't refer it to me, Aubrey—a young man's mother probably is the very last person to know. I know you, my dear, *au fond*. I know a great deal about you; but I know, too, that you have done many things which I never could have supposed you would have done: consult your own recollection. Probably it is something so insignificant that you will have difficulty in recalling it. One can never calculate what trifle may move a young girl's imagination. A grain of sand is enough to put a watch all wrong."

Thus it will be seen that Mrs. Leigh's long experience was after all good for something. She divined the

character of the dreadful obstacle which had come in her son's way and shattered all his hopes. If he had recounted to her that incident which it would have seemed ostentation to him to refer to, probably she would have pierced the *imbroglio* at once—or could she have seen into his life and his memory, she would, no doubt, have put her finger at once on that place. But there they stood, two human creatures in the closest relation to each other that nature can make, anxious to find out between them the key to a puzzle which neither of them could divine, but the secret of which lay certainly between them, could they but find it—and could make out nothing. A word from the son might have set the keen-witted mother, better acquainted than he with the manner in which scandals arise, on the scent. But it never occurred to him to say that word. They looked into each other's faces and made out nothing. Strange veil of individuality which is between two human creatures, as the sea is between two worlds, and more confusing, more impenetrable still than any distance! Aubrey made the most conscientious efforts to lay bare his heart, to discover something that might be twisted, as she said; but he found nothing. His thoughts since he met the Kingswards first had been full of nothing but Bee—his very dreams had been full of her. He wandered vaguely through his own recollections, not knowing what to look for—what was there? There was nothing. His mother sat by, and, notwithstanding her anxiety, could scarcely refrain from smiling at his puzzled, troubled endeavour to find out something against himself. But there was nothing to find out. He shook his head at last, with a sort of appeal to her out of his troubled eyes. He was distressed not to find what he sought. "I know nothing," he said, shaking his head. "One never does anything very good indeed—but not very bad either. I have just been as I always am—not much to brag of—but nothing to be ashamed of, between one man and another."

"The question is between one man and one woman, Aubrey, which is different."

"Then," he cried, with a short laugh, "I defy discovery. There has been nothing in all my thoughts that need have been hidden. You do me grievous wrong, mother, if you can think—even if I had been inclined that way."

"I don't think. I have the most complete faith in you, Aubrey. I say—anything that could be twisted by a malign interpretation?"

He shook his head again. "And who would take the trouble to make a malign interpretation? I assure you, I have no enemy."

"Colonel Kingsward is enemy enough."

"Ah! Colonel Kingsward. I have no reason, however, to think that he would do a dishonourable action."

"What do you call intercepting letters, Aubrey?"

"It is very antiquated and out of date, but I don't know that it need be called dishonourable; and he has a high idea of his authority; but to make a false representation of another man——"

"Aubrey, these distinctions are too fine for me. There is only one thing that I can do. I will now go and interview Colonel Kingsward. If he knows of anything new, he will soon reveal it to me. If he goes only over the old ground, then we may be sure that your *fiancée* has been told something in her own ear—something apart from her father—which she has betrayed to no one. Unless, perhaps, it was got from the mother——"

"Not a word about the mother. She is dead, and she is sacred; and besides she was the last, the very last——"

"You have yourself said she was very weak, Aubrey."

"Weak so far as resisting her husband was concerned, but incapable of an unkind word; incapable of any treachery or falsehood; a creature, both in body and soul, whom you could almost see through."

Mrs. Leigh shook her head a little.

"I know those transparent people," she said. "They are not always so—— But never mind; I am going to interview Colonel Kingsward now."

Colonel Kingsward was very courteous to his visitor. He received her visit of sympathy with polite gratitude, accepting her excuse that so nearly connected as the families had been about to be, she could not be in town without coming to express her great regret and feeling for his family left motherless. Colonel Kingsward was very *digne*. He had the fullest sense of what was expected in his position, and he did not allow any other feeling to come in the way of that. He thanked Mrs. Leigh for her sympathy, and exaggerated his sense of her goodness in coming to express it. It was more, much more, than he had any right to expect. If there was any alleviation to his grief it was in the sense of the great kindness of friends—"and even of strangers," he said, with a grave bow, which seemed to throw Mrs. Leigh indefinitely back into the regions of the unknown. This put her on her mettle at once.

"I do not feel like a stranger," she said. "I have heard so much of your family—every member of it—through my son, Aubrey. I regret greatly that the connection which seemed to be so suitable should hang at all in doubt——"

"It does not hang in doubt," said Colonel Kingsward, "I am sorry if you have got that impression. It is quite broken off—once for all."

"That is a hard thing to say to Aubrey Leigh's mother," she said; "such a stigma should not be put upon a young man lightly."

"I am sorry to discuss such matters with a lady. But I don't know what you call lightly, Mrs. Leigh. I do not believe for a moment that you would give a daughter of your own—I do not know whether you have daughters of your own——"

"Two—happily married, thank heaven, and off my hands."

"You will understand me so much the better. (Colonel Kingsward knew perfectly well all about Mrs. Leigh's two daughters). I do not believe that you would have given one of them to a man—to whom another lady put forth a prior claim."

"I am not at all sure of that. I should have ascertained first what kind of person put forth the claim——"

"We need not go into these details," said Colonel Kingsward, waving his hand.

"It is most important to go into these details. I can give you every particular about this lady, Colonel Kingsward; and so can a dozen people, at least, who have no interest in the matter except to tell the truth."

"The question is closed in my mind, Mrs. Leigh. I have no intention of opening it again."

"And this is the sole ground upon which my son is rejected?" she said, fixing her keen eyes upon his face.

"It is the sole ground; it is quite enough, I believe. Supposing even that the lady was everything you allege, an intimacy between a woman of that character and your son is quite enough to make him unsuitable for my daughter."

"Who is not of your opinion, however," Mrs. Leigh said.

Colonel Kingsward was confused by this speech. He got up and stood before the fire. He avoided meeting her eye. "My daughter is very young and very inexperienced," he said. "She is at present more moved by her feelings than her reason. I believe that with an increase of maturer judgment she will fully adopt my view."

Colonel Kingsward believed that he had altogether crushed his visitor, but he was not so right as he thought. Mrs. Leigh went back to her son with triumph in her eyes. "He knows nothing more," she said. "He does not know that she has turned against you. Whatever is her reason, it is something different from his, and she has not confided it to him. I thought as much when you told me of the letters stopped. A man does not intercept a girl's letters when he knows she has come round to his way of thinking. Now you have got to find out what she has heard, and to set her right about it whatever it may be."

CHAPTER X.

To set oneself to find out without any clue or guidance what it is which has affected the thoughts of a girl for or against her lover—without any knowledge of her surroundings, or from what quarter an adverse influence, an ill report, could have come—who could have spoken to her on the subject of Aubrey, or what kind of story to his disadvantage (for this was what Mrs. Leigh convinced herself must have happened) she had heard—to discover everything and counteract it, was a mission that might well have frightened anyone who undertook it. And I don't doubt that Mrs. Leigh, to encourage her son, spoke a great deal more confidently than she felt, and that she really intended to give herself up to this discovery, and to take no rest until she had made it, and cleared up the matter which threatened to separate these two young people for ever, and make havoc in both their lives.

Aubrey himself shook his head and declared himself to have little hope; but he was not really more hopeless than his mother was the reverse. While he shook his head there was a warm sensation of comfort at his heart. That she should have undertaken to find it out seemed like half the battle. When a man retains any confidence in his mother at all, which is by no means always the case, he is apt to be influenced more than he is aware by the old prejudice of childhood that she can do anything that is wanted. She by no means felt herself to be so powerful as he did, though she professed her certainty of success, and he was much more held up and supported by her supposed convictions than he himself allowed to appear. Thus they separated, Aubrey remaining in town, ready to take advantage of any occasion that might present itself, while she returned to her home, to make every exertion to discover the cause of Bee's estrangement. Very easy words to say—but how to do it? She had not a notion even what kind of story had been told to Bee. She did not know any special point of weakness on the part of Aubrey which could have been exaggerated or made to appear worse than it was. There was no inclination towards dissipation about him; he did not gamble; he was not addicted to bad company. What was there to say about him? The episode of Miss Lance—and that was all. And it was not the episode of Miss Lance which had revolted Bee. Had Mrs. Leigh ever heard of Aubrey's adventure at the railway station, it is possible that her mind, excited in that direction, would have been keen enough to have divined that the mystery was somehow connected with that; for it was certainly Quixotic of a young man to put a poor woman and her children into a sleeping-carriage—the most expensive mode of travelling, and wholly beyond her condition—by a mere charitable and kindly impulse. And the world, which believes that nothing is given without an equivalent, might easily have made a story out of it. But then, Mrs. Leigh was quite ignorant on this point, which, as has been said, had never occurred again to Aubrey himself, except as one of the few actions in his life which he could look back upon with entire satisfaction and even a little complacency. And thus the only way of setting things right was hermetically closed.

Mrs. Leigh went back to her jointure-house. It was near the sea, as has been said, and near a lively seaside town, where, in the summer, there were many visitors and a great deal going on, strangers appearing and disappearing from all parts of the country. But in winter there was nothing of the kind; the world closed up without, leaving only the residents, the people who were indigenious, the contracted society of neighbours who knew all about each other, and were acquainted with the same pieces of news, and, excepting by long intervals, heard but little of the outside gossip, or the doings of other circles. Mrs. Leigh returned to her natural surroundings, which knew no more of Colonel Kingsward and his family than people in what is called "a certain position" know of each other—something of his name, something of his connections, but nothing of his immediate circumstances. There were indeed many questions about Aubrey's marriage which she had to answer as she could. The news of his engagement had been received with many congratulations. Everybody felt that poor Aubrey's first essay at matrimony had been a very unfortunate one. The sooner he brings a nice wife to Forest-leigh the better, everybody had said. And when Mrs. Leigh returned after her brief absence, the many callers whom she received daily were full of inquiries about the marriage. It was generally supposed that his mother's hasty expedition had been in some way connected with it. She had gone about the refurnishing, about the household linen, which perhaps wanted renewing, and which was not in a man's sphere—about something in the settlements; at all events, whatever it was, her object must have been connected with the approaching marriage. They came down upon her full of the most eager questions. "I suppose the day is fixed? I suppose all the arrangements are made? How nice it will be to see the house opened, and a new, lively, young married couple to put a little life in everything"—matrons and little maids all concurred in this speech.

"You have not heard then?" said Mrs. Leigh, with a very grave countenance—"everything, alas, is postponed for the moment. Mrs. Kingsward, a most charming woman, adored by her family, died last week."

"I told you it was those Kingswards!" one of the ladies said to another.

"There are no other Kingswards that I know of," said Mrs. Leigh, who always held her head so high. "I went up with Aubrey to pay them a visit of sympathy. There is a very large young family. I found them quite broken down with grief. Of course we had not the heart, either Aubrey or I, to press an arrangement in these dreadful circumstances. I confess I am rather down about it altogether. Poor little Bee, my future daughter-in-law, is the eldest. I am quite terrified to hear that she has taken some tragic resolution, such as girls are so apt to do now-a-days, and think it her duty to dedicate herself to her little brothers and sisters."

"Oh, but surely she would not be permitted to do that—when everything was settled!"

"I hope not. I most sincerely hope not," said Mrs. Leigh. "Naturally, I have not said a word to Aubrey. But girls now-a-days are so full of their ideas, their missions, and their duty, and all that!"

"Not when they are engaged to be married," said a scoffing lady.

"I wish I could be sure of that. Miss Kingsward is only nineteen, just the self-sacrificing age. I wish I could be sure— There was something in her eye. But, however, not a word, not a word about this. I still hope that as soon as a reasonable time has passed—"

"It is such a pity," said another, "where unnecessary delays are made. I am sure no mother would wish her daughter's marriage to be put off—things are so apt to happen. I think it's tempting Providence when there is unnecessary delay."

"Colonel Kingsward is a very particular man. He will allow nothing to be done that the most punctilious could object to. He will not have anything spoken of even. All the arrangements are in abeyance. It is most trying. Of course, I am very sorry for the family, and for him, who has lost so excellent a wife. But, at the same time, I can't help thinking of my own son kept hanging in suspense, and all his plans broken up."

There was a chorus of regrets from all the visitors, one party after another; but from more than one group of ladies as they drove away there arose the most gloomy auguries, spoken amid much shaking of heads. "I don't believe it will ever come to a marriage after all," some said, "if Colonel Kingsward is so very particular a man, and if he hears of all that took place at Forest-leigh in the first wife's time." "Whatever took place," said another, "it was her fault, as everybody knows." "Ah, yes," said the first speaker, who represented more or less the common voice, "I know the first wife was a little fool, and whatever happened, brought it all on herself. But there is never any business of that sort without blame on both sides." Thus the world generally judges, having half forgotten what the facts of the case were, though most of the individuals who constitute the world could have recalled them very easily with an effort of memory. Still, the blurred general view is the one that prevails after a time, and works out great injustices without any evil intention at all.

It was thus that Mrs. Leigh thought it prudent to forestall all remarks as to the postponement of her son's marriage. She succeeded well enough, perhaps too well. Mrs. Kingsward's death accounted for everything. Still, the impression got abroad that Aubrey Leigh, that unlucky fellow, had somehow broken down again. And as the days went on and silence closed around, further and further did Aubrey's mother find herself from making any discovery. Indeed, she did not try, strong as her resolves to do so had been. For, indeed, she did not know what to do. How was she to clear up such a mystery? Had she known the neighbours about Kingswarden, and heard their talk among themselves, she might have been able to form some plan of action. But her own neighbours, who did not even know of Mrs. Kingsward's death—how could she find out anything from them? She thought it over a great deal, and when any friend of her son's drifted near her expended a great deal of ingenuity in endeavouring to ascertain whether there was anything in Aubrey's life which could have injured him in Bee's estimation. But Mrs. Leigh was perfectly aware, even while cautiously making these inquiries, that whatever his friends might know against him, his mother was the last person who was likely to be told. As a matter of fact, however, there was nothing to tell, and gradually this very fruitless quest died from her mind, and she did not even dream of pursuing it any more.

And Aubrey remained in town disconsolately getting through the winter as best he could, neglecting all his duties of hospitality, keeping his house shut up, and leaving his game to be shot by the gamekeepers—indifferent to everything. He could not bear the place with which he had so many painful associations, sharpened now by the loss of all the hopes that had fallen so quickly of taking Bee to it, and beginning a real life of happiness and usefulness. What he wanted most in life was to fulfil all his duties—in the happiest way in which such duties can be fulfilled, after the methods of an English country gentleman with sufficient, but not too great position, money, and all that accompanies them. He was not an *enragé* foxhunter, or sportsman, but he was quite disposed to follow all the occupations and recreations of country life, to maintain a hospitable house, to take his part of everything that was going on in the county, and above all, to efface the recollection of that first chapter of his life which had not been happy. But all these hopes and intentions seemed to have been killed in him by the cutting off of his new hopes. He kept up his confidence in his mother until he went to her at Christmas to spend with her those days of enforced family life which, when they are not more, are so much less happy than the ordinary course of life. He went down still full of hope, and though Mrs. Leigh received him with professions of unimpaired confidence, he was quick to see that she had in reality done nothing—for that best of all reasons, that there was nothing to do. "You don't seem to have made progress, however," he said, on the first night.

"No, perhaps I have not made much progress. I don't know that I expected to make much progress—at this time of the year. You know in winter one only sees one's neighbours, who know nothing. Later on, when the weather improves, when there is more coming and going, when I have more opportunities—"

This did not sound very cheerful, but it was still less cheerful when he saw how little even his mother's mind was occupied with his affairs. It was not her fault; all the thinking in the world could not make Bee's motives more clear to a woman living at a distance of three or four broad counties from Bee. And one of Aubrey's married sisters was in some family difficulty which occupied all her mother's thoughts. Aubrey did not refuse to be interested in his sister. He was willing to give anything he could, either of sympathy or help, to the solving of her problem; but, conscious of so much in his own fate that was harder than could fall to the lot of any comfortable, middle-aged person, it must be allowed that he got very tired of hearing of Mary's troubles. He answered rather curtly on one or two occasions, and chilled his mother, whose heart was full of Mary, and who was already disposed to blame herself in respect to Aubrey, yet to be irritated by any suspicion of blame from him. On the last morning of his stay he had begged her, if she could abstract her thoughts for a moment from Mary, to think of him. "I don't want to trouble you further, mother. I only want you to tell me if you think my whole business so hopeless that I had better give every expectation up?"

"Think your business hopeless, Aubrey? Oh, no; I don't think that."

"But we know just as much now as we did in October. I do not think we have advanced a step—"

"If you mean to reproach me with my want of success, Aubrey!"

"No—I don't mean to reproach you with anything, mother. But I think it seems just as hopeless as ever—and not a step nearer."

"Things cannot be done in a moment," she said, hurriedly. "I never expected—When the summer comes round, when one sees more people, when one can really pursue one's inquiries—." Mrs. Leigh was very conscious that she had pursued few inquiries, and the thought made her angry. "Rome," she added, "was not built in a day."

Aubrey Leigh said no more—but he went back to London feeling that he was a beaten man, and the battle once more lost.

CHAPTER XI.

THERE IS nothing more curious in life than the way in which it closes over those great incidents that shape its course. Like a stone disappearing in a pool, the slow circles of commotion widen and melt away, the missile sinks into the depths of the water, and tranquility comes back to its surface. Every ripple is gone, and yet the stone is always there.

This curious calm came into the life of Bee Kingsward after the incidents related above. The man with whom she had expected to share everything disappeared from her existence as if he had never entered into it, and a dead peace fell over her, and all things around her. It was at once better for Bee and worse that the mourning for her mother swept her away out of all the coming and going of ordinary life for a time—better because she was saved the torment of a perpetual struggle with her trouble, and worse because it shut her up to a perpetual recollection of that trouble. The Kingsward family remained at Kingswarden for the whole of that winter and spring. When the season began there was some question of removing to town, which Bee opposed strongly. "I have no wish to go out," she said. "I could not, papa, so soon— And we have no one to take us."

"You will find plenty of people ready to take you," he said.

And then Bee took refuge in tears. "Nobody—that we could endure to go with—so soon, so soon!—not yet a year," she said. Betty followed her sister dubiously. It was natural that she should always echo what Bee said, but this time she was not quite so sure as usual. Not to balls? Oh, not to balls! was Betty's secret comment, but—Betty felt that to speak occasionally to some one who was not of her own family—not the Rector or the Rector's wife, the Curate or the Doctor—would be an advantage; but she did not utter that sentiment. After all, what was one season to the measureless horizon of eighteen? Bee renounced her season eagerly, and uttered exclamations of content when Colonel Kingsward announced that, in those circumstances, he had let their house in town. But I am not sure that she was so completely satisfied as she professed to be. She had dismissed Aubrey "for ever"—and yet, when the deed was done, a longing seized her sometimes to hear his name, that someone should speak of him in her presence, that she should hear accidentally where he was, and what he was doing. She had imagined little scenes to herself in which she had heard strangers saying to each other that Aubrey Leigh had soon got over his disappointment, that he was going to be married to So-and-So; or that he was going to make the tour of the world, or to shoot big game in Africa; or, anything in short, so long as it was about him. Even when she had been so determined against going out, there had been a hope in her mind that somehow, she did not know how, some news of him and what he was doing might be wafted her way accidentally. She did not want, she said to herself passionately, ever to hear his name again! Yet she had calculated on hearing as much as that, hearing quite accidentally, at the Royal Academy, perhaps, or somewhere where she might happen to be calling, that he was going to the ends of the earth, or that he was going to be married—things which the speakers might suppose were not of the slightest interest to her. She said all the same that she was delighted when Colonel Kingsward informed them that he had let the house in town—very glad! before it had time to get shabby, the poor old house; yet, when she retired to her room for the night, Bee cried, shedding many salt tears.

But nothing of this was apparent in her life. The circles had all melted away from the still bosom of the pool. The household resumed its former regularity, quickened a little, perhaps, by the energetic sweeping of the new broom. Mrs. Kingsward had been an easy mistress about many trifles, which Bee, new to authority, and more enterprising than her mother, exacted a rigid account of. At the beginning she set all the servants by the ears, each of them being anxious to show that their own conscientiousness was perfect, and their desire to consider their master's interests; but, by degrees, matters settled down with an increased strictness of order. "As mamma would have wished it," Bee said; and she herself changed in a way that would be almost miraculous were it not a transformation commonly visible from time to time, from a light-hearted girl, full of little amusing misdemeanours and mistakes, into that sweet serious figure of the eldest daughter, the mother-sister, so often visible in England when the mistress of the household has been removed in early life. There is no more beautiful or more tender vision; it is fine at all ages, but in the first bloom of youth it has a pathetic grace which goes to the heart. Bee underwent this change quite suddenly, after a period of trouble and agitation and over activity. It might not perhaps have come but for the letting for the season of the town house, which seemed to make so complete a severance between her and the ordinary current of life.

It was perhaps this that opened what might almost be called a new relationship between Bee and her brother Charlie, who was the nearest to her in the family, though there had not been hitherto an unusual sympathy between them. For one thing, Betty feeling herself a little forlorn in the country with all the echoes of London, which occasionally came to her ears, had been permitted to accept an invitation to Portman Square to visit a quiet elderly family, not likely to lead her into any dissipation out of keeping with her black frock, and Bee was virtually alone with the children, to whom she gave herself up with a devotion which was the very quintessence of motherhood. Colonel Kingsward also was in town—a man cannot shut himself up (this was what he said) whatever his private griefs may be. He must keep a calm face before the world, he must not allow himself to be hustled out of the way. For this reason, he remained in London, living in chambers, to which he had an official right, in the dingy official grandeur of Pall Mall, and coming to Kingswarden only now and then from Saturday to Monday. This sundered Bee still more completely from the world. And when Charlie came back from Oxford she was more eager to meet him, more pleased with his company than ever before. This was not perhaps entirely the young man's mind. That he should choose to shut himself up in the country in June was perhaps scarcely to be expected. According to the curious rule which prevails in England he "did not mind" the country in January. But in June! However, it was soon apparent that there were other things than the season in Charlie's mind. He began a series of lamentations to Bee upon the situation of the family and things in general, by the usual complaint of a young man in the country of having "nothing to do."

"A man cannot sit at home and dot up the accounts like you," he said, "though I don't say but that it's hard upon you, too. Still, women like to tie up children's sashes and that sort of thing, and calculate how much their boots cost in a year. I say, mother can't have had half such an easy life as we all thought."

"I never thought she had an easy life," said Bee, which was perhaps not exactly true, but the things that Bee had

thought a year ago were so unlike the things she thought now that she did not believe life had ever appeared to her in a different light.

"Well," said Charlie, "she had a way of making it appear so. Do you remember that last time at the Baths? What a little thing you seemed then, Bee, and now here I am talking to you quite seriously, as if you were mother. Look here, I want you to speak to the governor for me. I am doing no good here. In fact, there's nothing to do—unless I am to drop into drinking and that sort of thing in the village."

"Charlie!"

"Well," he said, "I can't sit and sew strings on pinafores like you. A man must do something at my age."

"And what should you do at Oxford? And why do you want to go there when everybody is away?"

"Everybody away! That is all you know. The dons are away, if that is what you mean. There are no lectures going on. But lectures are a mere loss of time. There are lots of fellows up there reading. If you want to read hard, now is the best time."

"How curious," said Bee, in genuine surprise, "when all the people who teach are away! And I never knew that you wanted to read hard."

"No. I never was made to think that I ought to," said Charlie, with rising colour. "In this house nobody thinks of anything more than just getting through."

Bee was a little angry as well as surprised by this censure upon the family. She said, "The rest of us may not be clever—but everybody says there are few men that know as much as papa."

"Oh, in his special subjects, I suppose, but I am not going in for the army, Bee," said Charlie, the colour rising higher on his young face, which was still an ingenuous face, though not of a very high order. "It is such a wonderful thing to have your duty set before you, and how you ought to make the best of your life. I, for one, never thought of it before. I was always quite satisfied to get through and to have plenty of time to amuse myself; but if you come to think of it that's a very poor sort of ideal for a life."

Bee looked up at Charlie with more and more surprise. He was pulling his young moustache nervously, and there was a great deal of emotion in his face. It seemed amazing to his sister that Charlie—Charlie who had always been on the unemotional side, should take this heroic tone, or do anything but laugh at the suggestion of an ideal in life. She gazed at him in some bewilderment. "What are you going to read?" she asked, with doubt and wonder in her voice.

"It is just like a girl to ask a man what he is going to read! Why, everything. I just pushed through my mods., you know—a pass—which it covers me with shame to think of now. I must do something better than that. I don't know that I'm very good at anything, but work, after all, steady work, is the great thing; and if work can do it—!" cried Charley, breaking off, a little breathless, with a strange light in his eyes.

"You almost frighten me, Charlie. You were never meant for honours or a high degree, were you? Papa said you need not go in for honours, it would lose time; and you thought so, too."

"I have changed my mind," said Charlie, nervously. "I thought, like other asses, that in diplomacy you don't want much; but now I think differently. How are you to understand how to conduct national affairs and all that, and reconcile conflicting claims, and so forth, and settle the real business of the world—"

"But Charlie, I thought it was languages, and great politeness, and—and even dancing, and that sort of thing, that was wanted in an attaché—"

"Attachés," said the young man, with a gravity which, serious as she also was, almost made Bee laugh, "are the material out of which ambassadors are made. Of course, it takes time—"

Here Bee burst, without meaning it, into a nervous laugh.

"You are so dreadfully serious about it," she cried.

"And what should a man be serious about, if not that?" the young man replied.

Here for the moment, in great impatience on his part, and in the call of some little household necessity on hers, the conversation closed; but it was resumed as soon as the brother and sister were together again. The big boys were still at school, the little ones engaged with their lessons, and baby walking up and down in his nurse's arms, did not interrupt the talk which went on between the elders of the family. And there is nothing with which it is so easy to indoctrinate a girl than enthusiasm about an ideal, whatever that may be, or sympathy in a lofty view of duty such as this, which had dawned, it seemed, upon her brother. Bee took fire, as was so natural. She said to herself, that in the utter downfall of her own life, it would be a fine thing to be able to further his, and kept to the idea of Charlie as ambassador, settling all sorts of difficulties and deciding the fortunes of the world for war or for peace, as easily as if the question had been one of leading a cotillion. How splendid it would be! She thought of herself as an old lady, white-haired, in a cap and shawl—for, in an imagination of twenty, there are few gradations between youth and that pathetic, yet satisfactory ultimate period—seated in a particular corner of a magnificent room at the Embassy, looking on at her brother's triumph. These sort of reflected successes were the only ones she thought that would ever come to Bee.

CHAPTER XII.

"CHARLIE wishes to go up to Oxford to read. Why does he wish to go up to Oxford to read? And what reading is it necessary to do there?"

"He says, papa, that it is easier to get on when you have all your books about you—and when you can arrange all your way of living for that, instead of the interruptions at home."

"Oh, there are too many interruptions at home? I should have thought you were quiet enough here. I hope you have not thrown yourself into lawn tennis parties, and tea parties, and that sort of thing—so soon, Bee."

Her father looked at her with a seriously reproachful air. He had begun to dine out pretty freely, though only in serious houses, and where, he explained, it would be prejudicial to him in his profession not to appear.

The undeserved reproach brought quick tears to Bee's eyes. "I have thrown myself into no parties," she said,

hastily. "Nobody has been here. What Charlie means is the meal times, and hours for everything, and all the children about. I have often heard you say that you couldn't work when the children were playing about."

"My work and Charlie's are rather different," Colonel Kingsward said, with a smile.

"Well, papa! but to read for a good degree, so that you may distinguish yourself, must want a great deal of application—"

"Oh, he wants a good degree, does he? He should have thought of it a little earlier. And what use will that be to him in the Foreign Office? Let him learn French and German—that's what he has got to do."

"But even for French and German," said Bee. "German is dreadfully difficult, and Charlie does not pick up a language easily; and, besides," she added, "he has nobody to teach him at home—"

"And who would he have at Oxford? Why, in the Long, even the shopkeepers go away!"

"But that is just the time for good, hard reading," said Bee, acting on her instructions, "when there are no lectures or anything formal to interrupt you."

"He means, I suppose, when he can do whatever he likes, and there are no proctors nor gate bills to keep him right."

"Papa," said Bee, earnestly, "I don't think that is at all what Charlie means. I am sure that he has a real desire to get on. He says that he feels he has been wasting his time, and—and not—not responding properly to all you have done for him. He wants to make himself fit for anything that may happen. If you will think, papa," she added, with the deepest gravity, "what a great deal of study and reading an ambassador must require—"

"An ambassador!" Colonel Kingsward was not given to laughter, but he laughed now. "He may think himself fortunate if he is anything but an unpaid attaché for the next ten years—which is an office which does not require a great deal of study."

"But, papa—"

"Nonsense, Bee. He wants, I suppose, complete freedom, and to amuse himself as he pleases, with no control. I know what it means to stay up at Oxford to read during the Long. Oh, yes. I don't doubt men who know how to grind, grind, but Charlie is not one of them. Let him stay at home. You are a great deal sharper than he is at languages; you can help him with his German as well as anyone."

"Oh," cried Bee, from the bottom of her heart, "not with German, not with German, papa!"

And there came over her a sudden vision of the gardens at the Baths, the murmur of talk in the air, the German officers with their spurs, and one Englishman coming forward among them, an Englishman without spurs, without uniform, so much more distinguished, it had been Bee's pride to think, in his simplicity, than all these bedizened warriors—and now! A gush of hot tears came to her eyes. There was reason enough for them without Aubrey Leigh, and Colonel Kingsward, whose heart was still tender to every recollection of his wife, did not think of the other memory that thrilled poor Bee's heart. He walked up and down through the room for a moment saying nothing, and then he paused by her side and put his hand with an unusual caress upon his daughter's bowed head.

"You are right, you are right," he said. "I could not ask that of you, Bee."

Oh! if I had but known! Bee felt not only miserable, but guilty, when her father's touch came upon her hair. To think how little the dear mother's presence told in that picture, and how much, how much! that of the man—who had been vulgarly untrue to her, a man without sense of purity or honour! One whose name she never desired to hear again. She could hardly accept the imputation of so much higher and nobler feeling which her father's touch conveyed. The dear mother! who never condemned, who was always kind. She was moved to cry out in self-abasement, "It was not mamma I was thinking of, it was him! him!" But she did not do this. She raised her head and took up her work again with a trembling hand.

"I suppose," said Colonel Kingsward, as anxious as his daughter was to get away from a subject which was too moving for discussion, "that Charlie finds Kingswarden dull. It is not unnatural at his age, and I shall not object if he wishes to come to town for a week or so. His own good feeling, I hope, would keep him from anything unbecoming in the circumstances. But I must hear no more of this going to Oxford. It is quite out of the question. If he had shown any desire to go in for honours at the right time—. But now it is worse than folly. He must get through as quickly as he can, and take advantage of his nomination at once. Who can tell how soon it may be of no value? The Foreign Office may be thrown open, like all the rest, to every costermonger in the country, in a year or two, for anything one knows."

Charlie received this conclusion with disappointment, rapidly turning into rage and rebellion. "I should have thought the most old-fashioned old fogey in the world would have known better," he cried. "What, prevent a man from reading when he is at the University! Did you ever hear of such a thing, Bee? Why, even a military man, though they are the most obstinate in the world, must know that to be really educated is everything in these days. A week in town! What do I care for a week in town? It is exactly like the man in the Bible who, being asked for bread, gave a stone."

Bee was greatly impressed by her brother's anxiety to continue his studies. It filled her with a respect and admiration which up to this time she had never entertained for Charlie, and occupied her mind much with the question how, if her father were obdurate, he might be aided at home in those studies. She remembered suddenly that Mr. Burton's curate had been spoken of as a great scholar when he came first to the parish. He had taken tremendous honours she had heard. And why might not he be secured as an aid to Charlie in his most laudable ambition? She thought this over a great deal as she moved about her household duties. Bee as a housekeeper was much more anxious than her mother had been for many years. She thought that everything that was done required her personal attention. She had prolonged interviews every morning with the cook, who had been more or less the housekeeper for a long time, and who (with a secret sense of humour) perplexed Bee with technicalities which she would not allow that she did not understand. The girl ordered everything minutely for dinner and lunch and breakfast, and decided what was to be for the nursery as if she knew all about it, and reproved cook gravely when she found that certain alterations had been made in the menu when those meals were served. "I assure you as that is what you ordered, miss," cook said, with a twinkle in her eye. All this Bee did, not only because of her strong determination to do her duty, but also because preoccupation with all these details was her great salvation from thoughts which, do what she would, claimed her attention more than nursery puddings and the entrées that pleased papa. But while she pursued these labours there was still time for other thoughts, and she occupied herself very

much with this question about Charlie. Why could not Mr. Delaine come to read with him? Mr. Delaine had shown an inclination to flirt with Betty, but Betty was now absent, so that no harm could be done in that direction. She thought it all out during the somewhat gloomy days which Colonel Kingsward spent with his family in the country. It rained all the Sunday, which is a doleful addition to the usual heaviness of a day in which all usual occupations are put away. Colonel Kingsward himself wrote letters, and was very fully occupied on Sunday afternoon, after the Church parade on Sunday morning, which was as vigorously maintained as if the lessening rows of little ones all marshalled for morning service had been a regiment—but he did not like to see Bee doing anything but “reading a book” on Sunday. And it had always been a rule in that well-ordered house that the toys should be put away on Saturday evening, so that the day hung rather heavily, especially when it rained, on the young ones’ heads. Colonel Kingsward did not mean to be a gloomy visitor. He was always kind to his children, and willing to be interested in what they did and said; but, as a matter of fact, those three days were the longest and the most severe of any that passed over the widowed and motherless house. When Bee came downstairs from the Sunday lesson, which she gave in the nursery, she found her brother at the writing-table in the drawing-room, composing what seemed a very long letter. His pen was hurrying over the page; he was at the fourth side of a sheet of large paper—and opened out on the table before him were several sheets of a very long, closely-written letter, to which he was evidently replying. When Bee appeared, Charlie snatched up this letter, and hastily folding it, thrust it into its envelope, which he placed in his breast pocket. He put the blotting paper hastily over the letter which he was himself writing, and the colour mounted to his very forehead as he turned half round. It was not any colour of guilt, but a glow of mingled enthusiasm and shamefacedness, beautiful upon the face of a youth. Bee was too young herself to admire and appreciate this flush of early feeling, but she was so far sympathetic in her own experience, that she divined something at least of what it meant.

“Oh, Charlie!” she said, “you are writing to someone——”

“Most assuredly, I am writing to someone,” he said, with the half pride, half shame of a young lover.

“Who is she?” cried Bee. “Oh, Charlie, tell me! Oh, tell me! Do I know who it is?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “what you are making such a fuss about. I am writing to—a friend.” He paused a moment, and then said with fervour—“the best friend that ever man had.”

“A friend,” cried Bee, a little disappointed. “But isn’t it a lady?” she asked.

“I hope,” he said, with a haughty air, “that you are not one of those limited people that think there can be no friendship between a man and a woman, for if that’s so I’ve got nothing to say.”

Bee was scarcely philosophical enough to take up this challenge. She looked at him, bewildered, for a moment, and then said, “Oh, tell me about her, Charlie! It would do me good—it would, indeed, to hear about somebody whom there could not be any objection to, who would be, perhaps, happier than me,” cried poor little Bee, the tears coming to her eyes.

“Happier than you? And why shouldn’t you be happy?” said the elder brother. He made an effort to turn away in dignified silence, but the effort was too much for the young man, longing to talk of the new thing in his life. “There is no comparison at all between a little thing like you and—and the lady I was writing to,” he said, holding his head high. “If you think it is any sort of nonsense you are very much mistaken. Why, she—she is as much above me as heaven is from earth. That she should take the trouble to show any interest in me at all, just proves what an angel she is. I, an idle, ordinary sort of fellow, and she!—the sort of woman that one dreams of. Bee, you can’t think what she has done for me already,” Charlie cried, forgetting his first defiance. “I’m another fellow ever since she began to take notice of me.”

Bee stole to her brother’s side and gave him a sympathetic stroke upon his shoulder. “Oh! Charlie! what is her name?”

“You wouldn’t know her name if I were to tell you,” he said. And then, after a moment’s hesitation: “Her name,” he went on, “her real name as I call it, is Laura, like Petrarch’s Laura, don’t you know, Bee? But I don’t suppose you do know.”

“Yes, indeed, I do,” said Bee, eagerly. She added in her turn, “I shouldn’t have thought you would know anything like that.”

“No; I’m not up to it,” said Charlie, with unexpected humility; “but I read it all up as soon as she said it. Don’t you think it’s a beautiful name?”

“Yes,” said Bee, yet not with enthusiasm. “But, oh!” she added, “I hope she is not married, Charlie; for that would not be nice at all.”

“Married!” cried Charlie. “I wish you were not such a horrid little—Philistine. But she is not married, if that is any satisfaction to you.”

“And is she—beautiful, Charlie? and are you very, very fond of her? Oh, Charlie!” Bee clasped his arm in both her hands and sobbed. It made her feel wretched, yet filled her with a delicious tender sense of fellow-feeling. If he would only tell her all! It would be hard upon her, and yet it would be a sort of heavenly pang to hear another, and, oh! surely, this time, a happy love tale. Bee sat down close by him, and clasped his arm, and sometimes leaned her head upon it in the warmth of her tenderness and sympathy. And Charlie was persuaded, by degrees, to speak. But his tale was not like Bee’s. It was a tale of a lady who had stooped as from her throne to the young fellow of no account—the ordinary young man, who could not understand how she had come to think of him at all. It was she who had inspired him with his new ambition, who had made him so anxious to distinguish himself, to make something of his life. She had taken the trouble to write to him, to keep him up to it since he had come “down.” She had promised to let him come to see her when he came “up” again, to inspire him and encourage him. “One look at her is better than a dozen coaches,” Charlie cried, in the fervour of his heart.

“Do you mean that you are going to see her—in town?” asked Bee, doubtfully.

“In town? No. She detests town. It’s all so vain and so hollow, and such a rush. She came to live in Oxford at the beginning of last term,” Charlie said.

“Oh,” said Bee, and she found no more to say. She did not herself understand how it was that a little chill came upon her great sympathy with Charlie and this unknown lady of his—friendship, if not love.

CHAPTER XIII.

COLONEL KINGSWARD, however, could not be moved either by Bee's representations or by anything said by his son to grant to Charlie the permission, and the funds necessary, to pursue his studies in Oxford by going "up" to read "in the Long." It was indeed very little that Charlie said to his father on the subject. He responded somewhat sullenly to the Colonel's questions.

"So I hear you want to go back to Oxford to read?"

"Yes," said the young man.

"You have generally found before this that by the end of the term you had had too much reading."

No reply.

"I suppose you want to be free of supervision and do exactly what you please. And you find it dull at home?"

"I have never said so," said Charlie.

"You ought to feel that in the circumstances it was appropriate that it should be dull. Good heavens! Were you contemplating amusing yourself, rioting with your comrades, when your poor mother—"

"I have never thought of rioting with comrades," said Charlie, with averted head.

"One knows what that means—going up to read in the Long: boats and billiards and hotels, bands of young men in flannels lounging about, and every decorum thrown to the winds."

The Colonel looked severely at his son, who stood before him turning over the pages of a book in his hand, with lowering brows and closed mouth.

"You think I don't know," he said, sharply; "but you are mistaken. What would have been best for you would have been the discipline of a regiment. I always thought so, but at least I'm not going to permit every decent bond to be broken through."

"I think, sir," said Charlie, "that it's enough to say 'No,' without accusing me of things I never thought of."

"I am the best judge of what is enough," said the angry father. "If you want a week or so in town, I don't object; but Oxford in the Long—No. I only hope," he added severely, "that there's no woman in the case."

Charlie's countenance flushed crimson. He gave his father a furious glance. "If that's all," he said, "I may now go, perhaps?"

"Yes, go," said the Colonel, angrily. He was himself sorry for that last insinuation as soon as his son had left the room. His angry suspiciousness had carried him too far. Not that he blamed himself for the suspicion, but he was aware that to speak of it was a false step and could do no good. If there was a woman in the case, that flying dart would not move the young man to penitence or turn him from any dangerous way. Colonel Kingsward, however, quickly forgave himself for this inadvertence, and reflected with satisfaction that, at least, he had prevented the young fool from making an ass of himself for this summer. And in such cases absence is the best remedy and hinders much mischief. Charlie rejected with indignation the week in town which his father offered. "A week in town!" he said to Bee, contemptuously, "to waste my time and debase all my ideas! What does he think I want with a week in town? That's the way a fellow's father encourages him to do the best he can. Cuts off all inspiration, and throws one on the dregs of life! It's enough to make a man kick over the traces altogether."

"But, Charlie," said Bee, with timidity, "don't you think it's very, very quiet here. We have nothing to disturb us. If you were to try to do your work at home?—you would have the library to sit in all the week while papa is in town."

"Out of reach of books, out of reach of any coach—it's like telling a mason to build a wall without any stone."

"The library is full of books," said Bee, with a little indignation.

"What kind of books? Military books, and travels, and things for reference—old peerages, and so forth—and some of the heavy old reviews, and a few novels. Much good a man who is going in for real reading would get out of those!"

"But you have your own books—all those that you carry about with you, Charlie."

"Oh!" he said, with impatience, "What are they? Horrible cribs and things, that I promised not to use any more."

"Does Laura," said Bee, with a little awe, "say you are not to use cribs?"

"And as for the quiet," said Charlie, continuing his strain of complaint, "if you call that quiet! When you never know that next moment there may not be a rush down the nursery stairs like wild horses let loose, and shrieks all over the house for Bee or for nurse, sending every idea out of a man's head; or else baby screaming fit to bring down the house. You know nothing about it, to be sure; it is like talking to the wind to talk to a little thing like you. A man can't work unless he's in the right place for working. If any difficulty arises in a passage, for instance, what do you think I am to do here?"

"Do you go to— Laura, when there is a difficulty about a passage, Charlie?"

"No, you little fool!" With a flush of anger and shame he begged her pardon next minute. "But it is so hard to explain things to you, Bee. You are so ignorant—naturally, for, of course, you never were taught anything. Don't you know that Oxford is full of coaches?" he said.

"That was just what I was thinking of, Charlie—if you will not be angry, but let me speak."

"Speak away," he said. This was on Monday, after Colonel Kingsward had left. The days which he spent at Kingswarden were the heaviest, as has been said, to the young party; nevertheless when he went away the blank of that long world of a week, without any communication to speak of from without, closed down alarmingly upon the elders of the family. Even when papa was cross, when he was dissatisfied with his dinner or found fault with the noise of the children, it was more or less an event. But when he departed there was a sense of being cut off from all events, separated from the world altogether, shut out from the news and the hum of society, which was very blank and deadening. Bee and Charlie dined alone, and it was dreary; they spent the evening together, or else—one in the library, one in the garden, where the beauty of the summer evening was terrible to the one poor little girl with her recollections, incapable of shutting them out in that utter stillness, and trying very ineffectually not to be unhappy. When Charlie threw open the window of the library and strolled forth to join her, as he generally did, it was a little better. Bee had just done very conscientiously all her duties in the nursery—had heard the children say their prayers, in which they still, with a little pause of awe, prayed God to bless dear mother—and had made all the valorous little

efforts she could to keep down the climbing sorrow. When she heard the sound of the library window she quickly dried her eyes and contrived to smile. And she was a very good listener. She suffered Charlie to talk about himself as much as he pleased, and was interested in all he said. She made those little allusions to Laura which pleased him, though he generally answered with a scornful word, as who should say that "a little thing like you" was incapable of comprehending that lady. But this was the sole diversion of these young people in the evening. People called in the afternoon, and there was occasionally a game of tennis. But in the evening they were almost invariably alone.

They were strolling about the garden on this occasion when the young man bewailed himself. Bee, though she made those allusions to Laura, had never got over that little chill in respect to her which had arisen in the most capricious, causeless way when she knew that Laura lived in Oxford. Nothing could be more unreasonable, but yet it was so. It suggested something fictitious in her brother's eagerness to get back, and in his supposed devotion to his work. Had his Egeria been anywhere else Bee would not have felt this; but she did feel it, though she could not tell why. She was very anxious to please him, to content him, if possible, with his present life, to make her sympathy sweet to him, seeing that he had nobody but herself to console him, and must be separated from Laura until October. Poor Charlie! It was hard indeed that this should be the case, that he should have so dull a home and no companion but his sister. But it could not be helped; his sister, at least, must do what she could.

"You must not be angry," said Bee, very humbly. "It is only an idea that has come into my head—there may be nothing at all in it—but don't please shut me up as you do sometimes—hear me out. Charlie! there is Mr. Delaine."

"Mister—what?" said Charlie, which indeed did not show a very complaisant frame of mind—but a curate in the country is of less importance in the horizon of the son of a house who is at Oxford than he is in that of the daughter at home.

"Mr. Delaine," repeated Bee. "You don't remember him, perhaps, at all. He is the curate. When he came first he was said to be a great scholar. He took a first class. You need not say, pooh! Everybody said so, and it is quite true."

"A first in theology, I suppose," said Charlie, disdainfully.

"No, not that—that's not what people call a first. Mr. Burton, I have always heard, is a good scholar himself, and he said a first; of course you know better than I do what that means."

"Well," said Charlie, "and supposing for the sake of argument that he took a first—what then?"

"Why, Charlie dear! He is an Oxford man too; he must know all the things you want to know—difficult passages and all that. Don't you think, perhaps——"

"Oh, a coach!" cried Charlie. Then he paused, and with withering satire, added "No doubt, for little boys—your curate might do very well, Bee."

"He is not my curate," said Bee, with indignation; "but I have always heard he was a great scholar. I thought that was what you wanted."

"It is not to be expected," said her brother, loftily, "that you should know what I want. It is not a coach that is everything. If that were all, there need be no such things as universities. What a man needs is the whole machinery, the ways of thinking, the arrangements, the very atmosphere."

He strolled along the walk with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up to his ears.

"I do not think it is possible," he added, turning to her with a softened tone, "that I could make you understand; for it is so different from anything you have ever known."

"I hope I am not so dreadfully stupid!" said Bee, incensed. "If Laura understands, why should it be so impossible for me?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake talk of things you can know something about; as if there was any comparison between her and you."

"I think you are very uncivil," said Bee, ready to weep. "I may not be clever, but yet I am your sister, and it is only because I wanted to help you that I took the trouble to speak at all."

"You are very well meaning, Bee, I am sure," said Charlie, with condescension; "I do full justice to your good intentions. Another fellow might think you wanted to have Delaine here for yourself."

"Me!" cried Bee, with a wild pang of injured feeling and a sense of the injustice, and inappropriateness, the cruel wrong of such a suggestion. And that Charlie could speak like that—who knew everything! It was almost more than she could bear.

"But I don't say that," he went on in his lofty tones. "I know you mean well. It is only that you don't—that you can't understand." How should she? he said to himself with amusing superiority, and a nod of his head as if agreeing to the impossibility. Bee resented the tone, the assumption, the comparison that was implied in every word.

"I wonder," she cried, "if you ever tell Laura that she doesn't and can't understand?"

He stopped short opposite to her, and grasped her arm. "Bee," he said almost solemnly, "Don't! If you knew her you would know what folly it is and presumption to compare yourself for one moment!—and do me the favour not to profane that name, as if it were only a girl's name like your own."

"Is she a princess, then?" cried Bee, "or an angel? Or what is she?"

"She is both, I think," said Charlie, in a voice full of awe, "at least to me. I wish you wouldn't talk of her in that way. I am sorry I ever told you her name. And please just let my affairs alone. You haven't been able to do anything for me with my father, which is the only thing you might have done—and I don't want to discuss other things with you. So please just let my concerns alone from this day."

"It was not I that ever wished to interfere!" cried Bee, with great mortification and resentment, and after a few minutes' silent walk together in much gloom and stateliness the brother and sister bade each other an offended and angry good-night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THIS made, however, but a very temporary breach between Bee and her brother. They were a little stiff next morning at breakfast, and elaborately refrained from talking on any but the most trivial things, but by noon this reserve had

broken down, and in the evening, though Bee proudly refrained from any reference to Laura, they were as confidential as ever. Bee's mind had passed through various vicissitudes in respect to the object of Charlie's adoration. Her first overwhelming interest had given way to a little doubt, and this was naturally strengthened by the overweening estimate of the unknown which Charlie thrust upon her. A girl is very willing to admire at second-hand her brother's love, but when she is told that it is presumption to compare herself with that divinity, her sympathy is strained too far. Bee began to have an uneasy feeling about this unknown Laura. It was one thing to stimulate Charlie to work, to stir up all that was best in him, to urge him to distinguish himself, for Charlie's sake or for their joint sakes, if they married and became one—which was the only thing that could happen in Bee's idea—but it was quite another thing to pretend an enthusiasm for this in order that Charlie should be kept within her reach and at her feet during that quiet time of the long vacation. Bee knew enough to know that severe work is not compatible with much love-making. She imagined her brother strolling away from his books to take Laura out on the river, or lie at her feet in the garden, which had become the habit of his life, as he betrayed to her accidentally. Bee thought, with a little indignation, that the lofty intentions which would probably end in these proceedings were of the nature of false pretences, and that the girl whom Charlie endowed with the most superlative qualities should not attempt to take him from his home for such reason; or, at least, if she did should do it frankly for love's sake—which was always a thing to be forgiven—and not on any fictitious pretence.

For Charlie, being refused that heroic way of working, "going up to read," did not read at all, as was apparent to his sister's keen eyes. He did not attempt to do the best he could, being prevented from doing what he desired. He settled himself, it is true, in the library after breakfast, with his books, as if with the intention of working, but before Bee got through the little lesson which she gave every morning to the little ones, Charlie was out strolling about the garden, or lying on the grass in the shade with a book, which was usually a novel, or one which lay closed by his side while he abandoned himself to thought—to thought, not about his books it was to be feared, for Bee, with tremors of sympathy in her heart, recognised too well the dreamy look, the drooped eyelids, the air astray from anything going on around. From questions of study, as far as Bee had perceived in her short experience, the merest footstep on a path, the dropping of a leaf, was enough to rouse the student. Charlie's thoughts were of a far more absorbing kind.

Colonel Kingsward suggested once more the week in town, when he came on another Saturday evening to Kingswarden. He was a man not very open to a perception of the wants of others, but as time went on, and he himself became more and more sensible of the ameliorating influences of society and occupation, the stagnant atmosphere at home, where his two elder children were vegetating, so much against all their previous habits, struck him with a sensation which he could not wholly get the better of. It was only right that Bee, at least, should remain in the country and in retirement the first summer after her mother's death. It would have been most unbecoming had she been in town seeing people, and necessarily, more or less, been seen by the world. But yet he felt the stillness close round him like a sensible chill, and was aware of the great quiet—aggravated by his own presence, though of this he was scarcely aware—as if it had been a blight in the air. It made him angry for the moment. In other times his house in the country had always been refreshing and delightful to him. Now, the air, notwithstanding that it was full summer, chilled him to the bone.

When you are escaping from the atmosphere of grief, anything that draws you back to it feels like an injury. He was very cross, very impatient with the silence at table, the subdued looks of the young people, and that they had nothing to say. Was it not worse for him than for them? He was the one who had lost the most, and to whom all ministrations were due, to soften the smart of sorrow. But afterwards his thoughts towards his children softened. It was very dull for them. On the Sunday evening he took the trouble to press that week in town upon Charlie. "There's a spare closet you can have at my rooms at the office," he said. "It's very central if not much else, and I daresay your friends will ask you out quietly as they do me. I think even you might bring up Bee for the day to see the pictures. She could stay the night with the Hammonds and see Betty."

"Oh, don't think of me, papa," cried Bee. "I would rather, far rather, stay at home. I don't care for the pictures—this year."

"That is foolish, my dear," said the Colonel. "There is nothing in the least unbecoming to your mourning in going there. Indeed, I wish you to go. You ought not to miss the pictures, and it will be a little change. Of course, I cannot go with you myself, but Charlie will take you, and you can go to Portman Square to sleep. You will see Betty, who must be thinking of coming home about now; indeed, it is quite necessary you should settle that with her. She can't stay there all the season, and it is rather heartless leaving you like this alone."

"Oh, no, papa. It is I that wish her to stay. She would have come back long ago but for me."

Bee's generous assumption of the blame, if there was any blame, excited her father's suspicion rather than admiration. He looked at her somewhat severely. "I cannot conceive what object you can have in preferring to be alone," he said. "It is either morbid, or— In either case it makes it more desirable that Betty should come back. You can arrange that. We will say Wednesday. I suppose you will not be nervous about returning home alone?"

"But, papa—"

"I consider the question settled, Bee," said Colonel Kingsward, and after that there was nothing more to be said.

Poor Bee wept many tears over this compulsory first step back into the world—without her mother, without— She did not mean (as she said in her inmost thoughts) *anyone else*; but it made the whole world vacant around her to think that neither on one side nor the other was there anyone to walk by her side, to take her hand, to make her feel that she was not alone. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that, in the morning, this was the first thought that came into her mind, with a faint expansion of her young being. The change, though it was not joyful, was still something; and when she set out with Charlie on Wednesday morning her heart, in spite of herself, rose a little. To see the pictures! The pictures are not generally very exciting, and there was not, as it happened, a sensation in any one of them in this particular year, even had Bee been capable of it, which she was not. But yet she had a sensation, and one of the most startling description. As she was going languidly along, looking at one picture after another, mechanically referring to the catalogue, which conveyed very little idea to her mind, her attention was suddenly attracted by a lady standing in front of one of the chief pictures of the year. She was talking with great animation to some friends who surrounded her, pointing out the qualities and excellencies (or non-excellencies, for Bee was not near enough to hear) of the picture. She was picturesquely dressed in black, a tall and commanding figure, with a great deal of lace about her, and a fine profile, clearly cut and impressive. Bee's whole attention was called to her as by a charm. Where had she seen her before? She seemed acquainted with every detail of her figure, and penetrated

by a vague reminiscence as of someone who had been of personal importance to herself, though she could not tell when or how. "Who is she? Oh, who is she?" Bee asked herself. She was very handsome—indeed Bee thought her a beautiful woman; not young, which is a thing always noted with a certain pain and compassion by a young girl—but full of grace and interest. While Bee gazed, open-eyed, forgetful of herself—a young figure, very interesting, too, to behold, in her deep mourning, and with the complete forgetfulness of herself involved in that wistful, inquiring, and admiring gaze—the lady turned round, presenting her full face to the girl's troubled vision. Bee felt her breath come short, her heart beat. She fell back hurriedly upon a vacant place on one of the benches which someone had charitably left empty. Bee did not know who the woman was, nor what possible connections she could have with her own fate, and yet there was a conviction in the girl's heart that she had to do with it, that somehow or other her life was in this woman's hands. It was the lady whom she had met that autumn morning last year in the firwoods round the Baths, where Bee had gone to finish her sketch—the lady who had appeared suddenly from among the trees, who had sat down by her, and pointed out the errors in the little picture, and advised her how to put them right. The black lace which was so conspicuous in the stranger's dress, seemed to sweep over Bee as she passed, with the same faint, penetrating odour, the same thrill of unaccountable sensation. Bee could not take her eyes from this figure as it moved slowly along, pausing here and there with the air of a connoisseur. Who was she? Who was she? Bee turned as she turned, following her with her eyes.

And then there occurred the most wonderful incident, so strange, so unsuspected, so unaccountable, that Bee could scarcely suppress a cry of astonishment. Charlie had been "doing" the pictures in his way, going faster than his sister, and had been roaming down the whole side of the long gallery while Bee occupied herself with one or two favourites. He appeared now at a little distance, having made the round of the room, and Bee was the involuntary, much surprised witness of the effect produced upon Charlie by the sudden appearance which had so much excited herself. He stopped short, with it seemed a sudden exclamation, let the book in his hands drop in his amazement, then, cleaving the crowd, precipitated himself upon the group in which the lady stood. Bee watched with consternation the hurried, eager greeting, the illumination of his boyish face, even the gesture—both hands put forth, and the quiver of his whole eager figure. She even heard a little cry of surprise from the lady, who presently separated herself from her friends and went on with Charlie in the closest conversation. It seemed to Bee as she watched, following them as well as she could through the crowd which got between her and these two figures, that there were no two heads so close together in all the throng. They seemed to drift into a corner where the pictures were of no importance, where they were comparatively undisturbed as if for the most confidential talk. It was not mere acquaintanceship, a chance meeting with some one he knew, it was utter forgetfulness of everything else, complete absorption in this new interest that seemed to move her brother. For a time Bee formed no conclusion, thought of no explanation, but watched them only with all her faculties. The catalogue which Charlie had dropped was shuffled and kicked to her feet by the passers by, a visible sign that something unusual had happened. What was it? Who was she?

And then there darted into Bee's mind a suggestion, an idea which she could not, would not entertain. Laura! Was it possible that this could be Laura? The thought sent a thrill through and through her. But no! no! no! she cried within herself; impossible! This lady was years older than Charlie—of another generation altogether—not a girl at all. She gazed through the crowd at the two heads in the corner of the room, standing as if they were looking at the pictures. They had their backs to Bee, and she could see nothing but occasionally a side glimpse of Charlie's cheek and the lace bonnet, with the unusual accompaniment of a floating veil, which covered his companion's head. She had remembered the veil at once—not primly fastened over her face, as most ladies wore them, but thrown back and falling behind, a head-dress such as nobody else wore. It distinguished from every other head that of the woman who, Bee now felt sure, was like somebody in a tragedy of Fate—somebody who had to do, she could not tell how, with the shipwreck of her own life—for had she not appeared mysteriously, from she knew not where, on the very eve of misery and ruin?—and now was overshadowing Charlie's, bringing him some calamity. Bee shivered and trembled among all the crowding people on the seat which so many people envied her, and felt that she was retaining far longer than her share. She was too much frightened to do as she could have wished to do, to rush after them, to draw her brother away, to break the spell. Such a dark lady had been known in story long before Bee was born. Could it be true that hateful beings were permitted to stray about even in the brightest scenes, bringing evil augury and all kinds of trouble with them? Many a time had Bee thought of this lady—of her sudden appearance, and of her questions about the Leighs; of something in her look, an air of meaning which even at the moment had confused the unsuspecting, unalarmed girl. And now, What was she? Who was she? Laura? Oh, no, no; a hundred times no. If Bee could have supposed that her respectable father or any member of her innocent family could have wronged anyone, she would have thought it was a ghost-lady ominous of trouble. Oh, what a silly thought in broad daylight, in the Academy of all places in the world! There was very little that was visionary or superstitious in such a place.

Charlie came back to join his sister after a considerable time with a glowing face. "Oh, you are there!" he cried. "I've been looking everywhere for you. I couldn't think where you could have gone——"

"I should have seen you had you been looking for me," said Bee.

"Well, never mind, now that I have found you. Have you seen as much as you wish? It's time to be moving off if you mean to get to Portman Square in time for tea."

"Charlie," said Bee, very gravely, getting up and moving with him towards the door, "who is that lady you were talking to with the black lace about her head?"

"What lady?" said Charlie, with a very fictitious look of surprise, and the colour mounting all over his face. "Oh, the lady I met—that lady? Well, she is a lady—whom I have met elsewhere——"

"I have met her, too," cried Bee, breathless, "down at the Baths just before—— Oh, who is she—who is she, Charlie? I think she is one of the Fates."

"You little goose," cried her brother, and then he laughed in an unsteady way. "Perhaps she is—if there was a good one," he cried. "She is," he added, in a different tone, and then paused again; "but I couldn't tell you half what she is if I were to talk till next week—and never in such a noisy, vulgar place as this."

Then Bee's mind, driven from one thought to another, came suddenly back with a jar and strain of her nerves to the question about Laura; was it possible that this should be she?—for it was the tone sacred to Laura in which her brother now spoke. "Oh! tell me about her, tell me about her!" she cried, involuntarily clasping her hands—"she isn't

—is she? Oh, Charlie, you will have time to tell me when we get into the park. Didn't she want to speak to me? Why didn't you introduce me to her if she is such a great friend of yours?"

"Hush! for goodness' sake, now; you are making people stare," said Charlie. He hurried down the stairs and across the road outside, making her almost run to keep up with him. "I say, Bee," he cried hurriedly, when he had signalled to a hansom, "should you mind going by yourself? I hate driving when I can walk. Why, you've been in a hansom by yourself before! You're not going to be such a little goose as to make a fuss about it now."

"Oh, but Charlie—I'd rather walk too, and then you can tell me—"

"Oh, nonsense," he cried, "you're tired already. It would be too much for you. Portman Square, No. —. Good-bye, Bee. I'll look up later," he cried, as, to Bee's consternation, the wheels of the hansom jarred upon the curb and she felt herself carried rapidly away.

CHAPTER XV.

PORTMAN SQUARE had seemed to Bee the first step into the world, after all that had happened, but when she was there this gentle illusion faded. It was not the world, but only another dry and faded corner out of the world, more silent and reclusive than even Kingswarden had become, for there were no voices of children within, and no rustle of trees and singing of birds without. The meeting with Betty was sweet, but the air of the little old-fashioned tea-table, the long, solemn dinner, with the butler and the footman stealing like ghosts about the table, which was laid out with heavy silver and cut glass, with only one small bunch of flowers as a sacrifice to modern ideas in the middle, and the silence of the great drawing-room afterwards, half lighted and dreary, came with a chill upon the girl who had been afraid of being dazzled by too much brightness. There were only the old lady and the old gentleman, Betty and herself, around the big table, and only the same party without the old gentleman afterwards. Mrs. Lyon asked Bee questions about her excellent father, and she examined Bee closely about her dear mother, wishing to know all the particulars of Mrs. Kingsward's illness.

"I can't get a nice serious answer from Betty. She is such a little thing; and she tells me she was not at home through the worst," Mrs. Lyon said.

It was not a subject to inspire Bee, or enable her to rise above the level of her home thoughts. Betty did not seem to feel it in the same way. She was in a white frock with black ribbons, for Mrs. Lyon did not like to see her in black, "such a little thing, you know." Bee wondered vaguely whether she herself, only a year-and-a-half the elder, was supposed to be quite middle-aged and beyond all the happier surroundings of life. Mrs. Lyon gave her a great deal of advice as to what she ought to do, and talked much of the responsibilities of the elder sister. "You must teach them to obey you, my dear. You must not let down the habit of obedience, you must be very strict with them; a sister has more need even than a mother to be very strict, to keep them in a good way." Bee sat very still, while the old lady prosed. It was so silent but for that voice, that the ticking of the clock became quite an important sound in the large dim room. And Bee strained her ears for the sound of a hansom drawing up, for Charlie's step on the pavement. Many hansoms stopped at neighbouring houses, and footsteps sounded, but Charlie did not make his appearance. "My brother said he would look in later," she had told Mrs. Lyon when she arrived. "Well, my dear, we shall hope he will," the old lady had said, "but a young man in London finds a hundred engagements." And Betty, who had been so serious, who had been so sweet, a perfect companion at the time of their mother's death, more deeply penetrated by all the influences of the time than Bee herself, now flitted about in her white frock, with all her old brightness, and sang her little song without faltering, to show Bee what progress she had made since she had been taking lessons. Bee could scarcely yet sing the hymns in church without breaking down, though to be sure a girl who was having the best lessons would be obliged to get over that. After the long evening when they were at last alone together, Betty did not respond warmly to Bee's suggestion that she should now be thinking of returning home. "You seem to think of nothing but the children," she said; "you can't want me," to which Bee could only reply that there were more things than the children to think of, and that she was very lonely and had no one to talk to—

"But you have Charlie," said Betty.

"Charlie is very full of his own concerns. He has not much sympathy with me. All that he wants is to get back to Oxford."

"To Oxford in the vacation? What would he do there?"

"He says he would work," said Bee.

"Oh, Bee, how nice of Charlie! I know they do sometimes, Gerald Lyon tells me; but I never thought that Charlie —"

"No," said Bee, "and I don't feel very sure now, there is someone—— to whom he writes such long letters——"

"Oh, Bee! This is far, far more interesting than reading! Do you know who she is? Does he tell you about her?"

"Her name is Laura," said Bee, "that is all I know."

"Oh," cried Betty, "Charlie too!" And then a flush came over the girl's uplifted face. Bee, poor Bee, absorbed in the many things which had dawned upon her which were beyond Betty, did not observe the colour nor even that significant "too" which had come to Betty's lips in spite of herself.

"I think he met her or someone belonging to her—at the Academy to-day; and that's why he hasn't come—— Oh, Betty, I am not happy about it—I am not happy at all!"

Betty put her arms round Bee and kissed her. She thought it was the remembrance of her own disappointment and disaster which made her sister cry out in this heart-broken way. Betty looked very wistfully in Bee's eyes. She was more sorry than words could say. If she could have done anything in the world "to make it all come right" she would have done so, and in the bottom of her heart she still had a conviction that all would "come right." "Oh, Bee, Bee!" she cried, "cannot anything be done? If only—only you would have listened to his mother!—Bee——"

Bee held up a warning finger. "Do you think it is myself I am thinking of?" she said, and then, wringing her hands, she added, "I don't know what harm we have done to bring it on, but, oh! I think we are in the hands of fate."

What did this mean? Betty thought her sister had gone out of her mind, and Bee would make no explanation. But I think this strange conversation made Betty rather less willing to return home. She was the darling of the house in

Portman Square; though they did not go into society, they had all manner of indulgences for Betty, and took her to the Park, and encouraged the visits of their nephew, Gerald, who was a very merry companion for the girl. He was permitted to take her to see various sights, and the old people, as usual, did not perceive what was beginning to dawn under their very eyes. Betty was such a little thing. The consequence was that, though Bee thought Portman Square still duller than Kingswarden, her little sister was not of that opinion. Bee accordingly went back alone next day, Betty accompanying her to the railway station. Neither at Portman Square nor at the railway station did Charlie appear, and it was with a heavy heart that Bee went home. It seemed to her as she travelled alone, for, I think, the first time in her life—she was not yet quite twenty—that everyone was following his or her own way, and that only she was bearing the whole burden of the family. Her father had returned to his own world, his club, his dinners, official and otherwise. It was indispensable that he should do so. Bee had understood, it being impossible for a man in his position to withdraw from the world on account of any private feeling of his own. And Betty had flashed back again into her music, and her white frock, and was seeing everything as of old. And Charlie—oh, what was Charlie doing, drifting off into some tragic enchantment? The poor girl's heart was very heavy. There seemed only herself to think of them all in their separate paths, one here and another there, going further and further off in so many different directions from the event which had broken the unity of the family, yet surely should have held them together in their common trouble. That event had gone into the regions of the past. The time of the mother was over, like a tale that is told. There were still the children in the nursery, and Bee, their guardian, watching over them—but the others all going off, each at their separate angle. It is hard enough to realise this, even when age has gained a certain insensibility, but to the girl, this breaking up of the family was terrible. "I—even I alone remain," she was inclined to say with the prophet, and what could she do to stop the closing of these toils of Fate? Her mind gradually concentrated on that last and most alarming theme of all—the woman, the lady, without a name or history, or any evident link with the family, who had thus, for the second time, appeared in the path. Bee tried to fall back upon her reason, to represent to herself that she had no real cause for assuming that the stranger of whom she knew nothing, who might simply have been walking through that German wood, and have stopped by chance to speak to the little English girl with her stupid sketch, had anything to do with the disaster which so soon overtook that poor little English girl in the midst of her happy love. She had no reason, none, for thinking so. She tried to represent to herself how foolish she had been to entertain such a notion, how natural and without meaning the incident had been. And now again, for the second time, what reason had she to believe that anything fatal or even dangerous to Charlie was in this lady's appearance now? She was a distinguished-looking woman, much older than Charlie. What was more likely than that such a woman, probably by her looks a married lady, a person of importance, should have a great deal of influence over a youth like Charlie if she took notice of him at all? All this was very reasonable. There was far more sense in it than in that foolish terror and alarm which had taken possession of her mind. She had almost persuaded herself that these apprehensions were foolish before she reached home, and yet the moment after she had succeeded in reasoning it all out, and convincing herself how foolish they had been, they had risen up in a crowd and seized her anxious mind again.

It was some days beyond the week which Charlie had been allowed in town when he came back. He was in agitated spirits, with a look of mingled excitement and exhaustion, which gave Bee many alarms, but which she was not sufficiently skilled or experienced to interpret. Colonel Kingsward had not come home in the interval, having gone somewhere else to spend his weekly holiday, and when he did come there were various colloquies between him and his son, which were evidently of a disturbing kind. Some of these were about money, as was to be made out by various allusions. Charlie had either been spending too much, or had set up a claim to more in the future, a claim which his father was reluctant to allow. But it seemed that he had come out triumphant in the end, to judge by their respective looks, when they issued from the library together, just before Colonel Kingsward left for town.

"I hope, at least, you'll make good use of it," were the father's last words—and "you may trust me, sir," said Charlie, with all the elation of victory.

He was in great spirits all day, teasing the children, and giving Bee half confidences as to the great things he meant to do.

"They shan't put me off with any of their beastly Governorships at the end of the world," said Charlie. "I shall play for high stakes, Bee, I can't afford to be a mere attaché long, but they shan't shelve me at some horrible African station, I can tell you. That's not a kind of promotion that will suit me."

"But you will have to go where you are sent," said Bee.

"Oh, shall I?" cried Charlie, "that is all you know about it. Besides, when a man has a particularly charming wi——" He stopped and coughed over the words, and laughed and grew red.

"Do you think your manners are so particularly charming?" said Bee, with familiar scorn, upon which Charlie laughed louder than ever and walked away.

Next day he left home hurriedly, saying he was going to make a run for a day or two to "see a man," and came back in the same excited, exhausted state on Saturday morning, before his father returned—a process which was repeated almost every week, to the great consternation and trouble of Bee. For Charlie never mentioned these absences to his father, and Bee felt herself spell-bound, as if she were incapable of doing so. How could she betray her brother? And the letters to Laura ceased. He had no time now to write these long letters. Neither did he receive them as used to be the case. Had the correspondence ceased, or was there any other explanation? But Charlie talked but little to his sister now, and not at all on this subject, and thus the web of mystery seemed to be woven more and more about his feet—Bee alone suspecting or fearing anything, Bee alone entirely unable to make it clear.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE year went on in its usual routine, the boys came back from school, there was the usual move to the seaside, all mechanically performed under the impulse of use, and when the anniversary came round of the mother's death, it passed, and the black dresses were gradually laid aside. And everything came back, and everybody referred to Bee as if there had always been a slim elder sister at the head of affairs. Betty came home at the end of the season with a sentiment in respect to Gerald Lyon, and with the prospect of many returns to Portman Square, but nothing final in her little case, nothing that prevented her from being one of the ringleaders in all the mischief which inevitably

occurred when the family were gathered together. Bee had become so prematurely serious, so over-wrought with the cares of the family, that Betty, who was too energetic to be suppressed, gradually came to belong rather to the faction of the boys than to share the responsibilities of the elder sister, which might have been her natural place. The second Christmas, instead of being forlorn, like the first, was almost the gayest that had been known in Kingswarden for many years. For the boys were growing, and demanded invitations for their friends, and great skating while the frost lasted, which, as the pond at Kingswarden was the best for a great number of miles round, brought many cheerful youthful visitors about the house. Colonel Kingsward was nothing if not correct; he did not neglect the interests of any of his children. He perceived at once that to have Bee alone at the head of affairs, without any support, especially when his own time at home was so much broken by visits, would be bad at once for her "prospects," and for the discipline of the family. He procured a harmless, necessary aunt accordingly, a permanent member of the household, yet only a visitor, who could be displaced at any time, to provide for all necessary proprieties, an arrangement which left him very free to go and come as he pleased. And thus life resumed its usual lightness, and youth triumphed, and things at Kingswarden went on as of old, with a little more instead of less commotion and company and entertainment as the young people developed and advanced.

It was perhaps natural enough, too, in the circumstances that Charlie, though the oldest son, should be so little at home. He came for Christmas, but he did not throw himself into the festivities with the spirit he ought to have shown. He was in a fitful state of mind, sometimes in high spirits, sometimes overclouded and impatient, contemptuous of the boys, as having himself reached so different a line of development, and indifferent to all the family re-unions and pleasures. Sometimes it seemed to Bee, who was the only one in the family who concerned herself about Charlie's moods, that he was anxious and unhappy, and that the air of being bored which he put on so readily, and the hurried way in which he rushed out and in, impatient of the family calls upon him, concealed a secret trouble. He complained to her of want of money, of his father's niggardliness, of the unhappy lot of young men who never had any "margin," who dared not spend an extra shilling without thinking where it was to come from. But whether this was the only trouble, or how it came about that he had discovered himself to be so poor, Bee, poor child, who knew so little, could not divine. How miserable it was that it was she who was in the mother's place! Mamma would have divined, she would have understood, she would have helped him through that difficult passage, but what could Bee do, who knew nothing about life, who thought it very likely that she was making mountains out of molehills, and that all young men were bored and uneasy at home—oh, if people would only be all good, all happy with each other, all ready to do what pleased the whole, instead of merely what pleased themselves!

To Bee, so prematurely introduced into the midst of those jars and individual strivings of will and fancy, it seemed as if everything might be made so easy in life by this simple method. If only everybody would be good! The reader may think it was a nursery view of human life, and yet what a solution it would give to every problem! Colonel Kingsward then would have been more at home, would have been the real father who commanded his children's confidence, instead of papa, whose peculiarities had to be studied, and in whose presence the children had to be hushed and every occasion of disturbance avoided, and of whom they were all more or less afraid. And Charlie would have been more or less a second to him, thoughtful of all, chivalrous to the girls, fond of home, instead of, as he was, pausing as it were on one foot while he was with his family, anxious only to get away. And Bee—well, Bee perhaps would have been different too had that new, yet old, golden rule come into full efficacy. Oh, if everybody, including always one's own self, would only be good!

It makes the head go round to think what a wonderful revolution in the world generally the adoption of that simplest method would produce. But in poor Bee's experience it was the last rule likely to be adopted in Kingswarden, where, more and more to the puzzled consciousness of the girl not able to cope with so many warring individualities, everyone was going his own way.

It was in the early spring that Colonel Kingsward came down from town to Kingswarden, looking less like the adoption of this method than ever before. The children were in the hall when he came, busy with some great game in which various skins which were generally laid out there were in use as properties, making, it must be allowed, a scene of confusion in that place. The Colonel was not expected. He had walked from the station, and the sound of his voice stopped the fun with a sudden horror of silence and fright, which, indeed, was not complimentary to a father. Instead of greetings, he asked why the children were allowed to make such a confusion in the place, with a voice which penetrated to the depths of the house and brought Bee and Betty flying from the drawing-room.

"Papa!" they both cried, in surprise, mingled with alarm. Colonel Kingsward walked into the room they had left, ordering peremptorily the children to the nursery, but finding certain friends of Betty's there, in full enjoyment of talk and tea, retreated again to his library, Bee following nervously.

"Is your brother here?" he asked, harshly, establishing himself with his back to the fire.

"My brother?" echoed Bee, for indeed there were half-a-dozen, and how was she to know on the spur of the moment which he meant.

Colonel Kingsward looked, in the partial light (for a lamp which smoked had been brought in hurriedly, to make things worse), as if he would have liked to seize his daughter and wring her slender neck. He went on with additional irritation: "I said your brother. The others, I have no doubt, will provide trouble enough in their turn. For the moment it is, of course, Charlie I mean. Is he here?"

"Papa! Why, he is at Oxford, you know, in the schools——"

Colonel Kingsward laughed harshly. "He was going in for honours, wasn't he? Wanted to go up to read in the long vacation—was full of what he was going to do? Well, it has all ended in less than nothing, as I might have known it would. Read that!" he cried, tossing a letter on the table.

Bee, with her heart sick, took up and opened the letter, and struggled to read, in her agitation, an exceedingly bad hand by an indifferent light. She made out enough to see that Charlie had not succeeded in his "schools," that he had not even secured a "pass," that he had incurred the continual censure of his college authorities by shirking lectures, failing in engagements, and doing absolutely no work. So far as was known there was nothing against his moral character, but—Bee, to whom the censure of the college sounded like a sentence of death, put down the dreadful letter carefully, as if it might explode, and raised large eyes, widened with alarm and misery, to her father's face.

"Oh, papa!" was all that she could say.

"I telegraphed to him to come home at once and meet me here. The fool," said Colonel Kingsward, pacing about the room, "is capable of not doing that—of going away—of—"

"Papa, they say there is nothing against his character. Oh! you couldn't think that he would—do anything dreadful; not disappear, not—" Bee said the rest in an anguish of suspicion and ignorance with her eyes.

"God knows what an idiot like that may do! Things are bad enough, but he will, of course, think them worse than they are. There is one thing we may be sure of," he said, with a fierce laugh, "Charlie will do nothing to make himself uncomfortable. He knows how to take care of himself." Colonel Kingsward walked up and down the room, gnawing the end of his moustache. The lamp smoked, but he took no notice of it. "There is one thing certain," he said, "and that is, there's a woman in it. I remember now, he was always thinking of something; like an ass, I supposed it was his studies. No doubt it was some Jezebel or other."

"Papa," said Bee.

"Speak out! Has he told you anything?" He stopped in front of her, and stood looking with threatening eyes into her face. "If you keep back anything from me," he said, "your brother's ruin will be on your head."

"Papa," said Bee, faltering, "it is not much I know. I know that there was a lady who lived in Oxford——"

"Ah! The long vacation," he exclaimed, with another angry laugh.

"He used to write long letters to her, and he told me her name."

"That is something to the purpose. What was her name?"

"He said," said Bee, in a horror of betraying her brother, yet impelled to speak, "he said that she was called—Laura, papa."

"What?" he cried, for Bee's voice had sunk very low; and then he turned away again with an impatient exclamation, calling her again a little fool. "Laura, confound her! What does that matter? I thought you had some real information to give."

"Papa," said Bee, timidly, "there is a little more, though perhaps it isn't information. When he took me to the Academy in summer I saw him meet a lady. Oh, not a common person, a beautiful, grand-looking lady. But it could not be the same," Bee added, after a pause, "for she was much older than Charlie—not a young lady at all."

"Why didn't you tell me this at the time?" cried Colonel Kingsward. "Can one never secure the truth even from one's own children? I should have sent him off at once had I known. What do you mean by not young at all?"

"I should think," said Bee, with diffidence and a great anxiety not to exaggerate such a dreadful statement, "that she might perhaps have been—thirty, papa."

"You little idiot," her father kindly replied.

Why was she a little idiot? But Bee had not time to go into that question. The evening was full of agitation and anxiety. The poor little girl, unused to such sensations, sat through dinner in a quiver of anxious abstraction, listening for every sound. There were several trains by which he might still come, and at any moment when the door opened Charlie might present himself, pale with downfall and distress, to meet his father's angry look, whose eyes were fixed on the door whenever it opened with as much preoccupation as Bee's—with this difference, that Bee's eyes were soft with excuses and pity, while those brilliant steely eyes which shone from beneath her father's dark brows, and which were the originals of her own, blazed with anger. When dinner was over, which he hurried through, disturbing the servants in their leisurely routine, Colonel Kingsward again called Bee to him into the library. She was the only person to whom he could talk of the subject of which his mind was full, which was the sole reason for this great distinction, for he had very little patience with Bee's trembling remarks. "Don't be a little fool," was the answer he made to any timid suggestion upon which she ventured; but yet there was a necessity upon him to discuss it with someone, and Bee, however inadequate, had this burden to bear.

"If the woman is the kind you say, and if she thinks there's anything to be made by it—why the fool may have married her," he cried. "Heavens! Think of it; married at three and twenty, without a penny! But," he added, colouring a little, "they are very knowing, these women. She would find out that he was not worth her while, and probably throw him off in time."

"Oh, papa!" cried Bee, horrified by the thought that her brother might be deserted in the moment of his downfall.

"That is the best we can hope. He will have Kingswarden, of course, when I die, but not a penny—not a penny in the meantime to keep up any such ridiculous—Listen! Is that the train?"

There was a cutting near Kingswarden through which the thundering of the train was heard as it passed. This had been a great grievance at first, but it was not without its conveniences to the accustomed ears of the household now. They both listened with anxiety, knowing that by this time it must have stopped at the station and deposited any passenger, and for the next half-hour watched and waited; Bee, with all her being in her ears, listened with an intensity of attention such as she had never known before, holding her breath; while Captain Kingsward himself, though he kept walking up and down the room, did so with a softened step which made no sound on the thick carpet, not uttering a word, listening too. To describe all the sounds they heard, or thought they heard, how often the gate seemed to swing in the distance, and the gravel start under a quick foot, would be endless. It was the last train; if he did not come now it would be clear that he did not mean to come. And it was now too late for any telegram. When it was no longer possible to believe that he could have been detained on the way, Colonel Kingsward drew a long breath of that disappointment which, in the yielding of nervous tension, is almost for the moment a relief.

"If there is no letter to-morrow morning I shall go up to Oxford," he said, "and, Bee, if you like, you can come with me. You might be of use. Don't say anything to Betty or your aunt. Say you are going with me to town by the early train, and that you may possibly not return till next day. There is no need for saying any more."

"Yes, papa," said Bee, submissively. That was all he knew! No need for saying any more to Betty, who had known every movement her sister made since ever she was born! But, at all events, Bee made up her mind to escape explanation so far as she could to-night. She paused for a moment at the door of the drawing-room as she passed. No more peaceful scene could have been presented. Betty was at the piano singing one song after another, half for practice, half to amuse the aunt, who sat dozing in her chair by the fire. The others had gone to bed, and careless youth and still more careless age, knowing nothing of any trouble, pursued their usual occupations in perfect composure and calm. The aunt knitted mechanically, and dozed in the warmth and quiet which she loved, and Betty

went on singing her songs, indifferent to her audience, yet claiming attention, breaking off now and then in the middle of a line to ask "Do you like that, Aunt Ellen? Are you paying any attention, Aunt Ellen?" "Yes, my dear, I like it very much," the old lady said, and dozed again. Bee turned away with a suppressed sob. Where was Charlie? In disgrace, perhaps heart-broken, deserted by his love, afraid to meet his father! It was foolish to think that he was out in the night, wandering without shelter, without hope, for there was no need of any such tragic circumstances, but this was the picture that presented itself to Bee's aching and inexperienced heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHARLIE was not in his rooms at College, he had not been there for some days, and nobody could furnish any information as to where he was. Colonel Kingsward had left Bee in the hotel while he went on to make his inquiries. He was very guarded in the questions he asked, for though he was himself very angry with his son, he was still careful for Charlie's reputation, explaining even to the college porter, who was very well acquainted with the eccentricities of the gentlemen, that he had no doubt his son had returned home, though they had unfortunately crossed each other on the way. The Colonel tried to keep up this fiction even with the sympathetic Don, who made matters so much worse by his compassion, but who was very full and detailed in his relation of poor Charlie's backslidings, the heaviness of whose gate bill and the amount of whose sins and penalties were terrible to hear. He had attended no lectures, he had written no essays, he had been dumb and blank in every examination.

"Out of consideration to you, Colonel Kingsward, the College has been very forbearing, and shut its eyes as long as possible."

"I wish, sir, the College had shown more common sense and let me know," the Colonel cried, in wrath; but that did not throw any light upon the subject.

As it turned out, Charlie had not "gone in" for his "schools" at all. He had done nothing that he ought to have done. What things he had done which he ought not to have done remained to be discovered. His stern father did not doubt that a sufficient number of these actual offences would soon be found to add to the virtues omitted. He went back to the hotel where Bee had been spending a miserable morning, and they sat together in gloom and silence.

"You had better go home," he said to her. "He may have got home by this time, and I don't see what use you can be here."

Bee was very submissive, yet begged hard to return as far as London, at least, with her father; to wait for another day, in case some trace of the prodigal might be found. Many such parties have occupied the dreary hotel rooms and stared in vain out of the windows, and watched with sick hearts the passing throng, the shoals of undergraduates, to their eyes all dutiful and well-doing, while the one in whom they are concerned is absent, in what evil ways they know not. Poor Bee was too young to feel the full weight of such alarms but she was as miserable as if she had known everything that could happen in the vagueness of her consciousness of despair and pain. What Charlie could have done, what would become of him, what his father would do or could do, were all hidden from Bee. But there was in it all a vague misery which was almost worse than clear perception. Colonel Kingsward, with all his knowledge of the world, was scarcely less vague. He did not know how to find out the secrets of an under-graduate. Charlie had friends, but all of them protested that they had seen very little of him of late. He had fallen off from sports and exercise as much as from study. He had scarcely been on the cricket ground all the summer; he had given up football; "boating on the river with ladies," he had been seen, but not recently, for the floods were out and such amusements were no longer practicable. At night the Colonel knew almost as little about his son as when he had arrived full of certainty that the whole matter could be cleared up in a few hours.

Next day began gloomily with another visit to the Don, whom Colonel Kingsward hoped to have seen the last of on their former exasperating interview. As he had discovered nothing elsewhere, he went back again to the authority, who had also hoped on his side to be free from the anxious but impatient father, and they had another long talk, which ended like the first in nothing. The college potentate had no idea where the youth could have gone. Charlie had left most of his property still in his rooms; he had gone out with only a little bag, nobody suspecting him of an intention to "go down." After they had gone over the question again, the Don being by no means as sympathetic as the first time, and contributing a good deal to Colonel Kingsward's acquaintance with his son's proceedings—a sudden light was for the first time thrown upon the question by a chance remark. "You know, of course, that he had friends in Oxford?"

"Like other young men, I suppose. I have seen several of them, and they can give me no information."

"I don't mean undergraduates: people living in the town—ladies," said the Don, who was a young man, almost with a blush. And after sending for Charlie's scout, and making other inquiries, Colonel Kingsward was furnished with an address. He went back to the hotel quickly, in some excitement, to inform Bee of the new clue he had obtained, but he scarcely reached the room where she was awaiting him when he was told that a lady had just asked for him downstairs. Bee was sent off immediately to her room while her father received this unexpected visitor. Bee had been watching at the window all the morning, looking down upon that world of young men, all going about their work or their pleasure, all in their fit place, while Charlie was no one knew where. The poor girl had been breaking her heart over that thought, wistfully watching the others among whom he ought to have been, feeling the pang of that comparison, sometimes imagining she saw a figure like his in the distance, and watching, as it approached, how every trace died away. Where was he? Bee's young heart was very sore. The vacancy was appalling to her, filling itself with all kinds of visionary shapes of terror. She could not think of him only as wandering away in misery and despair, feeling himself to have failed, ashamed and afraid to look anyone in the face. She scarcely understood her father when he hurried her out of the sitting-room, but obeyed him with a sense of trouble and injury though without knowing why.

Bee spent a very forlorn hour in her room. She heard the sound of the voices next door. Her father's well known tones, and a low voice which she felt must be a woman's. She would have been much tempted to listen to what they said if it had been possible, but there was no door between the rooms, and she could only hear that a long and close conversation was going on, without making out a word of it. She was very restless in her anxiety, wandering from the window to the door, which she opened with a desire to hear better, which defeated itself—and to see better, though there was nothing to be seen. It seemed to Bee that half the day was over before the sound of movement in the

sitting-room warned her that the conference was breaking up. Even after that there was a long pause, and the talking went on, though it moved closer to the door. Bee had gradually grown in excitement as those sounds went on. She stole to her own half-open door, as the one next to it was opened, and the visitor came forth attended with the greatest courtesy by Colonel Kingsward, who accompanied her to the stairs. There the lady turned round and gave him her hand, turning her face towards the spot where the unsuspected watcher stood gazing with eyes of wonder and terror.

"Not another step," she said, with a sweet but decided voice. "The only thing I will ask from you, Colonel Kingsward, will be a line, a single line, to say that all is well."

"You may rely upon that," the Colonel said, bowing over the hand he held, "but may not I see you to your carriage, call your servant?"

"I am walking," she said, "and I am alone; come no further, please; one line to say that all is well." He still held her hand and she gave it a little, significant pressure, adding in a low tone: "And happy—and forgiven!"

Bee stood as if she had been turned to stone; a little, clandestine figure within the shelter of the door. It was a beautiful face that was thus turned towards her for a minute, unconscious of her scrutiny, and the voice was sweet. Oh, not a woman like any other woman! She said to herself that she remembered the voice and would have known it anywhere; and the look, half kind, yet with a touch of ridicule, of mockery in it. This was evidently not what the Colonel felt. He descended a few of the stairs after her, until turning again with a smile and with her hands extended as if to drive him back, she forbade his further attendance. He returned to the sitting-room thoughtfully, yet with a curious, softened expression upon his face, and a few minutes afterwards, not at once, he came to the door again and called Bee. There was still a smile lingering about his lips, though his mouth had stiffened back into its usual somewhat stern composure.

"Come in," he said, "I have something to tell you. I have had a very strange visit—a visit from a lady."

"I saw her," said Bee, under her breath, but her father was too much pre-occupied to hear.

"If this was, as I suppose, the lady whom you and your brother met, you are right, Bee, in thinking her very remarkable. She is one of the handsomest women I ever saw, and with a charm about her, which—. But, of course what you want to hear is about Charlie. I am glad to tell you that she has very much relieved my mind about Charlie, Bee."

Bee stood before her father with her hands folded, with the most curious sense of revolt and opposition in her mind—looking at him, a spectator would have said, with something of the sternness that was habitual to him, but so very inappropriate on her soft brow. She made no reply to this. Her countenance did not relax. Relieved about Charlie? No! Bee did not believe it. Pity and terror for Charlie seemed to take stronger and stronger possession of her heart.

"It is a long story," he said. "Sit down, you have got a way of standing staring, my dear. I wish you had more womanly models like the lady I have just been talking to—perfectly clear and straightforward in what she said, but with a feminine grace and sweetness. Well, it appears that Charlie had the good luck to get introduced to this lady about a year ago. Sit down, I tell you, I won't have you staring at me in that rude way."

There was a little pause, and Bee sat down abruptly, and not very gracefully. Colonel Kingsward could not but remark the difference. He followed her movements for a moment with his eyes, and then he began again—

"For all I can make out, he has been treated with a kindness which should have done everything for a young man. He has been invited to the house of these ladies—he has met all sorts of people who ought to be of use to him, whom it was a distinct advantage to meet—he has been kept out of the usual foolish diversions of young men. So far as I can make out, there is nothing against his character except what these Don-fellows call idleness—a thing that scarcely tells against a young man in after-life, unless he is a parson, or a schoolmaster, or something of that kind. Even the missing of his degree," said the Colonel, pulling his moustache reflectively, "is of little importance among practical men. So long as he can get through in his modern languages, and so forth, of what importance are the classics? I am very much relieved in my mind about Charlie. She thinks he must have gone straight down to London, instead of going home."

"Who is the lady, papa?"

Bee's interest in Charlie seemed to have dropped, as the Colonel's had done, for the moment. His advocate had made herself the first person on the horizon.

"The lady? So far as I can make out she is living here with some friends, up in the district called the Parks, where a great many people now live. She says she has always taken an interest in the undergraduates, who are left so sadly to themselves, and that, being of an age to make it possible, she has wished very much to devote herself to do what she could for these boys. Unfortunately, with her unusual personal attractions—." The Colonel stopped short and bit his moustache. "After all her kindness to your brother, encouraging him in his work and setting his duty before him—and no elder sister, no mother, could have been kinder, from all she tells me—the foolish boy repaid her good offices by—what do you think? But you will never guess."

"And I will never, never believe it," cried Bee, "if it was anything—anything that was not nice on Charlie's part!" Her voice was quite hoarse in her emotion, her secret fury against this woman, of whom she knew nothing, rising more and more.

"You little fool!" her father said, rising and standing up against the mantel-piece. He laughed angrily, and looked at her with his most contemptuous air. "One would think that even in their cradles women must begin to hate women," he said.

Bee, who hated no one unless it was this woman whom she feared but did not know, grew angry red. Her blue eyes flashed and shone like northern lights. The cruel and contemptuous assumption which touched her pride of sex, added vehemence to the other emotion which was already strong enough, and roused her up into a kind of fury.

"If she says anything bad of Charlie I don't believe it," she cried, "not a word, not a word! Whatever he has done she has driven him to it!" Then Bee was suddenly silent, panting, terrified or afraid that her little outburst of passion would close all further revelations.

"It seems unnecessary to add another word in face of such fierce prejudice!"

"Oh, papa, forgive me. Tell me; I shall say nothing more."

"You have said a great deal too much already. After this," he said, sarcastically, "you will perhaps think that your brother—of three and twenty, without a penny or a prospect—did Miss Lance honour by forcing a proposal upon her, making love to her at the end of all——"

"Miss Lance!" Bee said, with a sharp cry.

The Colonel took no notice of the interruption. He went on with a kind of disdainful comment to himself rather than to her.

"After all, there are things which a lady has to put up with, which we don't take into consideration. A young fool whom she has been kind to, knowing he has nobody near to look after him, no mother"—his voice even grew a little tender at this point—"and by way of reward the idiot falls in love with her, asks a woman like that to share his insignificant little life! Jove! What a piece of impertinence!" the Colonel said, with an angry laugh.

"Did you say," said Bee, with faltering lips, "Miss Lance, papa?"

He turned upon her with a look of extreme surprise.

"Why shouldn't I have said Miss Lance? What is there unusual in the name?"

Bee looked at him with a dumb rebellion, an almost scorn and passion far greater than his own. He had forgotten the name—but Bee had not forgotten it. The fact that Bee's own young life had suffered shipwreck had perhaps escaped from his memory altogether, though it was she who had done it. Bee looked at him with her blue eyes blazing, remembering everything that he had forgotten. Her brother had gone out of her mind, and all the history of his Laura, and the way in which he had been enfolded in this fatal web. She went back to her own wrongs—forgetting that she had keenly confirmed her father's decision and rejected Aubrey on what she thought to be other and sufficient grounds. She thought only of the moment when sudden darkness had fallen upon her in the first sunshine of her life, and she had struggled against the rigid will of her father, who would listen to no explanations—who would not understand. And all for the sake of this woman—the spider who dragged fly after fly into her net; the witch, the enchantress of whom all poems and stories spoke! Her exasperation was so intense that she forgot all the laws of respect and obedience in which her very being had been bound, and looked at her father as at an equal, an enemy whom she scorned as well as feared.

"What is the meaning of these looks," he said, "I am altogether at a loss to understand you, Bee. Why this fury at a name—which you have never heard before, so far as I know."

"You think I have never heard it before?" said Bee, in her passion. "It shows how little you think of me, or care for anything that has happened to me. Oh, I have heard it before, and I shall hear it again, I know. I know I shall hear it again. And you don't mind, though you are our father! You don't remember!" Bee was still very young, and she had that fatal woman's weakness which spoils every crisis with inevitable tears. Her exasperation was too great for words. "You don't remember!" she cried, flinging the words at him like a storm; and then broke down in a passion of choking sobs, unable to say more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

To do Colonel Kingsward justice, he was taken entirely by surprise by Bee's outburst. He had no remembrance of the name. The name had been wholly unimportant to him even at the time when it had come under his notice. The previous claimant to Aubrey Leigh's affections had been "the woman," no more, to his consciousness. He did not remember anything about the business now, except that there was a story about a woman, and that he would not permit his young daughter to marry a man concerning whom such a story existed. Even after Bee had left him, when he really made an effort to pursue into the recesses of his mind anything that was connected with that name, he could not make it out. Was it perhaps a tyrannical governess? but that would not explain the girl's vehement outcry. He had not thought for a long time of Bee's interrupted love, and broken-off engagement. Of what consequence is such an episode to so young a girl? And there were other matters in his mind of what seemed a great deal more importance. Whatever was the source of Bee's previous knowledge of Miss Lance, she hated that singularly attractive woman, as it is usual for the sex—Colonel Kingsward thought—to hate instinctively every other woman who is endowed with unusual attractions.

What a magnificent creature that woman was! How finely she had talked of the undeveloped boy to whom she had hoped to be of service, and with what genuine feeling, half-abashed, distressed, yet not without a gleam of amusement, she had told him of the wonderful scene at the end, when Charlie had asked her to marry him.

"Me! A woman who might be his mother!" she had said, with beautiful candour; though it was not candour, it was more like jest, seeing that she was still young—young enough to turn any man's head. And she had added hastily, "It must have been my fault. Somehow I must have led him astray, though I was so far from intending it. A boy like your son would not have done such a wild thing had he not supposed——" She put up her hands to her face to hide a blush. "That is the worst of us, poor women," she had said, "we cannot show an interest even in a boy but he supposes—oh, Colonel Kingsward, can't you imagine what I felt, wishing solely to be of use to your son, who is such a good, ingenuous, *nice* boy—and finding in a moment, without the least warning, that he had mistaken me like *that!*"

Colonel Kingsward was of opinion, and so was everybody who knew him, that he was by no means an impressionable man; but it would be impossible to say how touched he had been by that explanation. And she was so sorry for Charlie. She avowed that, after what had happened, she would have considered herself inexcusable if she had not come to his father, however unpleasant it might be to herself, to show him how little, how very little, Charlie was to blame.

"You must not—must not be angry with him," she had said, joining her hands in appeal. "Oh, forgive him; it is so much my fault. If I could but bear the penalty! But I cannot endure to think that the poor boy should be punished when all the time I, who am so much older than he is, am the one to blame. I ought to have known better. I am at your mercy, Colonel Kingsward. You cannot say anything worse to me than I have done to myself; but he, poor boy, is really not to blame."

The Colonel had no wish to say anything to her that was uncomplimentary. He entered into her position with the most unusual sympathy. Perhaps he had never had so warm a feeling of understanding and affection for anyone

before. The compassion and the appeal was something quite new and original to him. He was not a man to be sympathetic with the troubles of a middle-aged spinster—an elderly flirt, as he would probably have called her, had he heard the story at second hand; in such a case he would have denounced the mature siren in the terms usual to men of experience. But the presence of this lady made all the difference. She was not like anyone else. The usual phrases brought forward on such occasions were meaningless or worse in respect to her. He was softened to Charlie, too, by the story, though he could have raved at his son's folly. The puppy!—to think a woman like that could care for him! And yet, as she said, there was no harm in the boy; only absurdity, presumption, the last depths of fatuity. Poor young fool! But it was a different thing from racing towards the bottomless pit for the mere indulgence of his own appetites, as so many young men did, and if this was the only reason of Charlie's downfall it involved no loss of character and need make no breach in his career, which was the chief thing. He could make up his lost ground, and the F.O. would care very little for what the Dons said. The idleness of a boy in love (the puppy! inexcusable in his presumption, but yet with plenty of justification at least) could do him no more than temporary harm in any case.

These thoughts passed through the Colonel's mind with a great sense of relief. It did not occur to him that Charlie, when he saw his folly, could have much difficulty in getting over such a misplaced sentiment. It must be done, and the boy must feel that such a hope was as much above him as was the moon in the skies. He must make up his mind to apply himself, to get through his examination, to begin his real life—which his father would certainly impress upon him was not mere amusement or happiness, if he liked to call it so, but work and a sharp struggle to secure his standing. As for his degree, that was a matter of complete indifference to Colonel Kingsward. The boy had his experience of Oxford life to talk of and fall back upon; he was a University man all the same, though he had not been crowned by any laurels he had made some friends, and he had gained the necessary familiarity with that phase of a young man's existence. What did the details matter, and who would ever ask about his degree? An attaché does not put B.A. or M.A. (which was which, or if there was any difference, or on what occasion such vanities should be displayed the Colonel was quite unaware) to his name like a schoolmaster. Nothing could be of less importance than this. He dismissed Charlie from his mind accordingly with much relief. It was not at all unnatural that the boy should have gone to town instead of going to Kingswarden. No doubt by this time he had made his way home, and this reminded the Colonel that it would be as well to send his sister off at once to meet Charlie there. He called Bee again accordingly from her room, where she had taken refuge, and instructed her in what he desired.

"There is a train in an hour," he said. "You had better get ready. I wish you to go home at once. Charlie will be there by this time, I have no doubt, and I should like you to let him know that if he is reasonable and drives all folly from his mind, and addresses himself at once to his preparation for the exam., he shall hear no more from me about the Oxford business. It depends upon himself whether it is ever alluded to again."

"Papa," said Bee, faltering a little, "am I to go alone?"

"Why shouldn't you go alone? Are you afraid of getting into a cab at Paddington and driving to Victoria, the most ordinary everyday business? Why, I thought the girls of your period revolted against being protected, and were able to take care of themselves wherever they went?"

Now Colonel Kingsward had always insisted on surrounding his daughters with quite unnecessary care, being, as he prided himself, on all questions in respect to women, of the old school.

"Oh, no," said Bee, very tremulous, looking at him with eyes full of meaning, "I am not afraid."

"Then why do you make any fuss about it?" he said. "I shall stay behind for a few hours, perhaps for another night. I must see whether he has left any debts, and square accounts with the College, and—settle everything." Bee was still looking at him with that troubled air of meaning, and he looked at her with a stern look, putting her down; but there was in his eyes a certain understanding of her meaning and a shrinking from her scrutiny all the same. "You have just time to get ready," he said, pulling out his watch and holding it up to her. And Bee had nothing to do but to obey. It was not the drive from Paddington to Victoria, the change from one railway to another, which frightened her, though for a girl who had never done anything alone, that was not a pleasant thought; but the girl was deeply disturbed to leave her father there within the power of the woman whom more than ever she looked upon with terror as if she had been an embodied Fate. How ludicrous was the idea that a girl of twenty should be disturbed and anxious at the thought of leaving her father unprotected by her poor little guardianship—and such a father as Colonel Kingsward! Bee saw at once the folly and futility of such a notion, but she could not rid herself of the alarm. Her terror of this woman, now fully evident as the same who had wrecked her own life, was more than ever a superstitious panic.

Bee's mind was wholly possessed with this idea. She thought of the beautiful, dreadful lady in *Christabel*. She thought of that other shuddering image in the poem, of "the angel, beautiful and bright," who looked the hero in the face; "And how he knew it was a fiend, that miserable knight—" Aubrey had not known she was a fiend, nor Charlie; and now papa! What could such a woman do to papa? He was old (Bee thought) beyond the reach of the influences which had moved the others. What could Fate do to him? She asked herself this question in her great alarm, trying to beat down the terror in her bosom, and persuade herself that it was foolishness. But the more she thought the more her heart beat with fright and apprehension. It seemed to her, somehow, as if the former dangers had been nothing in comparison with this, although she did not know what it was that she feared.

Colonel Kingsward walked with his daughter to the station, and he was very affable and kind to her, taking unusual pains to make her feel that there was nothing to fear. He selected carefully a carriage which was reserved for ladies, and put her into the charge of the guard, whom he desired to find a cab for her at Paddington, and look after her in every way. Nothing could be more fatherly, more thoughtful than he was; but all these precautions, instead of reassuring Bee, increased her sensation of danger. For the Colonel, though he had always insisted upon every precaution, had not been in the habit of personally seeing to the comfort of his children. She followed him with her eyes as he occupied himself with all these little cares, and explained to the guard what was to be done. And then he went to the bookstall and bought her illustrated papers and a book to amuse her on the journey, Bee watching all the time with growing wonder. She gave a hurried glance now and then around her, sweeping the station from one end to another, with a terror of seeing somewhere appear the woman who had brought such pain and trouble into her life—though this, too, was folly, as she was aware. And when at last the carriage door was closed, and the train almost in motion, Bee gave her father a last look, in which there were unutterable things. He had not met her eyes hitherto, whether by chance or precaution. But now he was off his guard and did so. Their looks encountered with a clash, as if they had been meeting swords, the same eyes, brilliant with that blue blaze, flashing like lightning. But it

was the father's fiery eyes which gave way. The girl's look penetrated into his very being; his dropped, almost abashed. How did this strange change of position come about? It was anything but reassuring to Bee. It seemed to her as if already a new chapter of misery and dismay had opened in life, although her fears had taken no shape, and she could not tell what calamity was possible. The very vagueness made it all the more appalling to her inexperienced heart.

As for Colonel Kingsward, he saw his little daughter go away with a relief which he felt to be ridiculous. That Bee's looks should affect his movements one way or another was beyond measure absurd, and yet he was relieved that she was gone, and felt himself more at ease. He had a great many things to do—to settle his son's accounts, to take his name off the college books, to wind up that early unsuccessful chapter of Charlie's life. But he now felt very little real anger against Charlie—this shipwreck of his had suddenly introduced his father to what seemed a new view and new objects, which indeed he did not in any way define to himself, but of which he felt the stimulus with vague exhilaration to the bottom of his heart.

END OF SECOND VOLUME.
TILLOTSON AND SON, PRINTERS, BOLTON.

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

possibilities of calmtiy=> possibilities of calamity {pg 13}
He get's to think=> He gets to think {pg 24}
he want's to see you=> he wants to see you {pg 29}
upon tbe hushed=> upon the hushed {pg 69}
you're their farher=> you're their father {pg 82}
as has has been laid=> as has been laid {pg 83}
does nor please you=> does not please you {pg 118}
I sure that=> I am sure that {pg 118}
flirt with Bettty=> flirt with Betty {pg 169}
If any difficuity arises in a passage=> If any difficulty arises in a passage {pg 180}
to be a great schalar=> to be a great scholar {pg 184}
the injustice, and inappropriatness=> the injustice, and inappropriateness {pg 186}
her inmost thoughts=> her inmost thoughts {pg 195}
on one of the benehes=> on one of the benches {pg 197}
You're not not going=> You're not going {pg 204}
warring iividualities=> warring individualities {pg 222}
itself too Bee's aching=> itself to Bee's aching {pg 232}
had not forgotton=> had not forgotten {pg 247}
there were others matters=> there were other matters {pg 250}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SORCERESS, V. 2 OF 3 ***

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