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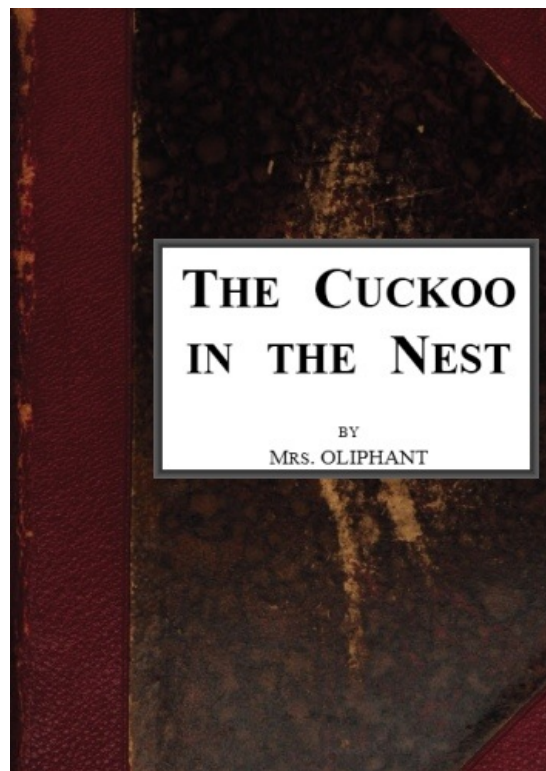
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THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST

By MRS. OLIPHANT

IN TWO VOLUMES

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THE VICTORIAN AGE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT
AUTHOR OF

*"WITHIN THE PRECINCTS," "THE RAILWAY MAN AND HIS CHILDREN,"
"AT HIS GATES," "THE MARRIAGE OF ELINOR," ETC.*

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME I.

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THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST

CHAPTER: I., II., III., IV., V., VI., VII., VIII., IX., X., XI.,
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XXII., XXIII., XXIV., XXV.

CHAPTER I.

THE Seven Thorns was rather an imposing place for a little country inn. It was a long house, not very high, yet containing some good-sized bedrooms on the upper storey, and rooms below calculated for the entertainment of a much greater company than ever appeared now upon the deserted highroad. It had been an old coaching road, and there were stables at the Seven Thorns which could take in half the horses in the county; but that, of course, was all over now. The greater part of these stables were shut up and falling into decay. So was the large dining-room and half of the extensive accommodation downstairs. The great kitchen, and a little room on the other side of the doorway, which was called the parlour, were all that was ever wanted now in the Seven Thorns. Sometimes there would come some excursion parties from the neighbouring town in summer, and then a large table was placed outside, or, on the emergency of a wet day, in the kitchen. This was the only event which ever broke the quiet in these degenerate days.

The usual traffic was confined to the village; to now and then a pedestrian jogging along on foot, sometimes a tramp, sometimes a tourist; or to a farmer going by to market, who remembered the day when the Hewitts of the Seven Thorns were as substantial a family as his own. It was a house which had come down in the world, with a downfall as greatly felt, as much rebelled against, as the fall of the proudest family in the county could have been. The Hewitts had no pretension to be gentry, but they had been yeomen, farming their own land, and giving a large and well-paid hospitality to man and beast, which involved little that was menial to the family itself. The Richard Hewitt of the day had stood with his hands in his pockets, on his own threshold, talking to his guests about public matters, or the affairs of the county, while his ostlers looked after the horses, and his buxom maid, or rough waiter, brought the gentlemen their beer or more potent draught. He did not touch either horse or glass, but admired the one or shared the other, like any other rustic potentate; and if his pretty daughter glanced out of an upstairs window upon the group at the door, Sir Giles himself would take off his cap, and though perhaps there might be a touch of extravagance in the obeisance, which meant, in his intention, that Patty or Polly was not in the least upon his own level, yet the Patty or Polly of the moment remained completely unconscious of that exaggeration, and blushed, and retired from the window with a delighted sensation of being admired by the gentleman who was always so civil. Alas! these fine days were all past: and when Patience Hewitt now swept out the parlour briskly, as she did everything, and threw fresh wholesome sand upon the floor, and brought in the beer which the young squire, loitering upon the forbidden threshold of the great kitchen, had already several times asked for, the sense of that downfall was as strong in her mind as if she had been the old aunt Patty, old as the world itself, the girl thought, to whom old Sir Giles had taken off his cap.

"Patty! Patty! bring us some beer; and be done with that sweepin', and come, there's a ducky, and pour it out yourself."

"Go to the parlour, Mr. Gervase; that's your place and not here. If you will have beer in the morning, which is so bad for you, I'll bring it presently; but you know father won't have you here."

"If you'll have me, I don't mind old Hewitt, not that!" said Gervase, snapping his thumb and forefinger.

"But I do," said Patience, with a frown. "Old Hewitt is my father, and those that don't speak respectful of him

had better get out of here, and out of there, too. I won't have a man in the house that don't know how to behave himself, if he was a dozen times the squire's son."

The young man in question was a lanky youth, long and feeble upon his legs, with light hair longer than is usual, and goggle eyes, in which there was no speculation. He was very much cowed by Patty's energetic disapproval, and looked as if about to cry.

"Don't go on at me like that, Patty, don't, now! I'll swallow old Hewitt, dirty boots and all, before I'll have you frown. And do, do have done with your sweepin' and bring us the beer. I never feel right in the morning till I have had my beer."

"If you didn't have too much at night, Mr. Gervase, you wouldn't want it in the morning."

"Well, and whose fault is that? I'll drink no more beer. I've promised you, if——"

"If!" said Patty: "it's a big 'if.' If I'll take you up on my shoulders, that ain't fit for such a job, and carry you through the world."

"Come, that's too bad," said the young man. "Do you think I can't take care of my own wife! I never had any intentions that weren't honourable, and that you well know."

"You well know," cried Patty, with a flush of anger, "that the mere saying you hadn't is enough for me to bundle you neck-and-crop out of this house, and never to speak to you again."

"Well!" said poor Gervase, "you're hard to please. If he can't say that he means well, I don't know what a fellow may say."

"If I were in your place, I'd say as little as possible," said the maid of the inn.

"What a one you are!" cried the young squire, admiringly. "When we're married I'll let you do all the talking. You'll bring round the father and mother a deal sooner than I should. Indeed, they never hearken to me; but, Patty, when you speak——"

"What happens when I speak?"

"The very rector turns round his head. I've seen him do it at the church door."

"Pooh! the rector!" said Patty. "Tell me something a little fresher than that."

For, in fact, this young woman scorned the rector as one whom she could turn round her little finger. Had not she, ever since the days when she was the quickest at her catechism, the readiest to understand everything, the sharpest to take any hint, the most energetic in action, been known as the rector's favourite and ally in all parish matters for miles around?

"Is that all you think of him? but he's of as good a family as we are; and I shouldn't wonder," said the young man, with a giggle, "if Mrs. Bethell were to die, as folk say, that he mightn't come a-wooing to Patty, of the Seven Thorns, same as me."

"I should like to know," said Patty, sharply, "what kind of company you've been keeping, where they dare to speak of me as Patty of the Seven Thorns? And I suppose you didn't knock the fellow down that said it, you poor creature! you're not man enough for that, though I know some——" said Patty, with an air of defiance. She had by this time carried out all her operations, and even drawn the beer, and waved off the thirsty customer before her, driving him, as if he had been a flock of geese, into the parlour, with its newly-sanded floor.

"There!" she said, setting down her tray with a little violence; "it's good stuff enough, but it puts no more heart and strength into you than if you was a mouse. Too much is as bad, or maybe worse, than none at all. And, I tell you, I know some that would no more hear me named disrespectful like that—or any way but Miss Hewitt, Mr. Hewitt of the Seven Thorns' daughter—than I would demean myself to carrying on like a barmaid with every one that comes for a glass of beer into this house."

"I beg your pardon, Patty," said the young man; "I meant no harm. When you're Mrs. Gervase Piercey there's never one of them will dare mention your name without taking off his hat."

"Oh, you block!" cried Patty, exasperated. She paused, however, with an evident sense that to make her meaning clear to him would be impossible; yet added, after a moment, "If I can't be respected as Miss Hewitt, I'll never seek respect under no man's name. There's your beer, Mr. Gervase; and as soon as you've drunk it I advise you to go back to your parents, for you'll get no more here."

"Oh! Patty, don't you be so cruel."

"I'll be as cruel as I think proper. And I'll draw father's beer for them as I think proper, and nobody else. You're the spoiled child at the Hall, Mr. Gervase, but no one cares *that* for you here!"

And she, too, snapped her thumb and forefinger, in scorn of any subjection to ordinary prejudices, and shone radiant, in her defiance, in the homely scene to which she gave so much life. Patty was not a beautiful girl, as perhaps you may suppose. She had bright eyes, very well able to flash with indignation when necessary, or even with rage. She had a fine country complexion, with the gift, which is not so usual among the lowly born, of changing colour as her sentiments changed: flashing forth in wrath, and calming down in peace; and when she was excited, with an angry sparkle in her eyes, and the colour rising and falling, there was a *faux air* of beauty about her, which impressed the minds of those who exposed themselves to any such blaze of resentment. Her features, however, were not very good, and there was a hardness in the lines, which, no doubt, would strengthen in later years. She had a trim figure, a brisk light step, an air of knowing her own mind, and fully intending to carry out all its purposes, which made a great impression upon the shiftless and languid generally, and upon Gervase Piercey in particular. Perhaps Patty had a little too much the air, in her sharp intelligence, of the conventional *soubrette*, to have charmed a squire's son of greater intellectual perceptions. But Gervase knew nothing about *soubrettes*, or any other types, theatrical or otherwise. He knew vaguely what he saw, but no more; and that sharp intelligence, that brisk energy, that air of knowing her own mind, was more captivating to him than anything he had ever seen. He, whom everybody snubbed, who was accustomed to be laughed at, who knew so much as to know that he never knew what to do until somebody told him, and often did not understand what was wanted of him then—threw himself upon Patty with all the heavy weight of his nature. He had never seen anything so admirable, so strong, or so fair. She never was afraid to do whatever she had a mind to. She never stood swaying from one foot to another unable to make up her mind. She was all swiftness, firmness, alertness—ready for anything. He almost liked her to be angry with him, though it sometimes reduced him to abject despair, for the sake of that sparkle, that flush, that exhibition of high spirit.

Nobody, Gervase felt, would "put upon him" while Patty was near; nobody would push him aside, bid him to get out of the way. Even his father did this; and, what was still more, his mother too, when exasperated. But they would not, if Patty was there. Gervase was not only in love with her, which he was to the full extent of his abilities in that way, but he felt that his salvation lay in Patty, and that, with her to back him up, nobody would trample upon him any more.

He hoped to find her in a milder humour when he came back in the evening; for in the meantime it was beyond anything he could say or do to charm Patty back into good humour. She went back to her sweeping, making the corners of the kitchen floor ring with the energetic broom that pursued every grain of dust into its last refuge there. She would not stop, even to say good morning to him, when he lounged away. But after he was gone Patty relaxed in her fierce industry. She put away the broom, and stood at the window for a moment, with deep thought upon her brow. What was it she was thinking of, bending those brows, drawing in her upper lip in a way she had when her mind was busy? "To be, or not to be," that was the question. She was far, very far, from a Hamlet; but that momentous choice was before her, as much as if she had been the mightiest of spirits. When a woman pauses thus upon the threshold of her life, and questions which path she is to take, it is generally easy to guess that the question really is, which man will she marry? Patty was full of ambition as if she had been a princess. And she felt truly as much the child of a fallen house as if Richard Hewitt of the Seven Thorns had been a ruined duke. How far, how very far was she, Patience, the maid of the inn, drawing beer for the customers, compelled to serve every tramp who had twopence to spend—from the state of young Miss Patty at the upstairs window, sitting like a lady, doing vandykes of tape for her new petticoats (for she was informed of every incident of those times of family grandeur), to whom Sir Giles took off his hat. She had heard all her life of these once glorious circumstances, and her spirit burned within her to do something to restore herself that eminence; to achieve something that would make Aunt Patty hold her tongue, and own herself outdone. Ah! and here it was lying in her power. Sir Giles might have bowed to old Patty, but never did she have it in her power to become Lady Piercey, if she chose. Lady Piercey! with Greyshott Manor at her command, and all the grandeur which the very best of the previous Hewitts had only seen by grace of the housekeeper. And Patty might one day be the mistress of the housekeeper if she chose! The possibility was enough to thrill her from head to foot; but she had not yet made up her mind. No, splendid as the prospect was, there was yet a great deal to think of before she could make up her mind. She went to the door and gave a hurried glance out, to see the long, listless figure of Gervase Piercey strolling along across the wide stretch of broken land that lay between him and his home. He paused to look back several times as he went along, but Patty would not gratify him with the sight of her looking after him. He was not a lover to be encouraged by such signs of favour, but to be kept down at her feet until she should choose to hold out a gracious finger. Her thoughts were not flattering to him as she looked after him: the long, lazy, listless, useless being. If he did not care so much for me, beer would be the chief thing that Mr. Gervase would care for; coming here in the morning for his glass, the fool, instead of doing something! A man with horses to ride and carriages to drive, and an estate that he might see to, and save his father money! "Lord! lord!" said Patty to herself, "what fools these men are!" for the only thing he could do with himself, to get through the morning, was to walk across to the Seven Thorns for his morning beer, and then to walk back again. She who had a hundred things to do scorned him for this more than words could say. But yet, "first and foremost, before I settle anything," said Patty, "I'll see that he's cured of that. A man that's always swilling beer morning and evening, if he was a duke, he is not the man for me."

CHAPTER II.

THE parlour at the Seven Thorns was, in the evening, turned into a sort of village club, where a select number of the fathers of the hamlet assembled night after night to consume a certain amount of beer, to smoke a certain number of pipes, and then to retire at a not very late hour, not much the worse, perhaps, for their potatoes. It was not a vicious place, nor was it one of revelry. The talk was slow, like the minds of the talkers, and it was chiefly concerned with local events. If now and then there was a public measure which was wide enough, or descended sufficiently low to reach the level of those rustic folk, there might be occasionally a few heavy words on that subject. But this was of the rarest occurrence, and the humours of the heavy assembly were little perceptible to a superficial observer. What was going on at the Manor was of infinitely less interest to this rustic club than what was going on in the village, and unless Sir Giles had turned out his cottagers, or, what was worse, endeavoured to improve their tumble-down habitations, I cannot see why their minds should have been directed to him or his affairs. It is, perhaps, a delusion of the writer, most interested himself in the Squire's family, which lends to the rural public the same inclination. It is true that when young Gervase Piercey first began to appear among them, to be placed in the warmest corner, and served first with whatever he called for, the elders of the village took their pipes out of their mouths and stared. "What do he be a-wanting 'ere?" they said to each other with their eyes, and a head or two was shaken, not only over the inappropriateness of his appearance, but because the presence of the young Squire was more or less a check upon their native freedom as well as prolixity of talk. Gervase had been known to interrupt a lingering discussion with a "Speak up, old cock!" or with a silly laugh in the wrong place, which confused the speaker and made him forget whereabouts in his subject he was. It was some time, however, before it occurred to them what the young man's motive was, which was made plain by several signs: in the first place by the fact that Patty ceased to serve the customers in the parlour, old Hewitt getting up with many grumbles from the settle to supply their wants himself; then by the impatience of the young man, who had at first smoked his pipe contentedly in his corner, interrupting the conversation only by those silly laughs of his, or by an equally foolish question, which, though idiotic in itself, was the cause of discomfiture to a village orator accustomed to have everything his own way; and then it was observed that Gervase let his pipe go out and kept his eyes upon the door, and then that he became very uneasy when the brisk voice of Patty was heard outside, presumably talking with the younger frequenters of the place, who hung about the precincts of the Seven Thorns, or occupied the bench under the window of the parlour. When the young squire at last got up and went out, the sages said little, but they looked at each other or nudged each other, those who were close enough pointing with their long pipes over their shoulders, and finally burst forth into a slow roar, shaking their sides. "Softy if 'e be, 'e knows wat's wat as well as ere another," said the "*Maestro de chi sanno*," the sage of sages, the Aristotle of the village. This revelation slowly communicated itself over the parish, "The young squire, he be after Patty Hewitt o' the Seven Thorns; but Patty is one as will keep him in his place, and

no mistake," was the popular verdict. The parish knew, even better than the gentry did, that Gervase—Sir Giles' only child—was a softy; it knew his habits, and that he was good for nothing, not even to take a hand at cards or field a ball at cricket, so that his dangling after Patty Hewitt caused nobody any anxiety. She knew how to keep him in his own place; no village story of lovely woman stooping to folly was likely to arise in her case. The Softy was a good creature enough, and harmed nobody, except by that exasperating laugh of his, which made the persons interrupted by it furious, but broke no bones, everybody allowed. So that it was more on Gervase's account than Patty's that the village concerned itself. "She do be making a fool of 'im," they said with gratification; for was not this a just revenge for other maidens wronged by other young squires of higher qualities than poor Gervase. Generally there was a slow satisfaction in the triumph of the people over the gentry, as thus exemplified; yet a general wish that Patty should not push that triumph too far.

On the evening of the day on which this story begins, he had kept in the parlour as long as his patience lasted, always looking for the moment when she should appear; for the mind of Gervase worked very slowly, and he had not yet begun to understand as a rule, what all the parish already knew, that Patty now entered the parlour no more in the evening. Gervase knew that he had not seen her for night after night, but he had no faculty for putting this and that together, and he did not draw the natural conclusion that she had so settled it with her father. Nor had he found much advantage in going out to the door, in following the sound of her voice, which seemed to flicker about like a will-o'-the-wisp, now sounding close at hand, now from a distance. When Patty was visible she was generally in close conversation with some one—Roger Pearson as often as not, was an antagonist whom Gervase had sense enough not to encounter. And, accordingly, it was the most rare thing in the world when he had any nearer view of the object of his admiration than the dim outline of her, in the dark, flitting about in front of the house with her tray, and not to be interrupted; or perhaps strolling off beyond the seven thorns which gave their name to the house, with another tall figure beside her. Roger Pearson was the athlete of the village. It was he who commanded the eleven got up between Greyshott and Windyhill, which had beaten almost every eleven that had met them, and certainly every other eleven in the county; and he was a leading volunteer, a great football player, everything that it is most glorious in English country life to be. Gervase did not venture to contest openly the favour of Patty with this stalwart fellow. He stood on the threshold with his mouth open, and his heart rung, and watched them stroll away together in the moonlight, losing sight of them in the shadow of the thorns: waiting till they emerged beyond upon the great flat of the moorland country among the furze bushes. Poor Softy! to see the lady of his love thus taken away from him by a stronger than he, was very hard upon him. Though he was a Softy, there was in Gervase so much of that feeling of the gentleman, which can be transmitted by blood and by the atmosphere of an ancient house—as made him aware that to make his possible wife the object of a brawl was not to be thought of, even had he felt any confidence in his own courage and muscles as against those of Roger. So that both these reasons held him back: the instinct of the weakling, and the instinct of the gentleman too. If he could have fought with and overthrown Roger on any other argument, how he would have rejoiced! He planned in his dreams a hundred ways of doing so, but never in his waking moments ventured to cross that hero's path: and he would not make a row over Patty. No! no! even if he could have seized Roger by the collar and pitched him to the other side of the moor, as Roger, he was convinced, would do to him if the opportunity ever arose, he would not have done it to bring in Patty's name and make her talked about. No! no! He said this to himself as he stood at the door and watched them with his mouth open and watering, and his heart sore. Poor Gervase; there was something in it, even if not so much as he thought.

But this evening, by a happy chance, Roger was not there. Gervase found Patty standing alone, wholly indifferent to the two or three vague figures which were dimly visible on the bench beneath the lighted window of the parlour. It was such a chance for Gervase as had never happened before. He whistled softly, but Patty took no notice; he called her by her name in a whisper, but she never turned her head. Was she regretting the other man, the fellow who had nothing to offer her but a cottage, and who was far too busy with his cricket matches and things ever to earn much money, or even to stay at home with his wife? Gervase ventured upon a great step. He came up behind her and seized Patty's hand, which was akimbo, firmly placed upon her side.

"Who's that?" she cried, throwing off the touch; "and what are you wanting here?"

"You know well enough who it is—it's Gervase come to have a word——"

"Oh!" said Patty, disdainfully, "it's the young gentleman from the Manor as has no right to be here."

"Yes, it is me," said Gervase, not quick enough to take up the scorn in her speech. "Come, Patty, let's take a little turn round the Thorns: do, now!—there's nobody else coming to-night."

"Much I care for any one coming! I can take my walk alone, thank you, Mr. Gervase, and you had better go home. I can't abide to see you spending your time here morning and night."

"Why shouldn't I come here, Patty? It is the nicest place in all the world to me."

"But it oughtn't to be," cried Patty; "your place is in Greyshott Manor, and this is only a little inn upon the edge of the downs. What pleasure can you find in this parlour, with all their pipes going, and the smoke curling about your head, and the silly talk about Blacksmith John at the smithy, and how he shod Farmer George's mare?"

"Well, if I don't object to the talk; and what reason have you against it? It's always good for trade."

"It's not even good for trade," said the girl. "Do you think they like you to be here, these men? No; not even father don't, though it's to his profit, as you say. It stops the talk: for there's things they wouldn't say before you: and it makes them think and ask questions. It ain't pleasant for me when they takes to ask each other, 'What's the young squire after for ever down here?'"

"Well, you can tell them," said Gervase, with his foolish laugh; "I make no secret of it. Patty's what I'm after, and she knows——"

They had gone down upon the open ground where the seven thorns, which gave the house its name, stood in a cluster, ghostly in the white moonlight, some of them so old that they were propped up by staves and heavy pieces of wood. Patty had moved on in the fervour of her speech, notwithstanding that she angrily rejected his request to take a turn. With the blackness of that shade between them and the house, they might have been miles, though they were but a few yards, from the house, with its murmuring sound of voices and its lights.

"Look here!" said Patty, quickly. "No man shall ever come after me that goes boozing like you do at beer from morning to night."

Patty, though she generally spoke very nicely, thanks to the Catechism and the rector's favour, was after all not

an educated person, and if she said "like you do," it was no more than might be expected from her ignorance. She flung away the arm which he had stolen round her, and withdrew to a distance, facing him with her head erect. "You're a dreadful one for beer, Mr. Gervase," she said; "it's that you come to our house for, it isn't for me. If there was no Patty, you'd want a place to sit and soak in all the same."

"That's a lie!" said the young man; "and I don't take more than I want when I'm thirsty. It's only you that are contrary. There's that Roger; you let him have as much as you like——"

"What Roger?" cried Patty, with a flash of her eyes, which was visible even in the moonlight. "If it's Mr. Pearson you mean, he never looks at beer except just to stand pots round for the good of the house——"

"If that's what pleases you, Patty, I'll—I'll stand anything—to anybody—as long as—as long as——" Poor Gervase thrust the hand which she would not permit to hold hers, into his pocket, searching for the coin that he had not. At which his tormentor laughed.

"As long as you've anything to pay it with," she said. "And you have not—and that makes all the difference. Roger Pearson—since you've made so bold as to put a name to him—has his pockets full. And you're running up a pretty high score, Mr. Gervase, I can tell you, for nobody but yourself."

"I don't know how he has his pockets full," Gervase said, with a growl; "it isn't from the work he does—roaming the country and playing in every match——"

"You see he *can* play," said Patty, maliciously; "which some folks couldn't do, not if they was to try from now to doomsday."

"But it don't get him on in his business, or make money to keep a wife," said the young man with a flash of shrewdness, at which Patty stared with astonishment, but with a touch of additional respect.

"Well, Mr. Gervase," she said, making a swift diversion; "I shall always say it's a shame keeping you as short as you are of money; and you the heir of all."

"Isn't it?" cried Sir Giles Piercely's heir. "Not a penny but what's doled out as if I were fifteen instead of twenty-five—or I'd have brought you diamonds, before now, Patty, to put round your neck."

"Would you, now, Mr. Gervase? And what good would they have been to me at the Seven Thorns? You can't wear diamonds when you're drawing beer," she added, with a laugh.

"I can't abide you to be drawing beer," cried the young man: "unless when it is for me."

"And that's the worst I can do," said Patty, quickly. "Here's just how it is: till you give up all that beer, Mr. Gervase, you're not the man for me. It's what I begun with, and you've brought me round to it again. Him as I've to do with shall never be like that. Father sells it—more's the pity; but I don't hold with it. And, if I had the power, not a woman in the country would look at a man that was fond of it: more than for his meals, and, perhaps, a drop when he's thirsty," she added, in a more subdued tone.

"That's just my case, Patty," said Gervase; "a drop when I'm thirsty—and most often I am thirsty——"

"That's not what I mean, neither. If you were up and down from morning to night getting in your hay, or seeing to your turnips, or riding to market—well, then I'd allow you a drink, like as I would to your horse, only the brute has the most sense, and drinks good water; but roaming up and down, doing nothing as you are—taking a walk for the sake of getting a drink, and then another walk to give you the excuse to come back again, and nothing else in your mind but how soon you can get another; and then sitting at it at night for hours together till you're all full of it—like a wet sponge, and smelling like the parlour does in the morning before the windows are opened—Faugh!" cried Patty, vigorously pushing him away, "it is enough to make a woman sick!"

Personal disgust is the one thing which nobody can bear; even the abject Gervase was moved to resentment. "If I make you sick, I'd better go," he said sullenly, "and find another place where they ain't so squeamish."

"Yes, do; there are plenty of folks that don't mind: neither for your good nor for their own feelings. You can go, and welcome. And I'm going back to the house."

"Oh, stop a moment, Patty! Don't take a fellow up so quick! It isn't nice to hear a girl say that, when you worship the ground she stands on——"

"The smell of beer," said Patty, sniffing audibly with her nostrils in the air, "is what I never could abide."

"You oughtn't to mind it. If it wasn't for beer——"

"Oh, taunt me with it, do!" cried Patty. "If it wasn't for beer, neither Richard Hewitt of the Seven Thorns, nor them that belongs to him, that once had their lands and their farms as good as any one, and more horses in their stables than you have ever had at the Manor, couldn't get on at all, nor pay their way—Oh, taunt me with it! It's come to that, and I can't gainsay it. I draw beer for my living, and I ought to encourage them that come. But I can't abide it, all the same," cried Patty, stamping her foot on the dry and sandy turf; "and I won't look at a man, if he was a prince, that is soaking and drinking night and day!"

She turned and walked off towards the house with her quick, springy step, followed by the unhappy Gervase, who called "Patty! Patty!" by intervals, as he went after humbly. At last, just before they came into sight of the loungers about the door, he ventured to catch at her sleeve.

"Patty! Patty! just for one moment! Listen—do listen to me!"

"What were you pleased to want, sir?" said Patty, turning upon him. "Another tankard of beer?"

"Oh, Patty," said the young man, "if I was to give it up, and never touch another blessed drop again——"

"It would be real good for you—the very best thing you could do."

"I wasn't thinking of that. Would you be a little nice to me, Patty? Would you listen to me when I speak?—would you——?"

"I always listen to them that speaks sense, Mr. Gervase."

"I know I ain't clever," said the poor fellow; "and whether this is sense I don't know: but you shall be my lady when father dies, if you'll only listen to me now."

Patty's eyes danced, and her pulses beat with a thrill which ran through her from head to foot. But she said:

"I'll never listen to any man, if he would make me a queen, so long as he went on like that with the beer!"

CHAPTER III.

GREYSHOTT MANOR, to which Gervase directed his steps after the interview above recorded, was a large red brick mansion, no earlier than the reign of Anne; though there were traces in various parts of the house of a much older lineage. The front, however, which you could see through the wonderful avenue of beeches, which was the pride of the place, bore a pediment and twinkled with rows of windows, two long lines above the porticoed and pillared door, which also had a small pediment of its own. It looked old-fashioned, but not old, and was in perfect repair. When the sun shone down the beech avenue, which faced to the west, it turned the old bricks of the house into a sort of glorified ruddiness, blended of all the warmest tones—red and russet, and brown and orange, with a touch of black relieving it here and there. The effect in autumn, when all those warm tints which, by the alchemy of nature, bring beauty out of the chilly frost and unlovely decay—was as if all the colours in the rainbow had been poured forth; but all so toned and subdued by infinite gradation that the most violent notes of colour were chastened into harmony. It was not autumn, however, at this moment, but full summer,—the trees in clouds and billows of full foliage, dark on either side of that glory of the moon, which poured down like a silver river between, and made all the windows white with the whiteness of her light. The avenue was a wonderful feature at Greyshott, and even the mere passer-by had the good of it, since it was closed only by a great gate of wrought iron, which would also have been worth looking at had the spectator been a connoisseur. The fault of the avenue was that it was a short one—not above a quarter of a mile long—and it was now used only by foot-passengers, who had a right of way through the little postern that flanked the big gate. Important visitors drove up on the other side, through what was called *the Avenue*, which was just like other avenues; but the Beeches were the pride of Greyshott. To think that the one slim shadow that came into the moonlight in the midst of them, with a wavering gait and stooping shoulders, should be the future lord and master of all those princely older inhabitants, with the power of life and death in his hands! A few years hence, when old Sir Giles had come to the end of his existence, his son could cut them down if he pleased. He could obliterate the very name of the great trees, so much more dignified and splendid members of society than himself, which stood in close ranks on either side of the path: he so little and they so great, and yet this confused and bewildered mortal the master of all!

If Gervase walked with a wavering gait, it was not because of the beer against which Patty had made so strong a remonstrance. He had, indeed, had quite enough of that; but his uncertain step was natural to the Softy, as all the country called him. He went along with his head stooping, his hands in his pockets, his eyes traversing the path as well as his feet, keeping up an inane calculation of the white pebbles, or the brown ones, among the gravel. He had long been in the habit of playing a sort of game with himself in the vacancy of his mind, the brown against the white, counting them all along the level of the road, occasionally cheating himself in the interests of the right side or the left. This occupation had beguiled him over many a mile of road. But it had palled upon him since he had known Patty, or rather, since she had surprised him into that admiration and enthusiasm which had made him determine to marry her, whatever difficulties might be in the way. It was, perhaps, because of the rebuff she had given him that Gervase had again taken to his game with the brown and white pebbles in the road, which, indeed, it was not too easy to distinguish in the whiteness of the moon. He walked along with his head down, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders up to his ears, and the moon was very unhandsome in the matter of shadow, and threw a villainous blotch behind him upon that clear white line of way. There was a light in the front of the house to which Gervase was bound; a sort of querulous light, which shone keen in the expanse of windows, all black and white in the moon, like the eyes of an angry watcher looking out for the return of the prodigal, but not like the father in the parable. It was, indeed, exactly so: the light was in his mother's window, who would not go to bed till Gervase had come home. It was not late, but it was late for the rural household, which was all closed and shut up by ten o'clock. Sir Giles was an invalid, his wife old, and accustomed to take great care of herself. She sat up in her dressing-gown, angry, though anxious, with all the reproachful dignity of a woman kept up and deprived of her natural rest, ready to step into bed the moment her vigil was over; a large watch ticking noisily and also reproachfully on the table beside her, with a sort of stare in its large white face, seeming to say, late! late! instead of tick, tick—to the young man's guilty ear.

At least, it had once done so; but Gervase by this time was quite hardened to the watch that said late! and the mother whose tongue in the tschick, tschick! of angry remonstrance, hailed him for want of better welcome when he went in.

He directed himself to a little side door in the shadow, which was often left open for him by the old butler, who had less fear of his plate than of getting the boy, whom, Softy as he was, he loved, into trouble. But sometimes it was not left open; sometimes an emissary from above, his mother's maid, who loved him not, one of her satellites, turned the key, and Gervase had to ring, waking all the echoes of the house. He thought it was going to be so on this particular night, for when he pushed, it did not yield. Next moment, however, it opened softly, showing a tall shadow in the dimly-lighted passage. "O, Gervase, how late you are!" said a low voice.

"Why, it's you!" he said.

"Yes, it's me. My aunt is angry, I don't know why. And she says you are to go to her before you go to bed."

"I sha'n't!" said Gervase.

"Do, there's a dear boy. She has got something in her head. She will imagine worse than the truth if you don't go. Oh! why should you be so undutiful? They would be so good to you if you would but let them. Go to your mother, Gervase, and let her see——"

She paused, looking at him by the faint light as if she were not very sure that Gervase's mother would see anything satisfactory. There was not, indeed, anything exhilarating to see. His light eyes, which had shone with a certain brightness upon Patty, were opaque now, and had no speculation in them. His under lip hung a little, and was always moist. The sullen look was habitual to his face. "What does she want o' me?" he said in his throat, running his words into each other.

"She wants of you—— what I'm afraid she'll never get," said the cousin with a tone of exasperation; "but at least go and say good-night to her, Gervase, and be as pleasant as you can. You may always do that."

"You're not one that thinks much o' my pleasantness, Meg."

"I've always been grateful for it when you've showed me any," she said with a smile. She was a tall woman, older than Gervase, a few years over thirty, at the age which should be the very glory and flush of prime, but which

in a woman is usually scoffed at as if it were old age. Gervase frankly thought his cousin an elderly woman who did not count any longer in life. She was very plainly dressed in black, being a widow and poor, and had something of the air of one who is on sufferance in a house to which she does not naturally belong. She kept at a slight distance from her cousin, taking half a step back when he took one in advance: but her voice to him was soft and her meaning kind. She had no great affection, beyond the habitual bond of having known him all his life, for Gervase; but she was a bystander seeing both sides of the question, and she did not think that the treatment adopted in his home was judicious, which made her more or less, as a dependent may be, the partizan of the poor fellow, for whom nobody had any respect, and few people cared at all.

"Come," she said, in a persuasive tone; "I'll go with you, Gervase."

"What good'll that do?" he said, sullenly.

"Well, not much, perhaps: but you always liked when you were little to have somebody to stand by you: and if my aunt thinks I'm intruding, it will be all the better for you."

So saying, she led the way upstairs, and knocked lightly at a door on the gallery which went round the hall. "Here he is, aunt," she said, "quite safe and sound; and now you can get to bed."

"Who is quite safe and sound? and was there any doubt on that subject?" said a voice within. Lady Piercey sat very upright in an old-fashioned chair of the square high-backed kind, with walls like a house. The candle that looked so querulous in the window had inside a sharp, self-assertive light, as if it had known all about it all the time. She was in a dressing-gown of a large shawl pattern, warm and wadded, and had a muslin cap with goffered frills tied closely round her face. It is a kind of head-dress which makes a benign face still more benign, and a sweet complexion sweeter, and which also stiffens and starches a different kind of countenance. Lady Piercey was high featured, of that type of the human visage which resembles a horse, and her frills quivered with the indignation in her soul.

"I thought you were anxious about Gervase, aunt."

Mrs. Osborne interfered in this obviously injudicious way, with the object of drawing aside the lightnings upon herself, as it was generally easy to do.

"I don't know what you had to do with it," said Lady Piercey, roughly. "If I'm anxious about Gervase, it's not about life or limb. I'm not a fool, I hope. What did you give her, you block, to make her come and put herself before you like this?"

"I've got nothing to give," said the lout. There had been a trace of manhood, a gleam even of the gentleman in him when he was with Patty. Here, in his mother's room, he became a mere lump of clay. He pulled out his pockets as he spoke, which shed a number of small articles upon the floor, but not a coin. "I have a deal to give—to her or any one," he said.

"Where do you spend it all?" said the mother; "five shillings I gave you on Monday, and what expenses have you? Kept in luxury, and never needing to put your hand in your pocket. Goodness, Meg, what a smell! Is it a barrel of beer you've rolled into my room, or is it—is it my only boy?"

"By—Gosh!" said Gervase. He could not be gentlemanly even in his oaths. He would have said "By George!" or perhaps "By Jove!" even if he had been with Patty, but nothing but this vulgar expletive would come to his lips here.

"I've heard of you, sir," said Lady Piercey; "I've heard where you spend your time, and who you spend it with. A common beerhouse, and the woman that serves the beer. Oh, good gracious! good gracious! and to think that should be my son, and that he's the heir to an old estate and will be Sir Gervase if he lives!"

"Ay," said Gervase, with a laugh, "and you can't stop that, old lady, not if you should burst."

"Don't you be too sure I can't stop it," she cried. "Your father is not much good, but he is more good than you think; and if you suppose there's no way of putting an idiot out of the line, you're mistaken. There are plenty of asylums for fools, I can tell you; and if you are such a double-dyed fool as that——"

Gervase stared and grew pale; but then he took courage and laughed a weak laugh. "I may be a fool," he said, "you're always that nice to me, mamma: but there's them in the world that will stand up for me, and cleverer than you."

Lady Piercey stared also for a moment; and then turning to Mrs. Osborne, asked, "Meg! what does the ass mean?"

"Oh, have a little patience, aunt! He means—nothing, probably. He has been doing no harm, and he's vexed to be blamed. Why should he be blamed when he has been doing no harm?"

"Do you call it no harm to bring the smell of an alehouse into my room?" cried Lady Piercey; "you will have to open all the windows to get rid of it, and probably I shall get my death of cold—which is what he would like, no doubt."

Gervase laughed again, his lower lip more watery than ever. "Trust you for taking care of yourself," he said. "If that's all you have got to say, slanging a fellow for nothing, I'll go to bed."

"Stop here, when I tell you! and let me know this instant about that woman. Who is she that will have anything to say to *you*? Perhaps she thinks she will be my lady, and get my place after me—a girl that draws beer for all the ploughmen in the parish!"

"I don't know who you're speaking of," said Gervase. His face grew a dull red, and he clenched his fist. "By Gosh! and if she marries me, so she will, and nobody can stop it," he said.

"You had better banish this illusion from your mind," said Lady Piercey, with solemnity. "A woman like that shall never be my lady, and come after me. It's against—against the laws of this house; it's against the law of the land. Your father can leave every penny away from you! And as for the name, it's—it's forbidden to a common person. The Lord Chancellor will not allow it!—the Queen will not have it! You might as well try to—to bring down St. Paul's to Greystott! Do you hear, you fool, what I say?"

Gervase stood with his mouth open: he was confounded with these big names. The Queen and the Lord Chancellor and St. Paul's! They mingled together in a something stupendous, an authority before which even Patty, with all her cleverness, must fail. He gazed at his mother with the stupid alarm which all his life her denunciations had inspired. St. Paul's and the Queen! The one an awful shadow, coming down on the moors; the other at the head of her army, as in a fairy story. And the Lord Chancellor! something more alarming still, because Gervase could form

no idea of him unless by the incarnation of the police, which even in Greysthott was a name of fear.

"Look here," said Lady Piercely, "this is what it would mean; you wouldn't have a penny; you'd have to draw the beer yourself to get your living; you'd be cut off from your father's will like—like a turnip top. The Lord Chancellor would grant an injunction to change your name; for they won't have good old names degraded, the great officers won't. You might think yourself lucky if you kept the Gervase, for that's your christened name; but it would be Gervase Brown, or Green, or something;—or they might let you for a favour take her name—the beerhouse woman's; which would suit you very well, for you would be the beerhouse man."

Gervase's lip dropped more and more, his face grew paler and paler. Lady Piercely by long experience had grown versed in this kind of argument. She was aware that she could reduce him to absolute vacuity and silence every plea he might bring forth. He had no plea, poor fellow. He was so ignorant that, often as he had been thus threatened, he never had found out the absurdity of these threats. He fell upon himself like a ruined wall, as he stood before her limp and terrified. There was a grim sort of humour in the woman which enjoyed this too, as well as the sense of absolute power she had over him; and when she had dismissed him, which she did with the slight touch of a kiss upon his cheek, but again a grimace at the smell of beer, she burst into a wild but suppressed laugh. "Was there ever such a fool, to believe all I say?" she said to her niece who removed her dressing-gown, and helped her into bed; and then—for this fierce old lady was but an old woman after all—she fell a-whimpering and crying. "And that's my son! oh Lord! my only child; all that I've got in the world."

CHAPTER IV.

MARGARET found Gervase waiting for her in the darkness of the corridor, when she left his mother. Lady Piercely was a righteous woman, who would not keep her maid out of bed after ten o'clock; but her niece was a different matter. He caught his cousin by the arm, almost bringing from her a cry of alarm. "Meg," he said in her ear, "do you think it's all true?"

"Oh, Gervase, you gave me such a fright!"

"Is it all true?"

"How can I tell you? I don't know anything about the law," she said, with a sense of disloyalty to the poor fellow who was so ignorant; but she could not contradict her aunt, and if that was supposed to be for his good—

"If it should be," said Gervase, with a deep sigh: and then he added, "I couldn't let her marry me if it wasn't to be for her good."

"Oh, Gervase, why can't you show yourself like that to *them*?" his cousin said.

"I don't know what you mean. I make no difference," he answered dully, as he turned away.

Then there came another disturbance. The door of Sir Giles' room further on opened cautiously, and his servant, who was also his nurse, looked out with great precaution and beckoned to her. Sir Giles was in bed; an old man with a red face and white hair; his under lip dropped like that of Gervase, though there was still a great deal of animation in his little bright blue eyes. He called her to come to him close to his bedside, as if Dunning, his man, did not know exactly what his master was going to ask.

"Has Gervase come in?" he said.

"Yes, uncle."

"Is he drunk?"

"Oh, no," said Margaret eagerly, "nothing of the sort!"

"That's all right," said the old gentleman with a sigh of satisfaction. "Now I'll go to sleep."

Thus the whole household, though it was not to be called a sensitive or a loving household, held its watch over the poor lad who, in his patent stupidity, was its only hope.

Margaret Osborne went away to the end of the corridor to her own room where her little boy was sleeping. She was a few years over thirty, as I have said, and therefore was one of those whose day is supposed to be over. She would have said so herself from other reasons, with complete good faith. For was she not a widow, thrown back as wrecks are upon the shore, out of the storms and hurricanes of life? She might have added that she was cast upon a desert island, after a very brief yet sharp acquaintance with all those stirring adventures and hair-breadth escapes which sometimes make life a stormy voyage. She had married a soldier, and gone with him from place to place during a course of troubled years. They had been poor, and their marriage was what is called an imprudent one; but it was so much worse than that, that Captain Osborne had by no means intended it to be imprudent, but had remained convinced till the last moment that Sir Giles Piercely's niece must bring something substantial with her to the common stock. He had been warned over and over again, but he had not believed the warning; and when he found himself with a wife on his hands, whose utmost endowment was a very small allowance; enough, with economy, to dress her in the simplest manner, but no more—while he himself had little more than his pay to depend on, the disappointment was grievous. Captain Osborne was a gentleman, though not a very high-minded one, and he did his best to keep the knowledge of this shock from his wife, and to look as if he shared that joy in life and intoxicating delight of freedom with which Margaret, the unconsidered orphan of Greysthott, stepped forth into the fulness of existence with the man she loved. He was able to keep that up quite a long time, his despondencies and occasional irritabilities being attributed by Margaret to anything but the real cause of them; but at the last, in an unguarded moment, the secret slipped from him. Not anything to leave an indelible mark on her memory; not that he had married her with the intention of increasing his income, which would not have been true; but only an unintentional revelation of the disappointment which had been in his mind from the very day of their marriage—the failure of a prospect upon which his thoughts were bent. "I thought I should have been able to do you more justice, Meg; but if we've grubbed on in a poor way, you must remember it's that old curmudgeon of an uncle of yours that's to blame." She had asked what he meant, with a startled look, and gradually had elicited the story of his disappointment, which sunk into her heart like a stone. Not that she misjudged him or believed that he had married her for that only. Oh! no, no; but to think, when you have supposed your husband to be satisfied with your society as you with his; to find in you the fulfilment of all his hopes of happiness as you in him; and then to discover that from your very marriage day he has gone forth with a disappointment, with a grudge; with an unsaid reflection, "If I had

but known!"—Margaret forgot it 'mid the many events that filled her existence, forgot even the bitter thought that, had he known, he need not have been subjected to those slights and scorns and forced self-denials that befall the poor; forgot everything but love and sorrow in those last sad scenes which have this one compensation—that they obliterate all that is not love from the mourner's heart. But, nevertheless, the mark that had been made on her life was always there. We may have forgotten when, and how, and even by whose hand we got the wound, but the scar remains, and the smoothness of the injured surface can never be restored.

But she had her little boy, who was her estate, her endowment, her dowry, whatever else might be lacking; and who had come to be the delight of the house in which she was received after her widowhood—oh! not unkindly—with a quite genuine compassion and friendliness, if not love. They were not a family of delicate mind; they did not think it necessary to spare a dependent any of those snubs or small humiliations which belong to her lot. They took her in frankly because she had nowhere else to go to, with an occasional complaint of their hard fate in having to receive and support other people's children, and an occasional gibe at the poor relations who were always a drag upon the head of the family. I do not say that she had not felt this, for she had a high spirit; and, perhaps, if she had been a woman educated as women are beginning to be now, she might have felt herself capable of achieving independence and throwing off the sore weight of charity which is so good for those who give, but generally so hard upon those who receive. But after many a weary thought she had given up the hope of this. She had not boldness enough to venture on any great and unusual undertaking, and there were no means for a woman of earning her living then, except in the way of teaching (which, at all times, must be the chief standby), for which she was not capable, having had no education herself. So that she had to accept the humiliations, to hear herself described as "my niece, you know, who has had to come back, poor thing, left without a penny. If she had not had her uncle's house to come back to, Heaven knows what would have become of her"; and to witness the visitor's pressure of Lady Piercey's hand, and admiring exclamation, "How good you are!" And it was true—they were very good. She had not a moment she could call her own, but was running their errands the whole day. She was sick-nurse, lady's maid, secretary, and reader, all in one. Sir Giles had moments when he remembered that to have such an invalid master was hard upon Dunning, and that so valuable a servant must have, now and then, an afternoon to himself; and Lady Piercey was very considerate of her maid, Parsons, and insisted, as we have seen, that she should always get to bed by ten o'clock. But to both of these good people it seemed quite natural that Meg should take the place thus vacated, and support the gouty old gentleman, and put the old lady to bed. Their own flesh and blood! like the daughter of the house! of course, it was she who came in naturally to fulfil all their needs. And Margaret never made an objection—scarcely felt one; was glad to be always busy, always at their service; but now and then, perhaps, in an idle moment, wondered, with a smile, how they could get on without her; felt a little indignation against Dunning and Parsons, who never showed any gratitude to her for the many fatigues she spared them—and thought within herself that the story of the niece, poor thing, who had come back without a penny, might be less frequently told.

But there had come into her life a great revenge—a thing which no one had thought of, unintentional, indeed undesired. The little boy, the baby, whom every one had called poor little thing!—as of the most unprotected and defenceless of God's creation—that little boy, Osy, such a burden on the poor niece who had not a penny! had become the king of the house! It was such a revolution as had never entered into any mind to conceive. Osy, who understood nothing about his proper place or his position, as entirely dependent on Sir Giles' charity, but did understand very well that everybody smiled upon him, delighted even in his very naughtiness, obeyed his lightest wish, fulfilled all his little caprices, took his little place as prince, as if it had been the most natural thing in the world. From old Sir Giles, by whom he sat on his little stool, patting the old gentleman's gouty foot, with the softest feather-touch of his little hand, and babbling with all manner of baby talk profound questions that could have no answer, and shrills of little laughter, while even Dunning, on the other side of the old man's chair, smiled indulgent, and declared that nothing do amuse master or take him out of himself like that child; and Lady Piercey, to whom he would run, hiding among her ample robes with full connivance on her part, when it was time to put him to bed—while Parsons stood delighted by, alleging that children was allays so when they was happy, and that the little 'un was fond of her ladyship, to be sure—there was but one thought little of Osy. He was a darling, he was, the housekeeper said, who was grim to Mrs. Osborne, and resented much being obliged occasionally to take my lady's orders from the poor niece without a penny. Gervase was the only one in the family who did not idolise Osy. He had liked him well enough at first, when he mounted the little thing on his shoulder to Margaret's terror, holding the child, who had twice his energy and spirit, with a limp arm in which there was no security. But after the time when Osy, with a fling, threw himself from his cousin's nervous hold, and broke his little head and plunged the house into a panic of alarm, all such pranks had been forbidden, and Gervase took no more notice of the child, who had already begun to share the contempt of the household for him.

"Why doesn't Cousin Gervase 'list for a soldier?" Osy had asked one day as he sat by Sir Giles. "Why should he 'list for a soldier?" asked the old gentleman; though Dunning grew pale, and Lady Piercey looked up with a sharp "Eh?" not knowing what treason was to follow. Dunning knew what had been said on that subject in the servants' hall, and divined that the child had heard and would state his authorities without hesitation. "Because——" said Osy—but then he made a pause—his mother's eye was upon him, and, perhaps, though he had not the least idea what she feared and probably in childish defiance would have done that precisely had he known, yet this glance did give him pause; and he remembered that he had been told not to repeat what the servants said. The processes in a child's mind are no less swift than those of a more calculating age. "Because," said the boy, lingering, beginning to enjoy the suspense on all these faces, "because—it would make his back straight. Mamma says my back's straight because the sergeant drilled me when I was a lickle, lickle boy."

"And the dear child is as straight as a rush, my lady," said Parsons, who was, as so often, arranging Lady Piercey's work. She, too, was grateful beyond measure to little Osy for not repeating the talk of the servants' hall.

"And what are you now, Osy," cried Sir Giles, with a great laugh, "if you're no longer a lickle, lickle boy?"

"I'm the king of the castle," said Osy, tilting at Dunning with the old gentleman's stick. "Bedone, you dirty rascal; let's play at you being the castle, Uncle Giles, and I'll drive off the enemy. Bedone, you dirty rascal;—det away from my castle. I'll be the sentry on the walls," said the child, marching round and round with the stick over his shoulder for a gun, "and I'll call out 'Who does there?' and 'What's the word'—and I'll drive off all the enemy. But there must be a flag flying." He called it a flap, but that did not matter. "Mamma, fix a flap upon my big tower. Here," he cried, producing from his little pocket a crumpled rag of uncertain colour, "this hankechif will do."

"But that's a flag of truce, Osy; are you going to give me up then?" said the old gentleman.

"We'll not have no flaps of truce," said Osy, seizing Sir Giles' red bandana, "for I means fightin'—and they sha'n't come near you, but over my body. Here! Tome on, you enemy!" Osy's thrusts at Dunning, who retreated outside a wider and a wider circle as the little soldier made his rounds, amused the old gentleman beyond measure. He laughed till, which was not very difficult, the water came to his eyes.

"I do believe that mite would stand up for his old uncle if there was any occasion," said Sir Giles, nodding his old head across at his wife, and trying in vain to recover the bandana to dry his old eyes.

These were the sort of games that went on in the afternoon, especially in winter, when the hours were long between lunch and tea. When the weather was fine, Osy marched by Sir Giles' garden chair, and made him the confidant of all his wonderings. "What do the leaves fall off for, and where do they come from when they come again? Does gardener go to the market to buy the new ones like mamma goes to buy clothes for me? How do the snowdrops know when it's time to come up out of the told, told ground?" Fortunately, he had so many things to ask that he seldom paused for an answer. Sir Giles laid up these questions in his heart, and reported them to my lady. "He asked me to-day if it hurt the field when the farmers ploughed it up? I declare I never thought how strange things were before, and the posers that little 'un asks me!" cried the old man. Lady Piercey smiled with a superior certainty, based upon Mangnall's Questions and other instructive works, that she was not so easily posed by Osy. She had instructed him as to where tea and coffee came from, and taught him to say, "Thank you, pretty cow," thus accounting for his breakfast to the inquisitive intelligence. But there was one thing that brought a spasm to Lady Piercey's face, especially when, as now and then happened, she hid the little truant from his mother, and saved Osy from a scolding, as he nestled down amid her voluminous skirts and lifted up a smiling, rosy little face, in great enjoyment of the joke and the hiding place. Sometimes as she laid her hand upon his curly head with that sensation of half-malicious delight in coming between the little sinner and his natural governor, which is common to the grandparent, there would come a sudden contraction to her face, and a bitter salt tear would spring to her eye. If Gervase had a child like that to be his father's heir! Why was not that delightful child the child of Gervase, instead of being born to those who had nothing to give him? It was upon Margaret, who had not a penny, that this immeasurable gift was bestowed. And no woman that could be the mother of such a boy would ever marry Gervase! Oh! no, no—a barmaid, to give him a vulgar brat, who, perhaps—. But the thoughts of angry love and longing are not to be put into words.

Margaret went to the end of the gallery to her own room, where her child's soft breath was just audible as he slept. She went and looked at him in his little crib, a little head like an angel's, upon the little white pillow. But it was not only in a mother's tender adoration that she stood and looked at her child. To hurt any one was not in Margaret Osborne's heart, but there had come into it for some time back a dart of ambition, a gleam of hope: little Osy, too, was of the Piercey blood. She herself was a Piercey, much more a Piercey than Gervase, poor fellow. If an heir was wanted, who so fit as her boy? Far more fit than old General Piercey, whom nobody knew. Oh! not for worlds, not for anything that life could give, would she harm poor Gervase, or any man. But the barmaid and her possible progeny were as odious to Margaret as to Lady Piercey: and where, where could any one find an heir like Osy, the little prince, who had conquered and taken possession of the great house?

CHAPTER V.

IT has been stated by various persons afflicted with that kind of trouble, that to be enlightened above one's fellows is a great trial and misery. I don't know how that may be, but it is certainly a great trouble to be a Softy, to have a fluid brain in which everything gets disintegrated, and floats about in confusion, and never to be able to lay hold upon a subject distinctly either by head or tail, however much it may concern you. This was the case of poor Gervase the morning after he had received that evening address from his mother in her nightcap, which was so well adapted to confuse any little wits the poor fellow had. That his marriage might be forbidden, and his very name taken from him, and himself reduced to draw beer at the Seven Thorns for his living, instead of making a lady of Patty, and lifting her out of all such necessities, overwhelmed his mind altogether. If it was true, he had better, in fact, have nothing more to say to Patty at all. A forlorn sense that it might be well for her in such a case to turn to Roger, who at least would deliver her from drawing beer, lurked in the poor fellow's breast. Nothing would humiliate Gervase so much as the triumph of Roger, who had always been the one person in the world who pointed the moral of his own deficiencies to the unfortunate young squire; and there swelled in his breast a sort of dull anguish and sense of contrast, in which Roger's triumphant swing of the bat and kick of the football mingled with his carrying off of the woman whom poor Gervase admired and adored, adding a double piquancy to the act of renunciation which he was slowly spelling out in his own dumb soul. Nobody would try to take away that fellow's name. He had a cottage of his own that he could take her to, dang him! Gervase was beguiled for a moment into his old indignant thought that such a man playing cricket all over the county would probably come to the workhouse in the end, and that this was where Patty might find herself, if she preferred the athlete to himself; but he threw off the idea in his new evanescent impulse. She was too clever for that! She'd find a way to keep a man straight, whether it was a poor fellow who was not clever, or one that was too good at every kind of diversion. I am no great believer in heredity, and the house of Piercey was by no means distinguished for its chivalrous instincts or tendencies; yet I am glad to think that some vague influence from his ancient race had put this idea of giving up Patty, if he could bring only trouble and no bettering to her, into his dull and aching head. If he had been wiser, he would probably have kept away from her in this new impulse of generosity, but he was not wise at all, his first idea was to go to Patty, and tell her, and receive her orders—which no doubt she would give peremptorily—to go away from her. He never expected anything else. He was capable of giving her up, for her good, if he found himself unable to make a lady of her, in a dull sort of way, as a necessity; but he was not capable of the thought that she might stand by him to her own hurt. It seemed quite natural to him—not a thing to be either blamed or doubted—that as soon as it was proved that he could not make a lady of her, she would send him away.

It was a dull morning, warm but grey, the sky, or rather the clouds hanging low, and the great stretch of the moorland country lying flat underneath, its breadth of turf and thickets of gorse, and breaks of sandy road and broken ground all running into one sombre, greyish, greenish, yellowish colour in the flat tones of the sunless

daylight. Such a day in weariness embodied, taking the spring out of everything. The very birds in the big trees behind the Seven Thorns were affected by it and chirruped dejectedly, fathers and mothers swiftly snubbing any young thing that attempted a bit of song. The seven thorns themselves, which were old trees and knocked about by time and weather and the passing of straw-laden carts, and other drawbacks, looked shabbier and older than ever: no place for any lovers' meeting. Gervase had not the heart to go into the house. He sat down on the bench outside, like any tramp, and neither called to Patty, nor attempted any way of attracting her attention. She had seen him, I need not say, coming over the downs. She had eyes everywhere—not only in the back of her head, as the ostler and the maid at the Seven Thorns said, but at the tips of her fingers, and in the handle of the broom with which she was as usual sweeping briskly out the dust and sand of yesterday, and striking into every corner. The weather did not affect Patty. It needed something more than a grey day to discourage her active spirits. But when she found that her suitor did not come in, did not call her, did not even beat with his knuckles on the rough wooden table outside, to let it be known that he was there, surprise entered her breast; surprise and a little alarm. She had never let it be known by any one that she was moved by Gervase's suit. In her heart she had always been convinced that the Softy would not be allowed to marry, and her pride would not allow her to run the risk of such a defeat. At the same time there was always the chance that her own spirit might carry him through, and the prospect was too glorious to be altogether thrown away; so that when Patty became aware that he was sitting there outside, with not heart enough to say Boh! to a goose—alarm stole over her, and to contemplate the possible failure of all these hopes, was more than she could calmly bear. She stood still for a minute or two listening, with her head a little on one side, and all her faculties concentrated upon the sounds from the door: but heard nothing except the aimless scrape of his foot against the sandy pebbles outside. Finally she went out, and stood on the threshold, her broom still in her hand.

"Oh! so it is you, Mr. Gervase! I couldn't think who it could be that stuck there without a word to nobody. You've got a headache, as I said you would."

"No—I've got no headache. If I've anything, it's here," said poor Gervase, laying his hand on what he believed to be his heart.

"Lord, your stomach, then!" said Patty with a laugh—"but folks don't say that to a lady; though I dare to say it's very true, for beer is a real heavy thing, whatever you men may say."

"I am not thinking of beer," said Gervase. "I wish there was nothing more than that, Patty, between you and me."

"Between you and me!" she cried with a twirl of her broom along the step, "there's nothing between you and me. There's a deal to be done first, Mr. Gervase, before any man shall say as there's something between him and Miss Hewitt of the Seven Thorns; and if you don't know that, you're the only man in the parish as doesn't. Is there anything as I can do for you? for I've got my work, and I can't stand idling here."

"Oh, Patty, don't turn like that at the first word! As if I wasn't down enough! You told me last night to give it up for your sake, and I meant to; and now you come and tempt me with it! If I must have neither my beer nor you, what is to become of me?" poor Gervase cried.

Patty felt that things were becoming serious. She was conscious of all the pathos of this cry. She leant the broom in a corner, and coming down the steps, approached the disconsolate young man outside. "Whatever's to do, Mr. Gervase?" she said.

"Patty, I'll have to give you up!" said the poor fellow, with his head upon his hand, and something very like a sob bursting from his breast.

"Give me up? You've never had me, so you can't give me up," cried proud Patty. She was, however, more interested by this than by other more flattering methods of wooing. She laughed fiercely. "Sir Giles and my lady won't hear of it? No, of course they won't! And this is my fine gentleman that thought nothing in the world as good as me! I told you you'd give in at the first word!" She was very angry, though she had never accepted poor Gervase's protestations. He raised his head piteously, and the sight of her, flaming, sparkling, enveloping him in a sort of fiery contempt and fury, roused the little spark of gentlemanhood that was in Gervase's breast.

"If I give in," he said, "it is because of you, Patty. I'll not marry you—not if you were ready this moment—to be the wife of a man without a penny that would have to draw beer for his living. I wouldn't; no, I wouldn't—unless I was to make you a lady. I wanted—to make a lady of you, Patty!"

And he wept; the Softy, the poor, silly fellow! Patty had something in her, though she was the veriest little egotist and as hard as the nether millstone, which vibrated in spite of her at this touch. She said, "Lord, bless the man! What nonsense is he talking? Draw beer for his living! Tell me now, Mr. Gervase, there's a dear, what is't you mean."

And then poor Gervase poured out his heart: how he had been threatened with the Lord Chancellor and even with the Queen; how they could take not only every penny but his very name from him, and so make him bring shame upon the girl he loved instead of honour and glory as he had hoped. And how, in these circumstances, he would have to give her up. Better, though it might kill him, that she should marry a man who could keep her up in every thing than one who would be thrown upon her to make his living drawing beer.

Patty listened patiently, and cross-examined acutely to get to the bottom of this mystery. She was a little overawed to hear of the Lord Chancellor, whose prerogatives she could not limit, and who might be able to do something terrible; but gradually her good sense surmounted even the terrors of that mysterious power. "They can't take your name from you," she said; "it's nonsense; not a bit. Your name? Why, you were born to it. It's not like the estate. Of course your name's yours, and nobody can't take it away."

"Not?" said Gervase, looking up beseechingly into her eyes.

"Not a bit. I, for one, don't believe it. Nor the property either! I, for one, don't believe it. They've neither chick nor child but you. What! give it away to a dreadful old man, a cousin, and you there, their own child! No, Mr. Gervase, I don't believe a word of it. They wanted to frighten you bad; and so they have done, and that's all."

"They sha'n't frighten me," said Gervase, lifting his pale cheek and setting his hat on with a defiant look, "not if you'll stand by me, Patty."

"How am I to stand by you," cried the coquette with a laugh, "if you're a-going to give me up?"

"It was only for your sake, Patty," he said. "I'd marry you to-day if I could, you know. That's what I should like—just to marry you straight off this very day." He got up and came close to her, almost animated in the fervour of his

passion. His dull eyes lighted up, a little colour came to his face. If he could only be made always to look like that, it would be something like! was the swift thought that passed through her mind. She kept him off, retreating a step, and raising both her hands.

"Stand where you are, Mr. Gervase! You say so, I know; but I don't see as you do anything to prove it, for all your fine words."

A look of distress, the puzzled distress habitual to it, came over poor Gervase's face. His under lip dropped once more, "What can I do?" he cried; "if I knew, I'd do it fast enough. Patty, don't it all stand with you?"

"I never heard yet," cried Patty, "that it was the lady who took the steps; everybody knows there's steps that have to be took."

"What steps, what steps, Patty?" he cried, with a feeble glance at his own feet, and the trace of them on the sandy road. Then a gleam of shame and confusion came over the poor fellow's face. He knew the steps to be taken could not be like that, and paused eager, anxious, with his mouth open, waiting for his instructions—like a faithful dog ready to start after any stick or stone.

"Oh, you can't expect me to be the one to tell you," cried Patty, turning away as if to go back to the house; "the lady isn't the one to think of all that."

"Patty! I'm ready, ready to do anything! but how am I to know all of myself? I never had anything of the sort to do."

"I hope not," said Patty, with a laugh, "or else you wouldn't be for me, Mr. Gervase, not if you were a duke—if you had been married before."

"I—married before! Patty, only tell me what to do!" He looked exactly like Dash, waiting for somebody to throw a stone for him, but not so clever as Dash, alas! with that forlorn look of incapacity in his face, and the wish which was not father to any thought.

"Well, if you're so pressing, a clergyman has the most to do with it."

"I'll go off to the rector directly." He was like Dash now, when a feint had been made of throwing the stone: off on the moment—yet with a sense that all was not well.

"Oh! stop, you—!" Whatever the noun was, Patty managed to swallow it. "Come back," she cried, as she might have cried to Dash. "Don't you see? The rector; he's the last man in the world."

"Why?" cried Gervase. "He knows me, and you, and everything."

"He knows—a deal too much," said Patty; "he'd go and tell it all at the Hall, and make them send for the Lord Chancellor, or whatever it is."

Poor Gervase trembled a little. "Couldn't we run away, Patty, you and me together?" he said humbly; "I know them that have done that."

"And have all the parish say I'm not married at all, and be treated like a— wherever I showed my head. No, thank you, Mr. Gervase Piercey. I don't think enough of you for that."

"You would think enough of Roger for that," cried poor Gervase, stung to the heart.

"Roger!" she cried, spinning round upon him with a flush on her face. "Roger would have had the banns up long before this, if I had ever said as much to him."

"The banns!" cried Gervase. "Ah, now I know! that's the clerk!" The stone was thrown at last. "They'll be up," he said, waving his hand to her as he looked back, "before you know where you are!"

It was all that Patty could do to stop him, to bring him back before he was out of hearing. Dash never rushed more determinedly after his stone.

"Mr. Gervase," she shouted, "Mr. Piercey; sir! Hi! here! Come back, come back! Oh, come back, I tell you!" stamping her foot upon the ground.

He returned at last, very like the dog still, humbled, his head fallen, and discomfiture showing in the very attitude of his limp limbs.

"Is that not right either?" he said.

"The clerk would be up at the Hall sooner than the rector; the rector would understand a little bit, but the clerk not at all. Don't you see, Mr. Gervase, if it is to be—"

"It shall be, Patty."

"It must be in another parish, not here at all; and then you'd have to go to stay there for a fortnight."

"Go to stay there for a fortnight!" Dismay was in the young man's face. "How could I do that, Patty, with never having any money, and never allowed to sleep a night from home?"

"Well, for that matter," she said, "how are you to marry anybody if things are to go on so?"

He made no reply, but looked at her with a miserable countenance, with his under lip dropped, his mouth open, and lack-lustre eyes.

And here Patty made a pause, looking at her lover, or rather gazing in the face of fate, and hesitating for one dread, all-important moment: she was not without a tenderness for him, the poor creature who adored her like Dash; but that was neither here nor there. While she looked at him there rose between him and her a vision of a very different face, strong and sure, that would never pause to be told what to do, that would perhaps master her as she mastered him. Ah! but then there was a poor cottage on one side, with a wife whose husband would be little at home, in too much request for her happiness; and on the other there was the Hall and the chance of being my lady. She looked in the face of fate, and seized it boldly, as her manner was.

"Stop a bit," she said; "there's another way."

"What is it, what is it, Patty?"

"But it wants money; it costs a bit of money—a person has to go to London to get it."

"Oh, Patty, Patty, haven't I told you—"

"Stop!" she said; "I'm going to think it over; perhaps it can be done, after all, if you'll do what I tell you. Don't come near the Seven Thorns to-night; stay at home and be very good to the old folks; say you'd like to see London and a little life, and you're tired of here."

"But that would be a lie!"

"Oh, you softhead, if you're going to stick at that! Perhaps you don't want me at all, Mr. Gervase. Give me up; it would be far the best thing for you, far the best thing for you! and then there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh, Patty!" cried the poor fellow; "oh, Patty! when you know I'd give up my life for you."

"Then do as I say, and mind everything I say, and I'll see if it can't be done."

CHAPTER VI.

GERVASE went home as she had told him, not bounding after the stone like a dog who has got its heart's desire, but steadily, a little heavily, somewhat disappointed, yet full of expectation, and always faithful. Something was going to be done for him that would result in Patty's standing by him for ever, and helping him to all he wanted. He did not know what it was; he was by no means sure that he would understand what it was were he told; but she did, and that was enough. It was going to be done for him, while he had no trouble and would only reap the results. That was how it was going to be all the rest of the time. Patty would take the responsibility. She would face everything for him. She would stand between him and his mother's jibes and his father's occasional roar of passion. Gervase was dimly sensible that his people were ashamed of him, that they thought him of little account. But Patty did not feel like that. She, too, jibed at him, it is true; but then she jibed at everybody, even Roger. It was different, and she would let no one else jibe. She would take all the responsibility; with her beside him, standing by him, or perhaps in front of him, standing between him and all that was disagreeable, he should escape all the ills of life. He should not be afraid of any one any more. He went back to the hall determined to carry out his orders. For her sake he would make a martyr of himself all that evening; he would sit with the old folks and do his best to please them. He would talk about London and how he wished to see it. He would say he was tired of the country—even that, since Patty told him to do so. To be sure, if there was no Patty, he would be tired of it; if the Hall meant the country, yes, indeed, he was tired enough of that. He went home not in the least knowing what to do with himself; but faithful, faithful to his orders. Dash, when commanded to give up the wild delights of a run and watch a coat, or a stick, did it resignedly with noble patience, and so did Gervase now: he had, so to speak, to watch Patty's coat while she went and did the work; it is the natural division of labour when one of two is the faithful dog rather than the man.

He began, three or four times, as he went along, that game with the white pebbles against the brown, and then remembered that it was silly, and pulled himself up. He would not like Patty to know that he had a habit of doing that. He was aware, instinctively, that it would seem very silly to her. Three, four, and five; and a great big one that ought to count three at least for the right hand man. No; he wouldn't do it; it was silly; it was like a child, not a man. What, he wondered, was she going to do? Not go to the rector, because she had herself objected to that. Another way—he wondered what other way there could be—that dispensed with both parson and clerk? But that, thank Heaven, was Patty's affair, and she had promised that she would do it. Seven brown ones in a row; such luck for the left-hand man! But no, no; he would not pay any attention to that. Patty would think him a fool for his pains. What was she doing—she that knew exactly what it was best to do? What a woman she was, up to everything; seeing with one look of her eye what he never would have found out, that it was not the right thing to speak to the rector, nor to the clerk, who was still worse than the rector. How much better it was that it should be all in her hands! How was a man to know, who had never been married himself, who knew nothing about such things, how to put up banns? What were banns? He had heard people asked in church, but he was not sure about the other name. Was it something, perhaps, to hang up like a picture? These thoughts did not pass through Gervase's mind in so many words, but floated after each other vaguely, swimming in a dumb sort of consciousness. He had, perhaps, never had so many all turning round and crossing each other before. Generally it was only the pebbles he thought of as he walked unless when it was Patty. It gave him a strange sort of bewildering sense of life to feel how many things he was thinking of—such a crowd of different things.

In the beech avenue, going up and down in his chair, pushed by Dunning, and with Osy capering upon a stick before him, Gervase came upon his father taking his morning "turn." He remembered what Patty said about being agreeable to the old folks, and he also had a certain pleasure in wheeling his father's chair. So he stopped and pushed the servant away. "You go and take a rest, Dunning. I'll take Sir Giles along," he said. "You mustn't play any tricks, Mr. Gervase," said the man, resisting a little. "What tricks should I play? I can take care of my father as well as any one, I hope," cried Gervase, taking with energy the back of the chair. It went along a little more quickly perhaps, but Sir Giles did not mind that. "Young legs go faster than ours, Dunning," he said to his servant; "but stand you by, old man, in case Mr. Gervase gets tired." "Oh, I'll stand by. I'll not leave that Softy in charge of my master," Dunning said to himself. "Oh, I'll not get tired, father," said Gervase aloud. This was quite a delightful way of uniting obedience to Patty's commands with pleasure to himself. "I'll take you all round the grounds, father. Ain't you tired of this beastly little bit of an avenue? I'll take you faster, as fast as the carriage if you like." "No, my boy, this'll do," said Sir Giles; "fair and softly goes the furthest." Dunning came on behind shaking his head.

"You tan't ride so fast as me, Uncle Giles," cried little Osy, prancing upon his wooden steed.

"Can't he, though, you little beggar. He'd soon run you out of breath, if I was to put on steam!"

"Oh, tome on, tome on!" cried Osy, flourishing his whip; and off Gervase tore, sweeping the chair along, with Dunning after him panting and exclaiming, and Sir Giles laughing, but shaking with the wild progress of the vehicle which usually went so quietly. The old gentleman rather liked it than otherwise, though when Gervase stopped with a sudden jerk and jar, he was thrown back upon his pillows, and seized with a fit of coughing. "You see you cannot do everything, little 'un; there's some that can beat you," cried Gervase, waving his long arms, and drawing up his sleeves. Osy had been thrown quite behind, and came up panting, his little countenance flushed, and his little legs twisting as he ran, the child no longer making any pretence to be a prancing steed. "Are you game for another run?"

"Yes, I'm dame," cried little Osy, making a valourous struggle for his breath.

"No, no, that's enough," cried Sir Giles, coughing and laughing, "that's enough, Gervase. No harm done, Dunning—you need not come puffing like a steam engine; but halt, Gervase, no more, no more."

"Uncle Giles, I'm dame, tome on; Uncle Giles, I'm dame," shouted Osy flourishing his little cap.

This scene was seen from my lady's chamber with extremely mingled feelings. Lady Piercy sat in the recess of

the window, where, in the evening, that querulous light had burned, waiting till Gervase came home. She had an old-fashioned embroidery frame fixed there, and worked at it for half an hour occasionally, with Margaret Osborne in attendance to thread her needles. Parsons had long since declared that her eyes were not equal to it, but with Mrs. Osborne there could be no such excuse. Lady Piercey had forgotten all about her work in watching. "There is my boy Gervase wheeling his father," she said; "look out, look out, Meg. Whatever you may say, that boy is full of feeling. Look! He has taken it out of Dunning's hands. See how pleased your uncle is; and little Osy acting outrider, bless him. Oh!" cried Lady Piercey with a shriek. Her terror made her speechless. She fell back in her chair with passionate gesticulations, grasped Margaret, and pulled her to the window, then thrust her away, pointing to the door. "Go! go!" she cried with a great effort, in a choked voice—which Parsons heard, and came flying from the next room.

"It's nothing, aunt; see, they've stopped. It's all right, Uncle Giles is laughing."

"Go! go!" cried the old lady, pointing passionately to the door.

"Go, for goodness gracious sake, Mrs. Osborne. My lady will have a fit."

"There is nothing—absolutely nothing, aunt. They've stopped. Dunning has taken his place again; there's no need for interfering. Ah!" Margaret gave just such a cry as Lady Piercey had done, and flinging down her little sheaf of silks upon the frame, turned and flew from the room, leaving the old lady and her maid exchanging glances of consternation. And yet the cause of Mrs. Osborne's sudden change of opinion was not far to seek; it was that Gervase had seized little Osy and swung him up to his shoulder, where the child sat very red and uneasy, but too proud to acknowledge that he was afraid.

"Put down my child this moment!" cried Margaret, descending like a thunderbolt in the midst of the group.

"He's as right as a trivet. I'm going to give him a ride. I haven't given him a ride for a long time. Hi! Osy, ain't you as right as a trivet, and got a good seat?"

"Yes, tousin Gervase," said the boy with a quaver in his voice, but holding his head high.

"Put him down this moment!" cried Margaret, stamping her foot and seizing Gervase by the arm.

"I'll put him down when he's had his ride. Now, old Dunning, here's for it. We'll race you for a sovereign to the gate. Sit tight, Osy, or your horse will throw you—he's as wild as all the wild horses that ever were made."

"Div me my whip first," cried the child. He was elated though he was afraid. "And I won't ride you if you haven't a bit in your mouff." Once more the little grimy pocket-handkerchief was brought into service. "Here's the bit, and I'm holding you in hand. Now, trot!"

Margaret stood like a ghost, while the wild pair darted along the avenue, Gervase prancing with the most violent motion, little Osy sitting very tight, holding on to his handkerchief with the tightness of desperation, his cheeks blazing and throbbing with the tumultuous colour of courage, excitement, and fright. They are things which consist with each other. The child was afraid of nothing, but very conscious that he had once before been thrown from Gervase's shoulder, and that the prospect was not a pleasant one. As for the spectators, Sir Giles in his chair and his wife at the window, they were in a ferment of mingled feeling, afraid for their pet, but excited by this new development on the part of their son. "Mr. Gervase is really taking great care," gasped Lady Piercey to her maid. "Don't you see? He's got the child quite tight—not like that other time; Master Osy is quite enjoying it."

"Oh yes, my lady," said Parsons, doubtfully; "he's got such a spirit."

"And his cousin is so kind, so kind. There's nobody," said the old lady, with a sob and a gasp, "so good to children as my Gervase. There! thank Heaven, he's put him down. Miss Meg—I mean Mrs. Osborne is making a ridiculous fuss about it," said Lady Piercey, now running all her words into one in the relief of her feelings, "as if there was any fear of the child!"

Little Osy had swung down through the air with a sinking whirl as if he had shot Niagara, but once on firm ground, being really none the worse, tingled to his fingers' ends with pride and triumph. He gave a smack of his little whip with his right hand, while with the other he clutched his mother's dress, trembling and glowing. "Dood-bye, dood horse; I'll—I'll wide you again another time," he shouted, with a slight quaver in his voice.

Sir Giles was half-weeping, half-laughing, in the excitement of his age and weakness. Now that the child was safe, he, too, was delighted and proud. "Good'un to go, ain't he, Osy?" he cried. "But I say, lad, you oughtn't to caper like that; he's a deal too fresh, Dunning, eh? wants to have it taken out of him."

"Yes, Sir Giles," said Dunning. ("And I'd just like to take it out of him with a cart whip," he murmured, between his closed teeth.)

Lady Piercey was weeping a little, too, at her window, calming down from her excitement. "How strong he is, bless him, and well-made when he holds himself straight; and wouldn't harm the child not for the world, or any one that trusts him. Oh, Parsons, what a joyful family we'd be if Master Osy had been my son's boy!"

"Bless you, my lady, he's too young to have a boy as big as that."

"So he is, the dear. If I could live to see him with an heir, Parsons!"

"And why not, my lady? You're not to call old, and with proper care and taking your medicines regular—one of these days he'll be bringing home some nice young lady." ("Some poor creature as will be forced to take 'im, or else Patty of the Seven Thorns," was Parsons' comment within herself.)

"And then that poor little darling!" said Lady Piercey, regretfully. "But," she added with a firmer tone, "Meg spoils the boy to such a degree that he'll be ruined before he's a man. Look at her petting him as if he'd been in any danger; but she never had an ounce of sense. Get me my things, Parsons; I'll go down and sit in the air a bit and talk to my boy."

Gervase had fallen out of his unusual liveliness before his mother succeeded in reaching the beech avenue, but he came forward at her call, and permitted her to take his arm. "I like to see you in spirits," the old lady said, "but you mustn't shake about your father like that. Dunning's safest for an old man."

"I'll drive you out in the phaeton, mother, if you like, this afternoon."

"No, my dear; I feel safest in the big carriage with the cobs, and old Andrews; but it's a pleasure to see you in such spirits, Gervase; you're like my own old boy."

"You see," said Gervase, with his imbecile, good-humoured smile, "I've promised to do all I can to please you at

home."

"Ah!" cried the old lady, "and who might it be that made you promise that? and why?" Gervase broke into a laugh. "Wouldn't you just like to know?" he said.

CHAPTER VII.

"Osy," said Mrs. Osborne, "you mustn't let cousin Gervase get hold of you like that again."

"He's a dood horse," said the little boy, "when I sit tight. I have to sit vewey tight; but next time I'll get on him's both shoulders, and hold him like a real horse. He's dot a too narrow back, and too far up from the ground."

"But listen to me, Osy. It makes me too frightened. You mustn't ride him again."

"I'll not wide him if I can help it," said Osy, reddening with mingled daring and terror, "but he takes me up before I can det far enough off, and I tan't run away, mamma."

"But you must run away, Osy, when I tell you."

The child looked up at her doubtfully. "It was you that told me gemplemens don't run away."

"Not before an enemy, or that," said Margaret, taking refuge in the vague, "but when it's only for fun, Osy."

"Fun isn't never serous, is it, mamma?"

"It would be very serious if you fell from that fo——, from Cousin Gervase's shoulder, Osy. Go out for a walk this afternoon, dear, with nurse."

"I don't like nurse. I like Uncle Giles best. And I'm the outwider, telling all the people he's toming."

"You see Uncle Giles has got something else to do."

Gervase was still in the foreground of the picture, carrying out his *consigne*. The servant had brought out upon the terrace at the other side of the house a box containing a game of which, in former days, Sir Giles had been fond. It was Gervase who had proposed this diversion to-day. "I'll play father a game at that spinner thing," he had said, after the large heavy luncheon, which was Sir Giles' dinner. "I'd like that, lad," the old man cried with delight. It was a beautiful afternoon, and nothing could be more charming than the shady terrace on the east side of the house which in these hot July days was always cool. The sunshine played on the roof of the tall house, and fell full on the turf and the shrubs, and the flower garden at the south corner, but on the terrace all was grateful shade. The game was brought out, and many experiments were made to see at what angle Sir Giles could best throw the ball with which it was played—an experiment in which Dunning took more or less interest, seeing it saved him another weary promenade through the grounds, pushing his master's chair. The carriage was waiting round the corner, and Lady Piercey came sailing downstairs with Parsons behind her carrying a large cloak. "Meg! do you know I'm ready to go out?" cried Lady Piercey, in the tone of that king who had once almost been made to wait. "May I bring Osy, aunt?" cried Margaret. "No," was the peremptory answer. "I'll go without you if you don't be quick."

"And I don't want to go, mover," said Osy. "I'm doing to play with Uncle Giles."

"Come along, little duffer," cried Gervase; "I'll give you another ride when we've done playing."

"Meg, come this moment!" cried Lady Piercey; and Margaret, with agonised visions, was compelled to go. Bitter is the bread of those who have to run up and down another man's stairs, and be as the dogs under his table. "Oh!" Margaret Osborne said to herself, "if I had but the smallest cottage of my own! If I could but take in needlework or clear starching, and work for my boy!" Perhaps the time might come when that prayer should be fulfilled, and when it would not seem so sweet as she thought.

Lady Piercey took her usual drive in a long round through the familiar roads which she had traversed almost every day for the last thirty years. She knew not only every village, but every cottage in every village, and every tree, and every clump of wild honeysuckle or clematis flaunting high upon the tops of the hedges. By dint of long use, she had come to make that frequent, almost daily, progress without seeing anything, refreshed, it is to be supposed, by the sweep of the wide atmosphere and all the little breezes that woke and breathed about her as she went over long miles and miles of green country, all monotonously familiar and awakening no sensation in her accustomed breast. She thought of her own affairs as she made these daily rounds, which many a poorer woman envied the old lady, thinking how pleasant it would be to change with her, and see the world from the luxurious point of vantage of a landau with a pair of good horses, and a fat coachman and agile footman on the box. But Lady Piercey thought of none of these advantages, nor of the beautiful country, nor the good air, but only of her own cares, which filled up all the foreground of her life, as they do with most of us. After a while, being forced by the concatenation of circumstances, she began to discuss these cares with Margaret, which was her custom when Parsons, who knew them all as well as her ladyship, was out of the way. Mrs. Osborne was made fully aware that it was because there was no one else near, that she was made the confidant of her aunt's troubles; but she listened, nevertheless, very dutifully, though to-day with a somewhat distracted mind, thinking of her child, and seeing an awful vision before her of Osy tossed from Gervase's shoulder and lying stunned on the ground, with nobody but Dunning and Sir Giles to look after him. This made her perhaps less attentive than usual to all Lady Piercey's theories as to what would be the making of Gervase, and save him from all difficulties and dangers. The old lady was not deceived in respect to her son; she was very clear-sighted, although in a moment of excitement, as on that morning, she might be ready to credit him with ideal virtues; on ordinary occasions nothing could be more clear than her estimate, or more gloomy than her forecast, of what his future might be.

"I am resolved on one thing," said Lady Piercey, "that we must marry him by hook or crook. I hate the French: they're a set of fools, good for nothing but dancing and singing and making a row in the world; but I approve their way in marrying. They would just look out a suitable person, money enough, and all that, and he'd have to marry her whether he liked it or not. Are you listening, Meg? If your uncle had done that with you, now, what a much better thing for you than pleasing your fancy as you did and grieving your heart!"

"I'm not worth discussing, aunt, and all that's over and gone long ago."

"That's true enough; but you're an example, and if I think proper, I'll use it. I dare say Captain Osborne thought you had a nice bit of money when he first began to think of you, and was a disappointed man when he knew——"

"Aunt, I cannot have my affairs discussed."

"You shall have just what I please and nothing else," said the grim old lady. "I have had enough of trouble about you to have a right to say what I please. And so I shall do, whatever you may say. A deal better it would have been for you if we had just married you, as I always wished, to a sensible man with a decent income, who never would have left you to come back upon your family, as you have had to do. That's a heavy price to pay, my dear, for the cut of a man's moustache. And I'd just like to manage the same for my own boy, who is naturally much more to me than you. But then there's the girl to take into account; girls are so much indulged nowadays, they take all kinds of whimsies into their heads. Now I should say, from my point of view, that Gervase would make an excellent husband; if she was sensible, and knew how to manage, she might turn him round her little finger. What do you say? Oh, I know you are never likely to think of anything to the advantage of my boy."

"I think my cousin Gervase has a great many good qualities, aunt; whether you would be doing right in making him marry, is another matter."

"Oh, you think so! it would be better to leave him unmarried, and then when we die Osy would have the chance? For all so clever as you are, Meg, I can see through you there. But Osy has no chance, as you ought to know. There's the General, and his son, Gerald—a new name in the family, as if the Gileses and the Gervases were not good enough for a younger branch! If it was Osy, bless the child, I don't know that I should mind so much," the old lady said in a softened tone, with a tear suddenly starting in the corner of her eye.

"Thank you for thinking that," said Margaret, subdued. "I know very well it could never be Osy."

"But there might be another Osy," said Lady Piercely, putting away that tear with a surreptitious finger. "There never was a brighter man than your uncle, and I'm no fool; and yet you see Gervase— What's to hinder Gervase from having a boy like his father if the mother of it was good for anything? A girl, if she had any sense, might see that. What's one person in a family? The family goes on and swamps the individual. You may be surprised at me using such words; but I've thought a deal about it—a great deal about it, Meg. A good girl of a good race, that is what he wants; and, goodness gracious, if she only knew how to set about it, what an easy time she might have!"

To this, Margaret, being probably of another opinion, made no reply; and Lady Piercely, after an expectant and indignant pause, burst forth—"You don't think so, I suppose? You think the only thing he's likely to get, or that is fit for him, is this minx at the Seven Thorns?"

"I never thought so," cried Margaret, "nor believed in that at all—never for a moment."

"That shows how much you know," said the old lady, with a snort of anger. "I believe in it, if you don't. Who is he staying at home to-day and trying to please, the booby! that hadn't sense enough to keep that quiet? Don't you see he's under orders from her? Ah, she knows what's what, you may be sure. She sees all the ways of it, and just how to manage him. The like of you will not take the trouble to find out, but that sort of minx knows by nature. Oh, she has formed all her plans, you may be sure! She knows exactly how she is going to do it and baffle all of us; but I shall put a spoke in my lady's wheel. My lady!" cried Lady Piercely, with the irritation of one who feels her own dearest rights menaced; "she is calculating already how soon she'll get my name and make me the dowager! I know it as well as if I saw into her; but she is going a bit too fast, and you'll see that I'll put a spoke in her wheel! John! you can turn back now, and drive to the place I told you of. I want to ask about some poultry at that little inn. You know the name of it."

"The Seven Thorns, my lady?" said John, turning round on the box, with his hand at his hat, and his face red with suppressed laughter, made terrible by fear of his mistress—as if he and the coachman had not been perfectly well aware, when the order was given, what kind of wildfowl was that pretended poultry which took Lady Piercely to the Seven Thorns!

"So it is; that was the name," said the old lady. "You can take the first turning, and get there as quick as possible. You'll just see how I shall settle her," she added, nodding her head as soon as the man's back was turned.

"Do you mean to see the girl, aunt?" cried Margaret, in surprise and alarm.

"What's so wonderful in that? Of course I mean to see her. I shall let her know that I understand all her little plans, and mean to put a stop to them. She is not to have everything her own way."

"But, aunt, do you think a girl of that kind will pay any attention?—don't you think that perhaps it will do more harm than—"

"I know that you have always a fine opinion of your own people, Meg Piercely! and of me especially, that am only your aunt by marriage. You think there's nothing I can do that isn't absurd—but I think differently myself, and you shall just see. Attention? Of course she will pay attention. I know these sort of people; they believe what you tell them in a way you wouldn't do: they know no better. They're far cleverer than you in some things, but in others they'll believe just what you please to tell them," said Lady Piercely, with a fierce toss of her head, "if you speak strong enough; and I promise you I sha'n't fail in that!"

The carriage swept along with an added impulse of curiosity and expectation which seemed to thrill through from the men on the box, who formed an impatient and excited gallery, eager to see what was going to happen, to the calm, respectable horses, indifferent to such mere human commotions, who probably were not aware why they were themselves made to step out so much more briskly. The carriage reached the Seven Thorns at an hour in the afternoon which was unusually quiet, and which had been selected by Patty on that account for an expedition which she had to make. She was coming out of her own door, when the two cobs drew up with that little flourish which is essential to every arrival, even at a humble house like that of the Seven Thorns, and stood there for a moment transfixed, with a sudden leap of excitement in all her pulses at the sight of the heavy old landau, which she, of course, knew as well as she knew any cart in the village. Was it possible that it was going to stop? It was going to stop! She stood on her own threshold almost paralysed, stupefied—though at the same time tingling with excitement and energy and wonder. My lady in her carriage, the great lady of the district! the potentate whom Patty of the Seven Thorns, audacious, meant to succeed, if not to supersede! The effect upon her for the first moment was to make her knees tremble, and her strength fail; for the next, to brace her up to a boldness unknown to her, though she had never before been timid at any time.

"If you please, my lady," said John, obsequious, yet with his eyes dancing with excitement and curiosity, at the carriage door, "that is Miss Hewitt of the Seven Thorns on the doorstep, if it is her your ladyship wants. Shall I say your ladyship wishes to—"

"Look here! you've got to go off to the post-office at once to get me some stamps. I'll manage the rest for

myself," said Lady Piercely, thrusting two half-crowns into the man's hand. Poor John! with the drama thus cut short at its most exciting moment! She waited till he had turned his back, and then she waved her hand to Patty, still standing thunderstricken on the threshold. "Hi!—here!" cried Lady Piercely, who did not err in her communications with the country people round her on the civil side.

If it had not been for overpowering excitement, curiosity, and the desire for warfare, which is native to the human breast, Patty would have stood upon her dignity, disregarded this peremptory call, and marched away. She almost tried to do so, feeling more or less what an immense advantage it would have given her, but her instinct was too strong—a double and complicated instinct which moved her as if she had not been at all a free agent: first, the impulse to obey my lady, which was a thing that might have been overcome, but second, the impulse to fight my lady, which was much less easy to master, and, last of all, an overpowering, dizzying, uncontrollable curiosity to know what she could have to say. She stepped down from her own door deliberately, however, and with all the elegance and eloquence she could put into her movements, and went slowly forward to the carriage door. She was in her best dress, which was not, perhaps, so becoming to Patty as the homelier attire, which was more perfect of its kind than the second-rate young ladyhood of her Sunday frock. Her hat was very smart with flowers and bows of velvet, which happened to be the fashion of the time, and she carried a parasol covered with lace, and wore a pair of light gloves, which were not in harmony with the colour of her dress—neither, indeed, were Lady Piercely's own gloves in harmony with her apparel, but that was a different matter. The old lady's keen glance took in every article of Patty's cheap wardrobe, with a comment on the way these creatures dress! as she came forward with foolish deliberation, as if to allow herself time to be examined from head to foot.

"You are Patty, that used to come out so well in the examinations," Lady Piercely said, with a breathlessness which showed what excitement existed on her side.

"I am Patience Hewitt, my lady, if that is what you're pleased to ask."

Margaret sat looking on trembling at these two belligerents: her aunt, who overbore her, Margaret, without any trouble silenced all her arguments and shut her mouth; and this girl of the village and public-house, the Sunday-school child whom she remembered, the pet of the rector, the clever little monitor and ringleader—Patty, of the Seven Thorns, something between a housemaid and a barmaid, and Lady Piercely of Greystott! The looker-on, acknowledging herself inferior to both of them, felt that they were not badly matched.

"Ah!" said Lady Piercely, "yes, that's what I asked. You're Robert Hewitt's daughter, I suppose, who keeps the public-house on our property?"

"Begging your pardon, my lady, the old inn of the Seven Thorns is my father's property, and has been his and his family's for I don't know how many hundred years."

"Oh!" cried Lady Piercely with a stare, "you speak up very bold, young woman; yet you've been bred up decently, I suppose, and taught how you ought to conduct yourself in that condition in which God has placed you."

"If you wish to know about my character, my lady, the rector will give it you; though I don't know why you should trouble about it, seeing as I am not likely to wish a place under your ladyship, or under anybody, for that matter."

"No," cried Lady Piercely, exasperated into active hostilities; "you would like to climb up over our heads, that's what you would like to do."

Patty replied to the excited stare with a look of candid surprise. "How could I climb over anybody's head, I wonder? me that manages everything for father, and keeps house at the Seven Thorns?"

"You look very mild and very fine," said Lady Piercely, leaning over the side of the carriage, and emphasising her words with look and gesture, "but I've come here expressly to let you understand that I know everything, and that what you're aiming at sha'n't be! Don't look at me as if you couldn't divine what I was speaking of! I know every one of your plots and plans—every one! and if you think that you, a bit of a girl in a public-house, can get the better of Sir Giles and me, the chief people in the county, I can tell you you're very far mistaken." Lady Piercely leant over the side of the carriage and spoke in a low voice, which was much more impressive than if she had raised it. She had the fear of the coachman before her eyes, who was holding his very breath to listen, growing redder and redder in the effort, but in vain. Lady Piercely projected her head over the carriage door till it almost touched the young head which Patty held high, with all the flowers and feathers on her fine hat thrilling. "Look you here!" she said, with that low, rolling contralto which sounded like bass in the girl's very ears, "we've ways and means you know nothing about. We're the great people of this county, and you're no better than the dust under our feet: do you hear? do you hear?"

"Oh yes, I hear very well, my lady," said Patty, loud out, which was a delight to the coachman, "but perhaps I am not of that opinion." There was, however, a little quaver of panic in her voice. Lady Piercely was right so far that a person of the people, when uneducated, finds it difficult to free him-, and especially herself, from a superstition as to what the little great, the dominant class can do.

"Opinion or no opinion," said the old lady, "just you understand this, Miss Polly, or whatever your name is: You don't know what people like us can do—and will do if we're put to it. We can put a man away within stone walls that is going to disgrace himself: we can do that as easy as look at him; and we can ruin a designing family. That we can! ruin it root and branch, so that everything will have to be sold up, and those that offend us swept out of the country. Do you hear? Everything I say I can make good. We'll ruin you all if you don't mind. We'll sweep you away—your name and everything, and will shut him up that you are trying to work upon, so that you shall never hear of him again. Do you understand all that? Now, if you like to think you can fight me and Sir Giles, a little thing like you, a little nobody, you can just try it! And whatever happens will be on your own head. Oh, are you back already, John? What haste you have made! Good-bye, Patty; I hope you understand all I've said to you. Those chickens, I can tell you, will never be hatched. John—home!"

Patty stood looking after the carriage with her breast heaving and her nostrils dilating. The old lady had judged truly. She was frightened. Panic had seized her. She believed in these unknown miraculous powers. What could the Seven Thorns do against the Manor House? Patty Hewitt against Sir Giles and Lady Piercely? It was a question to freeze the very blood in the veins of a poor little country girl.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT it was not for nothing that Patty had put on her best things: quivering and excited as she was, she would not go in again, however discouraged, and take them off and return to the usual occupations, which were so very little like the occupations of the great folks of the Manor. She went on a little way towards the village very slowly, with all her fine feathers drooping, dragging the point of her lace-covered parasol along the sandy road. She was genuinely frightened by old Lady Piercey, whom all her life she had been brought up to regard as something more terrible than the Queen herself. For Her Majesty is known to be kind, and there are often stories in the newspapers about her goodness and charity; whereas Lady Piercey, with her deep voice and the tufts of hair on her chin, had an alarming aspect, and notwithstanding her Christmas doles and official charities, was feared and not loved in her parish and district. How was Patty to know how much or how little that terrible old lady could do? She was much discouraged by the interview, in which she felt that she had been cowed and overborne, and had not stood up with her usual spirit to her adversary. Had Patty known beforehand that Gervase's mother was to come to her thus, she would have proudly determined that Lady Piercey should "get as good as she gave." But she had been taken by surprise, and the old lady had certainly had the best of it. She was of so candid a spirit, that she could not deny this; certainly Lady Piercey had had the best of it. Patty herself had felt the ground cut from under her feet; she had not had a word to throw at a dog. She had allowed herself to be frightened and silenced and set down. It was a very unusual experience for Patty, and for the moment she could not overcome the feeling of having lost the battle.

However, presently her drooping crest began to rise. If Lady Piercey had but known the errand upon which Patty was going, the intention with which she had dressed herself in all her Sunday clothes, taken her gloves from their box, and her parasol out of its cover! The consciousness of what that object had been returned to Patty's mind in a moment, and brought back the colour to her cheeks. "Ah, my lady! you think it's something far off, as you've got time to fight against, and shut him up and take him away! If you but knew that it may happen to-morrow, or day after to-morrow, and Patty Hewitt become Mrs. Gervase Piercey in spite of you!" This thought filled Patty with new energy. It would be still sweeter to do it thus, under their very nose, as it were, after they had driven away triumphant, thinking they had crushed Patty. It was perhaps natural, that in the heat of opposition and rising pugnaciousness, the girl should have turned her bitterest thought upon the spectator sitting by, who had not said a word, and whose sympathies were, if not on her side, at least not at all on that of the other belligerent. "That white-faced maypole of a thing!" Patty said to herself with a virulence of opposition to the dependent which exists in both extremes of society. The old lady she recognised as having a right to make herself as disagreeable as she pleased, but the bystander, the silent spectator looking on, the cousin, or whatever she was—what had she to do with it? Patty clenched her hand, in which she had been limply holding her parasol, and vowed to herself that that Mrs. Osborne should know who was who before they had done with each other, or she, Patty, would know the reason why. Poor Margaret! who had neither wished to be there, nor aided and abetted in any way Patty's momentary discomfiture; but it frequently happens that the victim of the strife is a completely innocent person, only accidentally concerned.

Stimulated by this corrective of despondency, Patty resumed all her natural smartness, flung up her head, so that all her artificial flowers thrilled again, raised and expanded her parasol, and marched along like an army with banners, taking up with her own slim person and shadow the whole of the road. Humbler passersby, even the new curate, who was not yet acquainted with the parishioners, got out of her way, recognising her importance, and that sentiment as if of everything belonging to her that was in her walk, in her bearing, and, above all, in the parasol, which was carried, as is done still in Eastern countries, as a symbol of sovereignty. Mr. Tripley, the curate, stumbled aside upon the grassy margin of the road in his awe and respect, while Patty swept on; though there was something in her members—that love of ancient habit, scientifically known as a survival—which made the impulse to curtsy to him almost more than she could resist. She did get over it, however, as wise men say we get over the use of a claw or a tail which is no longer necessary to us. Patty went along the high-road as far as the entrance to the village street, and then turned down to where, at the very end of it, there stood a little house in a little garden which was one of the ornaments of the place. It was a house to a stranger somewhat difficult to characterise. It was not the doctor's or even the schoolmaster's, still less the curate's, unless he had happened (as was the case) to be an unmarried young man, who might have been so lucky as to attain to lodgings in that well-cared-for dwelling. But, no; it was too well cared for to take lodgers, or entertain any extraneous element; it was, in short, not to be diffuse, the house of Miss Hewitt, the sister of Richard Hewitt of the Seven Thorns, and aunt to Patty; the very Miss Hewitt in her own person, who had sat at the window upstairs making the vandyke in tape for her new petticoat, and to whom Sir Giles, in the days of his youth, and all the gentlemen had taken off their hats. Those had been the palmy days of the Seven Thorns, and the Hewitt of those times had been able to leave something to his daughter, which, along with a bit of money which she was supposed to have inherited from her mother, had enabled Miss Hewitt to establish herself in great comfort, not to say luxury, in Rose Cottage. It was a small slice of a house, which looked as if it had been cut off from a row and set down alone there. Its bricks were redder than any other bricks in the village, indeed they were reddened with paint as high up as the parlour window; the steps were whiter, being carefully whitened every day; the door was very shiny and polished, almost like the panel of a carriage, in green; the window of the parlour, at the side of the door, was shielded by hangings of spotless starched muslin, and had a small muslin blind secured across the lower half of it by a band of brass polished like gold. The door had a brass handle and a brass knocker. There was not a weed in the garden, which presented a brilliant border of flowers, concealing the more profitable wealth of a kitchen garden behind. Several great rose bushes were there, justifying the name of the cottage; but Miss Hewitt had taken down those which clustered once upon the walls, as untidy things which could not be kept in order. Rose Cottage was the pride, if also in some respects the laughing-stock, of the village; but it was the object of a certain adoration to the members of the clan of Hewitt, who considered it a credit to them and proof of their unblemished respectability far and near.

Patty knew too well to invade the virginal purity of the front door, the white step, or the brass knocker; but went round through the garden to the back, where her aunt was busy preparing fruit for the jam, for which Miss Hewitt was famous, with the frightened little girl, who was her maid-of-all-work, in attendance. All the little girls who succeeded each other in Miss Hewitt's service had a scared look; but all the same they were lucky little girls, and competed for by all the housekeepers round when they attained an age to be handed on to other service as certain to be admirably trained. She was a trim old lady, a little taller than Patty, and stouter, as became her years, but with all the vivacity and alertness which distinguished the women of that ancient house. She was a person of discernment also, and soon perceived that this was not a mere visit of ceremony, but that there was matter for advice in Patty's eye, and not that interest in the fruit, and its exact readiness for preserving, which would have been natural to a

young woman in Patty's position had there been no other object in her mind. Miss Hewitt accordingly, though with regret, suspended her important operations, breathing a secret prayer that the delay might not injure the colour of her jam, and led the way into the parlour. To describe that parlour would occupy me gratefully for at least a couple of pages, but I forbear. The reader may perhaps be able to fill up the suggestion; if not, he (she?) will probably hear more about it later on.

"Well," said Miss Hewitt, placing herself in her high-backed chair, which no one else presumed to occupy, "what is to do? I could see as you'd something to tell me of before you were up to the kitchen door."

"I've more than something to tell you. I've something to ask you," said Patty.

"I dare say: the one mostly means the other; but you know as I'm not foolish, nor even to say free with my money, if that's it, knowing the valley of it more than the likes of you."

"I know that," said Patty; "and it ain't for anything connected with the house or the business that I'd ever ask you, auntie; but this is for myself, and I sha'n't go about the bush or make any explanations till I've just told you frank; it's a matter of thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds! the gell is out of her senses!" Miss Hewitt cried.

"Or thereabouts. I don't know for certain; but you, as knows a deal more than me, may. It's for a marriage-licence," said Patty, looking her aunt full in the face.

"A marriage-licence!" Miss Hewitt repeated again, in tones of consternation; "and what does the fool want with a licence as costs money, when you can put up the banns, as is far more respectable, and be married the right way."

"I don't know as there's anything that ain't respectable in a licence, and anyway it's the only thing," said Patty, "for him and me. If I can't get it, I'll have to let it alone, that's all. A marriage as mightn't be anything much for the moment, but enough to make the hair stand upright on your head, Aunt Patience, all the same!"

"What kind of marriage would that be?" said the old lady, sceptical yet interested; "that fine Roger of yours, maybe, as is probable to be made a lord for his battin' and his bowlin'. Lord! Patty, how you can be such a fool, a niece of mine!"

"I ain't such a fool," said Patty, growing red, "though it might be better for me if I was. But anyhow I am your niece, as you say, and I can't—be that kind of fool; maybe I'm a bigger fool, if it's true as that old witch at the Manor says."

"What old witch?" cried the other old witch in the parlour, pricking up her ears.

"Aunt Patience," cried Patty, "you as knows: can they lock up in a madhouse a young man as isn't mad, no more than you or me; but is just silly, as any one of us might be? Can they put him out of his property, or send for the Lord Chancellor and take everything from him to his very name? Oh, what's the use of asking who he is? Who could he be? there ain't but one like that in all this county, and you know who he is as well as I do. Mr. Gervase Piercey. Sir Giles' son and heir! and they've got neither chick nor child but him!"

"Patty," said the elder woman, laying a grip like that of a bird with claws upon her niece's arm, "is it *'im* as you want the thirty pounds for to buy the licence? Tell me straight out, and not a word more."

"It is *him*," said Patty, in full possession of her h's, and with a gravity that became the importance of the occasion. Miss Hewitt did not say a word. She rose from her chair, and, proceeding to the window, pulled down the thick linen blind. She then placed a chair against the door. Then she took from the recess near the fireplace an old workbox, full to all appearance, when she opened it with a key which she took out of her purse, with thread and needles of various kinds. Underneath this, when she had taken the shelf completely out, appeared something wrapt in a handkerchief half-hemmed, with a threaded needle stuck in it—as if it had been a piece of work put aside—which proved to be an old pocketbook. She held this in her hand for a moment only, gave Patty a look, full of suspicion, scrutiny, yet subdued enthusiasm; then she opened it and took out carefully three crisp and crackling notes, selecting them one by one from different bundles. Then with great deliberation she put notes, pocketbook, the covering shelf, of the workbox, and the box itself back into the place where it had stood before.

"Mind, now you've seen it, I'll put it all into another place," Miss Hewitt said; "so you may tell whoever you like, they won't find it there."

"Why should I tell?" said Patty; "it's more for my interest you should keep it safe."

"You think you'll get it all when I die," said the elder woman, sitting down opposite to her niece with the notes in her hand.

"I think, as I hope, you'll never die, Aunt Patience! but always be here to comfort and help a body when they're in trouble, like me."

"Do you call yourself in trouble? I call you as lucky as ever girl was. I'd have given my eyes for the chance when I was like you; but his father was too knowing a one, and never gave it to me. Here! you asked for thirty, and I've give you fifty. Don't you go and put off and shilly-shally, but strike while the iron's hot. And there's a little over to go honeymooning upon. Of course he's got no money—the Softy: but I know 'im; he's no more mad than you or me."

She ended with a long, low laugh of exultation and satisfaction which made even Patty, excited and carried away by the tremendous step in her life thus decided upon, feel the blood chilled in her veins.

"You think there's no truth, then, in what Lady Piercey said: that they could take everything from him, even to his name?" It was the hesitation of this chill and horror which brought such a question to Patty's lips.

Miss Hewitt laughed again. "The Manor estate is all entailed," she said, "and the rest they'll never get Sir Giles to will away—never! All the more if there's a chance of an heir, who ought to have all his wits about him, Patty, from one side of the house. Get along with you, girl! You're the luckiest girl as ever I knew!"

But, nevertheless, it was with a slower step and a chill upon all her thoughts that Patty went back, without even putting up her parasol, though the sun from the west shone level into her eyes, to the Seven Thorns.

CHAPTER IX.

FOR a few days after Patty's visit to her aunt, that young lady looked out with some eagerness for the

reappearance of Gervase at the Seven Thorns, but looked in vain. At first she scarcely remarked his absence, having many things to think of, for it was not without excitement that she planned out the steps by which she was to enter into a new life. The first evening was filled, indeed, with the events of the day; the mental commotion called forth by the visit of Lady Piercely, and the excitement, almost overwhelming, of her unexpected, enthusiastic reception by Miss Hewitt, and the sudden supply so much above her most daring hopes. Fifty pounds! it was more to Patty than as many thousands would have been to minds more accustomed—much more. For the possession of a great deal of money means only income, and an unknown treasure in somebody else's hands, whereas fifty pounds is absolute money, which you can change, and spend, and realise, and enjoy down to the last farthing. It gave her a great deal of anxiety how to dispose of it at first. The Seven Thorns was not a place where any thief was likely to come for money; it was not a house worth robbing, which was a point, as Patty with her excellent sense was aware, on which burglars are very particular, taking every care to obtain accurate information. But then, again, money is a thing that betrays itself—a secret that is carried by the birds of the air. Had there been any of these gentry about, he might have divined from the way in which she carried herself, that she had fifty pounds in her pocket. There was a little faint lightness about it, she thought, when she put it in her drawer—a sort of undeveloped halo, showing that something precious was in the old pocketbook which she had found to enshrine it in. Then she took it out of that formal receptacle, and placed it with scientific carelessness in an old envelope. But, immediately, that torn paper covering seemed to become important, too, among the pocket-handkerchiefs and cherished trumpery, beads and brooches in her "locked drawer." The "girl," who was the only servant, except the ostler, at the Seven Thorns, had always manifested a great curiosity (taken rather as a compliment to her treasures than as an offence by Patty) concerning the contents of that locked drawer. She had often asked to be shown the "jewellery," which Patty, indeed, had no objection to show. What if she would be tempted this night of all others to break open the drawer, to refresh her soul with gazing at them, and perhaps to throw the old dirty envelope away? It was highly improbable that poor Ellen, an honest creature, would break open the drawer. But still, everything is possible when you have fifty pounds to take care of. Patty took it out again and placed it first in her pocket—but she soon felt that to be quite too insecure—and then in her bosom under her trim little bodice. She felt it there, while she went about her usual occupations, carrying beer to her father's customers. Fancy carrying pots of beer to labourers that were not worth so much as the price of them, and thanking the clowns for twopence—a girl who had fifty pounds under the bodice of her cotton frock! She was glad to see that Gervase had obeyed her orders, and did not appear in the parlour among the dull drinkers there.

Next day Patty was much occupied in rummaging out the empty part of the house, the best rooms, once occupied by important guests, when the Seven Thorns was a great coaching establishment, but now vacant, tapestried with dust and cobwebs, rarely opened from one year's end to the other, except at the spring-cleaning, when it is the duty of every housekeeper to clear out all the corners. She got up very early in the summer mornings, before any one was stirring (and it may be imagined how early that was, for the Seven Thorns was all alert and in movement by six o'clock), and went in to make an inspection while she was secure from any disturbance. The best rooms were in the western end of the long house, quite removed from the bar and the parlour, the chief windows looking out upon the garden, and at a distance upon the retreating line of the high road, and the slope of the heathery downs. Patty's heart swelled with pleasure as she carefully opened the shutters and looked round at the old faded furniture. There was a good-sized sitting-room, and two or three other rooms communicating with each other, and separated by a long passage from the other part of the house. "A suite of apartments," she said to herself! for Patty had read novels, and was acquainted with many fine terms of expression. The early sunshine flooded all the silent country, showing a dewy glimmer in the neglected garden, and sweeping along the broad and vacant road, where as yet there was nothing stirring. A few cows in a field, one of which got slowly up to crop a morsel before breakfast, as fine ladies (and fine gentlemen, too) have a cup of tea in bed, startled Patty as by the movement of some one spying upon her unusual operations and wondering what they meant. But there was no other spectator, nothing else awake, except the early birds who were chattering about their own businesses in every tree, talking over their own suites of apartments, and the repairs wanted, before the professional occupations of the day began, and the pipes were tuned up. They were far too busy to pay any attention to Patty, nor did she mind them. Besides, they were all sober, married folks, with the care of their families upon their heads; while she was a young person all thrilling with the excitement of the unknown, and making a secret survey of the possible future nest.

Patty inspected these rooms with a careful and a practised eye. Any young couple in the land, she felt, might be proud to possess this suite of apartments. She examined the carpets to see whether they would do, whether they would bear a thorough beating, which they required, and whether by judicious application of gall, or other restoring fluid, the colour might be brought back to the part which had been most trodden; or whether it would be better to buy one of those new-fashioned rugs which were spread upon the matting in the Rectory—a poor sort of substitute for a carpet, Patty had always thought—but as it was the fashion, it might be adopted to cover deficiencies; or a nice round table with a cover might be placed upon that weak spot. Curtains would be necessary, but thin white muslin is cheap and could be easily supplied. Patty pulled the old furniture about, as the rector's wife had done on her first arrival, to give it a careless look, which does not suit the stern angles of early Victorian mahogany and haircloth; but Patty had great confidence in crochet and frilled muslin to cover a multitude of sins. She stood at the window and looked out upon the garden which was quite retired and genteel—as refined a view as could have been had in the Manor itself. The cow in the field had lain down again to finish her night's rest after that early cup of tea. It was so quiet: the morning's sunshine almost level in long rays on the grass, the sleek coat of the brown cow glistening, nobody stirring. It almost overawed Patty to look out upon that wonderful silence before the world was awake. There was no telling what might happen in that new day; there was no telling what might come to her in the new life upon the margin of which she stood. She did not, I need scarcely say, think of the ideal excellencies of her future husband, or of love, or any of the usual enchantments that brighten the beginning of life. She thought of the Manor; of the old people who would soon die and be out of the way; of Lady Piercely's carriage, which would be hers; of the coachman and John on the box, whom she had been at school with (John at least), and whom she would make to tremble before her when her turn came to be my lady. My lady! Patty's head turned round and round. She put her head upon the window-frame to support herself, turning giddy with the thought. Your ladyship! She could hear people say it reverentially who had called, as if she had been their servant, for Patty at the Seven Thorns.

This was the thought that filled her mind with something of that ineffable elation and delight in her own happiness which is supposed to be peculiar to people who are in love. Patty was in love; but it would be putting a

scorn upon her intelligence to suppose that she was in love with Gervase. Poor Gervase, the Softy! Patty was resolved to be very good to him—she had even a kind of affection for him as being her own to do what she pleased with. He should never have any reason to regret her ownership. She would be good to him in every way, deny him nothing, consider all his silly tastes as well as his serious interests. But what Patty was in love with was the Manor, and the carriage, and the rents, and the ladyship. Lady Piercey! The thought of that tingled to her very feet; it turned her head like wine. The old people, of course, would make themselves very disagreeable. It would be their part to do so. Patty felt that she would think no worse of them for fighting against her, tooth and nail. But they would have to give in at the end; or still better, they would die and get out of her way, which was the most probable thing. Young people generally think of the death of old people without compunction; it is their business to die, just as it is the business of their successors to live. It is the course of nature. Patty no more doubted they would die than that Christmas would come in six months, whatever happened. What she would have chosen for pleasure and to enhance her triumph to the utmost, was that old Sir Giles should die, and the old lady survive to be called the Dowager, and to see Patty bearing the title of Lady Piercey. This was what would be most sweet; and it was very likely to come to pass, for everybody knew that Sir Giles was a great invalid, whereas nobody knew that Lady Piercey had been attacked last year by a little, very little premonitory “stroke”—nobody, at least, except Parsons and Margaret Osborne and the doctor, with none of whom Patty had any communication. The greatest triumph she could think of was to see the Dowager bundled off to her dower-house, while she, Patty, the regnant Lady Piercey, took her place. She was not an ill-natured person on the whole, but she felt that there was here awaiting her a poignant joy.

In the meantime, however, this glory was still at a distance, and the first thing to do was to prepare a shelter for the young couple who would have to inhabit, for lack of other habitation, these rooms in the west end of the Seven Thorns. Patty interviewed her father on the subject as soon as he had eaten his breakfast. She told him that to leave these beautiful rooms unoccupied was a sin and shame, and that it was his plain duty to do them up and look out for a lodger for next summer. “Indeed, I’m not sure but we might hear of somebody this season still, if they were ready,” she said. She showed him all the capabilities of the place, and how a disused garden door might be arranged so as to form a separate entrance, “for gentry won’t come in by a public-house door. It ain’t likely,” she explained. “What do I care about gentry, and what do you know about ‘em?” said her father. “I’ll never spend my money on such nonsense.” “But you like to see the colour of theirs,” said Patty, “and it would be good for trade, too. For suppose you gave them their board for a fixed rate, there would always be a good profit. It would keep us going and them, too, so as we should pay nothing for our living, and that in addition to the rent: don’t you see, father?” “I don’t believe in them profits,” said the old man; “gentry, as you call ‘em, don’t eat the same things as I likes.” “But they’d have to, father,” said Patty, softly, “if they couldn’t get nothing else.” This struck Mr. Hewitt’s sense of humour, and he allowed that it might be possible so, with a chuckle of democratic enjoyment. “I’d like to see ‘em sit down with their mincin’ ways to beans and fat bacon,” he confessed. Patty was very sure that it was not on beans and fat bacon that she would feed the future Sir Gervase and Lady Piercey; but she made no remark on this point, and ere the week was over, she had all her plans in operation—the new entrance by the garden, the rods put up for the new muslin curtains, the old rooms scrubbed and polished, and dusted till they shone again. “I think I’ll take a run up to London, and buy two or three little things out of my own little bit of money,” she said cautiously. And though her father demanded what little bit of money she had to spend, he made no objection to the expedition. Patty was very well to be trusted to look after herself, as well as the interests of the family. And thus she prepared, in every respect, the way.

But Gervase never appeared. Morning and night she looked out for him, pleased and half-amused, at first, with the faithfulness with which he obeyed her. But after a time Patty became a little anxious. She had, indeed, forbidden him to come to the Seven Thorns. But she had not intended this self-sacrifice to be of such long duration. What if his mother had got hold of him? What if he had been frightened into giving up his love? The old lady had looked very masterful, very full of power to do mischief. What if they had shut him up? Patty grew more and more anxious as day followed day. The fifty pounds which she had sewn up in a little bag, and wore suspended by a ribbon round her neck, began to lie like a blister upon her pretty white skin underneath her bodice. What would Aunt Patience say if all her plans came to nothing, if no licence was necessary, and no bridegroom forthcoming? Patty felt her heart sink, sink into unimaginable depths. The old woman would reclaim her money with a sneer enough to drive any girl mad. She would laugh out at the fool that had fancied the Softy was in love with her. His father, as had all his wits about him, might take a person in; but Lord bless us, the Softy! Patty knew exactly what her aunt would say. Miss Hewitt had given her the money, not for love of her, but that she might triumph over the great people, and avenge the wrongs of the other Patty who had gone before her. Patty grew hot and grew cold, as she stood at the door looking out along the road, and seeing nobody; her heart sickened at every footstep, and leaped at every shadow on the way. One night, when she stood there with her face turned persistently in one direction, just as the soft summer twilight was stealing over the landscape, and everything was growing indistinct, a voice close to her made Patty jump. She had not even observed—so great was her preoccupation—another figure coming round the other corner. Roger Pearson had seated himself on the bench under the parlour window, and yet she had taken no notice. He broke the silence by a laugh of mockery, that seemed to Patty the beginning of the ridicule and scorn of the whole parish. “Looking out for some one, eh?” said the voice; “but he ain’t coming, not to-night.”

“Who is not coming, Mr. Pearson?” said Patty, commanding herself with a great effort; “some one you were expecting to meet?”

“You can’t come over me like that, Patty,” said Roger. “Lord, a nice lass like you that might have the best fellow in the village—a-straining and a-wearing your eyes looking after a Softy! and him not coming neither—not a step! They knows better than that.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Pearson,” said Patty, feeling herself enveloped from head to foot in a flush of rage and shame. “I don’t know as I ever was known as one that looked after Softies—meaning poor folks that have lost their wits, I suppose. You’re one of them, anyhow, that speaks like that to me.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” said the young man, in his deep voice—“a fellow that’s not fit to tie your shoe, though he may be the squire’s son. Don’t you think that’ll ever come to any good. They’ll never let you be my lady; don’t you think it. They’ll turn him out o’ doors, and they’ll cut him off with a shilling; and then you’ll find yourself without a penny and a fool on your hands instead of a man.”

“Is this something out of a story book, or is it out of his own head?” said Patty looking round her as if consulting

an impartial audience,—“anyway, it has nothing to say to me. I’ll send Ellen to you for your orders, Mr. Pearson, for I’ve got a lot to do to-night, and I can’t stand here to listen to your romancing. Ellen,” she cried, “just see to that gentleman.” She went off with all the honours of war, but Patty’s heart was likely to burst. She marched upstairs with a candle to the rooms she had been arranging so carefully, and locked the door, and sat down upon the sofa and gave way to a torrent of tears. Was it all to come to nothing, after all her splendid dreams? She knew as well as any one that he was a fool and could be persuaded into anything. How did she know that his mother, if she tried, could not turn him round her little finger, as she, Patty, had been certain she could do? How could she tell, in the battle between Lady Piercey of Greyshott and Patty of the Seven Thorns, that it was she who would triumph and not the great lady? It was all Patty could do not to shriek out her exasperation, her misery and rage; not to pull down the curtains and dash the furniture to pieces. She caught her handkerchief with her teeth and tore it to keep herself quiet—and the fifty pounds in the bag burnt her breast like a blister. What if it was to come to nothing, after all?

CHAPTER X.

THE week had been a very long week to Gervase. To him, poor fellow, there was no limit of time; no thought that his obedience was intended, nay, desired to stop at a certain point. He went on dully, keeping at home, keeping indoors, trying in his fatuous way to please his parents. It was a very dull round to him who had known the livelier joys of the Seven Thorns, the beer and the tobacco in the parlour, and Patty flitting about, throwing him a word from time to time. It seemed but a poor sort of paradise to sit among the slow old toppers in the smoky room and imbibe the heavy beer; but it is unfortunately a kind of enjoyment which many young men prefer to the fireside at home, even without any addition of a Patty; and the poor Softy was not in this respect so very much inferior to the best and cleverest. The fireside at home, it must be allowed, was not very exciting. To be sure, the room itself was a very different room from that of the Seven Thorns. It was not the drawing-room in which the Piercey family usually sat in the evening, for the drawing-room was upstairs, and Sir Giles could not be taken up without great difficulty in his wheeled chair. It was the library, a large long room, clothed with the mellow tones and subdued gilding of old books, making a background which would have been quite beautiful to an artist. There was a row of windows on one side veiled in long curtains, and between these windows a series of family portraits almost as long as the windows, full length, not very visible in the dim light, affording a little glimpse of colour, and a face here and there looking out from that height upon the little knot of living people below; but the Pierceys of the past were not remarkable any more than the present Pierceys. A shaded lamp was suspended by a very long chain from the high roof, which was scarcely discernible going up so far, with those glimmers of bookcases and tall old portraits leading towards the vague height above; beneath it was a small round table, at which Lady Piercey sat in a great chair with her bright-coloured work; on the other side was Sir Giles among his cushions, with his backgammon board on a stand beside him, where sometimes Margaret, sometimes Dunning played with him till bedtime. Parsons, on the other hand, was so frequently in attendance on her mistress that the two old servants might be taken as part of the family circle. When Margaret took her place at the backgammon board, Dunning had an hour’s holiday, and retired to the much brighter atmosphere of the servants’ hall or the housekeeper’s room. And when Dunning played with Sir Giles, Margaret attended upon Lady Piercey to thread her needles, and select the shades of the silk, and Parsons was set free. The one who was never set free was Mrs. Osborne, whose evenings in this dim room between the two old people were passed in an endless monotony which sometimes made her giddy. The dull wheel of life went round and round for her, and never stopped or had any difference in it. From year to year the routine was the same.

Now, whether this scene, or the parlour at the Seven Thorns, where the sages of the village opened their mouths every five minutes or so to emit a remark or a mouthful of smoke, or to take in a draught of beer, was the most—or rather the least—enlivening, it would be hard to say. The sages of the village are sometimes dull and sometimes wise in a book. They were full of humour and character in George Eliot’s representation of them, and they are very quaint in Mr. Hardy’s. But I doubt much if they ever say such fine things in reality, and I am sure, if they did, that Gervase Piercey was not capable of understanding them. The beer and the tobacco and the sense of freedom and of pleasing himself—also of being entirely above his company, and vaguely respected by them—made up the charms of the humbler place to Gervase. And Patty—Patty had got by degrees to be the soul of all; but even before Patty’s reign began he had escaped with delight from these home evenings to the Seven Thorns. Why? For Sir Giles, even in his enfeebled state, was better company than old Hewitt and his cronies; and Lady Piercey’s sharp monologue on things in general was more piquant than anything the old labourers found to say; and Mrs. Osborne was a great deal handsomer than Patty, and would willingly have exerted herself for the amusement of her cousin. But this is a problem to which there is no answer. Far better and cleverer young men than Gervase make this same choice every day, or rather every evening; and no one can tell why.

But Gervase had turned over a new leaf. He went out to the door and took a few whiffs of his pipe, turning his back to the road which led to the Seven Thorns, that the temptation might not be too much for him, and repeating dully to himself what Patty had said to him. And then he went into the library, where they were all assembled, and pushed Dunning away, who was just arranging the board for Sir Giles’ game. “Here! look out; I’m going to play with you, father,” Gervase said. The old gentleman had been delighted the first night, pleased more or less the second, fretful the third. “You don’t understand my play, Gervase,” he said.

“Oh! yes, I understand your play, father: Dunning lets you win, and that’s why you like Dunning to play with you; but I’m better, for I wake you up, and you’ve got to fight for it when it’s me.”

“Dunning does nothing of the sort,” cried Sir Giles, angrily, “Dunning plays a great deal better than you, you booby. Do you let me win, Dunning? It’s all he knows!”

“I ought to be good, Sir Giles, playin’ with a fine player like you; but I never come up to you, and never will, for I haven’t the eddication you have, Sir Giles, which stands to reason, as I’m only a servant,” Dunning said.

“There! You hear him: go and play something with Meg; you’re never still with those long legs of yours, and I like a quiet game.”

“I’ll keep as quiet as pussy,” said Gervase. “Which’ll you have, father, black or white? and let’s toss for the first move.”

Now, everybody knew that Sir Giles always played with the white men and always had the first move. Once

again the old gentleman had to resign himself to the noisy moves and shouts of his son over every new combination, and to the unconscious kicks which the restlessness of Gervase's long limp legs inflicted right and left. Dunning stood behind his master's chair, with a stern face of disapproval, yet trying hard by winks and nods to indicate the course which ought to be pursued, until Gervase threw himself back in his chair, almost kicking over the table with the corresponding movement of his legs, and bursting into a loud laugh. "What d'ye mean, ye old fool, making faces at me over father's shoulder? Do you mean I'm to give him the game, like you do? Come on, father, let's fight it out."

"I never said a word, Sir Giles! I hope as I knows my place," cried Dunning, alarmed.

"Hold your tongue, you big gaby," cried Sir Giles; but presently the old gentleman thrust the board away, overturning it upon his son's long legs. "I'll not play any more," he said: "I've had enough of it. I think I was never so tired in my life. Backgammon's a fine game, but one can't go on for ever. Fetch me my drink, Dunning; I think I'll go to bed."

"It's all because he's losing his game," cried Gervase, with a loud ha! ha! He had something like the manners of a gentleman at the Seven Thorns, but at home his manners were those of the public-house. "The old man don't like to be beaten; he likes to have everything his own way. And Dunning's an old humbug, and lets you have it. But it ain't good for you to have too much of your own way. I've been told *that* since I was a little kid like Osy; and what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, father, don't you know."

"Gervase, how dare you speak so to your papa? Come over here, sir, and leave him a little in peace. Where did you learn to laugh so loud, and make such a noise? Come here, you riotous boy. You always were a noisy fellow, making one's head ache to hear you. Sit down, for goodness' sake, and be quiet. Meg, can't you find something to amuse him? I dare say he'd like a game at cards. How can I tell you what game? If you can't, at your time of life, find something that will occupy him and keep him quiet—! Here, Gervase, hold this skein of silk while Parsons winds it, and Meg will go and get the cards, and perhaps you'd like a round game."

"I don't want a game, mother, not for Meg's sake, who doesn't count. I want to be pleasant to you—and to father, too," said Gervase, standing up against the fireplace, which, of course, was vacant this summer night.

Sir Giles was so far from appreciating the effort of his son, that he sat fuming in his chair, while Dunning collected the scattered "men," muttering indistinct thunders, and pettishly putting away with his stick the pieces of the game. "Make haste! can't you make haste, man?" he mumbled; "I want my drink, and I'm going to bed. And I won't have my evening spoiled like this again. I won't, by George, not for anything you can say. Four nights I've been a martyr to that cub, and I don't see that you've done much to keep him in order, my lady! It all falls upon me, as everything does, and, by George, I won't have it again. Can't you make haste, you old fool, and have done with your groping? You're losing your eyesight, I believe. Have one of the women in to find them, and get me my drink, for I'm going to bed."

"I'll find them, father," cried Gervase cheerfully, plunging down upon the carpet on his hands and knees, and pushing the old gentleman's stick back into his face.

"For goodness' sake, Meg, find something for him to do! and take that boy off his father, or Sir Giles will have a fit," cried Lady Piercy in Mrs. Osborne's ear.

"Get out o' my way, you young ass!" Sir Giles thundered, raising the stick and bestowing an angry blow upon his son's shoulders. Gervase sat up on his knees like a dog, and stared for a moment angrily, with his hand lifted as if he would have returned the blow. Then he opened his mouth wide and gave forth a great laugh. Poor old Sir Giles caught at Dunning's arm, clutching him in an ecstasy of exasperation. "Get me off, man, can't you? Get me out of sight of him; take me to bed," the old father cried, in that wretchedness of miserable perception which only parents know. His son—his only son! His heir, the last of the Piercy's!—this Softy sitting up like a dog upon the floor!

Lady Piercy fell back also in her chair, and whimpered a little piteously, like the poor old woman she was, as Sir Giles was wheeled out of the room. The backgammon board, overturned, lay on the floor, with the pieces scattered over the carpet, and Gervase scrambling after them, for Dunning had been too tremulous and frightened to pick more than half of them up. "Oh! my poor, silly boy! oh! you dreadful, dreadful fool!" the old lady cried. "Will you never learn any better? Can't you wake up and be a man?" She cried over this, for a little, very bitterly, with that terrible sense of the incurable which turns the poor soul back upon itself—and then she flung round in her big chair towards her niece, who stood silent and troubled, not knowing what part to take. "It's all your fault," she cried in a fierce whisper, "for not finding something for him to do. Why didn't you find something for him to do? You might have played something to him, or sung something with him, or got him to look at pictures, or— anything! And now you've let your poor uncle go off in a rage, which may bring on a fit as likely as not, and me worse, for I can't give in like him. Oh, Meg, what an ungrateful, selfish thing you are to stand there and never interfere when you might have found him something to do!"

When Lady Piercy's procession streamed off afterwards to bed, my lady leaning heavily on Parsons' arm and Margaret following with the work, Gervase was left still picking up the pieces, sprawling over the carpet and laughing as he followed the little round pieces of ivory and wood into the corners where they had rolled. Margaret went back to the library after being released by her aunt, and found him still there making a childish game of this for his own amusement, and chuckling to himself as he raced them over the carpet. He scrambled up, however, a little ashamed when he heard her voice asking, "What are you doing, Gervase?" "Oh, nothing," he said with his foolish laugh, stuffing the "men" into his pockets. She put her hand upon his shoulder kindly.

"Gervase, dear, you're quite grown up, don't you know; quite a man now. You mustn't be so mischievous, just like a boy. Poor Uncle Giles, you must not play tricks upon him; he likes a quiet game."

"Don't you be a fool, Meg. Why, that was what I was doing all the night, playing his quiet game. Poor old father, he got into a temper, but bless you 'twasn't my fault. It's that old ass, Dunning, that's always getting in everybody's way."

"Of course he would like you best, Gervase,—but Dunning knows all his ways. Your game might be better fun —"

"I should think so," said the poor Softy. "My game *is* the game, and Dunning spoils everything. It ain't my fault, though every one of you gets into a wax with me,"—Gervase's lip quivered a little as if he might have cried,—"and me giving up everything only to please them!" he said.

"I am sure they are pleased to see you always indoors and not spending your time in that dreadful place."

"What dreadful place? That is all you know—I'd never have come home any more but for them that's there. It was *she* that sent me to please the old folks. But I shan't go on much longer if you all treat me like this. I've tried my best to make the time pass for them, Meg, to give them a laugh and that. And they huff me and cuff me as if I was a fool. Why do they always call me a fool," cried the poor fellow with a passing cloud of trouble, "whatever I do?"

"Oh, Gervase!" cried Margaret, full of pity. "But why did she want you so particularly to please them just now?"

He stared at her for a moment, then laughed and nodded his head. "You'd just like to know!" he said, "but she didn't mean me to be nice to *you*, Meg; for she's always afraid I'll be driven to marry you—though a man must not marry his grandmother, you know."

Margaret repented in a moment of the flush of anger that flew over her. "You can make her mind easy on that point," she said gravely; "but oh, Gervase, I am afraid it will make them very unhappy if you go on with this fancy; they would never let you bring her here."

"Fancy!" he cried, "I'm going to marry her. You can't call that a fancy; and if you think you can put me off it, or the whole world!—Get along Meg, *I* don't want to talk to you any more."

"But I want very much to talk to you, Gervase."

Gervase looked at her with a smile of foolish complacency. "I dare say you think me silly," he cried, "but here's two of you after me. Get along, Meg; whatever I do I'm not going to take your way."

"You must do as you please, then," said Margaret in despair; "but remember, Gervase," she said, turning back before she reached the door, "your father is old, and you might drive him into a fit if you go on as you did to-night—and where would you be then?" she added, with an appeal to the better feeling in which she still believed.

"Why, I'd be in his place, and she'd be my lady," cried the young man, with a gleam of cruel cunning, "and nobody could stop me any more, whatever I liked to do."

But next evening there seemed to be in his mind some lingering regard for what she had said. Gervase left his father alone, and devoted himself to his mother, who was more able to take care of herself. He offered to wind her silks, and entangled them hopelessly with delighted peals of laughter. He took her scissors to snip off the ends for her, and put the sharp points through the canvas, until Lady Piercey, in her exasperation, gave him a sudden cuff on his cheek.

"You great fool!" she cried—"you malicious wretch! Do you want to spoil my work as well as everything else? I wish you were little enough to be whipped, I do; and I wish I had whipped you when you were little, when it might have done you some good. Margaret, what do you mean sitting quiet there, enjoying yourself with a book and me driven out of my senses? That's what he wants to do, I believe—to drive us mad and get his own way; to make us crazy, both his poor father and me."

"No, I don't," cried Gervase, "and you oughtn't to hit me—I'll hit back again if you do it again. It hurts—you've got a fist like a butcher, though you're such an old lady." He rubbed his cheek for a moment dolefully, and then again burst out laughing. "You look like old Judy in the show, mamma, when she hits her baby: only you're so fat you could never get into it, and your voice is gruff like the old showman's—not squeaky, like Mrs. Punch. I've cut all the silks into nice lengths for you to work with—ain't you obliged to me? Look here," he said, holding out his work. Poor Lady Piercey clapped her fat hands together loudly in sheer incapacity of expression. It made a loud report like a gun fired off to relieve her feelings, and Sir Giles looked up from his quiet game with Dunning, not without a subdued amusement that she should now be getting her share.

"What's the matter, what's the matter, my lady? Is that cub of yours playing some of his pranks? It's your turn to-night, it appears, and serves you right, for you always back him up."

"Oh, you fool, you fool, you fool!" cried the old lady in her passion. And then she turned her fiery eyes on her husband with a look of contempt and fury too great for words. "Meg!" she cried, putting out her hand across the table and grasping Mrs. Osborne's arm, "If you're ever driven wild like me, never you look for sympathy to a man! when they see you nearly mad with trouble they give you a look, and chuckle! that's what they always do. Put down the scissors, you, you, you—"

"Oh, and to think," she cried wildly, "that that's my only son! Oh, Giles, how can you play your silly games, and sit and see him—the only one we have between us, and he's a born fool! And me, that was so thankful to see him stay at home, and give up going out to his low company! And now I can't abide him. I can't abide to see him here!"

This happened on the night when Patty, frightened and dejected, shut herself up in the room which she had meant for her bridal bower, and cried her eyes out because of Gervase's absence. The poor Softy was thus of as much importance as any hero, turning houses and hearts upside down.

CHAPTER XI.

A WHOLE week, and nothing had been seen or heard of Gervase at the Seven Thorns. Even old Hewitt remarked it, with a taunt to his daughter. "Where's your Softy, that was never out of the house, Miss Patty, eh? Don't seem to be always about at your apron string, my lass, as you thought you was to keep him there. Them gentlemen," said old Hewitt, "as I've told you, Softy or not, they takes their own way, and there's no trust to be put in them. He's found some one else as he likes better, or maybe you've given him the sack, Patty, eh? And that's a pity, for he was a good customer," the landlord said.

"Whether I've given him the sack or he's found some one he likes better, don't matter much to any one as I can see. I'll go to my work, father, if you've got nothing more sensible than that to say."

"Sensible or not, he's gone, and a good riddance," said her father. "I ain't a fine Miss, thick with the rector and the gentry, like you; but I declare, to see that gaby laughing and gaping at the other side of the table, turned me sick, it did. And I hopes as we'll see no more of him, nor none of his kind. If you will have a sweetheart, there's plenty of good fellows about, 'stead of a fool like that."

Patty did not stamp her foot as she would have liked to do, or throw out her arms, or scream with rage and disappointment. She went on knocking her broom into all the corners, taking it out more or less in that way, and tingling from the bunch of hair fashionably dressed on the top of her head, to the toe of her high-heeled shoes, with

suppressed passion. She would not make an exhibition of herself. She would not give Ellen, the maid-servant, closely observing her through the open door of the back kitchen, nor Bob, the ostler, who had also heard every word old Hewitt said as he bustled about with his pail outside the house, any occasion of remark or of triumph over her as a maiden forsaken, whose love had ridden away. They were all on the very tiptoe of expectation, having already made many comments to each other on the subject. "You're all alike—every one of you," Ellen had said to Bob. "You'd go and forsake me just the same, if you saw some one as you liked better." "It'll be a long day afore I do that," said the gallant ostler, preserving, however, the privilege of his sex. They were all ready to throw the responsibility of attraction upon the woman. It was more to her credit to keep her hold on the man by being always delightful to him than by any bond of faithfulness on his part. Patty felt this to the bottom of her heart. It was not so much that she blamed her Softy. She blamed herself bitterly, and felt humiliated and ashamed that she had not been able to hold him; that he had found anything he liked better than her society. She swept out every corner, banging her broom as if she were punishing the unknown rivals who had seduced him away from her, and felt, for all her pride, as if she never could hold up her head again before the parish, which would thus know that she had miscalculated her powers. Roger Pearson knew it already, and triumphed. And then Aunt Patience—but that was the most dreadful of all.

Even old Hewitt himself, the landlord of the Seven Thorns, was a little disappointed, if truth were told. He had liked to say to the fathers of the village, "I can't get that young Piercey out o' my house. Morning, noon, and night that young fellow is about. And I can't kick him out, ye see, old Sir Giles bein' the Lord o' the Manor." "I'd kick him out fast enough," the blacksmith had replied, who never had any chance that way, "if he come sneakin' after my gell." "Oh, as for that, my Patty is one that can take care of herself," it had been Mr. Hewitt's boast to say. And when he was congratulated ironically by the party in the parlour with a "Hallo, Hewitt! you've been and got shut of your Softy," the landlord did not like it. Softy as Gervase was, to have got him thus fast in the web, old Sir Giles' only son, was a kind of triumph to the house.

In the afternoon, however, Patty resolved to take a walk. It was an indulgence which she permitted to herself periodically—that her best things and her hat with the roses, her light gloves and her parasol might not spoil for want of use. She put on all this finery, however, with a sinking at her heart. The last time she had worn them she had been all in a thrill with excitement, bent upon the boldest step she had ever taken in her life. And the high tension of her nerves and passion of her mind had been increased by the unexpected colloquy with Lady Piercey at the carriage-door. But that was a day of triumph all along the line. She had baffled the old lady, and she had roused her own aunt to a fierce enthusiasm of interest, which had reacted upon herself and increased her determination, and the fervour of her own. When she had walked back that evening with the fifty pounds, she had felt herself already my lady, uplifted to a pinnacle of grandeur from which no fathers or mothers could bring her down. But now! Gervase himself had not seemed a very important part of that triumph a little while ago. He had been a chattel of hers, a piece of property as much her own as her parasol. And if he had emancipated himself, if he had escaped out of her net, if his mother had obtained the mastery of him, or sent him away, Patty felt as if she must die of rage and humiliation. To take back that fifty pounds to Aunt Patience and allow that the use she had got it for was no longer possible; to submit to be asked on all sides, by Roger in triumph, by everybody else in scorn, what had become of him? was more than she could bear. She would rather run away and go to service in London. She would rather—there was nothing in the world that Patty did not feel herself capable of doing rather than bear the brunt of this disappointment and shame.

It must be added that the value of Gervase individually was enormously enhanced by this period of doubt and alarm. The prize that is on the point of being lost is very different from that which falls naturally, easily into your hands. Patty thought of the Softy no longer as if he were a piece of still life; no more—indeed, not so much—a part of the proceedings which were to end eventually in making her my lady as the marriage-licence which would cost such a deal of money. All that was changed now. Poor fellow! he who had never been of much importance to anybody had become of the very greatest consequence now. She would never, never be my lady at all, unless he took a principal part in it—the great fool, the goose, the gaby! But though her feelings broke out once or twice in a string of such reproaches under her breath, Gervase was too important a factor now to be thought of or addressed by contemptuous epithets. He could spoil it all; he could make all her preparations useless. He could shame her in the eyes of Aunt Patience, and even before the whole of her little world, although nobody knew how far things had gone. Therefore it was with an anxious heart that Patty made a turn round by the outskirts of the village as if she were going to pay a visit to her Aunt Patience—the last place in the world where she desired to go—and then directed her steps towards the Manor, meaning to make a wide round past the iron gate and the beech-tree avenue, which were visible to any passenger walking across the downs. She gave a long look, as she passed, at the great house, with all its windows twinkling in the afternoon sun, and the two long processions of trees on either side. Her heart rose to her mouth at the thought that all this might, yet might never, be her own. Might be! it had seemed certain a week ago; and yet might never be if that fool—oh, that imbecile, that ridiculous, vacant, gaping Softy—should take it into his foolish head to draw back now.

The road lay close under the wall of the park beyond the iron gate. Patty had got so anxious, so terrified, so horribly convinced that her chances of meeting him were small, and that, except in an accidental way, she could not hope to lay hands on him again, that her stout heart almost failed her as she went on. It was a very warm day, and she was flushed and heated with her walk, as well as with the suspense and alarm of which her mind was full, so that she was aware she was not looking her best, when suddenly, without warning, she came full upon him round the corner, almost striking him with her outstretched parasol in the suddenness of the encounter. Gervase did not see her at all. He was coming on with his head bent, his under-lip hanging, his hands in his pockets, busy with his old game—six white ones all in a heap. What a jump for the right-hand man! and hallo, hallo! a little brown fellow slipping along on the other side, driven by somebody's foot! He made a mental note of that before looking to see who the somebody was, which was of so much less importance. And then Patty's little cry of surprise and "Oh! Mr. Gervase!" went through him like a shot at his ear. He gave a shout like the inarticulate delight of a dog, and flew towards her as if he had been Dash or Rover, roused by the ecstatic sound of their master's voice.

"Patty! Lord, to think of you being here! and me, that hasn't had a peep of you for a whole week. Patty! Oh, come now, I can't help it. I'm so happy, I could eat you up. Patty, Patty!" cried the poor fellow, patting her on the shoulder, looking into her face with his dull eyes suddenly inspired, "you're sure it's you!"

"And a deal you care whether it's me or not, Mr. Gervase," cried Patty, tossing her head. But in that moment

Patty had become herself again. Her anxiety was over, her bosom's lord sat lightly on his throne. The fifty pounds in the little bag no longer felt like a blister. She was the mistress of the situation, and all her troubled thoughts flew before the wind as if they had never been.

"A deal I care? Oh, I do care a deal, Patty, if you only knew! Never you do it again—to make me stay away like this. I've made a mull of it, as I knew I should, without you to back me up. Father turns his back on me. He won't say a word. And even mother, that was always my stand-by, she says she can't abide to see me there."

Again Gervase looked as if he would cry; but brightening up suddenly, "I don't mind a bit as long as I can see you, and you'll tell me what to do."

"Well," said Patty, "I could perhaps tell you if I knew what you wanted to do. But I can't stand still here, for I've come out for a walk, and if you wish to speak to me you must come along with me. I'm going as far as Carter's Wells, and the afternoon's wearing on."

"Oh!" said Gervase, discomfited, "you're going as far as Carter's Wells? I thought—I supposed—or I wanted to think, Patty—as you were coming to look for me!"

"What should I do that for, Mr. Gervase?" said Patty, demurely.

"I'm sure I don't know," said the poor Softy. "I just thought so. You might have had something you wanted to tell me, or—to say I might come back, or——"

"What should I have to tell you, Mr. Gervase?"

He looked piteously at her, all astray, and took off his cap, and pushed his fingers through his hair. "I'm sure I don't know; and yet there was something that I wanted badly to hear. Patty, don't you make a fool of me like all the rest! If I don't know what it is, having such a dreadful memory, you do."

"It's a wonder as you remembered me at all, Mr. Gervase," said Patty, giving him a little sting in passing.

"You! I'd never forget you if I lived to be a hundred. I'd forget myself sooner, far sooner, than I'd forget you."

"But it's a long time since you've seen me, and you've forgotten all you wanted of me," Patty said, with a sharp tone of curiosity in her voice.

"No, I don't forget; I do know what I want—I want to marry you, Patty. I've been obeying all your orders, and trying to please the old folks for nothing but that. But it don't seem to succeed, somehow," he said, shaking his head; "somehow it don't seem to succeed."

"They will never give their consent to that, Mr. Gervase!"

"No?" he said, doubtfully. "Well, of course you must be right, Patty. They don't seem to like it when I tell them it's because of you I'm trying to please them and staying like this at home."

"You should never have said that," she cried quickly; "you should have made them think it was all because you were so fond of them, and liked best being at home."

"But it would be a lie," said Gervase, simply, "and mother's awful sharp; she always finds out when you tell her a crammer. Say I may come to-night; do now, Patty,—I can't bear it any more."

"But you must bear it, Mr. Gervase," said Patty; "that is, if you really, really, want *that* to come true."

"What's that, Patty?" cried the young man.

"Oh, you——!"—it was only a breath, and ended in nothing. Patty saw that mincing matters was of no use. "I mean about us being married," she said, turning her head away.

"If I want it!" he cried, "when you know there is nothing in the world I want but that. Nobody would ever put upon me if I had only you to stand by me, Patty. Tell me what I am to do."

She unfolded her scheme to him after this with little hesitation. He was to continue his attendance at home for a little longer, and to propound to his parents his desire to go to London and see the fine sights there. It took Patty a considerable time to put all this into her lover's head—what he was to say, which she repeated over to him several times; and what he was to do afterwards, and the extreme importance of not forgetting, of never mentioning her nor the Seven Thorns, nor anything that could recall her to their minds. He was to say that the country was dull ("And so it is—especially at home, and when I can't see you," said Gervase), and that he had never seen London since he was a child, and it was a shame he never was trusted to go anywhere or see anything. ("And so it is a great shame.") When all this was well grafted into his mind, or, at least Patty hoped so, she announced that she had changed her intention and would go no more to Carter's Wells, but straight home to complete her preparations. And he was allowed to accompany her back almost as far as the high road, then dismissed to return home another way. Patty did not say that she was afraid of meeting Lady Piercely's carriage; but this was in her mind as she proceeded towards the Seven Thorns, with her head and her parasol high, like an army with banners, not at all afraid now, rather wishing for that encounter. It did take place according to her prevision when she was almost in sight of the group of stunted and aged trees which gave their name to her father's house. Why Lady Piercely should be passing that way, she herself, perhaps, could scarcely have told. She wanted, it might be, with that attraction of dislike which is as strong as love, to see again the girl who had so much power over Gervase, and of whom he said in his fatuous way, that it was she who was the occasion of his present home-keeping mood; or she wanted, as the angry and suspicious mind always hopes to do, to "catch" Patty and be able to report some flirtation or malicious anecdote of her in the hearing of Gervase. The old lady had strained her neck looking back at the Seven Thorns, which lay all vacant in the westering sunshine, the door open and void, nobody on the outside bench, nobody at the window—a perfectly harmless uninteresting house, piquing the curiosity more than if there had been people about. "I declare, Meg," Lady Piercely was saying, "that horrid house gets emptier and poorer every day. The man must be going all to ruin, with not so much as a tramp to call for a glass of beer; and serves him right, to bring up that daughter as he has, all show and finery, and good for nothing about such a place." "The Rector has a great opinion of her," said Margaret; "they say she is so active and such a good manager." "Oh! stuff and nonsense," cried Lady Piercely, "you saw her with your own eyes in light gloves and a parasol, trailing her gown along the road; a girl out of a beershop, a girl——" But here Lady Piercely stopped short with a gasp, for close to the side of the carriage, and almost within hearing, was the same resplendent figure; the hat nodding with its roses; the gown a little too long, and trailing, as was the absurd fashion of that time; the light gloves firmly grasping the parasol, which was held high like an ensign, leaving the girl's determined and triumphant face fully visible. Patty marched past, giving but one glance to the inmates of the carriage, her colour high and her attitude martial; while the great lady almost fell back upon her cushions,

overwhelmed with the suddenness of the encounter. Fortunately Lady Piercey did not see the tremendous nudge which John on the box gave to the coachman. She was too much moved by this startling incident to note any other demonstration of feeling.

"Did you see that?" she asked in a low tone, almost with awe, when that apparition had passed.

"Yes—I saw her. She is too fine for her station, but Aunt——"

"Don't put any of your butts to me, Meg! Do you think she could hear what we were saying? The bold, brazen creature! passing me by without a bend of her knee, as if she were as good as we are. What is this world coming to when a girl bred up in my own school, in my own parish, that has dropped curtseys to me since ever she was a baby, should dare to pass me by like that?" Lady Piercey, who had grown very red in sudden passion, now grew pale with horror at a state of affairs so terrible. "She looked as if she felt herself the lady, and us nobodies. Meg! do you think Gervase has it in him to marry that girl, and give her my name when your uncle dies! If I thought that, I think it would kill me! at least," she cried, sitting up with fire in her watery eyes—"it would put me on my mettle, and I'd mince matters no more, but get the doctor's advice and lock him up."

"My uncle would never consent to that."

"Your uncle—— would just do what I wish. There's not many things he's ever crossed me in; and all he has have turned out badly. If I could make up my mind to it, it wouldn't be your uncle that would stop me. I have a great mind to send for the doctor to-night."

"But Aunt, is it not more likely they have quarrelled," said Margaret, "since he has been staying at home so faithfully, and never been absent day or night?"

"Do you think that's it, Meg? or do you think it's only policy to throw dust in our eyes? Oh, I wish I knew. I wish I knew. Oh, Meg, that I should say it! I feel as if I'd rather he should go out even to that horrible Seven Thorns, than drive us all frantic with staying at home. If he goes on like that another night, I don't think I can bear it. Oh, it's all very well for you, sitting patient and smiling! If you were to see your only child sitting there like an idiot, and showing the very page-boy what a fool he is, and gabbling and grinning till you can hardly endure yourself, I wonder—I wonder what you'd say."

CHAPTER XII.

GERVASE went home still with his head bent, but no longer thinking of the white pebbles and the brown. It is true that his accustomed eye caught a big one here and there, which had rolled to the side of the path, and which he felt with regret would have come in so finely for the right or the left-hand man! but his mind was fixed on his *consigne*, and he was saying to himself over and over the words Patty had taught him—that he wanted to go to see London, and all the fine things there; that he was tired (mortal tired) of staying always at home; that it was a shame he never was trusted nor allowed to do anything (and so it was a shame). He could not even think of the pleasure of going to London, of meeting Patty at the station, and all that was to follow, so absorbed were his thoughts with what he had to say in the meantime. And it would not have been surprising had Gervase been overwhelmed by the thought of making such a wild suggestion to his parents, who had kept him hitherto like a child under their constant supervision. But his simple mind was not troubled by any such reflection as this. Patty had told him what to say, and no feeling of the impossibility of the thing, or of the strange departure in it from all the rules which had guided his life, affected him. If it did not succeed, all he had to do was to tell her, and she would think of something else. Better heads than that of poor Gervase have found this a great relief among the problems of life. As for him, he was not aware of any problems; he had a thing to say, and the trouble was lest he should forget it or say it wrong. To think of anything further was not his share of the business. He, too, met his mother just as she returned from her drive, so that he had taken a considerable time to that exercise, walking up and down the path that led under the wall of the park, conning his lesson. An impulse came upon him to say it off then and there, and so free his mind from the responsibility; but he remembered in time that Patty had said it was to be kept till after dinner, when his father and mother were both present. He was rather frightened, however, when the carriage suddenly drove up, and he was called to the door. "Hallo! mamma," he said, striding over a gorse bush that was in his way. Lady Piercey had jumped at the conclusion, as soon as she saw him, that there had been a meeting, as she said, "between those two." She called out quickly to take him by surprise, "Hi! Gervase! have you met anybody on the road?"

Now, Gervase was not clever, as the reader knows; but just because he was a Softy, and his brains different from other people's, he was better qualified to deal with such a question than a more intelligent youth might have been. "Met anybody on the road?" he said, gazing with his dull eyes and open mouth. "But I've not been on the road; I've only been up and down here."

"Oh, you——! but here is just the same as the road. Who have you been talking to?" the mother cried.

"There was the man with the donkey from Carter's Wells," said Gervase; "but I never said a word to him, nor he didn't to me."

"Was that the only person you saw? Tell me the truth," said Lady Piercey severely. Gervase put his head on one side, and seemed to reflect.

"If I'm to tell the dead truth," he said, "but I don't want to, mother, for you'll scold like old boots——"

"Tell me this instant!" cried Lady Piercey, red already with the rage that was ready to burst forth.

"Well, then, there just was—the ratcatcher with his pockets full of ferrets coming up from——"

"Home!" cried the lady, more angry than words could say. "Oh, you fool!" she said, shaking her fist at her son, who stood laughing, his moist lips glistening—no very pleasant sight for a mother's eye.

"I thought I was to tell you the truth," he cried after them, as the carriage whirled away.

"Do you think it was the truth, Meg?" Lady Piercey demanded, in a gasp, when they had swept into the avenue. A feeling of relief came as her anger quieted down.

"Dear Aunt—do you think he could invent so quickly, without any time to prepare?"

"You mean he couldn't because he's not clever? Heaven knows! They're as deep as the deep sea, and as cunning as——. But that ratcatcher is a man I will not have hanging, with those beasts in his pockets, about my house."

The ratcatcher gave occasion for a good deal of talk that afternoon, both in Gervase's presence and out of it; and by good luck he had been about, and Lady Piercey gave her orders as to his expulsion from the premises, whenever he should appear, with real satisfaction. "He's not company for Gervase, and that every one knows," she said at the dinner table, when old Sir Giles ventured to remonstrate on behalf of the ferrets and their owner.

"Mother always says that when it's any fellow I like to have a chat with," Gervase said.

"There's no harm in old Jerry," said Sir Giles. "A man shouldn't be too squeamish, my lady. A good-natured word here and there is what's wanted of a country squire."

"But not taking pleasure in low company," retorted Lady Piercey. "And I tell you again, I won't have that old wretch and his beasts about my house."

"But father knows it's rare fun sometimes, ain't it, father?" said the young man, kicking the old gentleman under the table. Fortunately, the kick touched only Sir Giles' stick, and he was not displeased to take Gervase's part for once against his wife.

"Hush, you young ass, can't you? We don't speak of these things before ladies," he said.

This little confidential aside put Sir Giles in good humour. But when the family retired into the library, which was done by no means in the usual order—for Sir Giles himself in his chair, wheeled by Dunning, led the way—it was evident that an uneasy alarm in respect to Gervase was the leading sentiment in everybody's mind. Sir Giles announced loudly that it was Dunning, and only Dunning, who should play with him to-night. "I've got to give the fellow his revenge," he said. "I beat him black and blue last night. Eh, Dunning, didn't I beat you black and blue? You're not a bad player, but not just up to my strength."

"No, Sir Giles," answered the man, setting the table in haste, and keeping carefully between it and the heir of the house. Lady Piercey, on her side, employed Parsons and Margaret, both of whom were in attendance, in covering up all her silks. "Put them in the basket," she said, "and take out one as I want it. That's always the best way." Thus defended, the parents kept a furtive watch upon the movements of their son, but with less alarm than before, while Lady Piercey kept on a running exhortation to Mrs. Osborne in an undertone. "Meg! get him to play something. Meg! why don't you take him in hand! Meg! the boy's sure to get into mischief for want of something to do."

"Should you like a game of cribbage, Gervase?" said poor Margaret, unable to resist the urgency of this appeal.

"Cribbage is the old-fashionedest game; they don't play it anywhere—even in the public's," said Gervase. He had put himself in the favourite attitude of Englishmen, with his back to the fireplace; his coat-tails gathered over his arms in faithful adherence to custom, though the cause for any such unseemly custom was not there.

"Or bézique?" said Margaret; "or perhaps you'll sing a song, Gervase, if I play it. Your mother would like to hear you sing: you haven't sung her a song for years."

"Do, Gervase, there's a dear," said Lady Piercey. "You used to sing 'The north winds do blow, and we shall have snow,' so pretty when you were quite a little thing."

"I ain't a little thing now, and I'm not going to sing," said Gervase loudly. "I'm going to say something to father and mother. You can go away, Meg, if you don't want to hear."

"What is it?" cried Lady Piercey, sitting up more bolt-upright than usual, and taking off her spectacles to see him the better, and to cow him with the blaze of her angry eyes.

"This is what it is," said Gervase. "It's mortal dull at home, now that I've turned over a new leaf and don't go out anywhere at night; and a fellow of my age wants a little diversion, and I can't go on sitting in your pocket, mother, nor playing father's game every night—and he don't like losing, neither, and no more don't I."

This preamble was quite new, struck off out of his own head from Patty's text. It was with a great elation and rising self-confidence that Gervase found it so. Perhaps they'd find out that he was not such a fool as he looked—once he had got free.

"Eh! what's the lad saying? That's true enough—that's true enough," Sir Giles said.

"Oh, hold your tongue, papa! You don't know what he's aiming at," Lady Piercey said.

"And I've never seen a thing, nor gone any-place," said Gervase. "Its d—— d hard upon me—it's devilish hard. Oh," he cried, "I can speak up when I like! It's that dull nobody would stand it (and so it is)." He added his old parentheses, though he had dropped the original theme. "I mustn't talk a moment with any person, but mother's down upon me—even Jerry, the ratcatcher, that every one knows."

"That's true, my boy," cried Sir Giles, "your mother's too hard on you; that's quite true."

"Wait, you fool, till you know what he's aiming at," cried Lady Piercey, with her eyes on fire.

"And I can't play your game, father, nor take you for a walk, but there's a fright all round as if I was going to kill you; and old Dunning after me, looking like a stuck pig."

Here was a chance for Lady Piercey to approve, too, at her husband's expense; but she was magnanimous, and did not take it. "You're well meaning enough, Gervase," she said, "I don't deny it; but you're too strong, and you shake poor papa to bits."

"Well, then," said Gervase, raising his voice to talk her down, "it's clear as there is nothing here for me to do; and it's dreadful dull. Enough to kill a man of my age; and the short and the long of it is that I can't go on like this any more."

He had quite thrown Patty's carefully prepared speech away, and yet it came breathing over him by turns, checking his natural eloquence. She had never meant him to utter that outcry of impatience, and Gervase would have ruined his own cause, and gone on to say, "I am going to be married," but for the questions that were suddenly showered upon him, driving him back upon his lesson.

"You can't go on like this? And how are you going on?" cried his mother. "Everything a man can desire, and the best home in England, and considered in every way!" She went on speaking, but her voice was crossed by old Sir Giles' growl. "What do you want—what do you want?" cried the old man. "Dunning, be off to your supper, and take that woman with you. What do you want—what do you want, you young fool?"

"But I know what you want," Lady Piercey cried, becoming audible at the end of this interruption; "you want what you shall never have as long as I live, unless it's somebody of my choosing, and not of yours."

"I'll tell you what I want," said Gervase, the moisture flying from his mouth; "I want to have a—— I want to get

— I want P—.” Then that long-conned speech of Patty’s flew suddenly, like a cobweb, into his mind, and stopped him on the edge of the abyss. He stopped and stared at them for a moment, his eyes roaming round the room, and then he burst into a loud laugh. “I want to go to London,” he said, “and see all the fine things there. I don’t know what mother’s got in her head—some of her whimsies—I’ve never been let go anywhere or do anything, and I want to go to London to look about and see all the grand things there.”

“To London?” said Sir Giles with surprise. Lady Piercey had been wound up to too great a pitch to go easily down again. She opened her mouth with a gasp like a fish, but no sound came therefrom.

“I’ve never been let go anywhere,” said Gervase, “and up and down from the Manor to the village ain’t enough. I want to go to London and see the fine sights there; I want to see the Queen and all that; I want to see a bit of life. There never was a gentleman like me that was kept so close and never let go to see anything. I’ve not been in London since I was a little kid, and it is a shame that I am never trusted (so it is), and it’s mortal dull here, especially at home, and not seeing anything; and I want to go to London and see a bit of life, and not be buried alive here.”

“My lady,” said Sir Giles, after the pause of awe which followed this long, consequent, and coherent speech, “there’s reason in what the lad says.”

“There’s something underneath,” cried Lady Piercey, “a deal more than what he says.”

“Mother always thinks that,” cried Gervase, with his big laugh; and there could not be any question that what he said was true.

“There’s some plan underneath it all,” repeated Lady Piercey, striking her hand on the table. “He hasn’t the sense to make up a thing like that, that has reason in it; there’s some deep-laid plan underneath it all.”

“Pooh, my lady! Poor lad!” said Sir Giles, shaking his head; “he hasn’t the sense to make up a plan at all. He just says what comes into his head, and what he says has reason in it, and more than that, I’m glad to hear him say it. And it gives me a bit of hope,” said poor old Sir Giles, his voice shaking a little, “that when he comes fully to man’s estate, the boy, poor lad, will be more like other boys, Mary Ann, God bless him! and, perhaps, for so little as we think it, a real comfort to you and me.”

The old gentleman leaned back in his chair, and raised with a feeble hand his handkerchief to his eyes. It was not difficult nowadays to make Sir Giles cry. The fierce old lady had no such emotion to subdue. She sat very upright, staring at her son, suspicious, thinking she saw behind him the pert little defiant countenance under the parasol which she had met on the road. But she did not see how they could have met or communicated with each other, and she could not, on the spur of the moment, make out what connection there could be between his desire to go to London, and Patty of the Seven Thorns. Margaret stood behind her uncle’s chair, patting him softly on the shoulder to soothe him and assure him of sympathy. She looked over Sir Giles’ head at the boy who, he was able to flatter himself, might be like other boys when he came to man’s estate. How strangely can love and weakness be deceived! Gervase stood there against the mantelpiece, his foot caught up awkwardly in his hand, his slouching shoulders supported against the shelf, his big, loose bulk filling the place. Man’s estate! The poor Softy was eight-and-twenty and well grown, though he slouched and distorted himself. But still the father, and even the suspicious, less-persuadable mother, saw in him a boy, not beyond the season of growth—never beyond that of hope.

Fortunately for Gervase, he had not time to go on in his flush of triumph and success, for another moment of that elation might have broken down all precautions and betrayed the plan which his mother felt, but could not divine, underneath. In the meantime, however, it was bedtime, and neither Sir Giles nor my lady could bear any more. Lady Piercey sent off Parsons, and discussed the question with her niece in her bedroom for a full hour after. “There’s something underneath, I know there is,” Lady Piercey said, nodding her head in her big nightcap. “But I don’t see what she can have to do with it, for she would never want to send him away. And then, on the other hand, Meg, it would be the best thing in the world to send him away. There’s nothing like absence for blowing a thing like that out of a boy’s head. If there was a man we could trust to go with him,—but all alone, by himself, in a big place like London, and among so many temptations! Oh, Meg, Meg, I wish I knew what was the right thing to do!”

“He is very innocent, Aunt; he would not understand the temptation,” said Margaret.

“Oh, I’m not of that opinion at all,” cried Lady Piercey. “A man always understands that, however silly he may be; and sometimes, the sillier he is, the more he understands. But one nail knocks out another,” she added thoughtfully. Though Lady Piercey was not a woman of the world, but only a very rustic person, she was yet cynic enough for the remorseless calculation that a little backsliding, of which so many people were guilty, would be better than a dreadful marriage which would bring down the family, and corrupt the very race—which was her point of view.

Gervase roamed about the house in high excitement, immensely pleased with himself, while this colloquy was going on. Had he met even Dunning or Parsons, whom he did not love, the possibility was that he might have revealed his meaning to them in sheer elation of spirits. But neither of these persons came in his way, and in this early household most of the other servants were already in bed. Margaret, however, met him as usual when she came out of Lady Piercey’s room with her candle in her hand.

“What’s she been saying to you, Meg?” he asked, but burst out laughing before she could reply. “It’s such a joke,” he said, holding his sides, “such a joke, if you only knew! and I’ve half a mind to tell you, Meg, for you’re a good sort.”

“Don’t tell me anything, Gervase, for Heaven’s sake, that I can’t tell them. For, of course, I shall do so directly,” Margaret cried.

“Wouldn’t you just like to know?” he said, and laughed again, and chucked her under the chin in convulsions of hilarity. She stood at the door of the room, escaping hastily from the possible confidence and the familiarity, and, trembling, saw him slide down the banisters to the half-lighted hall below, with a childish chuckle of triumph. A slip upon that swift descent, and all might have been over—the commotion and the exultation, the trouble and the fear. But Gervase came back again beaming, and kissed his hand to her as he disappeared into his own room. He felt that he had gained the day.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE household at Greystott was much disturbed and excited by the new idea thus thrown into the midst of them. Lady Piercy discussed it all next morning, not only with Margaret but with Parsons, whose views on the subject were very decided. She thought, but this within herself, that to get quit of the Softy, even for a few days, would be a great blessing to the house—though what she said was chiefly to agree with her mistress that a change, and to see a little of life, would be the best thing possible for Mr. Gervase.

“Tisn’t good for any young man to be always at home,” said Lady Piercy. “I remember a piece of poetry, or a hymn, or something, which I used to know, that had a line about home-keeping youths, and that they had but poor wits—that is, looked as if they had poor wits, because they had never seen anything, don’t you know?”

“Yes, my lady,” said Parsons; “that’s just how it is.”

“And the dear boy has come to feel it himself,” continued the mother; “he sees all the rest of the young men rushing about from one end of the world to the other, and he’s begun to ask himself, How’s that? Don’t you see, Parsons?”

“Yes, my lady, it’s as plain as the eyes in one’s head,” said Parsons.

“Of course, it is all because of his being so delicate when he was a child,” said the old lady.

“But what a blessing it is, my lady, to see how he’s outgrown it now!”

“Yes, isn’t it a blessing, Parsons! Just as strong as any of them—and well grown—a good height, and large round the chest, and all that.”

“Yes, my lady,” Parsons replied. She did not commit herself, but she chimed in most satisfactorily with all that her lady said.

Margaret was by no means so entirely to be trusted to. She was very doubtful of the proposed expedition, and even when she assented, as it was often necessary to do to what her aunt said, did so with so uncertain and troubled a look that Lady Piercy, by force of the opposition, was more and more rooted in her view.

“It would do him all the good in the world,” she said. “I know you think he’s silly, my poor boy—not that he’s really silly, not a bit; but he does not know how to express himself; and how is he ever to learn, stuck up here at home between you and me and his poor father, Meg?”

Margaret was a little taken aback by this question, and in her confusion laughed inadvertently, which made Lady Piercy very angry.

“You think you are clever enough for anything, and could teach him—as well as the best!”

“No, indeed,” cried Margaret; “not at all. I don’t know how young men learn—to express themselves. I think, so far as I have seen, that there are a great many who know how to express themselves—much worse than Gervase,” she added hastily; for after all, it was not poor Gervase’s fault, whereas it was the fault of many other men.

The mother, in her jealousy for her son, was pacified by this, and shook her head. “Oh, yes,” she said, “there are many of them that are a poor lot. Gervase is—one in ten thousand, Meg. He is a gentleman, my poor boy. He doesn’t know how to bully or make himself disagreeable. You know I am saying no more than the truth. He would do far better in the world if he made more of himself.”

This required from Margaret only a murmur of assent—which she gave without too much strain of conscience; but she was unprepared for the swift following up of this concession. “So it’s your opinion, Meg—if your opinion were asked, which I don’t think likely—that your uncle and I should let him go?”

“Let him go! But as you say, aunt, my opinion is not likely to be asked,” Margaret said quickly, to cover her exclamation of dismay.

“I’m not too fond of asking anybody’s opinion. I like to hear what they say, just to make sure of my own; but since you’ve given yours, as you generally do, without waiting to be asked,—and you’re not so far wrong as usual this time,—he ought to have his freedom. He’s never done anything to make us suppose that he wouldn’t use it rightly. He is a boy in a thousand, Meg! He has no bad ways—he is only too innocent, suspecting nobody.”

“That might be the danger,” said Margaret.

“Yes, my dear, that is just the thing—you have hit it, though you are not so bright as you think. He suspects nobody. He would put his money or whatever he had into anybody’s hands. He thinks every one is as innocent as himself.”

It would have been hard upon the poor mother had Margaret said what she thought: that Gervase did not think at all, which was a danger greater still. Lady Piercy knew all there was to be said on that point, and she kept her eye upon her niece, waiting to surprise that judgment in her face. Oh, she knew very well not only all that could be said, but all the reason there was for saying it! Lady Piercy was not deceived on the subject of her son, nor unaware of any of his deficiencies. It is to be supposed, knowing all these, that she must have known the dangers to which he must be exposed if he were allowed to carry out this proposal; but many other things were working in her mind. She thought it was only just that he should see life; and she thought, cynically, with a woman’s half-knowledge, half-suspicion of what that meant—that life as seen in London would cure him entirely of Patty and of the dangers that were concentrated in her. Finally, there was a dreadful relief in the thought of getting rid of him for a little while, of being exempt, if even for a few days, from his presence, when he was present, which was insupportable—and from the anxiety about his home-coming and where he was, when he was absent. The thought of having him comfortably out of sight for a time, so far off that she should be no longer responsible for him, even to herself; that she should no longer require to watch and wait for him, but could go to bed when she pleased, independent of the question whether Gervase had come home—that prospect attracted her more than words could say. Oh, the rest and refreshment it would be! the exemption from care, the repose of mind! Whatever he might do in London, she, at least, would not see it. Young men, when they were seeing life, did not generally conduct themselves to the satisfaction of their parents. They acted after their kind, and nobody was very hard upon them. Gervase would be just like the others—just like others! which was what he had never been hitherto, what she had always wished and longed for him to be. She sat for a long time at her embroidery, silent, working her mouth as she did when she was turning over any great question in her mind; and Margaret was too glad to respect her aunt’s abstraction, to leave her at full liberty to think. At length Lady Piercy suddenly threw down her needle, and with a gesture more like a man than an old lady, smote her knee with her hand.

“I’ve got it!” she cried. “I’ve found just the right thing to do!”

Parsons stopped and listened at the other end of the room, and Margaret paused in her work too, and raised her eyes. Lady Piercey's countenance was in a flush of pleasure; she went on drumming on her knee in excitement, swaying a little back and forward in her chair.

"It is the very thing," she said. "He'll get his freedom, and yet he'll be well looked after. You remember Dr. Gregson, him that was at that poor little dingy chapel when we were in town? Oh! you never remember anything, Meg! Parsons, you recollect Dr. Gregson, the clergyman with the family—that was so poor?"

"Yes, my lady," said Parsons, coming a few steps nearer; her presence made legitimate, even during the discussion of these family matters, by this demand.

"Oh, you needn't stop work; I am talking to my niece. When I want you I'll call you," said Lady Piercey, ruthless, waving her away. "Meg," she said, after watching the woman's reluctant withdrawal, "servants are a pretty set, poking their heads into everything; but you always stand up for them. Perhaps you think I'd better have up the cook, and let the whole of 'em know?"

"No; if you ask my opinion, Aunt, I think they are better left out."

"Oh, you think they are better left out? Perhaps you think I'd better keep it all in my own mind, and not speak of my affairs at all? But it doesn't matter much, and that's a satisfaction, what you think," said Lady Piercey, grimly. Then she resumed the argument. "I see my way; I see how we can do it all! Mr. Gregson is as poor as a church mouse, and he'll do anything to get a little money. He shall meet Gervase at the station, and he shall look after him and show him life, as the poor boy says." She laughed a low, reverberating laugh, that seemed to roll round the room; and then she added, giving Mrs. Osborne a push with her elbow, "You don't seem to see the fun of it, Meg."

"I don't think Gervase will; nor, perhaps, the poor clergyman."

The old lady laughed with deep enjoyment, putting one hand on her side. "Gregson will like anything that puts a little money in his pocket. And as for Gervase——" It was some utterance of deep contempt that was on Lady Piercey's lips; but she remembered herself, and repressed it in time. During the rest of the morning she sat almost silent, with her mouth working, and, as if she were turning over an amusing thought, gave vent now and then to a chuckle of laughter. The idea of sending Gervase to see life under the auspices of the poor little Low Church incumbent of Drummond Chapel, Bloomsbury, was delightful. She felt her own cleverness in having thought of it almost as much as she felt the happy relief of being thus rid of her poor Softy without any harm—nay, with perfect safety to him. All the accessories were delightful—the astonishment of Dr. Gregson, the ludicrous disappointment of the weak young man, his probable seduction into tea-parties and Bible-classes, which would be much more wholesome for him than the other way of seeing life. It occurred to Lady Piercey, with a momentary check upon her triumph, that there had been little girls among the Gregsons who might have grown up into dangerous young persons by this time. But that gave her but a temporary alarm, for, to be sure, it would be easy enough to drop any entanglement of that kind, and a young Gregson might, in the most virtuous manner, supplant Patty, as well as the worst—and all would consequently work for good to the only person of any consequence, the only son and heir of Sir Giles Piercey, of Greystott, for whom alone his mother was concerned.

When this brilliant idea was communicated to Sir Giles, he, too, smote his thigh and burst into such a roar of laughter, that notwithstanding her gratification in the success of this admirable practical joke of hers, Lady Piercey was afraid. He laughed till he was red, or rather crimson, with a tinge of blue in the face; his large, helpless frame heaving with the roar which resounded through the room. She was so frightened that she summoned Dunning hastily, though she had the moment before sent him away, and had entered her husband's room alone, without any attendant on her own side, to consult him on this all-important subject. When Dunning returned, triumphant in the sense that they could not do without him, and tingling with curiosity, which he never doubted he should now have abundant means of satisfying, he found Sir Giles in a spasmodic condition in his chair, laughing by intervals, while Lady Piercey stood by his side, patting him upon the back with unaccustomed hands, and saying, "Now, my dear; now, now, my dear," as she might have done to a restive horse. Sir Giles' exuberance faded away at the sight of Dunning, who knew exactly what to do to make him, as they said, comfortable. And thus it happened that this old pair, who were older than the parents of Gervase had any need to be, and looked, both, much older than they were, from illness and self-indulgence, and all its attendant infirmities—were left to consult upon the fate of their only child with the servant making a third, which was very galling to Lady Piercey's pride. Sir Giles did not pay any attention. Dunning was to him not a man, but a sort of accessory—a thing that did not count. He calmed down out of his paroxysms of laughter at Dunning's appearance, but still kept bursting out at intervals. "What if the fellow"—and then he stopped to cough and laugh again—"what if he falls in love with Miss Brown or Miss Jones?" he said. "And then, my lady, you would be out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"I am not afraid of Miss Smith or Miss Jones," she cried, making a sign to him over Dunning's head to be careful what he said. But Sir Giles was in the humour for speech, and cared nothing who was present.

"I think a deal of these ladies," he said, in his mumbling voice. "It's a great joke—a great joke. I should like to see old Gregson's face when he hears of it. By Jove! and the old plotter you are, my lady, to make it all up. But it can't be; it can't be."

"Why can't it be?" cried Lady Piercey sharply, and much provoked.

"Because it wouldn't be fair, neither to the one of them nor to the other. Not fair at all, by George. Fair play's a jewel. What are you after, Dunning? Let my legs alone. There's nothing the matter with my legs. And you can go and be dashed to you. Can't I talk to my lady without you here?"

"Don't send him away," cried Lady Piercey hurriedly. "I can't have you get ill, and perhaps do yourself harm, because of me."

"Do myself fiddlesticks," cried Sir Giles. "I'm as strong as a horse, ain't I, Dunning? Be off with you, be off with you; don't you hear? I'll throw my stick at you if you don't scuttle, you son of a——. Hey! you can tell my lady I'm as well as either you or she."

"Yes, Sir Giles," said Dunning, stolid and calm. But he did not go away.

"It wouldn't be fair," Sir Giles went on, forgetting what he had said. "I say fair play all the world over. Women don't understand it. It's a capital joke, and I didn't think you had so much fun in you. But it wouldn't be fair."

"Don't be a fool, Giles," said Lady Piercey angrily. "If you don't see it's necessary, why, then, you can't see an inch before your nose; and to argue with you isn't any good."

"No," he said, "perhaps it isn't. I'm an obstinate old fool, and so are you an obstinate old fool, Mary Ann. And between us both we've made a mess of it. It wasn't altogether our fault, perhaps, for it was Nature that began," said the old gentleman, with something like a whimper breaking into his voice. "Nature, the worst of all, for you cannot do anything with that. Not a thing! We've tried our best. Yes; I believe you tried your best, my lady, watching and worrying; and I've tried my best, leaving things alone. But none of us can do anything. We can't, you know, not if we were to go on till Doomsday; and we're two old folks, and we can't go on much longer. It's not altogether your fault, and neither is it mine; but we'll go to our graves, by-and-by, and we'll leave behind us—we'll leave behind us——"

Here the old gentleman, probably betrayed by the previous disturbance of his laughter, fell into a kind of nervous crying, half exclamations, half laughing, half tears.

"Don't you be upset, my lady," said Dunning; "Sir Giles, he do get like this sometimes when he's flurried and frightened. But, Lord! a little glassful of water, and a few of his drops, and he's all right again."

Lady Piercey sat bolt upright in her chair. She, too, wanted the ministrations to which she was accustomed: the arm of Parsons to help her up, or Margaret to turn to, to upbraid her for her uncle's state, or to consult her as to what to do. She had not the same tendency to tears, though a few iron drops came from time to time, wrung out by her great trouble. She sat and stared at her husband, and at Dunning's services to him, till Sir Giles was quite restored. And then she rose with some stiffness and difficulty, and hobbled away. Parsons met her at the door, and took her mistress to her room; but, though Lady Piercey clung to her, the maid was not at all well received. "What were you doing at Sir Giles' door? What do you want in this part of the house?" she cried, though she had seized and clung to the ready arm. "I'll not have you spying about, seeing what you can pick up in the way of news, or listening at a door."

"I never listened at a door in my life," cried Parsons, indignant. "And nobody ever named such a thing to me, my lady, but you!"

"Oh, hold your tongue, do!" cried Lady Piercey. And she, too, like Sir Giles, was obliged to have a restorative when she had been safely conveyed to her room. She was the ruler upstairs, and he below. She had the advantage of him in being able to move about, notwithstanding her rheumatism, and the large share she had of those ills which flesh is heir to—all those which were not appropriated first by her husband—in which she took a certain satisfaction, not tempered, rather enhanced, by the attendant pain.

The letters came in at the hour of luncheon, and were taken to Lady Piercey as they are usually taken to the master of the house. She opened all the family-letters, her husband's as well as her own, and even the occasional bill or note that came very rarely for Gervase. Among them that day came a letter stamped with the Piercey crest, at which she gazed for a moment before opening it, with an indignant, yet scared look, as if she had beheld a blasphemy, and which made her, when she opened it, almost jump from her seat. She read it over twice, with her eyes opening wider and wider, and the red flush of surprise and horror rising on her face, then flung it violently across the table to Margaret. "Then he must go, that's flat! and to-morrow morning, not one hour later," she cried. Gervase was in the room, paying no attention to this pantomime, and caring nothing for what letters might arrive; but he was roused by what she said. He cried, "That's me, mother; I'm going to-morrow," with his loud and vacant laugh.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE letter which Lady Piercey had received, and which quickened so instantaneously her determination that Gervase should be gratified in his desire to visit London, did not seem at the first glance to have anything to do with that question. It was a letter from Gerald Piercey, asking to be allowed to come on a visit of two or three days to see his relations at Greysthott. Now, Gerald Piercey was, after Gervase, the heir-at-law—or rather he was the son of the old and infirm gentleman who was the heir-at-law. He was a soldier who had distinguished himself in India, and got rapid promotion, so that he had several letters already tacked to his name, and was in every way a contrast to the unfortunate who stood between him and the honours of the house. It was natural, and I think it was excusable, that poor Lady Piercey should hate this successful and highly esteemed person. To be sure, he was much older than Gervase—a man of forty, so that there was, as she said indignantly, no comparison! and she herself was not old enough (or at least, so she said) to have had a son of the Colonel's age. But these circumstances, which should have lessened the sense of rivalry, only made it greater, for even if Gervase had not been a Softy, he would never have been a man of so much importance as this cousin of the younger branch who had made himself known and noted in the world by his own personal character and deserts. Colonel Piercey had not been at Greysthott since he was a youth setting out in life, when he had paid his relations a hasty and not very agreeable visit. Gervase was then a silly little boy; but there are many silly little boys who grow up into tolerable young men; and his parents, at least, had by no means made up their minds to the fact of his inferiority. But Gerald, a young man who had just joined his regiment and was full of the elation and pleasure in life which is never greater than in these circumstances, who resembled the family portraits and knew all about the family history, and who looked so entirely the part of heir of the house, awoke a causeless enmity even in the jovial breast of Sir Giles, then a robust fox-hunter, master of the hounds, chairman of quarter sessions, and everything that a country gentleman should be. Poor little Gervase was nothing beside him, naturally! for Gervase was but a child, however clever he had been. But this thought did not heal the painful impression, the shock of a sensation too keen almost to be borne. All the neighbours were delighted with Gerald. What a fine young fellow! what a promising young man! what a pity it was—— and the visitors gave a glance aside at poor little Gervase, already, poor child, the Softy among all his childish companions. They did not utter that last half-formed regret, but Sir Giles and his wife perceived it on their lips, in their thoughts, and hated Gerald, which was wrong, no doubt, but very natural and almost pardonable, from a parent's point of view.

And here he was coming back! a guest whom they could not refuse, a credit to the family, a distinguished relation, while Gervase was what he was. But Gerald Piercey should not, Lady Piercey resolved, see Gervase as he was,—not for the world! He was coming, no doubt, to spy out the nakedness of the land—but what he should find would only be an account of her son enjoying himself in London, seeing life, doing as other young men did. If Gerald was a colonel and a C.B., Gervase should bear the aspect of a young man about town—a man of fashion, going everywhere; a man who had no occasion to go to India to distinguish himself, having a good estate and a baronetcy

behind him at home. To keep up this fiction would be easy if Gervase were but absent. It would be impossible, alas! to do it in his presence. Lady Piercey exerted herself during that day, in a way she had not been known to do before for years. She wrote a long letter, bending over it, and working all the lines of her mouth like a schoolboy. It was labour dire and weary woe, for a woman who had long given up any exertion of the kind for herself. But in this case she would not trust even Margaret. And then she had Gervase's drawers emptied, and his clothes brought to her to make a survey. They were not fashionable clothes by any means; Lady Piercey, though she was not much used to men of fashion, and knew nothing of what "was worn" at the time, yet knew and remembered enough to feel that Gervase in these garments would by no means bear the aspect of a young man about town. But he would do very well in the Gregson world in Bloomsbury; everybody who saw him there would know that he was young Mr. Piercey of Greyshott, Sir Giles' only son. This is the sort of fact that covers a multitude of sins, even in clothes. And in Bloomsbury the first fashions were not likely to be worn. He would pass muster very well there, but not—not before the eyes of Gerald Piercey, the colonel, the C.B., the cousin and heir. "You don't see why I should be in such a hurry," said Lady Piercey, with one of those glances which only want the power, not the desire, to kill. "I know, then, and that's enough, Gervase, my boy. You'll remember to be very good and please your poor father and me, now we've consented to give you this great treat, and let you go."

"Oh, yes," said Gervase, with a laugh; "I'll remember, mother. I sha'n't be let go wrong, you take your oath of that."

"What does he mean by not being let? You've told him about Gregson, Meg! Well, my dear, you know that is the only comfort I have. You'll be met at the station, and you'll find your nice rooms ready; and very lucky you are, Gervase, to find so good a person to take care of you. Do everything he tells you; mind, he knows all about you; and he'll always lead you the right road, as you say."

Gervase, staring open-mouthed at his mother, burst into a great laugh. He was astonished at her apparent knowledge of the companion who would not let him go wrong, but the confusion of the pronoun daunted him a little. Did she think it was old Hewitt that was going with him? He had enough of cunning to ask no questions, but laughed with a great roar of satisfaction mingled with wonderment. Lady Piercey put up her hands to her ears.

"Don't make such a noise," she said. "You laugh like your father, Gervase, and you're too young to roar like that. You must try to behave very nicely, too, and don't roar the roof off a London house with your laughing. And don't make a noise in company, Gervase. We put up with everything here because we're so fond of you; but in town, though they'll be fond of you, it makes a difference, not being used to you from your cradle. You must remember all I taught you about manners when you were a little boy."

"Oh, mother, don't you be afraid; my manners will be well looked after, too. I sha'n't dare to open my mouth," said Gervase, with another laugh.

"Well, I believe they are very particular," said Lady Piercey, with a still more bewildering change of pronouns. "And, Gervase, there's young ladies there: mind that you are very nice and civil to them, but don't go any further than you can draw back."

"Oh, I'll be kept safe from the young ladies, you take your oath of that!" he cried, with another shout of a laugh.

"For goodness gracious sake," cried Lady Piercey, "take him away!—Meg, can't you take him away and give him a good talking to? You have no nerves, and I'm nothing but a bundle of 'em. That laugh of his goes up to the crown of my head and down to the soles of my feet. Take him off, and let me look over his things in peace. And mind, Gervase, you've to listen to what Meg says to you, just the same as if I were speaking myself; for she knows about men, having married one, and she can give you a deal of good advice. Go out to the beech avenue, and then I can see you from my window, and make sure that you are paying attention to what she says."

When Gervase was safely outside with his patient cousin, whose part in all these proceedings was so laborious and uninterrupted, though she was not permitted to do much more than look on—he plucked off his hat and flung it up into the air in triumph, executing at the same time a sort of dance upon the gravel.

"Does she mean what she says, Meg? and how has she heard of it? and what has made her give in? Lord! what will some folks say when they know that it's all with her will?"

"What is it you are going to do, Gervase? and what do you mean by 'some folks'?" Margaret cried.

The Softy looked at her for a moment irresolute, doubtful, it would seem, what he should reply; and then he laughed again, more loudly than ever, and said: "Shouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, I should like to know. I do not believe that they know at all what you mean. You are too cunning for them. You are going to take some step——"

"More than one—many steps. I'm going to London to see all that's going on—to see life. I told 'em so; and instead of looking curious like you, mother, don't you see, she knows all about it, and wants me to do it. Mother's a trump! She is that fond of me, she will do whatever I say."

"The thing is, what are you going to do, Gervase? What do you mean by seeing life?"

He laughed longer than ever, and gave her a nudge with his arm. "Oh, get along, Meg!" he said,—"*you know.*"

"No, Gervase; tell me. You have always been a good boy—you are not going to do any harm?"

"I never heard it was any harm; it's what everybody does, and rejoicings about it, and bells ringing, and all that. Don't you tell—I'm going—— No; I said I wouldn't say a word, and I won't. You'll know when I come back."

"Gervase, you frighten me very much—you wouldn't deceive your father and mother that love you so." She drew a long breath of alarm; then added with relief: "But if he is met at the station and taken care of——"

"That's it," said Gervase. "I'm going to be met at the station, and everything done for me. I'll never be left to myself any more. I'm not very good at taking care of myself, Meg."

"No," she cried; "that is quite true. I am so glad you feel that, Gervase. Then you won't be rebellious, but do what your mother wishes, and what her friend tells you. It will make her so happy."

"Her friend! Who's her friend?" said Gervase; and then the peal of his laughter arose once more. "I like my own friend best; but my friend and my mother's friend being just the same, don't you see?"

"Are they the same?" said Mrs. Osborne, thoroughly perplexed.

"There ain't two of them that are going to meet me at the station? No? then there's only one. And mother's a trump, and I'll do everything I'm told, and never be without some one to guide me all my life. And to stand up for me

—for I am put upon, Meg, though you don't seem to see it. I am; and made a jest of; and no money in my pocket; never given my proper place. Meg, how much is mamma going to give me for my pocket-money while I'm away?"

"I can't tell you, Gervase. There will be your travelling money, and probably she will send the rest to—to be given you when you are in town."

"I ought to have it now in my own pocket," said Gervase, with a cloud upon his brow. "Do you think a man can go like a man to London town, and no money? They are mad if they think that. Lend us something, Meg—you've got a little, and no need to spend it; with everything given you that heart can wish. Why, you never spend a penny! And I'll pay it all back when I come to my own."

"I have nothing," she said, faltering. To tell what was not strictly true, and to refuse what her cousin asked, were things equally dreadful to Margaret—and it was a relief to her when Lady Piercey's window was jerked open by a rapid hand, and the old lady's head appeared suddenly thrust out.

"You're not talking to him, Meg; you're letting him talk to you. Don't let us have more of that. You're there to give him good advice, and that's what we expect of you. Don't you hear?" And the window was snapt with another emphatic jerk.

"Gervase, I am to advise you," said Margaret, trembling, though the situation was ludicrous enough, and she might have laughed had the case been other than her own. The watchful eye upon her from the window, the totally unadvisable young man by her side, were not, however, ludicrous but dreadful to Margaret. Her sense of humour was obscured by the piteous facts of the case: the young man entirely insensible to any reason, and his mother, who had never lost her primitive faith that if some one only "talked to him," Gervase would be just as sensible as other men. "But how can I advise you? I am troubled about what you are going to do. I hope you will not do anything to grieve them, Gervase. They are old people——"

"Yes," said Gervase, with a nod and a look of wisdom; "they are pretty old."

"They are old people," said Margaret, "and they have a great many things to put up with: they have illnesses and weakness—and they have anxiety about you."

"They needn't trouble their heads about me. I've got some one to look after me. She said it wasn't I," cried Gervase with a chuckle.

"That is while you are in London; but they think of you all day long, and are always thinking of you. You will not do anything to grieve them, Gervase, while you are away?"

"How can I when I'm going to be looked after all the time, and somebody to meet me at the station?" cried Gervase, with his loud laugh.

Lady Piercey was very anxious afterwards to know what advice Margaret had given to her son. The "things" had all been looked over and packed; and it took Lady Piercey a long time to consider what money she could trust her son with when he went away. She had intended at first to send some one with him to pay his railway ticket, and to send what he would want in London to Dr. Gregson. But then, what if an accident happened? what if Gregson failed to meet him, or appropriated the money? which was a thing always on the cards with so poor a man, the old lady thought. It could not be that the heir of Greyshott, Sir Giles' son, should leave his home penniless. She took out her cash-box, for she was the manager of everything, and had all the money interests of Greyshott in her hands—and took from it a five-pound note, over which she mused and pondered long, weighing it in her hand as if that were the way of judging. Then she put it back, and took out a ten-pound note. Ten pounds is a great deal of money. Much good as well as much harm can be done with ten pounds. It is such a large sum of money that, if you trust a man with that, you may trust him with more. She took out another—wavering, hesitating—now disposed to put it back, now laying it with the other, poisoning them both in her hands. Finally, with a quick sigh, she shut up the cash-box sharply and suddenly, and gave it to Parsons to be put back in the cabinet, where it usually dwelt; and folding up the notes, directed her niece to put them in an envelope. "Twenty pounds!" she said, with a gasp. Her two supporters had been present during all this process, and Parsons was exactly aware how much money was to be trusted in the pockets of the Softy, and thought it excessive. Lady Piercey sat by grimly, and looked on while the money was enclosed in the envelope, and then she turned briskly to her companion. "You had a long talk, Meg," she said; "and I suppose you gave him a great deal of advice. You ought to know, you that had as husband an officer, for they are always in the heat of everything. What advice did you give to my boy?"

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL PIERCEY arrived next day in the afternoon, Gervase having gone away in a state of the most uproarious spirits in the morning. Margaret had been made to accompany him to the railway, to see that his ticket was taken properly, and that he got the right train, and was not too late so as to miss it, or too early so as to be lingering about the station; in which latter circumstance it seemed quite possible to his mother that "that girl" might become aware that her prey was slipping from her fingers, and appear upon the scene to recover him. She might save herself the trouble, Lady Piercey thought, for the boy's brain was full of London, and a country lass was not likely to get much hold of him; but still, it's best to be on the safe side. No suggestion of Patty's real intentions had occurred to any one; not even in the Seven Thorns, where they suspected much less than at Greyshott. In the little inn it was supposed that the Softy had been, after all, too clever for her, and had got clean away; and in the Manor it was also believed that he had escaped from her vulgar attractions. He had got London in his blood, he was thinking of how to enjoy himself as much as he was capable of thinking of anything, and the Rev. Gregson would take care of that, his mother reflected with a grim smile. And to have him safely away, transferred to some one else's responsibility, no longer for the moment a trouble to any one belonging to him, filled Greyshott in general, and his parents in particular, with a heavenly calm. The only one who was not perfectly at ease was Mrs. Osborne, who endeavoured in vain to make out what he meant by many of his broken expressions. Margaret was sure that Gervase meant something which was not suspected by his family: but she, too, believed that he had somehow cut himself adrift from Patty, and that whatever his meaning was, in that quarter he was safe; which showed that though she was very different from the rest of the household, her mind, even when awakened into some anxiety and alarm, had little more insight than theirs.

She was met upon the road by Osy and his nurse, and the little boy was delighted to be lifted into the carriage,

an unusual privilege. His chatter was sweet to his mother's ears. It delivered her for the moment from those anxieties which were not hers, which she was compelled to share without any right to them; without being permitted any real interest. Osy was her refuge, the safeguard of her individuality as a living woman with concerns and sentiments of her own. To put her arms round him, to hear the sound of his little babbling voice, was enough at first; and then she awoke with a start to the consciousness that Osy was saying something in which there was not only meaning, but a significance of a most alarming kind—"Movver, Movver!" the little boy had been saying, calling her attention, which was so satisfied with him, that it was scarcely open to what he said. He beat upon her knee with his little fist, then climbed up on the seat and seized her by the chin—a favourite mode he had of demanding to be listened to: "Movver! has Cousin Gervase don to be marrwed? Where has he don to be marrwed—tell me; tell me, Movver!"

Mrs. Osborne started with a sudden perception of what he meant at last. "Osy, you must not be so silly; Gervase has gone to London to see all the fine things—the shops, don't you remember? and the theatres, and the beautiful horses, and the beautiful ladies in the park."

"Yes, I wemember; there was one beau'ful lady with an organ, that singed in the street. But you said I couldn't marrwey her, I was too little. Will Cousin Gervase marrwey a lady like that?"

"Hush, child! he is not going to marry at all."

"Oh yes, yes, Movver! for he telled me. He made me dive him my big silver penny that Uncle Giles dave me, and he said, 'I'm doing to be marrwed, Osy.' I dave it to him for a wedding present, like you dave Miss Dohnson your silver bells."

"Osy, don't say such things! It is nurse that has put this nonsense into your head."

"'Tisn't nurse, and 't isn't nonsense, Movver!" cried the child with indignation. "Will he bring home the beau'ful lady, or will he do away with her, and live in another place? I hope he will go and live in another place."

"Osy, this is all an invention, my little boy. You must be dreaming. Don't say such things before any one, or you will make Uncle Giles and Aunt Piercey very unhappy. It is one of your little stories that you make up."

"It isn't no story, Movver! I never make up stories about Cousin Gervase; and he tooked my big silver penny, and then I dave it him for a wedding present; for he said 'I'm doing to be marrwed.' He did; he did—Movver! I hope he'll do away and live in another house. I dave it to him," said Osy, with a little moisture on his eyelashes. "But he tooked it first. It was my big, big, silver penny, that is worth a great lot. I hope——"

"Hush, Osy: don't you know, my little boy, that Cousin Gervase is to his mother what you are to me? She would not like him to go away."

"I heard Uncle Giles say, 'T'ank God, we've dot a little time to breathe,' and Aunt Piercey dave a great, great, big puff, and sat down as if she was t'ankful, too. It is only you, Movver, that looks sad."

"Osy, did you ever hear of the little pitchers that have long ears?"

"I know what it means, too," said the child. "It means me; but I tan't help it when people say fings. Movver, are you fond of Cousin Gervase, that you looks like that? like you were doing to cry?"

Was she fond of Gervase, poor boy? Margaret could not even claim that excuse for being sad. Was she fond of any of the people by whom she was surrounded, who held her in subjection? At least, she was terribly perturbed by the cloud that hung over them—the possible trouble that was about to befall them. Poor Gervase was not very much to build hopes or wishes upon, but he was all they had; and if it were possible that he was meditating any such steps, what a terrible blow for his father and mother!—a stroke which they would feel to the bottom of their hearts. For himself, was it, indeed, so sad? Was it not, perhaps, the best thing he could do? Her mind went over the possibilities as by a lightning flash. Patty—if it was Patty—if there was anything in it—was probably the best wife he could get. She was energetic and determined; she would take care of him for her own sake. And who else would marry the Softy? Margaret's mind leapt on further to possible results, and to a sudden perception that little Osy, had he ever had any chance of succession, would be hopelessly set aside by this step, and the only possible reward of her own slavery be swept from her horizon. This forced itself upon her, through the crowd of other thoughts, with a chill to her heart. But what chance had Osy ever had? And who could put any confidence in the statement of Gervase to the child? Perhaps it was only "his fun." The little theft of the money was nothing remarkable; for Gervase, who never had any money, was always on the look-out for unconsidered trifles, which he borrowed eagerly. Perhaps this was all. Perhaps the half-witted young man meant nothing but a joke—one of his kind of jokes—for why should he have betrayed himself to little Osy? On the other hand, there were those allusions to some one who was to meet him, which he had laughed at so boisterously, and which she could not imagine referred to Dr. Gregson. Margaret's bewilderment grew greater the more she thought.

"Osy," she said, as they turned up the avenue, "you must forget all this, for it is nonsense."

"About my big, big, silver penny?" said the child, the water now standing in his eyes; for the more he thought of his loss, which he had carried off in childish pride with a high hand at first, the more Osy felt it. "It is not nonsense, Movver," he said, "for it is true."

"About what Cousin Gervase said? It was very wrong of him, but that is not true, Osy. He must have said it for a joke. Don't say anything. Promise me, dear! Not a word."

"Not to you, Movver?" said the little boy, two big tears dropping from his eyes; "for I tan't, tan't bear to lose my silver penny, and I would not mind if it was a wedding present. I want my silver penny back!"

"We'll find you another one, dear, that will be just as good."

"But it won't be my own one, and I want my own one," Osy said. He was still sobbing with long-drawn childish reverberation of woe when they got to the door; but there he took a great resolution. "I'll fink it was a wedding present," he cried, "and then I sha'n't mind. I'll fink he is going to be marrwed, and I'll never say a word, because nobody knows but me."

This valorous resolve exercised a great control, and yet was very hard to keep up during the long afternoon which followed. It rained in the later part of the day, and Sir Giles could not go out, so that Osy, restored to all the privileges which had been a little curtailed during Gervase's temporary reign, became once more a leading member of the party. And how often that important secret came bursting to the little fellow's lips! But he kept his word, like a gentleman. Margaret heard him singing it to himself as he capered about the room on Sir Giles' stick, "Doing to be

marrwed, doing to be marrwed," which relieved his mind without betraying his knowledge. It even attracted Sir Giles' attention, who called to him to know what he was singing.

"It's a silly rhyme he has just picked up," said Margaret, interposing, which was a thing the old people did not like.

"He can tell me himself," said Sir Giles; "he's quite clever enough."

"No, it isn't a silly rhyme," said little Osy; "it's me myself, that am a gweat prince riding upon a noble steed, and I'm doing to be marrwed—I'm doing to be marrwed!"

"And who's the bride, Osy; who's the bride?" said Sir Giles, in high good humour.

"It is a beau'ful lady in London that singed in the streets, with a big napkin on her head. But Movver said I was too little to marrwey her. I'm a man now, and a soldier and a gweat, gweat knight; and I can marrwey any one I please."

"That's the thing!" said old Sir Giles; "don't you be tied to your mother's apron-strings, my boy. The ladies always want to rule over us men, don't they? and some of us must make a stand, you know." The old gentleman laughed at his joke till he cried, the old lady sitting grimly by. But she, too, smiled upon the little rebel: "You'll not find him such an easy one to guide when he grows up, Meg," she said, nodding her head. "He's got the Piercey temper, for all it's so amusing now. It ain't amusing when they grow up," said Lady Piercey, shaking her head. But she, too, encouraged Osy to defy his mother. He was a pretty sight careering round the dim library like a stray sunbeam, his little laughing face flushed with play and praise. Had the child been clever enough to invent that little fiction, innocent baby as he looked?—or had he really forgotten, as children will, and believed himself the hero of his little song? But this was one of the mysteries that seven years can hide from everybody as well as seventy, and Margaret could not tell. Now that Gervase was gone the boy seemed to fall into his place again, the darling of everybody, the centre of all their thoughts. And who could tell what might happen? Osy was not the next in succession, but he was not far out of the line. Margaret tried to put all such thoughts out of her mind, but it was difficult to do so, with the sight of Osy's triumph and sway over them—two old people who were so fond of him and could do so much for him—before their eyes.

There came a moment, however, no further off than that evening, when every furtive hope of this description died at a blow out of Margaret Osborne's heart. It was not that Osy was less admired and petted, or that he had offended or transgressed in any way. It was simply the arrival at Greyshott of Colonel Gerald Piercey that had this effect. It was she who met him first as he came into the hall, springing down from the dogcart that had brought him from the station, and at the first glance her heart had died within her. Not that there was anything alarming in his aspect. He had attained, with his forty years, to an air of distinction which Margaret did not remember in him; and a look of command, of easy superiority, of the habit of being obeyed. This habit is curiously impressive to those who do not possess it. The very sound of his step as he came in was enough. Not a man to lose anything on which his hand had once closed, not one to risk or relinquish his rights, whatever they might be. Osy, by the side of this man! Her hopes, which had never ventured to put themselves into words, died on the moment a natural death. She advanced to meet the stranger, as in duty bound, being the only valid member of the family, and said, holding out her hand with a smile which she felt to be apologetic: "You are welcome to Greyshott, Cousin Gerald. My uncle and aunt are neither of them very well, and Gervase is from home. You don't remember me. I am Margaret Osborne, your cousin, too."

"I remember you," he said, "very well; but pardon me if I did not remember your face. I fear that is a bad compliment for a lady."

"Not at all," she said; "a good compliment: for I am more, I hope, than my face."

He did not understand the look she gave him, a wondering look with an appeal in it. Would he be good to Osy? Margaret felt as if this man were coming in like a conqueror—sweeping all the old, and feeble, and foolish of the house away before him, that he might step in and reign. He, on his side, had no such thought. He had come to pay a duty visit, moved thereto by his father. He had not been at Greyshott for many years; he remembered little, and thought less, of Gervase, who had been a child on his previous visit. That he should ever be master of the place, or sweep anybody away, was far from his thoughts. He followed into the library the slim, serious figure of this middle-aged woman in a black gown, horrified to think that this was Meg Piercey, the lively girl of his recollection. This Meg Piercey! It was true that he remembered her very well, a madcap of a girl, ready for any mischief; but this was certainly not the face he remembered, the young, daring, buoyant figure. It might have wounded Margaret, accustomed as she was to be considered as nobody, if she had been aware of the consternation with which he regarded her. A middle-aged woman! though not so old by a good many years as himself, who was still conscious of being young.

The visit, however, began very successfully. As he had no *arrière pensée*, he was quite at his ease with the old people whom he neither meant to sweep away nor to succeed. He received, quite naturally, the long and elaborate apologies of Lady Piercey in respect to her son.

"Gervase will be very sorry to miss you, Gerald,—he's in town; there is not much to amuse a young man in the country at this season of the year. He's not fond of garden parties and so forth, the only things that are going on, and not many of them yet. He prefers town. Perhaps it isn't to be wondered at. We have all liked to see a little life in our day."

What "life" could it have been that Lady Piercey in her day had liked to see? the new-comer asked himself, with an involuntary smile. But he took the explanation with the easiest good humour, thinking no evil.

"Lucky fellow!" he said; "he has the best of it. I was out in India all my young time, and saw only a very different kind of life."

"Come," said Sir Giles, "you amuse yourselves pretty well out there. Don't give yourself airs, Gerald."

"Oh, yes; we amuse ourselves more or less," he said, with a pleasant laugh. "Enough to make us envy a young swell like Gervase, who, I suppose, has all the world at his feet and nothing to do."

There was a strange pause in the room; a sort of furtive look between the ladies; a sound—he could not tell what—from Sir Giles. Colonel Piercey had a faint comprehension that he had, as he said to himself, put his foot in it. What had he said that was not the right thing to say? He caught Margaret's eye, and there was a warning in it, a sort of appeal; but he had not an idea what its meaning was.

"I am sure," said Lady Piercey, with a voice out of which she vainly endeavoured to keep the little break and

whimper which was habitual to her when she was moved, "my boy might have all the world at his feet—if he was that kind, Gerald. But he's not that kind; he's of a different sort. He takes things in a— in a kind of philosophical way."

"Humph!" said Sir Giles, pushing back his chair. "Meg, Gerald will not mind if I have my backgammon. I'm an old fogey, you see, my boy, with long days to get through, and not able to get out. I'm past amusement. I only kill the time as well as I can now."

"I'm very fond of a game of backgammon, too, Uncle Giles."

"Are you, boy? why, that's something like. Meg, I'll give you a holiday. Ladies are very nice, but they never know the rules of a game," the ungrateful old gentleman said.

CHAPTER XVI.

THAT evening in the library at Greysthott was the most cheerful that had been known for a long time; Colonel Piercey made himself thoroughly at home. He behaved to the old people as if they had been the most genial friends of his youth. He told them stories of India and his experiences there. He played backgammon with Sir Giles, and let him win the game as cleverly as Dunning did, and with more grace. He admired Lady Piercey's work and suggested a change in the shading, at which both she and Parsons exclaimed with delight that it would make all the difference! He was delightful to everybody except Margaret, of whom he took very little notice, which was a strange thing in so apparently chivalrous and kind a man, seeing in what a subject condition she was kept, how much required of her, and so little accorded to her, in the strange family party of which the two servants formed an almost unfailing part. Margaret felt herself left out in the cold with a completeness which surprised her, much as she was accustomed to the feeling that she was of no account. She had no desire that Gerald Piercey should pity her; but it was curious to see how he ignored her, never turning even a look her way, addressing her only when necessity required. It has always been a theory of mine that there exists between persons of opposite sexes who are no longer to be classed within the lines of youth, middle-aged people, or inclining that way, a repulsion instead of an attraction. A young man tolerates a girl even when she does not please him, because she is a woman; but a man of forty or so dislikes his contemporary on this account; is impatient of her; feels her society a burden, almost an affront to him. He calls her old, and he calls himself young; perhaps that has something to do with it. Colonel Piercey was not shabby enough to entertain consciously any such feeling; but he shared it unconsciously with many other men. He thought the less of her for accepting that position, for submitting to be the *souffre-douleur* of the household. He suspected her, instinctively, of having designs of—he knew not what kind,—of being underhand, of plotting her own advantage somehow, to the harm of the two old tyrants who exacted so much from her. Would she continue to hold such a place, to expose herself to so much harsh treatment, if it were not for some end of her own? It was true that he could not make out what that end would be; that there should be any possibility of the child (who was delightful) supplanting or succeeding Gervase, was not an idea that ever entered his mind. Gervase was a young man of whom he knew nothing, whom he supposed to be like other young men. And, after Gervase came the old General, Gerald Piercey's father, and himself. There was no possibility of any intruder in that place. He supposed that it was their money she must be after—to get them to leave all they could to her. Meg Piercey! the girl whom he could not help remembering still, who was not in the least like this pale person: to think that years and poverty should have brought that bright creature to this!

"I almost wonder, Gerald," said Lady Piercey, as she sat among her silks with an air of ease diffused over all the surroundings, working a little by turns and pausing to watch benignantly the process of the backgammon,— "I almost wonder that you did not meet my boy at the station. His train would come in just before yours left, and I have been thinking since then that you might have met. He was to meet an old friend, an excellent old clergyman, with whom he was to spend a few days. Though he is full of spirit, my Gervase is very fond of all his old friends."

"Humph!" said Sir Giles; but that was only perhaps because at that moment he made an injudicious move.

"I should not have known him had I met him," said the Colonel, carefully making a move more injudicious still, to the delight of Sir Giles; "you forget he was only a child when I was here. I saw an old clergyman roaming about, looking into all the carriages: was that your friend, I wonder? He had found no one up to that time."

"You sent Gregson after him then, my lady?" said Sir Giles; "though I said it wasn't fair."

"Why Sir Giles says it wasn't fair is this, Gerald," said Lady Piercey; "and you can judge between us. He thought because the boy was going to enjoy himself he shouldn't be troubled with old friends; but I thought a good judicious old clergyman, that had known him from his cradle, couldn't be in any one's way."

"I see your point of view," said Colonel Gerald, "but I think for my part I agree with Uncle Giles. At Gervase's age I should have thought the old clergyman a bore."

"Ah! but my Gervase is one in a thousand," Lady Piercey said, nodding her head and pursing up her lips.

"I saw another group at the station that amused me," said Gerald: "a young country-fellow with something of the look of a gentleman, and a girl all clad in gorgeous apparel, who had not in the least the look of a lady. They got out of the train arm-in-arm, he holding her just as if he feared she might run away—which was the last thing I should say she had any intention of doing. Is there any *hobereau* about here with a taste for rustic beauties? They were newly married, I should think, or going to be married. He, in a loud state of delight, and she— I should think she had made a good stroke of business, that little girl."

"I don't know of any name like Hobero," said Lady Piercey; "but there are a great many stations between this and London. I dare say they didn't come from hereabouts at all. Girls of that class are dreadful. They dress so that you don't know what kind they are—neither flesh nor fish nor red herring, as the proverb is—and their manners—but they haven't got any. They think nothing is too good for them."

"The woman in this case, I should say, knew very well that the young fellow was too good for her, but had no thought of giving him up. And he was wild with delight, a silly sort of fellow—not all there." Colonel Piercey's looks were bent unconsciously as he spoke upon the writing-table which stood behind Sir Giles' chair, and on which some photographs were arranged; and from the partial darkness there suddenly shone out upon him, from the whiteness of a large vignette, a face which he recognised. He cried, "Hallo!" in spite of himself as it seemed, and then, with a sudden start, looked at Margaret. She had grown pale, and as he looked at her she grew red, and lifted a warning

finger. The Colonel sank back upon his seat with a consternation he could scarcely disguise.

"What's the matter, Gerald?" said Sir Giles, who was arranging steadily upon the board the black and white men for another game.

"Only the sight of that old cabinet which I remember so well," cried the soldier, with a curious tone in his voice. "It used to be one of our favourite puzzles to find out the secret drawers. When Mrs. Osborne was Miss Piercey," he continued, to give him an excuse for looking towards her again. Margaret had bent her head over her work. Was that what it meant? he asked himself. Was this designing woman in the secret? Was this her plan to harm her cousin, and get him into trouble with his parents? His face grew stern as he looked at her. He thought there was guilt in every line of her attitude. She could not face him, or give any account of the meaning in her eyes.

"Ay, it's a queer old thing," said Sir Giles; "many a one has tried his wits at it, and had to give up. It's very different from your modern things."

"You should see my Gervase at it," said Lady Piercey. "He pulls out one drawer after another, as if he had made it all. I never could fathom it for my part, though I have sat opposite to it in this chair for five-and-thirty years. But Gervase has it all at his fingers' ends."

"Pooh! he's known it all his life," said Sir Giles. "Gerald, my fine fellow, we've just time for another before I go to bed."

"Surely, Uncle," said Gerald; but it seemed to him that he had become all at once conscious of another game that was being played; a tragic game, with hearts and lives instead of bits of ivory—a hapless young fellow in the hands of two women, one of whom he had been made to believe he loved, in order to carry out the schemes of the other who was planning and scheming behind backs to deprive him of his natural rights. Imagination made a great leap to attain to such a fully developed theory, but it did so with a spring. Colonel Piercey thought that the presence of this woman, pale, self-restrained, bearing every humiliation, was accounted for now.

"Why did Gerald Piercey look at you so, Meg?" asked Lady Piercey. She had said she felt tired, and risen and said good night earlier than usual, seizing her niece's arm, not waiting till Parsons should come at her ordinary hour. She was fatigued with all the strain about Gervase; getting him off at the right hour, and getting all his "things" in order; and making out that new wonderful character for him to dazzle the visitor. She had a right indeed to be tired, having gone through so much that was exciting, and succeeded in everything, especially the last of her efforts. "Why did he look at you and talk that nonsense about the old cabinet? Something had come into his head."

"I supposed he thought, Aunt, of the time when we used to make fun over it, and ask all the visitors to find it out."

"Perhaps he did," said the old lady; "but though he looked at you that once, you needn't expect that he's going to pay attention to you, Meg. He thinks you're dreadfully gone off. I saw that as soon as he came into the room. You can see it in a moment from the way a man turns his head."

"I don't doubt that he is quite right," said Margaret, with a little spirit.

"Oh, yes; he's right enough. You're a very different girl from what you used to be," said Lady Piercey. "But you don't like to hear it, Meg; for you don't give me half the support you generally do. I don't feel your arm at all. It is as if I had nothing to lean on. I wish Parsons was here."

"Will you sit down for a moment and rest, and I will call Parsons?"

"Why should I rest— between the library and the stairs? I want to get to my room; I want to get to bed. What — what are you standing there for, not giving me your arm? I'll— I'll be on my nose— if you don't mind. Give me— your arm, Meg. Meg!" The old lady gave a dull cry, and moved her left arm about as if groping for some support, though the other was clasped strongly in that of Margaret, who was holding up her aunt's large wavering person with all the might she had. As she cried out for help, Lady Piercey sank down like a tower falling, dragging her companion with her; yet turning a last look of reproach upon her, and moving her lips, from which no sound came, with what seemed like upbraiding. There was a rush from all quarters at Margaret's cry. Parsons and Dunning came flying, wiping their mouths, from the merry supper-table, where they had been discussing Mr. Gervase—and the other servants, in a crowd, and Gerald Piercey from the room they had just left. Margaret had disengaged herself as best she could from the fallen mass of flesh, and had got Lady Piercey's head upon her shoulder, from which that large pallid countenance looked forth with wide open eyes, with a strange stare in them, some living consciousness mingling with the stony look of the soul in prison. Except that stare, and a movement of the lips, which were unable to articulate, and a slight flicker of movement in the left hand, still groping, as it seemed, for something to clutch at, she was like a woman made of stone.

And all in a moment, without any warning; without a sign that any one understood! Parsons, wailing, said that she wasn't surprised. Her lady had done a deal too much getting Mr. Gervase off; she had been worried and troubled about him, poor dear innocent! She hadn't slept a wink for two nights, groaning and turning in her bed. "But, for goodness gracious sake!" cried Parsons, "some one go back to master, or we'll have him on our 'ands, too. Mrs. Osborne, Lord bless you! go to master. You can't be no use here; we knows what to do—Dunning and me knows what to do. Go back to Sir Giles—go back to Sir Giles! or we won't answer for none of their lives!"

"Cousin Gerald, go to my uncle. Tell him she's a little faint. I will come directly and back you up, as soon as they can lift her. Go!" cried Margaret, with a severity that was not, perhaps, untouched, even at this dreadful moment, by a consciousness of the opinion he was supposed to have formed of her. It was as if she had stamped her foot at him, as she half-sat, half-lay, partially crushed by the fall of the old lady's heavy body, with the great death-like face surmounted by the red ribbons of the cap laid upon her breast. Those red ribbons haunted several minds for a long time after; they seemed to have become, somehow, the most tragic feature of the scene.

Colonel Piercey was not a man to interfere with a business that was not his. He saw that the attendants knew what they were about, and left them without another word.

Sir Giles was fuming a little over the interruption to his game. "What's the matter?" he said, testily. "You shouldn't go and leave a game unfinished for some commotion among the women. You don't know 'em as well as I do. Come along, come along; you've almost made me forget my last move. What did Meg Osborne cry out for, eh? My old lady is sharp on her sometimes. She must have given her a stinger that time; but Meg isn't the girl to cry out."

"It was a— stumble, I think," said the Colonel.

"Ay, ay! something of that kind. I know 'em, Gerald. I'm not easily put out. Come along and finish the game."

Margaret came in, some time after, looking very pale. She went behind her uncle's chair, and put her hand on his shoulder, "May I wheel you to your room, Uncle, if your game's over, instead of Dunning? He asked me to tell you he was coming directly, and that it was time for you to go to bed."

"Confound Dunning," cried Sir Giles, in his big rumbling voice. "I'm game to go on as long as Frank here will play. I've not had such a night for ever so long. He's a good player, but not good enough to beat me," he said, with a muffled long odd laugh that reverberated in repeated rolls like thunder.

The Colonel looked up at her to get his instructions. He did not like her, and yet he recognised in her the authority of the moment. And Margaret no longer tried to conciliate him, as at first, but issued forth her orders with a kind of sternness. "Let me wheel your chair, sir," he said; "you'll give me my revenge to-morrow? Three games out of four!—is that what you call entertaining a stranger, to beat him all along the line the first night?"

Sir Giles laughed loud and long in those rumbling, long-drawn peals. His laugh was like the red ribbons, and pointed the sudden tragedy. "You shall have your revenge," he said; "and plenty of it—plenty of it! You shall cry off before I will. I love a good game. If it wasn't for a good game, now and then, I don't know what would become of me. As for Meg, she's not worth naming; and my boy, Gervase, did his best, poor chap; but between you and me, Gerald, whatever my lady says, my boy Gervase—poor chap, poor chap!" Here the old gentleman's laughter broke down as usual in the weakness of a sudden sob or two. "He's not what I should like to see him, my poor boy Gervase," he cried.

He was taken to his room after a while, and soothed into cheerfulness, and had his drink compounded for him by Margaret, till Dunning came, pale, too, and excited, whispering to Mrs. Osborne that the doctor was to come directly, and that there was no change, before he approached his master, with whom, a few minutes afterwards, he was heard talking, and even laughing, by the Colonel, who remained in the library, pacing up and down with the painful embarrassment of a stranger in a new house, in the midst of a family tragedy, but not knowing what part he had to play in it, or where he should go, or what he should do. Margaret had left him without even a good-night, to return to the room upstairs, where Lady Piercey lay motionless and staring, with the red ribbons still crowning her awful brow.

CHAPTER XVII.

AND where was Gervase? His mother lay in the same condition all the next day. There was little hope that she would ever come out of it. The doctor said calmly that it was what he had looked for, for a long time. There had been "a stroke" before, though it was slight and had not been talked about; but Parsons knew very well what he was afraid of, and should have kept her mistress from excitement. Parsons, too, allowed that she knew it might come at any time. But Lord! a thing that may come at any time, you don't ever think it's going to come now, Parsons said; and who was she to control her lady as was the head of everything? It was allowed on all sides that to control Lady Piercey would have been a difficult thing indeed, especially where anything about Gervase was concerned.

"Spoiled the boy from the beginning, that was what she always did," said Sir Giles, mumbling. "I'd have kept a stronger hand over him, Gerald; but what could I do, with his mother making it all up to him, as soon as my back was turned?"

Colonel Piercey heard a great deal about Gervase that he had never been intended to hear. Lady Piercey's fiction, which she had made up so elaborately about the young man of fashion, crumbled all to pieces, poor lady; while one after another made their confidences to him. The only one who said nothing was Margaret. She was overwhelmed with occupation; all the charge of the house, which Lady Piercey had kept in her own hands, falling suddenly upon her shoulders, and without any co-operation from the much-indulged old servants, who were all servile to their imperious mistress, but very insubordinate to any government but hers. It became a serious matter, however, as the days passed by, and the old lady remained like a soul in prison, unable to move or to speak, yet staring with ever watchful eyes at the door, looking, they all felt, for some one who did not come. Where was Gervase? There was more telegraphing at Greystott than there ever had been since such a thing was possible. Mr. Gregson replied to say that he had not found Gervase at the train, and had not seen him, news which brought everything to a standstill. Where, then, had he gone? They had no address to send to, no clue by which he might be traced out. He had disappeared altogether, nobody could tell where. Colonel Piercey's first impulse had been to leave the distracted family, thus thrown into the depths of domestic distress, but Sir Giles clung to him with piteous helplessness, imploring him not to go.

"After my boy Gervase, there's nobody but you," he cried, "and he's away, God knows where, and whom should I have to hold on by if you were to go too? There's Meg, to be sure: but she's got enough to do with my lady. Stay, Gerald, stay, for goodness' sake. I've nobody, nobody, on my side of the house but you; and if anything were to happen," cried the poor old gentleman, breaking down, "who have I to give orders, or to see to things? I don't know what is to become of me if you won't stay."

"I'll stay, of course, Uncle Giles, if I can be of any use," said Colonel Piercey.

"God bless you, my lad!" cried Sir Giles, now ready to sob for satisfaction, as he had before been for trouble. "Now I can face things, if I've you to stand by me."

The household in general took heart when it was known he was to stay.

"Oh! Colonel Piercey, if you'd but look up Mr. Gervase for my lady?—she can't neither die nor get better till she sees her boy," said the weeping Parsons; and "Colonel Piercey, Sir," said Dunning, "Sir Giles do look to you so, as he never looked to any gentleman before. I'll get him to do whatever's right and good for him if so be as he knows you're here." Thus, both master and servants seized upon him. And yet what could he do? He could not go out and search for Gervase whom he had never seen, knowing absolutely nothing of his cousin's haunts, nor of the people among whom he was likely to be. And he could not consult the servants on this point. There was but one person who could give him information, and she kept out of his way.

On the evening of the second day, however, Margaret came into the library after Sir Giles had been wheeled off to bed. It happened that Colonel Piercey was standing before the writing-table, examining that very photograph

which he had discovered with such surprise, and which had made him break off so quickly in his story on the night when Lady Piercey was taken ill. She came suddenly up to him where he stood with the photograph, and laid her hand on his arm. He had not heard her step, and started, almost dropping it in his surprise. "Mrs. Osborne!" he exclaimed.

"You are looking at Gervase's picture? Cousin Gerald, help us if you can. I don't know how much or how little she feels, but it is Gervase my aunt is lying looking for—Gervase, who doesn't know she is ill even if he had the thought. Was it him you saw with—with the woman? I have not liked to ask you, but I can't put it off any longer. Was it Gervase? Oh! for pity's sake, speak!"

"How should I know," he said, "if you don't know?"

"Know? I! What way have I of knowing? You saw him, or you seemed to think you did."

"It was only for a moment. I had never seen him before; I might be mistaken. It seemed to me that it was the same kind of face. But how can I speak on the glimpse of a moment? I might be quite wrong."

"You are very cautious," she cried at last, "oh, very cautious!—though it is a matter of life and death. Won't you help us, then, or can't you help us? If this is so, it might give a clue. There is a girl—who has disappeared also, I have just found out. Oh! Cousin Gerald, you know what he is?—you must have heard enough to know: not a madman, nor even an imbecile, yet not like other people. He might be imposed upon—he might be carried away. There was something strange about him before he went. He said things which I could not understand. But they suspected nothing."

"Was it not your duty," said Gerald Piercey, almost sternly, "to tell them—if they suspected nothing, as you say?"

"You speak to me very strangely," she said with a forced smile; "as if I were in the wrong, anyhow. What could I tell them? That I was uneasy, and not satisfied? My aunt would have asked what did it matter if I were satisfied or not?—and Uncle Giles!" She stopped, and resumed in a different tone, "And the girl has gone up to London from the Seven Thorns—so far as I can make out, on the same day."

"What sort of a girl?"

Margaret described her as well as she was able.

"I cannot give you many details. I think she is pretty: brown hair and eyes, very neat and nice in her dress, though my aunt thinks it beyond her station. I think, on the whole, a nice-looking girl—not tall."

"The description would answer most young women that one sees."

"It is possible—there is nothing remarkable. She looks clever and watchful, and a little defiant. But I did not mean you to go into the streets to look for Patty. I thought you might see whether my description agreed."

"Mrs. Osborne, perhaps you will tell me what you suppose to have happened, and what there is that I can do."

"If we are to be on such formal terms," said Margaret, colouring deeply, "yes, Colonel Piercey, I will tell you. I suppose, or rather, I fear, that Gervase may have gone away with Patty Hewitt. She is quite a respectable girl. She would not compromise herself; therefore——"

"You think he has married her?"

"I think most likely she must have married him—or intends to do it. But that takes time. They could not have banns called, or other arrangements made——"

"They could have a special licence."

"Ah! but that costs money. They would not have money, either of them. I have been trying to make inquiries quietly. But time is passing, and his poor mother! It would be better to consent to anything," said Margaret, "than to have her die without seeing him; and perhaps if he were found, the pressure on the brain might relax. No, I don't know if that is possible; I am no doctor. I only want to satisfy her. She is his mother! Whatever he is, he is more to her than any one else in the world."

"She does not seem very kind to you, that you should think so much of that."

"Who said she was not kind to me? You take a great deal upon yourself, Colonel Piercey, to be a distant cousin!"

"I am the next-of-kin," he said. "I'd like to protect these poor old people—and it is my duty—from any plot there may be against them."

"Plot—against them?" She stared at him for a moment with eyes that dilated with astonishment. Then she shook her head.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "If you will not help, I must do what I can by myself. And you are free on your side to inquire, and I hope will do it, and take such steps as may seem to you good. The thing now is to find Gervase for his mother. At another moment," said Margaret, raising her head, "you will perhaps explain to me what you mean by this tone—towards me."

She turned her back upon him without another word, and walked away, leaving Colonel Piercey not very comfortable. He asked himself uneasily what right he had to suspect her?—what he suspected her of?—as he stood and watched her crossing the hall. It was a sign of the agitation in the house, that all the doors seemed to stand open, the centre of the family existence having shifted somehow from the principal rooms downstairs to some unseen room above, where the mistress of the house lay. What did he suspect Meg Piercey of? What had he against her? When he asked himself this, it appeared that all he had against her was that she was a dependent, a widow, a middle-aged person—one of those wrecks which encumber the shores of life, which ought to have gone down, or to be broken up, not to strew the margins of existence with unnecessary and incapable things, making demands upon feeling and sympathy which might be much better expended elsewhere. Colonel Piercey was not a hard man by nature: he was, in fact, rather too open to the claims of charity, and had expended too much, not too little, upon widows and orphans in his day. But it had stirred up all the angry elements in his nature to see Meg Piercey in that condition which was not natural to her. She ought to have died long ago along with her husband, or she ought to have a position of her own: to see her here in that posture of dependence, in that black gown, with that child, living, as he said to himself harshly, upon charity, and accepting all the penalties, was more than he could bear. There is a great deal to be said for the Suttee, though a humanitarian government has put an end to it. It is so much more dignified for a woman. To a man of fine feelings, it is a painful thing to see how a person whose natural rôle is that of a princess, a dispenser of help to others, should come down herself into the rank of the beggar, because of the death

of, probably, a very inferior being to whom she was married. It degraded her altogether in the scale of being. A princess has noble qualities, large aims, and stands above the crowd—a dependant does quite the reverse. Scheming and plotting are the natural breath of the latter; and that a woman should let herself come down to that wilfully, rather than die and be done with it, which would be so much more natural and dignified! Colonel Piercey was aware that his thoughts were very fantastic, and yet this is how they were—he could not help himself. He was angry with Margaret. It was not the place she was born to; a sort of Abigail about the backstairs, existing by the caprice of a disagreeable old woman. Oh, no! it was not a thing that a man could put up with. And, of course, she must have sunk to the level of her kind.

This was why he suspected her. The question remained, What did he suspect her of? And this was still more difficult to answer. Such a woman, of course, would live by sowing mischief in a family; by hurting in the most effectual way the superiors who kept her down, and were so little considerate of her. And their son was the way in which she could most effectively do this. Gerald Piercey had various thoughts rising in his mind about this young man, who probably was not at all fit to hold the family property and succeed Sir Giles in its honours. There was one point of view from which Colonel Piercey could not forget that he himself was the next-of-kin—that which made him, in his own eyes, the champion of Gervase—his determined defender against every assault. Perhaps the very strength of this feeling might push him beyond what was right and just; but it would be in the way of supporting and protecting his weak-minded cousin. That was a point upon which, naturally, he could have no doubt. If Meg Piercey was against him, it was Gerald Piercey's part to defend him. But the means were a little doubtful. He was not clear whether Meg was helping Gervase to marry unsuitably, to spite his parents, or whether her intention was to prevent this marriage, in order to deprive him of his happiness and the natural protection which the support of a clever wife might afford to the half-witted young man. Thus, he had a difficult part to play; having first to find out what Margaret's scope and meaning was, and then to set himself to defeat it. He had been but three days in the house, and what a tangled web he was involved in!—to be the Providence of all these people, old and young, whom he knew so little, yet was so closely connected with; and to defeat the evil genius, the enemy in the guise of a friend, whom he alone was clear-sighted enough to divine. But she puzzled him all the same. She had looks that were not those of a deceiver; and when she had raised her head and told him that at another moment she would demand an explanation of what his tone meant, something like a shade of alarm passed through the soldier's mind. He would not have been alarmed, you may be sure, if Margaret had threatened him with a champion, as in the older days. Bois-Guilbert was not afraid of Ivanhoe. But, when it is the woman herself who asks an explanation, and his objections have to be stated in full words, to her alone, facing him for herself, that is a different matter. It may well make a man look pale.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE next morning after this, Gerald Piercey found himself in the front of the Seven Thorns. He had not known what it was: whether a hamlet, or a farm, or what he actually found it to be, a roadside inn. The aspect of the place was more attractive than usual. It was lying full in the morning sunshine; a great country waggon, with its white covering, and fine, heavily-built, but well-groomed horses, standing before the door, concentrating the light in its great hood. One of the horses was white, which made it a still more shining object in the midst of the red-brown road. The old thorns were full in the sunshine, which softened their shabby antiquity, and made the gnarled roots and twisted branches picturesque. The long, low fabric of the house was bathed in the same light, which pervaded the whole atmosphere with a purifying and embellishing touch. The west side, looking over the walled garden, which extended for some distance along the road, though in the shade, showed a row of open windows, at which white curtains fluttered, giving an air of inhabitation to that usually-closed-up portion of the place. The visitor felt, as he looked at it, that it was not a mere village public-house, that its decadence might have a story, and that it was possible that the daughter of such a house might not, after all, be a mere rustic coquette, or, perhaps, so bad a match for the half-witted Gervase. Colonel Piercey had never once thought of himself as the possible heir of Greyshott; he did not feel that he had any interest in keeping Gervase from marrying, and though it was intolerable that the heir of the Pierceys should marry a barmaid, his feelings softened as he looked at the old country inn, with its look of long-establishment. Probably there was a farm connected with it; perhaps there was a certain pride of family here, too, and the daughter of the house was kept apart from the drinking and the wayside guests. Meg Piercey might have divined that the young woman was really the best match that Gervase could hope for, and this might be the cause of her opposition. (He forgot that he had supposed it likely that Meg might be bringing the match about for her own private ends, one hypothesis being just as likely as another.) With this idea he approached slowly, and took his seat upon the bench that stood under the window of the parlour. The roads between Greyshott and the Seven Thorns were dry and dusty, and his boots were white enough to warrant the idea that he was a pedestrian reposing himself, naturally, at the place of refreshment on the roadside.

The landlord came to the door with the waggoner, when Colonel Piercey had established himself there, and his aspect could not be said to be quite equal to that of his house. Hewitt had a red nose and a watery eye. His appearance did not inspire respect. He was holding the waggoner by the breast of his smock, and holding forth, duly emphasising his discourse by the gesture of the other hand, in which he held a pipe.

"You just 'old by me," he was saying, "look'ee, Jack; and I'll 'old by you, I will. The 'ay's a good crop; nobody can't say nothing again that. But there's rain a-coming, and Providence, 'e knows what'll come of it all in the end. It ain't what's grow'd in the fields as is to be trusted to, but what's safe in the stacks; and there's a deal o' difference between one and the other. Look'ee here! you 'old by me, and I'll 'old by you. And I can't speak no fairer. I've calculated all round, I 'ave—me and Patty, my girl, as is that good at figures; and if it's got in safe, all as I've got to say is, that this 'ere will be a dashed uncommon yeer."

"It's mostly the way," said the waggoner, "I'll allow, with them dry Junes. The weather can't 'old up not for ever."

"Nor won't," said old Hewitt, with assurance; "it stands to reason. Ain't this a variable climate or ain't it not? And a drop o' rain we 'aven't seen not for three weeks and more. Then we'll 'ave a wet July. You see yourself when I knocked the glass 'ow it went down. And that," he added, triumphantly, waving his pipe in the air, "is what settles the price of the 'ay."

"I shouldn't wonder if you was right, master," said the waggoner, getting under weigh.

Gerald Piercey sat and watched the big horses straining their great flanks to the work, setting the heavy waggon in motion, with pleasure in the sight which diverted him for a moment from his chief object of interest. Coming straight from India and the fine and slender-limbed creatures which are the patricians of their kind, the great, patient, phlegmatic English cart-horse filled him with admiration. The big feathered hoofs, the immense strain of those gigantic hind-quarters, the steady calm of the rustic, reflected with a greater and more dignified impassiveness in the face of his beast, was very attractive and interesting to him.

"Fine horses, these," he said, half to Hewitt at the door, half to the waggoner, who grinned with a slow shamefacedness, as if it were himself who was being praised.

"Ay, sir," said Hewitt, "and well took care of, as ever beasts was. Jack Mason there—though I say it as shouldn't—is awful good to his team."

"And why shouldn't you say it?" said Colonel Piercey. "It's clear enough."

"He's a relation, that young man is, and it's a country saying, sir, as you shouldn't speak up for your own. But I ain't one as pays much 'eed to that, for, says I, you knows them that belong to you better nor any one else does. There's my girl Patty, now; there ain't one like her betwixt Guildford and Portsmouth, and who knows it as well as me?"

"That's a very satisfactory state of things," said the visitor, "and, of course, you must know best. But I fear you won't be able to keep Miss Patty long to yourself if she's like that."

At this Patty's father began to laugh a slow, inward laugh. "There's 'eaps o' fellows after 'er, like bees after a 'oney 'ive. But, Lord bless you! she don't think nothing o' them. She's not one as would take up with a country 'Odge. She's blood in her veins, has my girl. We've been at the Seven Thorns, off and on, for I don't know 'ow many 'undred years: more time," said Hewitt, waving his pipe vaguely towards Greyshott, "than them folks 'as been at the 'All."

"Ah, indeed! That's the Pierceys, I suppose?"

"And a proud set they be. But 'Ewitts was 'ere before 'em, only they won't acknowledge it. I've 'eard my sister Patience, 'as 'ad a terrible tongue of 'er own, tell Sir Giles so to his face. 'E was young then, and father couldn't keep 'im out o' this 'ouse. After Patience, to be sure; but he was a terrible cautious one, was Sir Giles, and it never come to nought." The landlord laughed with a sharp hee-hee-hee. "I reckon," he said, "it runs in the blood."

"What runs in the blood?"

"I don't know, sir," said the innkeeper, pausing suddenly, "if you've called for anything? I can't trust neither to maid nor man to attend to the customers now Patty's away."

"If you have cider, I should like a bottle, and perhaps you'll help me to drink it," said Colonel Piercey. "I'm sorry to hear that Miss Patty's away."

"In London," said Hewitt; "but only for a bit. She 'as a 'ead, that chit 'as! Them rooms along there, end o' the 'ouse, 'asn't been lived in not for years and years. She says to me, she does, 'Father, let's clear 'em out, and maybe we'll find a lodger.' I was agin it at first. 'What'll you do with a lodger? There ain't but very little to be made o' that,' I says. 'They don't come down to the parlour to drink, that sort doesn't, and they're more trouble nor they're worth.' 'You leave it to me, father,' she says. And, if you'll believe it, she's found folks for them rooms already! New-married folks, she says, as will spend their money free. And coming in a week, for the rest of the summer or more. That's Patty's way!" cried the landlord, smiting his thigh. "Strike while it's 'ot, that's 'er way! Your good 'ealth, sir, and many of 'em. It ain't my brewing, that cider. I gets it from Devonshire, and I think, begging your pardon, sir, as it's 'eady stuff."

"But how," said Colonel Piercey, "will you manage with your visitors, when your daughter is away?"

"Oh, bless you, sir, she's a-coming with 'em, she says in her letter, if not before. Patty knows well I ain't the one for lodgers. I sits in my own parlour, and I don't mind a drop to drink friendly-like with e'er a man as is thirsty, or to see a set of 'orses put up in my stables, or that; but Richard 'Ewitt of the Seven Thorns ain't one to beck and bow afore folks as thinks themselves gentry, and maybe ain't not 'alf as good as 'er and me. No, sir; I wasn't made, nor was my father afore me made, for the likes of that."

"It is very good of you, I'm sure, Mr. Hewitt, to sit for half an hour with me, who may be nobody, as you say."

"Don't mention it, sir," said Hewitt, with a wave of the pipe which he still carried like a banner in his hand: "I 'ope I knows a gentleman when I sees one; and as I said, I sits at my own door and I takes a friendly drop with any man as is thirsty. That ain't the same as bowing and scraping, and taking folks's orders, as is nothing to me."

"And Miss Patty, you say, is in London? London's a big word: is she east or west, or—"

"It's funny," said Hewitt, "the interest that's took in my Patty since she's been away. There's been Sally Ferrett, the nurse up at Greyshott, asking and asking, where is she, and when did she go, and when she's coming back? I caught her getting it all out of 'Lizabeth the girl. What day did she go, and what train, and so forth? 'Lizabeth's a gaby. She just says 'Yes, Miss,' and 'No, Miss,' to a wench like that, as is only a servant like herself. I give it 'em well, and I give Miss her answer. 'What's their concern up at Greyshott with where my Patty is?"

"That's true," said Colonel Piercey, "and what is my concern? You are quite right, Mr. Hewitt."

"Oh, yours, sir? that's different: you ask out o' pure idleness, you do, to make conversation; I understand that. But between you and me I couldn't answer 'em, not if I wanted to. For my Patty is one as can take very good care of 'erself, and she don't give me no address. She'll be back with them young folks, or maybe, afore 'em, next week, and that's all as I want to know. I wants her then, for I'll not have nothing to do with 'em, and 'Lizabeth, she's a gaby, and not to be trusted. Lodgers in my opinion is more trouble than they're any good. So Patty will manage them herself, or they don't come here."

"The family at Greyshott takes an interest in your daughter, I presume, from what you say," said Colonel Piercey.

Upon this Hewitt laughed low and long, and winked over and over again with his watery eye. "There's one of 'em as does," he said. "Oh, there's one of 'em as does! If so be as you know the family, sir, you'll know the young gentleman. Don't you know Mr. Gervase?—eh, not the young 'un, sir, as is Sir Giles's heir? Oh, Lord, if you don't know him you don't know Greyshott Manor, nor what's going on there."

"I have never seen the young gentleman," said Gerald; "I believe he is not very often at home."

"I don't know about 'ome, but 'e's 'ere as often as 'e can be. 'E'd be 'ere mornin', noon, and night if I'd 'a put up with it; but I see 'im, what 'e was after, and I'll not 'ave my girl talked about, not for the best Piercey as ever trod in shoe-leather. And 'e ain't the best, oh, not by a long chalk 'e ain't. Sir Giles is dreadful pulled down with the rheumatics and that, but 'e was a man as was something like a man. Lord bless you, sir, this poor creature, 'e's a Softy, and 'e'll never be no more."

"What do you mean by a Softy?" said Gerald, quickly; then he added with a sensation of shame, "Never mind, I don't want you to tell me. Don't you think you should be a little more careful what you say, when a young man like this comes to your house?"

"What should I be careful for?" said Hewitt; "I ain't noways beholdin' to the Pierceys. They ain't my landlords, ain't the Piercey's, though they give themselves airs with their Lords o' the Manor, and all that. Hewitts of the Seven Thorns is as good as the Pierceys, and not beholdin' to them, not for the worth of a brass fardin—oh, no! And I wouldn't have the Softy about my house, a fool as opens 'is mouth and laughs in your face if you say a sensible word to 'im; not for me! Richard Hewitt's not a-going to think twice what he says for a fool like 'im. Softy's 'is name and Softy's 'is nature: ask any man in the village who the Softy is, and they'll soon tell you. Lord, it don't matter a bit what I say."

"Still, I suppose," said Colonel Piercey, feeling a little nettled in spite of himself, "it is, after all, the first family in the neighbourhood."

"First family be dashed," cried Hewitt; "I'm as good a family as any of 'em. And I don't care that, no, not that," he cried, snapping his fingers, "for the Pierceys, if they was kings and queens, which they ain't, nor no such big folks after all. Old Sir Giles, he's most gone off his head with rheumatics and things; and my lady, they do say, she 'ave 'ad a stroke, and serve her right for her pride and her pryin'. And Mr. Gervase, he's a Softy, and that's all that's to be said. They ain't much for a first family when you knows all the rights and the wrongs of it," Hewitt said.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE poet's wish that we might see ourselves as others see us was, though he did not so intend it, a cruel wish. It might save us some ridicule to the outside world, but it would turn ourselves and our pretensions into such piteous ridicule to ourselves, that life would be furnished with new pangs. Colonel Piercey went back to Greyshott with a sense of this keen truth piercing through all appearances, which was half ludicrous and half painful, though it was not himself, but his relations, that had been exhibited to him in the light of an old rustic's observations. He had come upon this visit with a sense of the greatness of the head of his own family, which had, perhaps, a little self-esteem in it; for if the younger branches of the house were what he knew them in his own person, and his father's, what ought not the head of the house, Sir Giles, the lineal descendant of so many Sir Gileses, and young Gervase, the heir of those long-unbroken honours, to be? He had expected, perhaps a little solemn stupidity, such as the younger is apt to associate with the elder branch. But he had also expected something of greatness—evidence that the house was of that reigning race which is cosmopolitan, and recognises its kind everywhere from English meads to Styrian mountains, and even among the chiefs of the East. It was ludicrous to see, through the eyes of a clown, how poor, after all, these pretences were. Yet he could not help it. Poor old Sir Giles, helpless and querulous, broken down by sickness, and, perhaps, disappointment and trouble; the poor old lady, not much at any time of the rural princess she might have been, lying speechless in that lingering agony of imprisoned consciousness; and the son, the heir, the future head of the house! Was not that a revelation to stir the blood in the veins of Gerald Piercey, the next-of-kin? He was a man of many faults, but he was full both of pride and generosity. The humiliation for his race struck him more than any possible elevation for himself. Indeed, that possible elevation was far enough off, if he had ever thought of it. A half-witted rustic youth, taken hold of by a pert barmaid, with a numerous progeny to follow, worthy of both sides—was that what the Pierceys were to come to in the next generation? He had never thought, having so many other things to occupy him in his life, of that succession, though probably he began to think, his father had, who had so much insisted on this visit. But what a succession it would be now! He was walking along, turning these things over in his mind, going slowly, and not much observant (though this was not at all his habit) of what was about him, when he was sensible of a sudden touch, which was, indeed, only upon his hand, yet which felt as if it had been direct upon his heart, rousing all kinds of strange sensations there. It was a thing which is apt to touch every one susceptible of feeling, with quick and unexpected sensations when it comes unawares. It was a little hand—very small, very soft, very warm, yet with a grasp in it which held fast, suddenly put into his hand. Colonel Piercey stopped, touched, as I have said, on his very heart, which, underneath all kinds of actual and conventional coverings, was soft and open to emotion. He looked down and saw a little figure at his foot, a little glowing face looking up at him. "May I tum and walk with you, Cousin Colonel?" a small voice said. "Sally, do away."

"Certainly you shall come and walk with me, Osy," said the Colonel. "What are you doing, little man, so far from home?"

"It's not far from home. I walks far—far—further than that. Sally, do away! I'm doing to walk home with a gemplemans. I'm a gemplemans myself, but Movver will send a woman wif me wherever I do. Sally, do away!"

"I'll take care of him," said Colonel Piercey, with a nod to the maid. "And so you think you're too big for a nurse, Master Osy. How old are you?"

"Seven," said the boy; "at least I'm more than six-and-three-quarters, Cousin Colonel. Little Joey at the farm is only five, and he does miles, all by hisself. Joey is better than me many ways," he added, thoughtfully; "he dets up on the big hay-cart, and he wides on the big horse, and his faver sits him up high! on his so'lder. But I only have a pony and sometimes I does with Jacob in the dog-cart, and sometimes—"

"Would you like to ride on my shoulder, Osy?"

Osy looked up to the high altitude of that shoulder with a look full of deliberation, weighing various things. "I s'ould like it," he said, "but I felled off once when Cousin Gervase put me up, and I promised Movver: but I tan't help it when he takes me by my arms behind me. Sometimes I'm fwightened myself. A gemplemans oughtn't to be fwightened, s'ould he, Cousin Colonel?"

"That depends," said Gerald. "I am a great deal bigger than you, but sometimes I have been frightened, too."

Osy looked at the tall figure by his side with certain glimmerings in his eyes of contempt. That size! and afraid!—but he would not make any remark. One does not talk of the deficiencies of others when one is of truly gentle spirit. One passes them over. He apologised like a prince to Gerald for himself. “That would be,” he said, “when it was a big, big giant. There’s giants in India, I know, like Goliath. If I do to India when I’m a man, I’ll be fwightened, too.”

“But David wasn’t, you know, Osy.”

“That’s what I was finking, Cousin Colonel, but he flinged the stone at him before he tummed up to him. Movver says it was quite fair, but—”

“I think it was quite fair. Don’t you see, he had his armour on, and his shield, and all that; if he had had his wits about him, he might have put up his shield to ward off the stone. When you are little you must be very sharp.”

Osy looked at his big cousin again, reflectively. “I don’t fink I could kill you, Cousin Colonel, even if I was very sharp.”

“I hope not, Osy, and I trust you will never want to, my little man.”

“I would if we was fighting,” said Osy, with spirit; “but I’ll do on detting bigger and bigger till I’m a man: and you are a man now, and you tan’t gwow no more.”

“You bloodthirsty little beggar! You’ll go on getting bigger and bigger while I shall grow an old man like Uncle Giles.”

“I never,” cried Osy, flushing very red, “would stwike an old gemplemans like Uncle Giles. Never! I wouldn’t let nobody touch him. When Cousin Gervase runned away with his chair, I helped old Dunning to stop him. You might kill me, but I would fight for Uncle Giles!”

“It appears you are going to be a soldier, anyhow, Osy.”

“My faver was a soldier,” said Osy. “Movver’s got his sword hanging up in our room; all the rest of the fings belongs to Uncle Giles, but the sword, it belongs to Movver and me.”

The Colonel gave the little hand which was in his involuntary pressure, and a little moisture came into the corner of his eye. “Do you remember your father,” he said, “my little man?”

Osy shook his head. “I don’t remember nobody but Movver,” the child said.

What a curious thing it was! To hear of the dead father and his sword brought that wetness to Colonel Piercey’s eye; but the name of the mother, which filled all the child’s firmament, dried the half-tear like magic. The poor fellow who had died went to the Colonel’s heart. The lonely woman with the little boy, so much more usual an occasion of sentiment, did not touch him at all. He did not want to hear anything of “Movver”: and, indeed, Osy was by no means a sentimental child, and had no inclination to enlarge on the theme. His mother was a matter of course to him, as to most healthy little boys: to enlarge upon her love or her excellencies was not at all in his way.

“You walk very fast, Cousin Colonel,” was the little fellow’s next remark.

“Do I, my little shaver? What a beast I am, forgetting your small legs. Come, jump and get up on my shoulder, Osy.”

Osy looked up with mingled pleasure and alarm. “I promised Movver: but if you holded me very fast——”

“Oh, I’ll hold you. You mustn’t be frightened, Osy.”

“Me fwightened! But I felled down and hurted my side, and fwightened Movver. Huwah! huwah!” shouted the child. “I’m not fwightened a bit, Cousin Colonel! You holds me and I holds you, and you may canter, or gallop, or anyfing. I’ll never be afwaid.”

“Here goes, then,” said the grave soldier. And with shouts and laughter the pair rushed on, Colonel Piercey enjoying the race as much as the child on his shoulder, who urged him with imaginary spurs, very dusty if not very dangerous, holding fast with one hand by the collar of his coat. He had not much experience of children, and the confidence and audacity of this little creature, his glee, his warm grip, in which there was a touch of terror, and his wild enjoyment at once of the movement and the danger, aroused a new sentiment in the heart of the mature man, who had known none of the emotions of paternity. Suddenly, however, a change came over his spirit: he reduced his pace, he ceased to laugh, he sank all at once—though with the child still shouting on his shoulder, endeavouring, with his little kicks upon his breast, to rouse him to further exertions—into the ordinary gravity of his aspect and demeanour. There had appeared suddenly out of the little gate of the beech avenue, a figure, which took all the fun out of Gerald Piercey, though he could not have told why.

“Movver, movver! look here: I’m up upon my horse. But you needn’t be fwightened, for he’s not like Cousin Gervase. He’s holded me fast, fast all the way.”

“Oh! Osy,” cried Margaret, holding her breath—for, indeed, it was a remarkable sight to see the unutterable gravity of Colonel Piercey endeavouring solemnly to take off his hat to her, with the child, flushed and delighted, upon his shoulder. There was something comic in the extreme seriousness which had suddenly fallen upon Osy’s bearer. “You are making yourself a bore to Colonel Piercey,” she said.

“Not at all; we have been enjoying ourselves very much. He is a delightful companion,” said Gerald, but in a tone which suggested a severe despair. “Will you get down, Osy, or would you rather I should carry you home?”

“I would wather——” said the child, and then he paused. “I tan’t see your face,” he said, pettishly, “but you feels twite different, as if you was tired. I fink I’ll get down.”

Colonel Piercey’s comment to himself was that the child was frightened for his mother, but, naturally, he did not express this sentiment. He lifted Osy down and set him on the ground. “Where’s the nurse now?” he said; “a long way behind. You see, Osy, it’s good to have a basis to fall back upon when new operations are ordered by the ruling powers.”

Could the man not refrain from a gibe at her, even to her child, Margaret thought, with wonder? But she was surprised to see that he stood still, as if with the intention of speaking to her.

“You are going out?” he said, in his solemn tones. “Is Lady Piercey better?”

“She is no better; but I must attempt, in some way, to get the news conveyed to Gervase. Her eyes turn constantly to the door. They are still quite living, though not so strong. She must see him, if it is possible. She *must* see him, if there is any way—her only child.”

"But not, from all I hear, a child that does her much credit," he said.

"What does that matter? He is all she has," she added hastily. "Don't let me detain you, Colonel Piercey. I must not be gone long; and I must try if anything can be done."

"You mean that I am detaining you," he said, turning with her. "And I have something to tell you, if I may walk with you. I have been talking to old Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns. He says he has no address to communicate with his daughter; but there is a newly-married couple coming to occupy his rooms, and that she is returning with them next week."

"A newly-married couple!" cried Margaret, aghast. "Can it be they? Can it be Patty? Is it possible?"

"I thought it might be so, if it was he and she whom I saw."

"Oh, his mother! his mother! And this was what she was most afraid of. Why, why did she let him go?"

"Yes, why did she let him go, if she were so much afraid to this, as you think? But, perhaps you are alarming yourself unnecessarily? Lady Piercey must have known tolerably well at his age what her son was likely to do?"

"Yes, I am perhaps alarming myself unnecessarily. The chances are she will not live to see it. It is only she who would feel it much. Poor Aunt Piercey! Why should one wish her to live to hear this?" Margaret paused a little, wringing her hands, uncertain whether to turn back or to proceed. At last she said to herself, "Anyhow, she wants him—she wants him. If it is possible, she must see her boy;" and went on again quickly, scarcely noticing the dark figure at her side. But he did not choose to be overlooked.

"I should like," he said, "to have a few things explained. You say nobody would mind this marriage—if it is a marriage—except Lady Piercey?"

"I said nobody would mind it much. My uncle would get used to it, and he could be talked over: and Patty Hewitt is a clever girl. But Aunt Piercey——!"

"Why should she stand out?"

"If you do not understand," cried Margaret, "how can I tell you? His mother! and a woman that has always hoped better things, and thought still, if he married well,—— You forget," she cried vehemently, "that poor Gervase was not to her what he was to us. He was her only child! A mother may see everything even more keenly than others; but you hope, you always hope——"

"I presume, then, you did not think so? You did not object to this marriage."

"What does it matter whether I objected or not? Of what consequence is my opinion? None of us can like it. A girl like Patty to be at the head of Greyshott! Oh! who could like that? But," said Margaret more calmly, "my poor aunt deceives herself; for what nice girl, unless she were forced, as girls are sometimes, would marry Gervase? Poor Gervase! It is not his fault. She deceives herself. But I don't think she will live to see it. I don't think she will live to hear of it. If she could only have him by her before she dies. Patty could not oppose herself to that. She could not prevent that."

"Is it supposed, then, that she would wish to do so?"

"Colonel Piercey," cried Margaret, "you have come among us at a dreadful moment, when all the secrets of the family are laid bare. Oh, don't ask any more questions! I have said things I did not intend to say."

"I hope that I am to be trusted," he said, with his severe tone; "and if I can help, I will. To whom are you going? Is it to this old Hewitt? for nothing, I think, is to be learned from him."

"I am going to Miss Hewitt, her aunt. It is in despair. For she has a hatred of all of us at Greyshott; but surely, surely, when they hear that his mother is dying——"

"She cannot hate me. I will go," Gerald Piercey said.

CHAPTER XX.

OLD Miss Hewitt sat in her parlour, if not like a fat spider watching for the fly, at least like a large cat seated demurely, with an eye upon her natural prey, though her aspect was more decorous and composed than words could tell. She had been made aware by her little servant a few minutes before that "a gentleman" was coming up to the door, and had instantaneously prepared to meet the visitor. A visitor was a very rare thing at Rose Cottage.

"You're sure it ain't the curate, a-coming begging?"

"Oh, no," cried the little maid, "a tall, grand gentleman, like a lord. I think I knows a pa'son when I sees 'un!" she added, with rustic contempt. Miss Hewitt settled herself in her large chair; she gave her cap that twist that every woman who wears a cap supposes to put all aright. She drew to her a footstool for her feet, and then she said, "You may let him in, Jane." A smile of delight was upon her mouth; but she subdued even that in her sense of propriety, to heighten the effect. She had been waiting for this moment for thirty years. She had not known how it would come about, but she had always felt it must come about somehow. She had paid fifty pounds for it—and she had not grudged her money—and now it had come. She did not even know the shape it would take, or who it was who was coming to place the family of Piercey at her feet, that she might spurn them; but that this was what was about to happen, she felt absolutely sure. It could not be Sir Giles himself, which would have been the sweetest of all, for Sir Giles was too infirm to visit anybody; while she, whom he had scorned once, was hale and strong, and sure to see both of them out! Perhaps it was a solicitor, or something of the kind. What did she care? It was some one from the Pierceys coming to her, abject, with a petition—which she would not grant—no, not if they besought her on their knees.

The room seemed in semi-darkness to Gerald, coming in from the brightness of the summer afternoon. The blind was drawn down to save the carpet, and the curtains hung heavily over the window for gentility's sake. Miss Hewitt sat with her back to the light, by the side of the fireplace, which was filled up by cut paper. There was no air in the room; and though Colonel Piercey was not a man of humorous perceptions, there occurred even to him the idea of a large cat with her tail curled round her, sitting demure, yet fierce, on the watch for some prey, of which she had scent or sight.

"My name is Piercey," said the Colonel. "I am a relation of the family at Greyshott, who perhaps, you may have heard, are in great trouble at this moment. I have come to you, Miss Hewitt—and I hope you will pardon me for

disturbing you—to know whether, by any chance, you could furnish us with Gervase Piercey's address."

"Ah, you're from the Pierceys," said Miss Hewitt. "I thought as much—though there ain't that friendship between me and the Pierceys that should make them send to me in their trouble. And what relation may you be, if a person might ask?"

"I am a cousin; but that is of little importance. The chief thing is that Mr. Gervase Piercey is absent, and his address is not known. His mother is ill——"

"I heard of that," said the old lady, drawing a long breath as of satisfaction. "She's a hard one, too, she is. It would be something sharp that made her ill. I suppose as she heard——"

"She heard nothing. There was no mental cause for her illness, if that is what you mean. She had been sitting, talking just as usual——"

"Oh—h!" cried Miss Hewitt, with an air of disappointment; "then it wasn't from the shock? And what's their meaning, then, Mister Piercey—if you call yourself Piercey—in sending to me?"

"That is precisely what I can't tell you," said Gerald, with much candour. "I confess that it seems absurd, but I supposed, perhaps, that you would know."

"And why should it seem absurd? I know a deal more about the Pierceys than you think for, or any fine gentleman that comes questioning of me, as if I were an old hag in the village. Oh! I know the way that you, as calls yourselves gentlemen, speak!"

"I hope," said Gerald, surprised, "that I don't speak in any unbecoming way, or fail in respect to any woman. It is very likely that you know much more than I do, and the question is one that is easily settled. Could you throw any light upon the question where Gervase Piercey is, and if so, will you tell me his address?"

She looked at him for a moment as if uncertain how to respond—whether to play with the victim any longer, or to make a pounce and end it. Then she said, quickly, "Did he send you himself?"

"Did who send me?"

"Giles—Sir Giles; don't you understand? Was it him as thought of Patience Hewitt? That's what I want to know."

"Miss Hewitt, Lady Piercey is very ill——"

"Ah! he never was in love with her," cried the old lady; "never! He married her—he was drawn in to do it; but I know as he hated it when he did it. It never was for her, if it was he has sent you. Not for her, but for——"

She stopped and looked at him again, with a glare in her eyes, yet resolved, apparently, not to pounce but to play a little longer. "Ah! so my lady's ill, is she? She's an old woman, more like an old hag, I can tell you, than me. She was thirty-five, if she was a day, when she married Sir Giles, and high living and nothing to do has made her dreadful. He never could abear fat women, and it serves him right. Some people never lose their figure, whatever their age may be."

She sat very upright in her chair, with a smile of self-complacence, nodding her head. "Well," she said, "and what's wanted of me? Not to go and nurse my lady, I suppose? They don't want me to do that?"

"They wish to know," said Colonel Piercey, restraining himself with an effort, "Mr. Gervase Piercey's address."

"Their son's address?" said Miss Hewitt. "He's the heir, you know. The village folks calls him the Softy, but there couldn't nothing be proved against him. He'll be Sir Gervase after his father, and nobody can't prevent that. And how is it as they don't know their own son's address? and for why should they send you to me? Me, a lady living quiet in her own house, meddling with none of them, how should I know their son's address?"

"I have told you I have not the slightest light to throw on this question. It appears that your niece is in London, and that she was seen, or it is supposed she was seen, with my cousin."

"And what then?" cried the old lady. "You think, perhaps, as that Softy led my Patty wrong. Ho, ho! ho, ho!" She laughed a low guttural laugh, prolonging it till Colonel Piercey's exasperation was almost beyond bearing. "You think as he was the gay Lotharium and she was the young Lavinyar, eh? Oh, I've read plenty of books in my time, and I know how gentlemen talk of them sort of things. No, she ain't, Mister Piercey. My Patty is one that knows very well what she is about."

"So I have heard, also. I believe it is supposed that as he is such a fool, your niece may have married him, Miss Hewitt."

"And so she have, just!" cried the old lady, springing from her chair. She waved her arms in the air and uttered a hoarse "Hooray!" "That is just what has happened, mister; exactly true, as if you'd been in all the plans from the first. You tell Sir Giles as there is a Patty Hewitt will be Lady Piercey, after all, and not the Queen herself couldn't prevent it. Just you tell him that from me; Patience, called for her aunt, and thought to be like me, though smaller—my brother being an ass and marrying a little woman. But that's just the gospel truth. She's Mrs. Gervase Piercey, now, and she'll be Lady Piercey when the time comes. Oh!" cried Miss Hewitt, sinking back in her chair, exhausted, "but I'd like to be there when he hears. And I'd like to tell her, I should," she added, with a fierce glare in her eyes.

Gerald had risen when she did, and stood holding the back of his chair. Fortunately, he had great command of his temper, though the provocation was strong. He was silent while she settled herself again in her seat, and rearranged her cap-strings and the folds of her gown, though the flowers in her head-dress quivered with excitement and triumph. He said, "I fear you will never have that satisfaction. Lady Piercey is dying, and, happily, knows nothing about this. Perhaps your revenge might be more complete if you would summon her son to see her before she dies."

Miss Hewitt was too much occupied by what she had herself said to pay much attention to him. It was only after some minutes of murmuring and smiling to herself, that she began to recall that he had made a reply. "What was you saying, Mr. Piercey—eh? If you was counting on succeeding you're struck all of a heap, and I don't wonder, for there's an end of you, my fine gentleman! There'll be a family and a large family, you take your oath of that. None of your marrying in-and-in cousins and things, but a fine, fresh, new stock. What was you saying? Dying is she, that woman? Well, we've all got to die. She's had her share above most, and taken other folks's bread out of their mouths, and she must take her share now. Nobody's a-going to die instead of her. That's a thing as you've got to do when your time comes for yourself."

"And, happily," said Gerald, "she knows nothing of all this. Perhaps if she were permitted to see her son——"

"Goodness gracious me!" cried Miss Hewitt, rousing up: "do you hate her like that? I think you must be the devil

himself, to put that into a body's head. It's a disappointment to me, dreadful, that she should die and not know; but to send him to tell her, and the woman at her last breath—Oh! Lord, what wickedness there is in this world! Man! what makes you hate her like that?"

"Will you allow her to see her son?" Colonel Piercey asked.

The old woman rose up again in her agitation. One of the old Puritan divines describes Satan as putting so big a stone into the sinner's hand to throw at his enemy, that the bounds of human guilt were over-passed and the almost murderer pitched it at his tempter instead. This suggestion was to Patience Hewitt, in the sense in which she understood it, that too-heavy stone. The desire for revenge had been very strong in her. She had waited and plotted all her life for the opportunity of returning to Sir Giles the reward of his desertion of her, and she had attained her object, and a furious delight was in it. But to see the kid in his mother's milk is a thing about which the most cruel have their prejudices. To bring the Softy back to shout his news into the ear of the dying woman, that was a more fiendish detail than she had dreamed of. She rose up and sat down again, and clasped her hands and unclasped them, and turned over the terrible temptation in her mind. No doubt it would be the very crown of vengeance, to prove to Sir Giles' wife that she, whom she had supplanted, was the victor at the last. That was what she had hoped for all through. She had hoped that it was some rumour of what had happened that had been the cause of Lady Piercey's illness. A stroke! it was quite natural she should have a stroke when she heard; it was the vengeance of God long deferred for what she had done unpunished so many years ago. But between this, in which she felt a grim joy, and the other, there was a great gulf. To send for Gervase, in order that he, with his own hand, should give his mother her death-blow, the horrible thought made her head giddy and her heart beat. It was a temptation—the most dreadful of temptations. It seized upon her imagination even while it filled her with horror. It answered every wild desire of poetic justice in the untutored mind: never had been any vengeance like that. It was a thing to be told, and shuddered at, and told again. "Oh! for goodness gracious sake, go along with you, go along with you," she cried, putting out her hands to push the Colonel away, "for I think you must be the very devil himself."

It was almost with the same words that Gerald Piercey answered Margaret, who met him eagerly as he returned. Sir Giles was out in the garden with Dunning and Osy, and there was no one to disturb the consultation of these two enemies or friends. "Have you heard anything of him?" cried Margaret. Colonel Piercey answered almost solemnly, "I have seen the devil; if he ever takes a woman's form."

"I have heard that she was a dreadful old woman."

"And I have made a dreadful suggestion to her, which she is turning over in her dreadful mind. She hates poor old Lady Piercey with a virulence which—perhaps you may understand it, knowing the circumstances; I don't. She is terribly disappointed that it was not the news which was the cause of the illness. And I have suggested that if the bridegroom could be sent home, the old lady might still hear it before she dies."

"The news—the bridegroom! Then it is so? They are married!"

"That's better, I suppose," said the Colonel, "than if it had been worse."

Margaret coloured high at this enigmatical speech. "To everybody but Aunt Piercey," she said. "My uncle will get used to the idea; but his mother! It is better he should not come than come to tell her that."

"If he comes we can surely keep him silent," Colonel Piercey said. "I thought that was the one thing to be attained at all risks."

"And so it was. And I thank you, Cousin Gerald, and we can but do our best."

Lady Piercey turned her eyes towards the door as Margaret went into the room. A dreadful weariness was in those living eyes, which had not closed, in anything that could be called sleep, since her seizure. She had lain there dead, but for that look, for three days, unable to move a finger. But always her eyes turned to the door whenever it opened, however softly. Sometimes the film of a doze came over them; but no one came in without meeting that look—the look of a soul in prison, with no sense but that one remaining to make existence a fact. How much she knew of what was passing around her, they could not tell; or of her own condition, or of what was before her. All she seemed to know was that Gervase did not come. Sometimes her eyes fell upon Margaret with a look which seemed one of angry appeal. And then they returned to watch the door, which opened, indeed, from time to time, but never to admit her son. Oh, dreadful eyes! Mrs. Osborne shrank from encountering them. It was she, she only of whom they asked that question—she whom they seemed to blame. Where was Gervase? Why did he not come? Was he coming? Speech and hearing were alike gone. Her question was only in her eyes.

And thus the evening and the morning made the fourth day.

CHAPTER XXI.

PATTY'S ambitious schemes were crowned with complete success, and the poor Softy was made the happiest and most triumphant man in the world, on the day on which his mother was taken ill. Was it some mysterious impalpable movement in the air that conveyed to Lady Piercey's brain a troubled impression of what was taking place to her only son? But this is what no one can tell. As for Gervase, his triumph, his rapture, his sense of emancipation, could not be described. He was wild with pleasure and victory. The sharp-witted, clear-headed girl, who had carried out the whole plot, was at last overborne and subjugated by the passion she had roused, and for a time was afraid of Gervase. She had a panic lest his feeble head might give way altogether under such excitement, and she be left in the hands of a madman. Luckily this wild fit did not last long, and Patty gradually brought the savage, which was latent in his undeveloped nature, into control. But she had got a fright, and was still a little afraid of him when the week was over, and her plans were laid for the triumphant return home. She had written to her aunt on the day of her marriage, proclaiming the proud fact, and signing her letter, not with her Christian name, but that of Mrs. Gervase Piercey, in her pride and triumph. Mrs. Gervase Piercey! That she was now, let them rave as they pleased! Nobody could undo what Aunt Patience's fifty pounds had done. Those whom God had joined together—or was it not rather Miss Hewitt, of Rose Cottage, and ambition and revenge? Patty, however, had no intentions appropriate to such motives in her mind. She was not revolted by the passion of Gervase, as another woman might have been. She felt it to be a compliment more or less; his noise and uproariousness, so that he could scarcely walk along a street without shoutings and loud laughter, did not in the least trouble her. She subdued him by degrees, bidding him look

how people stared, and frightening him with the suggestion that the world in general might think him off his head, and carry him off from her, if he did not learn to suppress these vociferous evidences of his happiness: a suggestion which had a great effect upon Gervase, and made him follow her about meekly afterwards to all the sights which she thought it necessary in this wonderful holiday to see. She took him to the Zoological Gardens, which he enjoyed immensely, dragging her about from one cage to another, not letting her off a single particular. They saw the lions fed, they gave buns to the bears, they rode like a couple of children upon the camels and the elephant. Gervase drank deep of every pleasure which the resources of that Garden of Eden permitted. He had not been there since he was a child, and everything was delightful to him. The success was not so great when Patty took him to St Paul's and the Tower, which she considered to be fashionable resorts, where a bride and her finery ought to be seen, and where Gervase walked about gaping, asking like a child at church when he could get out? Nor at the theatre, where Patty, instructed by the novels she had read, secured a box, and appeared in full costume, with that intoxicating proof that she was now a fine lady and member of the aristocracy, a low dress—and with an opera-glass wherewith to scan the faces and dresses of the other distinguished occupants of boxes. She was herself surprised at various things which she had not learnt from books—the unimpressive character of the ladies' dresses, and the manner in which they gazed down into what she believed to be the pit, a part of the house which she regarded with scorn. It was not a fashionable house, for to Patty, naturally, a theatre was a theatre, wherever situated; but it was disappointing not to see the flashing of diamonds which she had expected, nor to have other opera-glasses fixed upon herself as a new appearance in the world of fashion, which was what she looked for. And Gervase was very troublesome in the theatre. He kept asking her what those people were doing on the stage, what all that talking was about, and when it would be time to go away. When the merchant of ices and other light refectations came round, Gervase was delighted, and even Patty felt that an ice in her box at the theatre was great grandeur; but she was discouraged when she saw that it was not a common indulgence, and that Gervase, peeling and eating oranges, and flinging them about, attracted an attention which was not that sentiment of mingled admiration and envy which Patty hoped to excite. A few experiences of this kind opened her sharp eyes to many things, and reduced the rapture with which she had looked forward to her entry into town as Mrs. Gervase Piercey. But these disenchantments, and scraps of talk which her sharp ears picked up and her still sharper imagination assimilated, suggested to her another kind of operation next time, and left her full of anticipations and the conviction that it only wanted a little preparation, a little guidance, to ensure her perfect triumph.

This strange pair had what seemed to Patty boundless funds for their week in town. Twenty pounds over of Aunt Patience's gift after paying the expenses of the marriage, had seemed enough for the wildest desires; but when there was added to that twenty pounds more, his mother's last gift to Gervase, she felt that their wealth was fabulous; far, far too much to expend upon personal pleasure or sightseeing. She permitted herself to buy a dress or two, choosing those which were ready made, and of which she could see the effect at once, both on herself and the elegant young lady who sold them to her; and she put aside a ten-pound note carefully, in case of any emergency. On the whole, however, it was a relief to both parties when they went home, though it took some trouble to convince Gervase that he could not go back to the Manor, leaving his wife at the Seven Thorns. He was not pleased to be told that he too must go and live at the Seven Thorns: "Why, that's what mother said—and draw the beer!" he cried; "but nothing shall make me draw the beer," cried Gervase. "Nobody asked you," Patty said, "you goose. We're going to live in the west rooms, a beautiful set of rooms that I put all ready, where there's a nice sofa for you to lie on, and nice windows to look out of and see everything that comes along the road—not like Greysthott, where you never see nothing—the carts and the carriages and the vans going to the fairs, and Punch and Judy, and I can't tell you all what." "Well," said Gervase, "you can stay there, and I'll come to see you every day; but I must go home." "What, leave me! and us but a week married!" cried Patty. She made him falter in his resolution, confused with the idea of an arrangement of affairs unfamiliar to him, and at last induced him to consent to go to the Seven Thorns with her on conditions, strenuously insisted upon, that he was not to be made to draw beer. But Gervase did not feel easy on this subject, even when he was taken by the new side-door into the separate suite of apartments which Patty had prepared with so much trouble. When old Hewitt appeared he took care to entrench himself behind his wife.

"I'll have nothing to do with the beer or the customers, mind you," he cried nervously. Nobody, however, made any account of Gervase in that wonderful moment of Patty's return.

"What! it's you as is the new married couple? and you've gone and married 'im?" cried Hewitt, with a tone of indescribable contempt.

"Yes, father! and I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head; I've married him, and I mean to take care of him," Patty cried, tossing her head.

Old Hewitt laughed a low, long laugh. His mental processes were slow, and the sight of the Softy with his daughter had startled him much; for notwithstanding all that had been said on this subject he had not believed in it seriously. Now, however, that it dawned upon him what had really happened, that his child, his daughter, was actually Mrs. Gervase Piercey, a slow sensation of pride and victory arose in his bosom too. His girl to be Lady Piercey in her time, and drive in a grand carriage, and live in a grand house! The Hewitts were a fine old family, but they had never kept their carriage and pair. A one-horse shay had been the utmost length to which they had gone. Now Patty—Patty, the child! who had always done his accounts and kept his customers in order—Patty, his own girl, was destined to the glory of riding behind two horses and being called "my lady." The thought made him burst into a long, rumbling subterranean laugh. Our Patty! it did not seem possible that it could be true.

"That reminds me," he said a moment after, turning suddenly grave. He called his daughter apart, beckoning with his finger.

Gervase by this time was lolling half out of the open window, delightedly counting the vehicles in sight. "Farmer Golightly's tax cart, and Jim Mason's big waggon, and the parson's pony chaise, and a fly up from the station," he cried: "it's livelier than London. Patty, Patty, come and look here." Gervase turned round, and saw his wife and her father with grave faces consulting together, and relapsed into absolute quiet, effacing himself behind the fluttering curtains with the intention of stealing out of the room as soon as he could and getting away. His mother's threat about drawing the beer haunted him. Could not she, who could do most things, make that threat come true?

"Patty," said old Hewitt, "you've done it, and you can't undo it; but there'll be ever such a rumpus up *there*."

"Of course, I know that," she said calmly; "I'm ready for them. Let them try all they can, there's nothing they can do."

"Patty," said the old innkeeper again, "I've something to tell you as you ain't a-thinking of. About 'Er," he said, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"What about her? I know she's my enemy; but you needn't be frightened, father. I've seen to everything, and there's nothing she can do."

"It ain't that as I want you to think of. It's more dreadful than that. It's 'in the midst of life as we are in death,' " said Hewitt. "That sort of thing; and they've been a-'unting for 'im far and wide."

"Lord, father, what do you mean?" Patty caught at a confused idea of Sir Giles' death, and her heart began to thump against her breast.

Hewitt pointed with his thumb, jerking it again and again over his shoulder. "She's—she's—dead," he said.

"Dead!" said Patty, with a shriek, "who's dead?"

Hewitt, less aware than she of Gervase's wandering and unimpressionable mind, shook his head at her, jerking his thumb this time in front of him at the young man lolling out of the window. "Usht, can't ye? Why, 'Er, 'is mother," he said, under his breath.

A quick reflection passed through Patty's mind. "Then, I'm her," she said to herself, but then remembered that this was not the case that Sir Giles' death alone could make her Lady Piercey. As this flashed upon her thoughts, a bitter regret came into Patty's mind—regret, keen as if she had loved her, that Lady Piercey was dead, that she should have been allowed to die. Oh, if she had but known! How quickly would she have brought Gervase back to see his mother! Her triumph, whenever it should come, would be shorn of one of its most poignant pleasures. Lady Piercey would not be there to see it! She could never now be made to come down from her place, made to give up all her privileges to the girl whom she despised. Patty felt so genuine a pang of disappointment that it brought the tears to her eyes. "I must tell him," she said quickly,—the tears were not without their use, too, and it is not always easy to call them up at will.

"I wouldn't to-night. Let 'im have 'is first night in peace," said the innkeeper, "and take 'is beer, and get the good of it like any other man."

"Go down, perhaps you think, to your men in the parlour, and smoke with them, and drink with them, and give you the chance to say as he's your son-in-law? and his mother lying dead all the time. No, father, not if I know it," cried Patty, and she gave her head a very decided nod. "I know what I'm about," she added; "I know exactly what he's going to do. So, father, you may go, and you can tell 'Liza that we'll now have tea."

"I tell 'Liza! I'll do none of your dirty errands," said old Hewitt; but his indignation answered Patty's purpose, who was glad to get rid of him, in order that her own duty might be performed. She went forward to the window where Gervase was sitting, and linked her arm in his, not without some resistance on the part of the Softy, who was wholly occupied with his new pleasure.

"Let alone, I tell you, Pat! One white horse on the off side, that counts five for me; and a whole team of black 'uns for the other fellow. Where's all those black horses come from, I should like to know?"

"Gervase dear, don't you do it; don't make a game with the black horses. It's dreadful unlucky. They're for a funeral, come from town on purpose. And oh! Gervase dear, do listen to me! for whose funeral do you suppose?"

"Is it a riddle?" said Gervase, showing his teeth from ear to ear.

"Oh hush, hush, there's a good boy! It's not like you to make a joke of such dreadful things."

"Why can't you say then what it is, and have done with it?" Gervase said.

"That's just one of the sensible things you say when you please. Gervase—you remember your mother?"

"I remember my mother? I should think I remembered my mother. You know it's only a week to-day—or was it yesterday?"

"It was yesterday. You might remember the day you were married, I think, without asking me," said Patty, with spirit. "Well, then, you parted from her that day. She wasn't ill then, was she, dear?"

Upon which Gervase laughed. "Mother's always ill," he said. "She has such health you never know when she's well, or, at least, so she says. It's in her head, or her liver, or her big toe. No!" he cried, with another great laugh, "it's father as has the devil in his big toe."

"Gervase, do be serious for a moment. Your mother has been very ill, dreadful bad, and we never knew——"

"I told you," he said calmly, "she's always bad; and you can never tell from one day to another, trust herself, when she mayn't die."

"Oh, Gervase," cried Patty, holding his arm with both her hands: "you are fond of her a little bit, ain't you, dear? She's your mother, though she hasn't been very nice to me."

"Lord," cried Gervase, "how she will jump when she knows that I'm here, and on my own hook, and have got a wife of my own! Mind, it is you that have got to tell her, and not me."

"A wife that will always try to be a comfort to you," said Patty. "Oh, my poor dear boy! Gervase, your poor mother (remember that I'm here to take care of you whatever happens),—Gervase, your mother will never need to be told. She's dead and gone, poor lady, she's dead and gone!"

Gervase stared at her, and again opened his mouth in a great laugh. "That's one of your dashed stories," he said.

"It isn't a story at all, it's quite true. She had a stroke that very day. Fancy, just the very day when we—— And we never heard a word. If we had heard I should have been the very first to bring you home."

"What good would that have done?" Gervase said sullenly, "we were better where we were."

"Not and her dying, and wanting her son."

Gervase was cowed and troubled by the news, which gave him a shock which he could not understand. It made him sullen and difficult to manage. "You're playing off one of your jokes upon me," he said.

"I playing a joke! I'd have found something better than a funeral to joke about. Gervase, we have just come back in time. The funeral's to-morrow, and oh! I'm so thankful we came home. I'm going to send for Sally Fletcher to make me up some nice deep mourning with crape, like a lady wears for her own mother."

"She was no mother of yours," said Gervase, with a frown.

"No; nor she didn't behave like one: but being her son's wife and one that is to succeed her, I must get my mourning deep; and you and me, we'll go. We'll walk next to Sir Giles, as chief mourners," she said.

Gervase gave a lowering look at her, and then he turned away to the open window, to count as he had been doing before, but in changing tones, the white horses and the brown.

CHAPTER XXII.

PATTY sat up half the night with Sally Fletcher, arranging as rapidly and efficiently as possible her new *mise en scène*. To work all night at mourning was by no means a novel performance for Miss Fletcher, the lame girl who was the village dressmaker; and she felt herself amply repaid by the news, as yet almost unknown to the neighbours, of the Softy's marriage and Patty's new pretensions. It is true that it had a little leaked out in the evening symposium in Hewitt's parlour; but what the men said when they came home from their dull, long booze was not received with that faith which ladies put in the utterances of the clubs. The wives of the village had always a conviction that the men had "heard wrong"—that it would turn out something quite different from the story told in the watches of the night, or dully recalled next day, confused by the fumes of last night's beer. But Sally Fletcher knew that her tale would meet with full credence, and that her cottage next morning would be crowded with inquirers; so that her night's work was not the matter of hardship it might have been supposed. She was comforted with cups of tea during the course of the night, and Patty spent at least half of it with her, helping on the work in a resplendent blue dressing-gown, which she had bought in London, trimmed with lace and ribbons, and dazzling to Sally's eyes. The dressmaker had brought with her the entire stock of crape which was to be had in "the shop," a material kept for emergencies, and not, it may be supposed, of the very freshest or finest—which Patty laid on with a liberal hand, covering with it the old black dress, which she decided would do in the urgency of the moment. It was still more difficult to plaster that panoply of mourning over the smart new cape, also purchased in town: but this, too, was finished, and a large hatband, as deep as his hat, procured for Gervase, before the air began to thrill with the tolling, lugubrious and long drawn out, of the village bells, which announced that the procession was within sight.

It was a great funeral. All the important people of that side of the county—or their carriages—were there. An hour before the *cortège* arrived, Sir Giles' chair, an object of curiosity to all the village boys, was brought down to the gate of the churchyard, that he might follow his wife to the grave's side. And a great excitement had arisen in the village itself. Under any circumstances, Lady Piercey's funeral, the carriages and the flowers, and the mutes and the black horses, would have produced an impression; but that impression was increased now by the excitement of a very different kind which mingled with it. Patty Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns, now Mrs. Gervase Piercey, would be there; and there was not a house, from the Rectory downwards, in which the question was not discussed—what would happen? Would Patty receive the tacit recognition of being allowed to take her place along with her husband. Her husband! could he be anybody's husband, the Softy? Would the marriage stand? Would Sir Giles allow it? The fact that it was Sir Giles gave the eager spectators their only doubt—or hope. Had it been Lady Piercey, she would never have allowed it. She would have thrown back the pretender from the very church-door. She would have rejected Patty, thrust her out of the way, seized her son, and dragged him from the girl who had entrapped him. At the very church-door! Everybody, from the rector down to the sexton's wife, felt perfectly convinced of that.

But it would not be Lady Piercey she would have to deal with. Lady Piercey, though she filled so great a position in the ceremonial, would have nothing to say on the subject; and it was part of the irony of fate, felt by everybody, though none were sufficiently instructed to call it by that name, that she should be there, incapable of taking any share in what would have moved her so deeply—triumphed over in her coffin by the adversary with whom, living, she would have made such short work. There was something tragic about this situation which made the bystanders hold their breath. And no one knew what Patty was about to do. That she would claim her share in the celebration, and, somehow, manage to take a part in it, no one doubted; but how she was to accomplish this was the exciting uncertainty that filled all minds. It troubled the rector as he put on his surplice to meet the silent new-comer, approaching with even more pomp than was her wont the familiar doors of her parish church. There was not much more sentiment than is inseparable from that last solemnity in the minds of her neighbours towards Lady Piercey. She had not been without kindness of a practical kind. Doles had been made and presents given in the conventional way without any failure; but nobody had loved the grim old lady. There was nothing, therefore, to take off the interest in the other more exciting crisis.

"Rattle her bones
Over the stones,
She's only a pauper, whom nobody owns."

Far from a pauper was the Lady Piercey of Greyshott; but the effect was the same. There are many equalising circumstances in death.

It was imposing to witness the black procession coming slowly along the sunshiny road. Old Miss Hewitt from Rose Cottage came out to view it, taking up a conspicuous position on the churchyard wall. So far from wearing decorous black in reverence of the funeral, Miss Hewitt was dressed in all that was most remarkable in her wardrobe in the way of colour. She wore a green dress; she had a large Paisley shawl of many colours—an article with which the present generation is virtually unacquainted—on her shoulders, and her bonnet was trimmed with gold lace and flowers. She had a conviction that Sir Giles would see her, and that he would perceive the difference between her still handsome face, and unbroken height and carriage, and the old ugly wife whom he was burying—poor old Sir Giles, entirely broken down by weakness and the breach of all his habits and ways, as well as by the feeling, not very elevated perhaps, but grievous enough, of loss, in one who had managed everything for him, and taken all trouble from his shoulders! There might be some emotion deeper still in the poor old gentleman's mind; but these at least were there, enough to make his dull eyes, always moist with slow-coming tears, quite incapable of the vision or contrast in which that fierce old woman hoped.

The interest of the moment concentrated round the lych-gate, where a great deal was to take place. Already conspicuous among the crowd assembled there to meet the funeral were two figures, the chief of whom was veiled from head to foot in crape, and leant upon the arm of her husband heavily, as if overcome with grief. Patty had a

deep crape veil, behind which was visible a white handkerchief often pressed to her eyes, and in the other hand, a large wreath. Gervase stood beside her, in black clothes to be sure, and with a deep hatband covering his hat, but with no such monumental aspect of woe. His light and wandering eyes strayed over the scene, arresting themselves upon nothing, not even on the approaching procession. Sometimes Patty almost bent him down on the side on which she leant, by a new access of grief. Her shoulders heaved, her sobs were audible, when the head of the doleful procession arrived. She moved her husband forward to lay the wreath upon the coffin and then lifting her great veil for a moment looked on with an air of agonising anxiety, while Sir Giles was lifted out of the carriage and placed in his chair, with little starts of anxious feeling as if he were being touched roughly by the attendants, and she could scarcely restrain herself from taking him out of their hands. It was a pity that poor old Sir Giles, entirely absorbed in his own sensations, did not observe this at all, any more than he observed the airs of Miss Hewitt equally intended for his notice. But when Sir Giles had been placed in his chair, Patty recovering her energy in a moment, dragged her husband forward and dexterously slid and pushed him immediately behind his father's chair, coming sharply in contact as she did so with Colonel Piercey, who was about to take that place. "I beg your pardon, we are the chief mourners," she said sharply, and with decision. And then Patty relapsed all at once into her grief. She walked slowly forward half-leading, half-pushing Gervase, her shoulders heaving with sobs, a murmur of half-audible affliction coming in as a sort of half-refrain to the words read by the clergyman. The village crowding round, watched with bated breath. It was difficult for these spectators to refuse a murmur of applause. How beautifully she did it? What a mourner she made, far better than any one else there! As for that Mrs. Osborne, her veil was only gauze, and through it you could see that she was not crying at all! She walked by Colonel Piercey's side, but she did not lean upon him as if she required support. There was no heaving in her shoulders. The mind of the village approved the demeanour of Patty with enthusiasm. It was something like! Even Miss Hewitt, flaunting her red and yellow bonnet on the churchyard wall, was impressed by the appearance of Patty, and acknowledged that it was deeply appropriate, and just exactly what she ought to have done.

But though Patty was thus overcome with grief, her vigilant eyes noted everything through the white handkerchief and the crape. When poor Sir Giles broke down and began to sob at the grave it was she who, with an energetic push and pressure, placed Gervase by his side.

"Speak to him," she whispered in his ear, with a voice which though so low was imperative as any order. She leaned herself over the other side of the chair, almost pushing Dunning out of the way, while still maintaining her pressure on Gervase's arm.

"Father," he said, putting his hand upon the old man's; he was not to say too much, she had instructed him! Only his name, or a kind word. Gervase, poor fellow, did not know how to say a kind word, but his dull imagination had been stirred and the contagion of his father's feeble distress moved him. He began to sob, too, leaning heavily upon Sir Giles' chair. Not that he knew very well what was the cause. The great shining oaken chest that was being lowered down into that hole had no association for him. He had not seen his mother placed there. But the gloomy ceremonial affected Gervase in spite of himself. Happily it did not move him to laugh, which was on the cards, as Patty felt. It made him cry, which was everything that could be desired.

And Sir Giles did not push away his son's hand, which was what might have happened also. The old gentleman was in precisely the state of mind to feel that touch and the sound of the wavering voice. It was a return of the prodigal when the poor old father's heart was very forlorn, and the sensation of having some one still who belonged to him most welcome. To be sure there was Colonel Piercey—but he would go away, and was not in any sense a son of the house. And Meg—but she was a dependant, perhaps pleased to think she would have nobody over her now. Gervase was his father's own, come back; equally feeble, not shaming his father by undue self-control. To hear his boy sob was sweet to the old man; it did him more good than Dunning's whispered adjurations not to fret, to "think of your own 'ealth," to "'old up, Sir Giles!" When he felt the hand of Gervase and heard his helpless son sob, a flash of force came to the old man.

"It's you and me now, Gervase, only you and me, my boy," he said loud out, interrupting the voice of the rector. It was a dreadful thing to do, and yet it had a great effect, the voice of nature breaking in, into the midst of all that ceremony and solemnity. Old Sir Giles' bare, bowed head, and the exclamation loud, broken with a sob, which everybody could hear, moved many people to tears. Even the rector paused a moment before he pronounced the final benediction, and the mourners began to disperse and turn away.

One other moment of intense anxiety followed for Patty. She had to keep her Softy up to the mark. All had gone well so far, but to keep him in the same humour for a long time together was well nigh an impossible achievement. When Sir Giles' chair was turned round, Patty almost pushed it herself in her anxiety to keep close, and it was no small exertion to keep Gervase steadily behind, yet not to hustle Dunning, who looked round at her fiercely. If there should happen to come into the Softy's mind the idea of rushing off with his father, which was his usual idea when he stood behind Sir Giles' chair! But some benevolent influence watched over Patty on that critical day. Gervase, occupied in watching the equipages, of which no man had ever seen so many at Greysthott, walked on quietly to the carriage door. He got in after Sir Giles as if that were quite natural, forgetting the "manners" she had tried to teach him; but Patty minded nothing at that moment of fate. She scrambled in after him, her heart beating wildly, and no one venturing to oppose. Dunning, indeed, who followed, looked unutterable things. He said: "Sir Giles, is it your meaning as this—this lady—?"

But Sir Giles said never a word. He kept patting his son's hand, saying, "Only you and me, my boy." He took no notice of the intruder into the carriage, and who else dared to speak? As for Patty's sentiments, they were altogether indescribable. They were complicated by personal sensations which were not agreeable. The carriage went slowly, the windows were closed on account of Sir Giles, though the day was warm. And she was placed on the front seat, beside Dunning, which was a position which gave her nausea, and made her head swim, as well as being highly inappropriate to her dignified position. But anything was to be borne in the circumstances, for the glory of being seen to drive "home" in the carriage with Sir Giles, and the chance of thus getting a surreptitious but undeniable entrance into the house. She said nothing, partly from policy, partly from discomfort, during that prolonged and tedious drive. And Gervase behaved himself with incredible discretion. Gervase, too, was glad to be going "home." He was pleased after all that had passed to be sitting by his father again. And he did Sir Giles good even by his foolishness, the poor Softy. After keeping quite quiet for half of the way, suffering his father to pat his hand, and repeat that little formula of words, saying "Don't cry, father, don't cry," softly, from time to time, he suddenly burst

forth: "I say! look at those fellows riding over the corses. You don't let them ride over our corses, do you, father?"

"Never mind, never mind, my boy," said Sir Giles. But he was roused to look up, and his sobbing ceased.

"I wish you'd stop the carriage and let me get at them. They shouldn't ride that way again, I promise you," Gervase cried.

"You can't interfere to-day, Mr. Gervase," Dunning presumed to say. "Not the day of my lady's funeral, Sir Giles. You can't have the carriage stopped to-day."

"Mind your own business, Dunning," said Sir Giles, sharply. "No, my boy, never mind, never mind. We must just put up with it for a day. It don't matter, it don't matter, Gervase, what happens now—"

"But that isn't my opinion at all," said Gervase; "it matters a deal, and they shall see it does. Job Woodley, isn't it, and young George? They think it won't be noticed, but I'll notice it. I'll take care they sha'n't put upon you, father, now that you have nobody but me."

"God bless you, Gervase, you only want to be roused; that's what your poor dear mother used always to say."

"And now you'll find him thoroughly roused, Sir Giles, and you can depend upon him that he will always look after your interests," Patty said.

The old gentleman looked at her with bewildered eyes, gazing heavily across the carriage, only half aware of what she was saying, or who she was. And then they all drove on to Greyshott in solemn silence. They had come up by this time to the great gates, and entered the avenue. Patty's heart beat more and more with suspense and excitement. Everything now seemed to hang upon what took place in the next hour.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GERVASE went up the steps and into his father's house without waiting either for Sir Giles, whose disembarkation was a troublesome business, or his newly-made wife. For the moment he had forgotten all about Patty. She had to scramble out of the high old-fashioned chariot, which had been Sir Giles' state equipage for long, and which had been got out expressly for this high and solemn ceremony, nobody taking any notice or extending a finger to her—even the footman turning his back. Patty was too anxious and too determined on making her own entry to be much disturbed by this. To get her feet within the house was the great thing she had to consider; *but*—it need not be said that John Simpson, the footman, had his fate decided from that day, if indeed Mrs. Gervase established, as she intended to do, her footing in her husband's home.

Gervase stood on the threshold, carelessly overlooking the group, the men about Sir Giles' chair putting him back into it, and Patty not very gracefully getting down the steps of the carriage. His tall hat, wound with the heavy band, was placed on the back of his head, his hands were in his pockets, his eyes wandering, catching one detail after another, understanding no special significance in the scene. The other carriages coming up behind, waiting till the first should move on, aroused the Softy. He had forgotten why they were there, as he had forgotten that he had any duty towards his wife, who, in her hurry, had twisted herself in her long veil and draperies, and whom no one attempted to help. Patty was not the kind of figure to attract sentimental sympathy, as does the neglected dependant of fiction, the young wife of low degree in presence of a proud and haughty family. She was briskness and energy itself, notwithstanding that complication with the long veil, at which Gervase was just about to burst into a loud laugh when a sudden glance from her eyes paralysed him with his mouth open. As it took a long time to arrange Sir Giles, Patty had the situation before her and time to grasp it. She saw her opportunity at once. She passed the group of men about the chair, touching Dunning's arm sharply as she passed, bidding him to "take care, take care!" Then, stepping on, took the arm of Gervase, and stood with him on the threshold, like (she fondly hoped) the lady of the house receiving her guests. Dunning had nearly dropped his master's chair altogether at that insolent injunction and touch, and looked up at her with a countenance crimson with rage and enmity. But when Dunning saw the energetic figure in the doorway, holding Gervase's limp arm, and unconsciously pushing him to one side in so doing, placing herself in the centre, standing there like the mistress of the house, a cold shiver ran over him. "You could 'a knocked me down with a straw," he said afterwards confidentially to Parsons, in the mutual review they made later of all the exciting incidents of the day.

But this was not all: the opportunity comes to those who are capable of seizing upon it. Patty stood there with a heart beating so loudly that it sounded like a drum in her own ears, but with so full a sense of the importance of every act and look, that her excited nerves, instead of mastering her, gave support and stimulation to her whole being. She might have known, she said to herself, that Gervase would have been of no use to her, a thing which she resented, being now in possession of him, though she had fully calculated upon it before. "Stand by your wife, can't you!" she whispered fiercely, as she took hold of his arm and thrust him towards the wall. He grinned at her, though he dared not laugh aloud.

"Lord, you did look ridiculous, Patty, with that long thing twisting round you."

"If you laugh, you fool," said Patty, between her closed teeth, "you'll be turned out of the house."

When she had warned him she turned, bland but anxious, to the group below. "Oh, carry him gently, carry him gently!" she cried. When Sir Giles was set down on the level of the hall, she was the first to perceive his exhausted state. "I hope you have a cordial or something to give him, after all this fatigue?" she said. "You have nothing with you? Let the butler get it instantly—*instantly!*" She was quite right, and Dunning knew it, and made a sign that this unexpected order should be obeyed, with bitter anger in his heart. The old gentleman was very nearly fainting, after all the exertion and emotion. Patty had salts in her hand and eau de Cologne in her pocket ready for any emergency. She flew to him, while Dunning in his rage and pain called to the butler to make haste. And when the rest of the party followed, Patty was found in charge of Sir Giles, leaning over him, fanning him with her handkerchief impregnated with eau de Cologne, applying from time to time her salts to his nose. When the butler came hurrying back with the medicine, the first thing the surrounding spectators were conscious of was her voice sharply addressing Dunning, "You ought to have had the drops ready; you ought to have carried them with you; you ought never to be without something to give in case of faintness—and after such a dreadful day."

The woman, the creature, the alehouse girl (these were the names by which Dunning overwhelmed her in his private discourses), was quite right! He ought to have carried his master's drops with him. He ought to have been

ready for the emergency. Margaret, who had come in in the midst of this scene, after one glimpse of Mrs. Gervase standing in the doorway, which had filled her with consternation, stood by helplessly for the moment, not doing anything. Mrs. Osborne would not have ventured to interfere with Dunning at any period of her residence at Greyshott. His authority with the family had been supreme. They had grown to think that Sir Giles' life depended upon him; that he knew better than the very doctor. To see Dunning thus assailed took away her breath, as it did that of all the servants, standing helplessly gaping at their master in his almost faint. And it was evident from Dunning's silence, and his hurried proceedings, that this audacious intruder was right—astounding discovery! Dunning did not say a word for himself. His hand trembled so, that Patty seized the bottle from him, and dropped the liquid herself with a steady hand. "Now, drink this," she said authoritatively, putting it to Sir Giles' lips, who obeyed her, though in his half-unconsciousness he had been feebly pushing Dunning away. This astonishing scene kept back all the other funeral guests who were alighting at the door, and among whom the most dreadful anticipations were beginning to breathe to the effect that it had been "too much" for Sir Giles. To see Margaret Osborne standing there helpless, doing nothing, gave force to their suppositions, for she must have been occupied with her uncle had there been anything to do for him, everybody thought. Patty's shorter figure, all black, was not distinguishable from below as she leant over Sir Giles' chair.

Gervase, who had been hanging in the doorway, reduced to complete silence by his wife's threats, pulled Margaret by her dress. "I say, Meg! she's one, ain't she? She's got 'em all down, even Dunning. Lord! just look at her going it!" the admiring husband said. He dared not laugh, but his wide-open mouth grinned from ear to ear. He did not know who the tall fellow was by Margaret's side, who stood looking on with such a solemn air, but he poked that dignitary with his elbow all the same. "Ain't she as good as a play?" Gervase said.

Colonel Piercey was in no very genial frame of mind. He was angry to see Mrs. Osborne superseded, and angry with her that she did not step forward and take the direction of everything. And when this fool, this Softy, as the country people called him, addressed himself with elbow and voice, his disgust was almost beyond bounds. It was not decorous of the next-of-kin: he turned away from the grinning idiot with a sharp exclamation, forgetting altogether that he was, more or less, the master of the house.

"Oh, hush, Gervase," said Mrs. Osborne. "Don't laugh: you will shock all the people. She is—very serviceable. She shows—great sense—Gervase, why is she here?"

He was on the point of laughter again, but was frightened this time by Margaret. "Why, here's just where she ought to be," he said, with a suppressed chuckle. "I told you, but you didn't understand. I almost told—mother."

Here the half-witted young man paused a little with a sudden air of trouble. "Mother; what's all this about mother?" he said.

"Oh, Gervase! she wanted you so!"

"Well," he cried, "but how could I come when I didn't know? Ask her. We never heard a word. I remember now. We only came back last night. I thought after all we might find her all right when we came back. Is it—is it true, Meg?"

He spoke with a sort of timidity behind Patty's back, still pulling his cousin's dress, the grin disappearing from his face, but his hat still on the back of his head, and his fatuous eyes wandering. His attention was only half arrested even by a question of such importance. It moved the surface of his consciousness, and no more; his eye, even while he was speaking, was caught by the unruly action of the horses in one of the carriages far down the avenue, which put a movement of interest into his dull face.

"I cannot speak to you about it all here. Come in, and I will tell you everything," Margaret said.

He made a step after her, and then looked back; but Patty was still busily engaged with Sir Giles, and her husband escaped, putting his cousin's tall figure between himself and her.

"I say, are all this lot of people coming here? What are they coming here for? Have I got to talk to all these people, Meg?"

He went after her into the library, where already some of the guests were, and where Margaret was immediately occupied, receiving the solemn leave-takings of the county gentry, who had driven so far for this ceremony, but who looked strangely at Gervase, still with his hat on, and who, in presence of such a chief mourner, and of the illness of poor Sir Giles, were eager to get away. A vague story about the marriage had already flashed through the neighbourhood, but the gentlemen were more desirous even of keeping clear of any embarrassment that might arise from it, than of getting "the rights of the story" to carry back to their wives—though that also was a strong motive. Gervase gave a large grip of welcome to several who spoke to him, and laughed, and said it was a fine day, with an apparent indifference to the object of their visit, which chilled the blood of the kindly neighbours. And still more potent than any foolishness he might utter was the sign of the hat on his head, which produced the profoundest impression upon the small solemn assembly, though even Margaret, in the excitement of the crisis altogether, did not notice it for some time.

"We feel that the only kindness we can do you, dear Mrs. Osborne, is to leave you alone as quickly as possible," said Lord Hartmore, who was a very dignified person, and generally took the lead—and he was followed by the other potentates, who withdrew almost hurriedly, avoiding Gervase as much as possible, as he stood swaying from one foot to another, with a half laugh of mingled vacuity and embarrassment. Gervase was rather disappointed that they should all go away. It was rarely that he had seen so many people gathered together under his father's roof. He tried to detain one or two of them who gave him a second grasp of the hand as they passed him.

"You're going very soon. Won't you stay and have something?" Gervase said.

Colonel Piercey was standing outside the door of the library as they began to come out, and Lord Hartmore gave him a very significant look, and a still more significant grasp of the hand.

"That," he said with emphasis, with a backward movement of his head to indicate the room he had just quitted, "is the saddest sight of all,"—and there was a little pause of the gentlemen about the door, a group closed up the entrance to the room, all full of something to say, which none of them ventured to put into words; all relieving themselves with shaking of heads and meaning looks.

"Poor Sir Giles! I have the sincerest sympathy with him," said Lord Hartmore, "the partner of his life gone, and so little comfort in the poor son."

They grasped Gerald Piercey's hand, one by one, in a sort of chorus, grouping round the open door.

It was at this moment that Patty found herself free, Sir Giles having been wheeled away to his own rooms to escape the agitating encounter of so many strangers. She walked towards them with the heroic confidence of a Joan of Arc. Probably nothing but the habits of her previous life, her custom of facing unruly men in various stages of difficulty, dissatisfied customers, and those of too convivial a turn, drunkards, whom she had to master by sheer coolness and strength of mind, could have armed her for such an extraordinary emergency. She knew most of the men by sight, but had hitherto looked at them from a distance as beings unapproachable, not likely ever to come within touch of herself or her life; and they all looked towards her, more or less severely,—some with surprise, some with concealed amusement, some with the sternest disapproval. So many men of might and dignity, personages in the county, not one among them sympathetic; and one small young woman, in a place the very external features of which were unknown to her, where every individual was an enemy, yet which she meant to take possession of and conquer by her bow and her spear, turning out every dissident! The gentlemen stood and stared, rather in astonishment than in curiosity, as she advanced alone, her long veil hanging behind her, her crape sweeping the carpet. They did not make way for her, which was scarcely so much from incivility as from surprise, but stood staring, blocking up the door of a room which Patty saw must be the first stronghold to be taken, from the mere fact of the group that stood before it. She came up quite close to them without saying a word, holding her head high. And then she raised her high, rather sharp voice:—

“Will you please to make room for me to pass? I want to join my husband,” she said.

And then there was a start as simultaneous as the stare had been. Patty’s voice gave the gentlemen of the county a shock as if a cannon had been fired into the midst of them. It was a challenge and an accusation in one. To accuse men of their class of a breach of civility is worse than firing a gun among them. They separated quickly with a sense of shame. “I beg your pardon” came from at least two voices. It would be difficult to explain what they thought they could have done to resist the intruder: but they were horrified by the suggestion of interference—as if they had anything to do with it! so that in fact Patty entered triumphantly through a lane formed by two lines of men dividing to make way for her. A princess could not have done more.

She walked in thus with flags flying, pale with the effort, which was advantageous to her appearance, and found herself in the great room, with its bookcases on the one hand and the tall portraits on the other. But Patty found here, against her expectations, a far more difficult scene before her. Two or three ladies had come to give Margaret Osborne the support of their presence, on what they called “this trying day,” without in the least realising how trying it was to be. One of them, an old lady, sat in a great chair facing the door, with her eyes fixed upon it. Two others, younger, but scarcely less alarming, were talking to Mrs. Osborne, who in her own sole person had been supposed by Patty with natural enmity to be the chief of her adversaries. They stopped their conversation and stared at Patty, as with a sudden faltering, she came in. Gervase stood against the end window, fully outlined against the light, with his hands in his pockets, and his hat on his head, swaying from one foot to another, his lower lip hanging a little and very moist, his wandering eyes turned towards the door. Patty entering alone under the eyes of these ladies, with a consciousness that much had passed since she had last looked at herself in a glass, and that veil and mantle might easily have got awry—and with the additional excitement of surprise in finding them there when she had looked at the worst only for the presence of Mrs. Osborne—might well have called forth a sympathetic movement in any bosom. And when it is added to this that Gervase, standing there against the light, had probably never in all his life looked so idiotic before, and that *he had his hat on his head*, last and most dreadful climax of all, it may be dimly imagined what were the sensations of his bride. But there are circumstances in which an unusual exaggeration of trouble brings support. Patty looked for a moment and then rushed upon her husband in horror. “Oh, Gervase! do you know you have got your hat on, and ladies in the room?” she cried, with an almost shriek of dismay.

Gervase put up his hand to his head, took off the hat, and then carefully examined it, as if to find the reason of offence there. “Have I?” he said, with a laugh; “then I never knew it. You should stick by me if you mean me to behave. I don’t think of such things.”

“Then you ought,” she cried, breathless, taking the hat from him with a wife’s familiarity, “and you ought to beg pardon.” She took him by the arm quickly and led him forward a step or two. “Ladies,” she said, “I am sure me and my husband are very glad to see you. He meant no rudeness, I’m sure. He doesn’t think about such little things. I am still,” she added, “a sort of a stranger”—with an insinuating smile which, however, was very tremulous, for Patty’s nerves were strained to the utmost. She paused a moment for breath. “A bride has the feeling that the friends of the family know her husband better than she does; and it’s such a sad occasion to begin. But I’m sure I may say both for him and for me that we are pleased, and will always be pleased, to see old friends here.”

The ladies sat and stared at her speechless. What reply could be made to a woman so manifestly within her rights?

CHAPTER XXIV.

PATTY felt, which was surely very natural, that the worst of her troubles were over after this scene; and when Mrs. Osborne went out with the ladies, going with them from sheer inability to know what to do—she threw herself into a great chair, which seemed to embrace and support her, with a sense at once of having earned and fully deserved the repose, and also of having been successful all along the line. She had encountered almost all who were likely to be her adversaries, and they had all given way before her. To be sure, there had not been much said to her: the gentlemen had stood aside to let her in, the ladies had stared and said nothing, only one of them had turned with a little compunction of civility to bow to her as she went away. The old lady, whom Patty knew to be Lady Hartmore, had waddled out, saying: “Well, Meg, we shall say all we have to say another time,” and had not so much as looked again at Patty. Meg Osborne, as Patty had begun to call her, had kept her eyes on the ground, and had accompanied her friends to the door without a word. But still it was Patty who had driven them away, not they who had interfered with Patty. When one of the armies in an engagement encamps upon the field of battle, that belligerent is generally admitted to have won the day. And here was Mrs. Gervase resting in that large deep chair, which was such an one as Patty Hewitt had never seen before, enjoying a moment of well-earned repose in her own house. Was it her own house? Her pulses were all throbbing with the excitement of conflict and the pride of victory; but she was aware that her triumph was not yet assured. Nevertheless, everything was in her favour. This grand house into which she had

made her way, and which was even grander than Patty had supposed, was certainly her husband's home, and she was his wife as legally, as irrevocably as if she had been married with the consent of all the parents in the world. Nothing could part her from her husband, neither force nor law, and though her heart still owned a thrill of alarm and insecurity, she became more at ease as she thought the matter over. Who dared turn her out of the house into which she had so bravely fought her way? Nobody but Sir Giles, who was not equal to the effort, who would not wish to do it, she felt sure. Patty had a conviction in her mind that she only required to be let alone and allowed access to him for a single day to get wholly the upper hand of Sir Giles. And who else had any right to interfere? Not Meg Osborne, who had herself no right to be at Greyslott, except as a humble companion and hanger-on. A niece! what was a niece in the house? Patty herself had a poor cousin who had been taken in at the Seven Thorns, as a sort of inferior servant, out of charity, as everybody said, and whose life Patty well knew had been a very undesirable one. What was Meg Osborne more than Mary Thorne? She had no right to say a word. Neither had the tall gentleman, of whom she was, however, more frightened, whom she had already discovered to be Colonel Piercey, the nearest relation. How persons like Patty do make such discoveries is wonderful, a science which cannot be elucidated or formulated in mere words. She knew by instinct, and she knew also that he could not interfere. The servants were more in Patty's way, and her hatred of them was sharp and keen—but she had already managed to discredit Dunning, and she was not afraid of the servants. What could they do? What would they venture to do against the son's wife? All these thoughts were passing through her mind as she rested in the great chair. And yet that repose was not without thorns. Gervase, though he stood still and stared while the ladies withdrew, did not rest as she was doing. He walked to the window, to look out, and stood there fidgetting, and eager to take part in all the commotion outside. "Lord!" he cried, "Hartmore's carriage is sent round to the stables, and my lord has got to wait, and Stubbins, the little parson, is offering his fly. Oh, I can't stay here, Patty, I must be in the fun. You can get on very well by yourself without me."

"What do you want with fun the day of your mother's funeral?" she said severely. "They'll all think a deal more of you if you stay quiet here."

Gervase's countenance fell at the suggestion of his mother's funeral. No doubt, had he been at home, had his dull mind acquainted itself with the preliminaries, he would have been more or less moved. But it was too great an effort of mind for him to connect the ceremony in the churchyard, the grave and the flowers, with Lady Piercey, whom he had left in her usual health, deciding everything in her usual peremptory way. He had a strong impression that she would presently appear on the scene as usual and settle everything; and a sort of alarm came over his face, and his spirit was overawed for a moment by the mention of her name. There succeeded accordingly, for about a minute, silence in the room, which left Patty time to go over the question again. Who could interfere with her? Nobody! Not Meg Osborne, not Colonel Piercey, not a mere housekeeper or butler. Oh dear no! Nobody but Sir Giles himself! Patty settled herself more and more comfortably in her chair. The funeral had been at an unusually late hour, and it was now almost evening. She thought that after a little interval she would ring the bell for tea. If any one had need of refreshment after the labour of the day, it was she. And after that there were many things to think of, both small things and great things. What should she do about dinner, for instance? Meg Osborne, no doubt, had got a full wardrobe of mourning, day dress and evening dress (at her, Patty's, expense!), while Mrs. Gervase Piercey had only the gown which she had on, an old dress plastered with crape. Should she wear this for dinner? The thought of going down to dinner, sitting down with a footman behind her chair, and all the etiquette involved, was almost too much for Patty, and took away her breath. Should she brush the skirt, and smarten up the neck and wear this? Or should she send down to the Seven Thorns for her black silk, and explain that she had not had time to get proper mourning? Gervase had begun to fidget again while she carried on this severe course of thought. She could hear him laughing to himself at the window, making occasional exclamations. "Oh, by Jove!" he called out at last. "There's lots more coming, one on the top of another. I'm going to see after them." She was so deep in her meditations, that he was gone before she could interfere. And thus she was left in the great silent library, a room such as she had never seen before, overawing her with the sight of the bookcases, the white marble faces looking down upon her of the busts that stood high up here and there, the full-length portraits that stared upon her from the other side. Many people, quite as little educated as Patty—or less so, for the sixth standard necessarily includes many things—had come and gone lightly enough, and thought nothing of the books or the ancestors. I doubt much whether Margaret Osborne had half so much general information as Patty had; but, then, their habits of mind were very different. Mrs. Gervase, when she was left alone, could not help being a little overawed by all she saw. Her husband was not much to hold on by, but yet he "belonged there," and she did not. Patty had felt increasingly, ever since the day on which she married him, how very little her husband was to be depended upon. She had fully recognised that before the marriage, and had decided that she should not mind. But now it seemed a grievance to Patty that he could not defend her and advise her; that she had nobody but herself to look to; that quite possibly he might even abandon her at the most critical moment. "There is never any calculating," she said to herself bitterly, "what a fool may do;" in which sentiment Patty echoed, without knowing it, all the philosophies of the subject. Who could have thought he would have slid away from her, on her first entrance into a house where she would have to fight her way step by step, for nothing at all—for the first novelty that caught his wandering eye?

Patty was tired, and she cried a little at this crisis, feeling that her fate was hard. To acquire a husband with so much trouble, and to find out at once how little help to her he was. He was very fond of her, she knew. Still, now he was used to her, and took her for granted as a part of the order of things, he could not keep his mind fixed even on his wife. He was only a Softy after all, nothing more! Patty roused herself briskly, however, from this line of thought, which was evidently not one to encourage, and rang the bell. It remained a long time unanswered; and then she rang again. This time the footman who had turned his back upon her at the carriage-door, came, looked in, said "Oh!" when he saw her sitting alone, and went away. Patty's fury was indescribable. Oh that dolt John Simpson, what a fate he was making for himself! While she waited, growing more and more angry, Mrs. Osborne came in again, with hesitation. She was still in her outdoor dress, and looked disturbed and embarrassed.

"The servants— have told me— that you had rung the bell," she said, faltering considerably. "Is there— anything— I can order for you?"

Margaret was very little prepared for her *rôle*, and was as profoundly aware of her own want of power as Patty could be.

"Order for me!" said Patty. "I rang for tea, as a proper servant would have known; and I wish you to know, Mrs. Osborne—if you are Mrs. Osborne, as I suppose, for no one has had the decency to introduce you—that it is my place

to give the orders, and not yours."

Margaret was so much taken by surprise that she had no weapon with which to defend herself. She said mildly:

"I do not often give orders; but the housekeeper, who was my aunt's favourite maid, is much overcome. I will tell them—what you want."

"Thank you, I can tell them myself," said Patty, ringing another, a louder, and more violent peal. It brought up the butler himself in great haste, and it startled the still lingering visitors, who again thought nothing less than that Sir Giles must be taken ill. "Bring up tea directly," cried Mrs. Gervase. "This is the third time I have rung. I pass over it now, owing to the confusion of the house, but it had better not occur again."

The butler stared open-mouthed at the new-comer. Patty Hewitt, of the Seven Thorns! He knew her as well as he knew his own sister. Then he looked at Mrs. Osborne, who made him a slight sign—and then disappeared, to carry astonishment and dismay into the servants' hall.

"Mrs. Osborne give me a nod," said the angry dignitary, "as I had better do it. Lord! saucing me as have known her since she was *that* high, setting up for my lady, as grand as grand, and the family giving in to her!"

"The family!" said the cook, tossing her head; "call Mrs. Osborne the family, that is no better nor you and me. Far worse! A companion as is nobody, eating dirt to make her bread."

"Oh, if my poor lady had been here!" said Parsons, "that creature would soon have been put to the door! She was too soft-hearted over Mr. Gervase, was my poor lady—but not to stand that. As for Miss Meg, she hasn't got the spirit of a mouse!"

"But what am I to do?" said Stevens, the butler. "Me, an old servant, ordered about and sauced like that! What am I to do, I ask you? Take up the tea—or what? Mrs. Osborne, she give me a nod—but Mrs. Osborne she's not like Sir Giles' daughter, and nobody has no authority. What am I to do?"

It was finally resolved in that anxious conclave that John should be sent up with the tea, much to John's mortification and alarm, who began to feel that, perhaps, it might have been better to be civil to Patty Hewitt. He went, but returned in a minute, flying along the passages, his face crimson, his eyes staring out of his head. "She says as I'm never to show in her sight again!" he cried. "She says as how Mr. Stevens is to come hisself and do his duty: nor she didn't say *Mr.* Stevens either," cried John, with momentary satisfaction, "but Stevens, short; and wouldn't let me so much as put down the tray!"

"Robert can take it," said the butler; but he was bewildered and hesitated. Presently he followed with a sheepish air. "I'll just go and see what comes of it," he said.

Patty was sitting up very erect in her chair, a flame of battle on her cheeks. She allowed herself, however, to show a dignified relief when Stevens came in following his inferior, who carried the tray. It was not to be supposed that so great a man could bear that burden for himself: Patty recognised this fact with instant sympathy. She nodded her head with dignity.

"Stevens," she said, with the air of a duchess, "you will see that that man never comes into my sight again."

Stevens did not, indeed, make any reply, but a sound of consternation burst from him, a suspiration of forced breath, which Patty accepted as assent. Margaret was standing at a little distance speechless, an image of confusion and embarrassment. She knew no more than the servants what to do. Gervase's wife—as there was no reason to doubt this woman was—how could Gervase's cousin oppose her? Margaret had no rights—no position in the household; but the wife of Gervase had certainly rights, however inopportune might be the moment at which she chose to assert them. Mrs. Osborne, however, started violently when she herself was addressed with engaging friendliness.

"Won't you come and have some tea? No? are you going? Then, will you please tell Gervase that tea is here, and I am waiting for him?" Patty said.

Margaret withdrew from the room as if a shot had been fired at her. Her confusion and helplessness were so great that they went beyond anything like resentment. She was almost overawed by the boldness of the intruder and the impossibility of the situation. Gervase stood in the doorway, excited and pleased, shouting for the carriages, talking about the horses to whoever would talk with him. She was glad of some excuse for calling him, taking him by the arm. Certainly he would be better anywhere than there.

"Gervase," she said, "tell me, is that your wife who is in the library?"

"Eh? What do you say, Meg? Patty? Why, of course! What did you think she could be? Patty! look here, you come and tell Meg—"

"Hush, Gervase, she wants you to go to her. Tea is ready, and she is waiting for you. Now go, Gervase, go—do go!"

"She's come over Meg, too!" said Gervase to himself with a chuckle; and, fortunately, his amusement in that, and the impulse of his cousin's touch on his arm, and the new suggestion which, whatever it happened to be, was always powerful with him, made him obey the call which now came out shrilly over the other noises from the library door.

"Gervase! Gervase! I'm waiting for you for tea."

Margaret crossed the hall into the morning-room, with a grave face. The consternation which was in her whole aspect moved Colonel Piercey, who followed her, to a short laugh. "What is to be done?" he said.

"Oh, nothing, nothing that I know of! Of course she is Gervase's wife—she has a right to be here. I don't know what my poor uncle will say—but I told you before he would be talked over."

"She showed herself very ready and with all her wits about her, at the door."

"Yes," said Margaret. "She has a great deal of sense, I have always heard. It may not be a bad thing after all."

"It frightens you, however," Colonel Piercey said.

"Not frightens but startles me—very much: and then, poor Aunt Piercey! Poor Aunt Piercey! her only child, and on her funeral day."

"She was not a wise mother, I should imagine."

"What does that matter?" cried Margaret. "And who is wise? We do what we think is the best, and it turns out

the worst. How can we tell? I am glad she is gone, at least, and did not see it," she cried with a few hot tears.

Colonel Piercey looked at her coldly, as he always did. It was on his lips to say, "She was not very good to you, that you should shed tears for her," but he refrained. He could not refrain, however, from saying—which was perhaps worse—"I am afraid it is a thing which will much affect you."

"Oh, me!" she cried, with a sort of proud disdain, and turned and left him without a word. Whatever happened he was always her hardest and coldest judge, suggesting meanness in her conduct and thoughts even to herself.

CHAPTER XXV.

No house could be more agitated and disturbed than was Greyshott on the night of Lady Piercey's funeral. That event, indeed, was enough to throw a heavy cloud over the dwelling, where the imperious old lady had filled so large a place, that the mere emptiness, where her distinct and imposing figure was withdrawn, touched the imagination, even if it did not touch the heart. The impression, however, on such an occasion is generally one of subdued quiet and gloom—an arrest of life; whereas the great house was quivering with fears and suppositions, with the excitement of a struggle which nobody could see the end of, or divine how it should turn. The servants were in a ferment, some of them expecting dismissal; others agreed that under new sway, such as seemed to threaten, Greyshott would not be a place for them. The scene in the housekeeper's room, where the heads of the female department sat together dismayed, and exchanged presentiments and resolutions, was tragic in its intensity of alarm and wrath. The cook had not given more than a passing thought to the dinner, which an eager kitchen-maid on her promotion had the charge of; and Parsons sat arranging her lists of linen with a proud but melancholy certainty that all would be found right, however hastily her reign might be brought to an end.

"I never thought as I should have to give them up to the likes of her," Parsons said, among her tears. "Oh, my lady, my poor lady! She's been took away from the evil to come."

"She'd never have let the likes of her step within our doors," said cook, indignant, "if it had only been poor Sir Giles, as is no better than a baby, that had been took, and my lady left to keep things straight."

"Oh, don't say that, cook, don't say that," cried Parsons, "for then *he'd* have been Sir Gervase, and *she* Lady Piercey, and my lady would have—bursted; that's what she would have done."

"Lord!" cried the cook, "Lady Piercey! But the Colonel or somebody would have stopped that."

"There's nobody as could have stopped it," said Parsons, better informed. "They might say as he hadn't his wits, and couldn't manage his property, or that—but to stop him from being Sir Gervase, and her Lady Piercey, is what nobody can do; no, not the Queen, nor the Parliament: for he was born to that: Softy or not it don't make no difference."

"Lord!" said the cook again: and she took an opportunity shortly after of going into the kitchen and giving a look at the dinner, of which that ambitious, pushing kitchen-maid was making a *chef-d'œuvre*. The same information filtering through the house made several persons nervous. Simpson, the footman, for one, gave himself up for lost; and any other member of the household who had ever entered familiarly at the Seven Thorns, or given a careless order for a pot of beer to Patty, now shook in his shoes. The general sentiments at first had been those of indignation and scorn; but a great change soon came over the household—a universal thrill of alarm, a sense of insecurity. No one ventured now to mention the name of Patty. *She*, they called her with awe—and in the case of some far-seeing persons, like that kitchen-maid, the intruder had already received her proper name of Mrs. Gervase, or even Lady Gervase, from those whose education was less complete.

The sensation of dismay which thus pervaded the house attained, perhaps, its climax in the rooms which Margaret Osborne shared with her boy, and where she had withdrawn after her brief intercourse with Patty. These rooms were little invaded by the rest of the household, the nurse who took care of Osy, doing everything that was needed for her mistress, and the little apartment making a sort of sanctuary for the mother and the child. She was sure of quiet there if nowhere else; and when she had closed the door she seemed for a moment to leave behind her all the agitations which convulsed and changed the course of life. The two rooms, opening into one another, in which Margaret's life had been spent for years, which were almost the only home that Osy had ever known, were still hers, though she could not tell for how short a time: the sword hanging over the mantelpiece, which Osy had described as the only thing which belonged to his mother and himself, hung there still, their symbol of individual possession. For years past, Margaret had felt herself safe when she closed that door. She held it, as it now appeared, on but a precarious footing; but she had not thought so up to this time. She had felt that she had a right to her shelter, that her place was one which nobody could take from her; not the right of inheritance, it is true, but of nature. It was the home of her fathers, though she was only Sir Giles' niece, and bore another name. She had been a dependant indeed, but not as a stranger would be. It was the home of her childhood, and it was hers as long as the old rule continued—the natural state of affairs which she had not thought of as coming to an end. Even Lady Piercey's death had not appeared to her to make an end. Sir Giles would need her more: there would be still more occasion for her presence in the house when the imperious, but not unkind, mistress went away. The old lady had been sharp in speech, and careless of her feelings, but she had never forgotten that Meg Piercey had a right to her shelter as well as duties to discharge there. There had been, indeed, a scare about Gervase, but it was a proof of the slightness of reality in that scare that Margaret had scarcely thought of it as affecting herself. She had been eager to bring back Gervase to his mother, if by no other means, by the help of Patty, thus recognising her position; but after Lady Piercey's death, when the necessity was no longer pressing, Margaret had thought of it no more. And, certainly, of all days in the world, it was not upon the day of the funeral that she had looked for any disturbance in her life.

But now in a moment—in the time that sufficed to open a door, to ring a bell, to give an order—Mrs. Osborne recognised that this life was over. It had seemed as if it must never come to an end, as all established and settled existence does; and now in a moment it had come to an end. At many moments, when her patience was strained to the utmost, Margaret had come up here and composed herself, and felt herself safe within these walls. As long as she had this refuge she could bear anything, and there had been no likelihood that it would be taken from her. But now, whatever she might have to bear, it seemed certain that it was not here she could retire to reconcile herself to it. It seemed scarcely possible to believe that the old order of affairs was over; and yet she felt convinced that it was over and could return no more. She did not as yet ask herself what she should do. She had never acted for herself,

never inquired into the possibilities of life. Captain Osborne's widow had come back to her home as the only natural thing to do. She had been brought up to do Lady Piercey's commands, to be the natural, superfluous, yet necessary, person who had no duty save to do duty for everybody; and she had fallen back into that position as if it were the only one in life. Margaret did not enter into any questions with herself even now, much less come to any decision. It was enough for one day to have faced the startling, incomprehensible fact that her life was over, the only life—except that brief episode of her marriage—which she had ever known. Where was she to go with her little pension, her husband's sword, and her boy? But she could not tell, or even think, as yet, of any step to take. All that she was capable of was to feel that the present existence, the familiar life, was at an end.

Osy had been left in a secluded corner of the garden while the funeral took place, to be out of the way. It had not seemed necessary to his mother to envelop him in mourning, and take him with her through that strange ceremonial, so mysterious to childish thoughts; and while she sat alone, the sound of his little voice and step became audible to her coming up the stairs. Osy, who was willing on ordinary occasions to spend the whole of his time out-of-doors, had been impatient to-day, touched by the prevailing agitation, though he did not know what it meant. He came in, stamping with his little feet, making up for the quiet which had been exacted from him for a few days past, and threw himself against Margaret's knee.

"Movver," he said, breathless, "there's a lady down in the libery."

"Yes, Osy, I know."

"Oh, movver knows," he said, turning to his attendant, "I told you movver always knows. Very queer fings," said Osy, reflectively, "have tummed to pass to-day."

"What things, Osy?"

"Fings about Aunt Piercey," said the little boy, counting upon his fingers; "somefing I don't understand. You said, movver, she had don to heaven, but Parsons, she said you had all don to put her somewhere else, but I believe you best; and then there were all the carriages and the gemplemans, and the horse that runned away. But most strangest of all, the lady in the libery." He paused to think. "I fought she wasn't a lady at all, but a dressmaker or somefing."

"And then? you changed your mind?"

"No," said the little boy, doubtfully, "not me. But she looked out of the window, and then she called, 'Gervase! Gervase!'—she touldn't say, Gervase, Gervase, if she were one of the maids. I fink it's the lady Cousin Gervase went to London to marrwy. And I'm glad," Osy said, making another pause. He resumed, "I'm glad, because now I know that my big silver piece was a marrwage present, movver. He tooked it, but I dave it him all the same; and as it was a marrwage present, I don't mind scarcely at all. But that is not the funniest fing yet," said Osy, putting up his hand to his mother's face to secure her attention; "there's somefing more, movver. She tummed to the window, and she said, 'Gervase, Gervase, who is that ickle boy?' "

"Well, Osy, there was nothing very wonderful in that," said Margaret, trying to smile.

"Yes, mower, there was two fings wonderful." He held out the small dirty forefinger again, and tapped upon it with the forefinger of his other little fat hand. "First—there touldn't any lady tum to Greyshott and not know me. I'm not an ickle boy, I'm Osy; and another fing, she knows me already quite well; for she isn't a beau'ful lady from London, like that one that singed songs, you know. She is the woman at the Seven Thorns. Sally, tum here and tell movver. We knowed her quite well, bof Sally and me."

"It's quite true, ma'am, as Mr. Osy says, it's quite, quite——"

"That will do," said Margaret, "I want no information on the subject. Make haste, Sally, and get Master Osy's tea."

Osy stood looking up somewhat anxiously in his mother's face, leaning against her. He put one hand into hers, and put the other to her chin to make her look at him, with a way he had. "Movver, why don't you want in—in—formashun?" he said.

"Osy, my little boy, you know you mustn't talk before Sally of your Cousin Gervase or the family; you must tell me whatever happens, but not any of the servants. That lady is perhaps going to be the lady of the house, now. She is Mrs. Gervase, and she has a better right to be here than you or me. Perhaps we shall have to go away. You must be a very good, very thoughtful little boy; and polite, like a gentleman, to every one."

"I am never not a gemplemans, movver," said the child, with an air of offended dignity; then he suddenly grew red, and cried out, "Oh, I fordot! Cousin Colonel met me in the hall, and he said would I tell you to tum, please, and speak to him in the rose-garden, because he touldn't tum upstairs. Will you do and speak to Cousin Colonel in the garden, movver? He said, wouldn't I tum with him to his house?"

"Osy! but you wouldn't go with any one, would you, away from your mother?"

"Oh, not for always," cried the child, "but for a day, two days, to ride upon his s'oulder. He's not like Cousin Gervase. He holds fast—fast; and I likes him. Movver, run into the rose-garden; for I fordot, and he is there waiting, and he will fink I've broke my word. And I doesn't want you now," said Osy, waving his hand, "for I'm doin' to have my tea."

Thus dismissed, Margaret rose slowly and with reluctance. She did not run to the rose-garden as her son had bidden her. A cloud had come over her face. It was quite reasonable that Colonel Piercey should ask to speak with her in her changed position of affairs. It would be quite reasonable, indeed, that he should offer her advice, or even help. He was her nearest relation, and though he had not been either just or kind to herself, he had fallen under the charm of her little boy. It might be that, distasteful as it was, for Osy's sake she would have to accept, even to seek, Gerald Piercey's advice. Probably it was true kindness on his part to offer it in the first place, to put himself at her disposal. For herself there could be no such question; somehow, so far as she was concerned, she could struggle and live or die: what would it matter? But Osy must grow up, must be educated, must become a man. Margaret had been of opinion that she knew something already of the bitterness of dependence; it seemed to her now, however, that she had not tasted it until this day.

END OF VOL. I.

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