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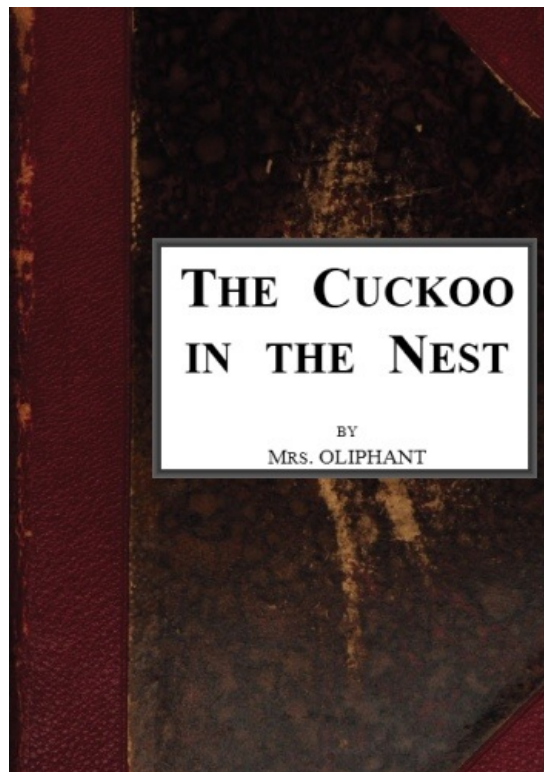
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The Cuckoo in the Nest

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT
AUTHOR OF

VOLUME II.

LEIPZIG
HEINEMANN AND BALESTIER (*Ltd. London*)

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BY MRS. OLIPHANT

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BY
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AUTHOR OF

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

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME II.

LEIPZIG
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THE CUCKOO IN THE NEST

CHAPTER XXVI.

COLONEL PIERCEY had been walking up and down somewhat impatiently for some time, at the corner of the rose-garden where Osy had left him. The child had not then seen the lady at the window who asked who was that little boy; and this incident and the account of it, which Osy had hastened to give to his mother, had

naturally occupied some time. He was not much accustomed to wait, and did not like it. And when he saw Margaret come slowly along, some half-hour after he had sent, what he felt was a very respectful message to her, asking her to allow him a few minutes' conversation, the curious opposition and sense of inevitable hostility which he felt towards his cousin, was sharpened into a keen feeling of resentment. She had held him at bay all along, never treated him with confidence or friendliness; and if she chose to affect fine-lady airs of coyness and pride *now!* It was quite unconsciously to himself, and he was by nature a man full of generosity, who would have been more astonished than words could say, had he been charged with presuming upon adverse circumstances; and yet he was far more angry with Margaret in her dependent position than he would have been with any woman more happily situated. He felt that she, as women he believed generally did, was disposed to stand upon the superiority of being at so great a disadvantage, and to claim consideration from the very fact that she got it from no one. Why should she bear the spurns of all the unworthy, and mount upon that pedestal of patient merit to him? It was not that he felt it natural to treat her badly because other people did, but because the fact that other people did, gave her the opportunity of assuming that it would be the same with him. He would have liked to take her by the shoulders and shake out of her that aspect of injury, without knowing that he dared not have entertained that fierce intention towards any one who was not injured. Finally, he watched her coming towards him slowly, showing her reluctance in every step, with an impatience and disinclination to put up with it, which was almost stronger than any feeling of personal opposition he had ever felt in his life. She said, before she had quite come up to him: "I am sorry I have kept you waiting. Osy has only given me your message now."

It was on his lips to say: "You are not sorry to have kept me waiting!" but he subdued that impulse. A man like Colonel Piercey cannot give a woman the lie direct, unless in very serious circumstances indeed. He replied stiffly: "I fear I have taken a great liberty in asking you to meet me here at all."

Margaret answered only with a faint smile and wave of her hand, which seemed to Colonel Piercey to say as plainly as words: "Everybody offers me indignity; why not you, too?" which, perhaps, was not very far from the fact; though she was a great deal too proud to have ever said, or even implied, anything of the kind. He answered his own supposition hotly, by saying: "I know no other place where we should be safe from interruption, and I thought it my duty to— speak to you about the new condition of affairs."

"Yes?" said Margaret. "I am afraid I have very little light to throw on the position; but I shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

All that he said in the meantime was, with some resentment: "You don't seem so much startled by what has happened as I should have supposed."

"I was much startled to see Patty—I mean the person whom we must now call Mrs. Gervase—at the funeral. But of course, after that, one was prepared for all the rest. I don't know that I had much reason to be startled even at that. From the moment we found that she was absent while he was absent, I ought to have, and indeed I did, divine what must have occurred. However sure one is of such a thing, it is startling, all the same, when one comes to see it actually accomplished; but I ought not to say more than that."

"You take it with much philosophy," Colonel Piercey said.

"Do you think so? I should be glad to think I was so strong-minded; for there is probably no one to whom it will make so much difference as to me."

"That is why I felt that I must speak to you. Can nothing be done to prevent this?"

"To prevent what?" she said, with some surprise.

"The reign of this woman over Uncle Giles' house, in Aunt Piercey's place! It is too intolerable; it is enough to make the old lady rise from her grave."

"Poor old Aunt Piercey! She has been taken away from the evil to come. I am glad that she is dead, and has not had this to bear."

"I suppose women have tears at their will," cried Colonel Piercey, bursting forth in an impatience which he could restrain no longer. "She was not so kind to you that you should feel so tenderly for her."

"How do you know she was not kind to me? She was natural, at all events," cried Margaret. "It has all been quite natural up to this time; I went away and I came back, and whatever happened to me, I was at home. But you, Colonel Piercey, you are not natural. I have no right to accept contumely at your hands. You came here with a suspicion of Heaven knows what in your mind; you thought I had some design: what was the design which you suspected me of having against the happiness of this household? I warned you that you should have some time or other to explain what you meant—to me."

Colonel Piercey stood confronting her among the roses which formed so inappropriate a background, and did not know what reply to make. He had not expected that assault. Answer to a man for whatever you have said or seemed to say, and whatever may lie behind, that is simple enough; but to explain your injurious thoughts to a woman, who does not even soften the situation by saying that she has no one to protect her—that is a different matter. He grew red, and then grew grey. He had no more notion what to answer to her than he had what it was, actually and as a matter of fact, that he had suspected. He had not suspected anything. He had felt that a woman like this could never have accepted the position of dependence, unless— That such a person must be a dangerous and hostile force—that she had wrongs to redress, a position to make—how could he tell? It had been instinctive, he had never known what he thought.

"Cousin Meg—" he said, hesitating.

"From the moment," she said indignantly, "in which you set me up as a schemer and designing person in the home that sheltered me, these terms of relationship have been worse than out of place."

Poor Colonel Piercey! He was as far from being a coward as a man could be. If he did not write V.C. after his name, it was, perhaps, because the opportunity had not come to him of acquiring that distinction; he was the kind of man of which V.C.'s are made. But now, no expedient, save that of utter cowardice, occurred to him; for the first time in his life he ran away.

"I am very sorry you will not accord me these terms," he said, meekly; "I don't understand what you accuse me of. I think you a schemer and designing person! how could I? If you will excuse me, there is no sense in such a suggestion. Unless I had been a fool—and I hope, at least, that you don't consider me a fool—

how could I have thought anything of the kind? You must think me either mad or an idiot," he went on, gaining a little courage. "I came here with no suspicions. I have been angry," he added, turning his head away, "to see my cousin, Meg Piercey, at everybody's beck and call, and to see how careless they were of you, and how exacting, and how——"

"All this," said Margaret, with surprise, "should have made you look upon me with compassion instead of something like insult."

"Oh, compassion," he cried, "to you! I should have thought that the worst insult of all. You are not a person to be pitied. However I may have offended, I have always felt that——"

The end of this statement was part of the process of running away. Indeed, he was very much frightened, and felt the falseness of his position extremely. He had not a word to say for himself. To upbraid her—at a moment when her home, her last shelter, was probably about to be taken from her, and herself thrown upon the world with her helpless child—he, perhaps, being the only person who had any right to help her—was the most impossible thing in the world. And though his opinion had no time or occasion to have changed, it had always been an opinion founded upon nothing. A more curious state of mind could scarcely be. He was dislodged from his position at the point of Margaret's sword, so to speak. And he had never had any ground for that position, or right to have assumed it; and yet he was still there in mind, though in word and profession he had run away. Margaret did not understand this complicated state of mind. She was half amused by the dismay in his face, by his too swift and complete change of front. The *amende* which he had made was as complete as any apology and confession could be, though it was an apology by implication, rather than a direct denial of blame. "How could I?" is different from "I did not." But she did not dwell upon this.

"Of course," she said, "I have no right not to accept what you say, though it is, perhaps, strangely expressed. And I scarcely know what there is I can explain to you. My aunt feared this that has taken place, before I did: she naturally thought less of her son's deficiencies. She was so imprudent, as I thought it, as to warn the girl of things she would do to prevent it. I believe there was really nothing that could have been done to prevent it. And then she was equally imprudent in letting him go to town, and thus giving him the opportunity. She thought she could secure him by putting him in the hands of the clergyman, who never saw him at all. I feared very much how it would be, and poor Gervase was several times on the point of betraying himself. Perhaps, if I had sought his confidence—— But his mother would not have paid any attention to what I could say. And I don't know what could have been done to prevent it."

"Why, he is next to an idiot!"

"Oh no," cried Margaret, half offended. "Gervase is not an idiot. He has gleams of understanding, quite—almost, as clear as any one. He knows what he wants, and though you may think his mind has no steadiness, you will find he always comes back to his point. He has a kind of cleverness, even, at times. Oh no; Aunt Piercey examined into all that. They could not make him out incapable of managing his own affairs. To be sure, he has not had any to manage up to this time. And now that he has this sharp Patty behind him," said Margaret, with a half smile——

"Then you think nothing can be done?"

"What could be done? You could not do anything in Uncle Giles' lifetime to turn his only child out of his inheritance."

"It is you," said Colonel Piercey, "who are imputing intentions now. I had no such idea. I think my business as next-of-kin is to defend the poor fellow. But the woman; that is a different thing."

"The woman is his wife. I don't want to assume any unnatural impartiality. But, after all, is he likely ever to have had a better wife? I believe she will be an excellent wife to Gervase. One of his own class, I hope, would not have married him."

"Why do you say, 'I hope?' Is that not worse than anything that could be said?"

"Perhaps," said Margaret. "Poor Gervase is not an idiot, but neither is he just like other people. And a girl might have been driven into it, and then might have found——" She added, with a little shiver, "It is the best thing that could have happened for him to marry Patty. I hate it, of course. How could I do otherwise? But as far as he himself is concerned——"

"You are a great philosopher, Cousin Meg."

"Do you think so?" Half resentful as she was, and not more than half satisfied with Colonel Piercey's explanations, he was yet the only person in the world to whom she could speak with freedom; and it was a relief to her. "She will look after Uncle Giles' comfort, and he will get to like her," she continued. "She will rule the household with a rod of iron." Margaret laughed, though her face settled down the next moment into a settled gravity. "They will have no society, but they will not want it. She will keep them amused. Perhaps it is the best thing that could have happened," she said.

"And you? and the boy?" He stopped and looked at her standing among the roses, which were very luxuriant in the last climax of maturity, full blown, shedding their leaves, just about to topple over from that height of life into the beginning of decay. Margaret had no trace of decay about her, but she, too, was in the full height of life, the fulfilment of promise, standing at the *mezzo di cammin*, and full of all capabilities. She did not look up at him, but answered with a half-smile,—

"I—and the boy? We are not destitute. Perhaps it will be better for us both to set out together, and live our own life."

"You are not destitute? I hope you will pardon me. After what you think my conduct has been, you may say I have no right——"

Margaret smiled in spite of herself.

"But you say that your conduct has been—not what I thought."

"Yes, yes, that is so: I have not been such a fool. Cousin Meg, we were great friends in the old days."

"Not such very great friends—no more than girls and boys are when they are not specially attached to each other."

He thought that she intended to give him a little prick with one of those thorns which the matured rose still keeps upon its stalk; and he felt the prick, which, being still more mature than she, he ought not to have done.

"I think it was a little more than that," he said, in a slight tone of pique; "but anyhow—we are cousins."

"Very distant cousins."

"Distant cousins," he cried, impatiently, "are near when there are no nearer between. We are of the same blood, at least. You want to push me away, to make me feel I have nothing to do with it; but that can't be so long as you are Meg Piercely—"

"Margaret Osborne at your service," she said, gravely. "Forgive me, Cousin Gerald. It is true, we have had enough of this tilting. I don't doubt for a moment that you would give me a helping hand if you could; that you wish me well, and especially," she added, lifting her eyes with a half reproach, half gratitude in them, "the boy—as you call him."

"What could I call him but the boy?" said Colonel Piercely, with a sort of exasperation. "Yes, I don't deny it, it was of him I wanted to speak. He is a delightful boy—he is full of faculty and capacity, and one could make anything of him. Let me say quite sincerely what I think. You are not destitute; but you are not rich enough to give him the best of everything in the way of education, as—as—don't slay me with a flash of lightning—as I could. Now I have said it! If you would trust him to me!"

She had looked, indeed, for a moment as if her eyes could give forth lightning enough to have slain any man standing defenceless before her; but then these eyes softened with hot tears. She kept looking at the man, explaining himself with such difficulty, putting forth his offer of kindness as if it were some dreadful proposition, with a gradual melting of the lines in her face. When he threw a hasty glance at her at the end of his speech, she seemed to him a woman made of fire, shedding light about her in an astonishing transfiguration such as he had never seen before.

"This," she said, in a low voice, "is the most terrible demonstration of my poverty and helplessness that has ever been made to me—and the most awful suggestion, as of suicide and destruction."

"Meg!"

"Don't, don't interrupt me! It is: I have never known how little good I was before. I don't know now if it will kill me, or sting me to life; but all the same," she cried, her lip quivering, "you are kind, and I thank you with all my heart! and I will promise you this: If I find, as you think, that, whatever I may do, I cannot give my Osy the education he ought to have, I will send and remind you of your offer. I hope you will have children of your own by that time, and perhaps you will have forgotten it."

"I shall not forget it; and I am very unlikely to have children of my own."

"Anyhow, I will trust you," she said, "and I thank you with all my heart, though you are my enemy. And that is a bargain," she said, holding out her hand.

Her enemy! Was he her enemy? And yet it seemed something else beside.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHILE these scenes were going on, Mr. and Mrs. Gervase Piercely were very differently employed upstairs. When Patty had finished her tea, and when she had made the survey of the library, concerning which her conclusion was that these horrid bookcases must be cleared away, and that a full-length portrait of herself in the white satin which had not, yet ought to have been, her wedding-dress, would do a great deal for the cheerfulness of the room, she took her husband's arm, and desired him to conduct her over the house. When Patty saw the drawing-room, which was very large, cold, and light in colour, with chairs and chandeliers in brown holland, she changed her mind about the library. She had not been aware of the existence of this drawing-room.

"This is where we shall sit, of course," she said.

"Father can't abide it," said Gervase.

"Oh, your father is a very nice old gentleman. He will have to put up with it," said the new lady of the house.

In imagination she saw herself seated there, receiving the county, and the spirit of Patty was uplifted. She felt, for the first time, without any admixture of disappointment, that here was her sphere. When she was taken upstairs, however, to Gervase's room, she regarded it by no means with the same satisfaction. It was a large room, but sparsely furnished, in no respect like the luxurious bower she had imagined for herself.

"Take off my bonnet here!" she said: "no, indeed I sha'n't. Why, there is not even a drapery to the toilet table. I have not come to Greyshott, I hope, to have less comfort than I had at home. There must be spare rooms. Take me to the best of the spare rooms."

"There's the prince's room," said Gervase, "but nobody sleeps there since some fellow of a prince—I can't tell you what prince— And I haven't got the keys; it's Parsons that has got the keys."

"You can call Parsons, I suppose. Ring the bell," said Patty, seizing the opportunity to look at herself in the glass, though she surveyed the room with contempt.

"Lord!" cried Gervase. "Parsons, mother's own woman—." Then he threw himself down in his favourite chair with his hands in his pockets. "You can do it yourself. I'm not going to catch a scolding for you."

"A scolding!" said Patty; "and who is going to scold you, you silly fellow, except me? I should like to see them try—Mrs. Parsons or Sir Giles, or any one. You can just say, 'Speak to my wife.'"

"There's mother, that you daren't set up your face to. I say," said Gervase; "Patty, what's all this about mother? Mother's—dead? She'll never have a word to say about anything any more?"

"Dear mother!" said Patty. "You must always say dear mother, Gervase, now: I'm sure I should have loved her—but, you see, Providence never gave me the opportunity. No, she'll never have a word to say: it's me that will have everything to say.—Oh, you have answered the bell at last! Send Mrs. Parsons here."

"Mrs. Parsons, ma'am—my lady?" the frightened little under-housemaid, who had been made to answer, said.

Patty gave her a gracious smile, feeling that at last she had found some one who understood what her claims were.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Ellen."

"Well, Ellen, I like your looks, and I've no doubt we shall get on; but you needn't call me my lady, not now,—for the present I am only Mrs. Gervase. Now, go and send Parsons here."

"Oh, my lady, Mrs. Parsons! she's in my old lady's room. I daren't disturb her, not for anything in the world; it would be as much as my place was worth."

"I see you are only a little fool after all," said Patty, with a frown. "Your place is just worth this much—whether you please me or not. Mrs. Parsons has as much power as—as that table. Goodness," cried Patty, "what a state this house has been in, to be sure, when one servant is afraid of another! but I shall soon put an end to that. Call Parsons! let her come at once."

The little housemaid came back while Patty still stood before the glass straightening the edge of her bonnet and arranging her veil.

"If you please, my lady, Mrs. Parsons is doing out my old lady's drawers—and she has her head bent down, and I can't make her hear."

"I'll make her hear," cried Patty, with an impulse which belonged rather to her previous condition than to her present dignity; and she rushed along the corridor like a whirlwind, with her draperies flying. It was, doubtless, instinct or inspiration that directed her to the right door, while Gervase followed on her steps to see the fun, with a grin upon his face. He remembered only now and then, when something recalled it to him, that his mother was gone. He was not thinking of her now; nevertheless, when Patty burst into that room, he stood in the doorway dumb, the grin dying out from his face, and gave a scared look round as if looking for the familiar presence he had so often encountered there.

"You perhaps have not heard, Mrs. Parsons," said Patty, with her sharp, decisive voice, "that I sent for you?"

Parsons had her head bent over the drawers. She said, without turning round, "That gaby, Ellen, said something about somebody wanting me"; and then began to count,—“Eight, nine, ten. Three dozen here and three dozen in the walnut wardrobe,” said Parsons; “that makes it just right.”

Patty's curiosity overcame her resentment. She came forward and looked over Parsons' shoulder. "Six dozen silk stockings," she cried; "is that what you are counting? What a number for an old lady! and fine, too, and in good condition," she said, putting her hand over the woman's shoulder and bringing forth a handful. They were mingled white and black, and Patty looked upon them with covetous eyes.

"Who are you as takes such a liberty?" cried Parsons, springing to her feet. She found herself confronted by Patty's very alert, firm figure and resolute countenance. Patty drew Lady Piercey's silk stockings through her hands, looking at the size of them. She held them up by the toes to mark her sense of their enormous dimensions.

"I could put both my feet into one of them," she said, reflectively, "so that they are no use to me. Oh, you are Parsons! Open the door, please, at once, of the best rooms. I want to settle down."

The woman looked at the intruder with a mixture of defiance and fear. She turned to Gervase, appealing against the stranger. Many a time had Parsons put the Softy out of his mother's room, bidding him be off and not aggravate my lady. But my lady was gone, and Gervase was the master, to do what he would; or, what was worse, it was Patty who was the mistress. Patty of the ale-house! Parsons looked at Gervase with an agonised appeal. "They're your mother's things," she said; "Mr. Gervase, will you see them knock about your mother's things?"

Patty's eyes were in the drawer remarking everything, and those eyes sparkled and shone. What treasures were there! Not only silk stockings too big for her, but linen, and lace, and embroidered handkerchiefs, and silks, such as Patty had never seen before. She went to the drawers and closed them one after another.

"I see there are some nice things here," she said. "We can't have them turned over like this by a servant. Some servants expect their mistress's things as their perquisites, but we can't allow that in this house. Lock them up, lock them up at once, and I'll take the keys."

"The keys—my keys!" cried Parsons almost beside herself.

"The late Lady Piercey's keys. I'll take them, please, all of them. There's a time for everything; and to go over my mother-in-law's things the very day of her funeral is indecent—that is what it is, indecent; I can find no other word."

"I'll never give up my keys!" cried Parsons, "that my dear lady trusted me with—never, never!" And then she burst into tears, and flung them down on the floor at Gervase's feet. "Take them all, then! all!" she cried; "I'll not keep one of them! Oh, my dear old lady, what a good thing she has not lived to see this day! But it never would have happened had she been here. You never, never would have dared to lift up your little impudent face.—Oh, Mr. Gervase! oh, Mr. Gervase, save me from her! She'll tear me to pieces!" Parsons cried. No doubt Patty's look was fierce. The woman seized hold upon Gervase and swung herself out by him, keeping his limp person between her and his wife. "Don't let her!" she cried, "don't let her! in your own mother's room."

"Mrs. Parsons," said Patty, over Gervase's body as it were, "do you think I would soil my fingers by touching you? You thought you would rob the poor lady that's dead, and that nobody would notice; but you did not know that *I* was here. Instead of rummaging Lady Piercey's drawers, you had better empty your own, and get ready for leaving. Have all your accounts ready and your keys ready; you shall leave this house by twelve to-morrow," Patty cried.

"Mr. Gervase, Mr. Gervase!" cried the unfortunate woman.

"I say, don't you go and touch me, Parsons. I don't mind your talking, but you sha'n't go and finger me as if I was clothes from the wash," said Gervase. He laughed at his own joke with enjoyment. "As if I was a basket of clothes from the wash," he said.

"Shut the door upon her, Gervase. I don't condescend to bandy words.—At twelve to-morrow," Patty said.

Parsons went downstairs mad with fury, and was told the tale of the tea, and how John Simpson had got his dismissal, and was never to appear before that upstart more. "We had better all give warning afore she comes to the rest of us," said cook. But it was a good place, with many perquisites, and as she spoke she exchanged with the butler a look of some anxiety. Perhaps they did not wish to present their accounts at a moment's notice. Perhaps they only thought regretfully of their good place. Parsons had carried things with a high hand over the younger servants for years. She had not always even respected the susceptibilities of cook. She had been her mistress's favourite and companion, doing, they all thought, very much what she liked with the internal economy of the house. No one had ventured to contradict, or even oppose, Lady Piercely's factotum. It was not in human nature not to be pleased, more or less, that she had found some one to repay to her in a certain degree the little tyrannies of the past. "What would Mr. Dunning say?" was what everybody asked.

The house was, however, in great agitation as the hour of dinner approached, and the drama of the family was about to be exposed to the searching observation of that keen audience which waits at table, and which had all its faculties sharpened for this, its chief moment of spectatorship. To have this mode and period of watching the crisis of life in other human creatures, must be a great *dédommagement* for any ills that may pertain to domestic service in these days. It is as good as a play, nay, better, seeing that there is no simulation in the history that is worked out under our servants' eyes. It was exciting to think, even, how many places should be laid at table; whether Patty, whose new dignity had not been formally announced to any one, and, who, for anything they knew, might shrink from appearing in the midst of the family, unsupported—might not withdraw from the ordeal of the common meal, or be too much overcome with grief to come downstairs. Patty's mind was greatly exercised on the same subject. She had chosen from among the unoccupied rooms those which pleased her best, which were not, however, the prince's rooms, but a suite adjoining which took her fancy, the size and the fittings of which, however, suggested innumerable new ideas to a mind open and eager to receive every indication of what was suitable to her new state. For one thing, they were lined with prodigious wardrobes: *miles*, Patty said to herself with awe, of old dark, gleaming, mahogany doors, behind which were pegs and shelves innumerable, to contain the dresses of the inhabitant. Patty could count hers—and only two, or at most, three of these were fit for the use of Mrs. Gervase Piercely—on one hand; and the long range of empty space at once depressed and excited her—a vacancy that must be filled. In like manner, the large dressing-table had drawers for jewellery, of which Patty had none. And in this great space, where her little figure was visible in glimpses in two or three tall mirrors, there was such evident need of a maid, that her alert spirit was overawed by the necessity. Then she had nothing that was needful for the toilet: no shoes, not even a fresh handkerchief to dry those tears, which were ready to come at the mention of her dear mother-in-law's name. The temptation to return to that dear mother-in-law's room, and equip herself with those articles which lay there in such abundance, and which certainly, it would harm no one to make use of, was very strong. But Patty was half-afraid, half-conscious, that on this evening, at least, it would be unwise so to compromise herself. It was not an evening, she reflected, for full dress, and her mourning would be an excuse for everything. What a wise inspiration that had been, to cover her old dress with crape! Patty undid a hook or two, and folded in the corners of her bodice at the neck. It showed the whiteness of that throat, and gave an indication that she knew what was required in polite society. And she drew on again with some difficulty, over hands which were not quite so presentable, the black gloves, which had not borne the strain of the morning, the heat, and the affliction, so well as might have been desired. Before doing this, however, she had written, by a sudden inspiration, a note to Sally Fletcher, requesting her to come to Greystott at once with Mrs. Gervase Piercely's "things," and to remain as her maid till further orders. And then she took her husband's arm, and went solemnly downstairs.

Colonel Piercely was lingering in the hall, much at a loss what to do. Margaret had not yet appeared. The butler stood at the door of the dining-room, with Robert, not John Simpson, at his side. Patty knew that it was correct and proper for the party to assemble first in the drawing-room, but she waived that ceremony for to-night. She came downstairs very audibly, describing to Gervase what she intended to do.

"I can't bear the gloomy library," she said. "I don't mean to sit in it. We must have the real drawing-room made fit to live in. But all that will want a little time, and, of course, your dear papa must be consulted. I would not for the world interfere with his little ways."

"Where's father? ain't he coming to dinner?" said Gervase, breaking into this speech, which the audience for which it was intended had already heard, noted, and inwardly digested.

"No, Mr. Gervase. Mr. Dunning things as Sir Giles 'as 'ad enough excitement for to-day."

"Well," said Patty, "I don't think much of Dunning after his neglect, but he's right in that. I should have said so myself had it been referred to me. Early to bed and kept quite quiet—that is the only thing for your poor dear papa. Are we waiting for any one?" she said, looking round with majesty. *J'ai failli attendre*. Patty had never heard these words, but they were written on her face.

There was silence in the hall. Colonel Piercely had turned round from the engraving which he had been examining with quite unnecessary minuteness; but as he did not know either of the strange couple who by a sudden transformation had become his hosts, it was not possible that he could give any explanations; and the butler, who had not the training of a master of the ceremonies, and who had begun to shake in his shoes before that personage who, in her day, had drawn beer for him at the Seven Thorns—who had dismissed the great Parsons, and accused the greater Dunning of neglect—remained dumb, shifting from one foot to another, looking helplessly in front of him. He ventured at last to say, with trepidation, that "Mrs. Osborne, if you please, is just coming downstairs."

"Oh, Mrs. Osborne!" said Patty, and swept into the room. She stood looking for a moment at the expanse of the table laid with five places—one of them unnecessary. "I suppose I had better take my own proper place at once without ceremony," she said, with an airy gesture, half to Colonel Piercely, half to the butler. "And,

Gervase, as your father isn't here, you had better sit in his place. We must make another arrangement when Sir Giles is able to come to table. Oh, Margaret Osborne! Is that where she sits? And here she is! I don't say anything, for we are a little unpunctual ourselves to-night. But I must warn you all that I am generally exact to the minute, and I never wait for anybody," Patty said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It may easily be supposed that there was not much conversation at the table thus surrounded. Colonel Piercey and Margaret Osborne sat opposite to each other, but concealed from each other by the huge bouquet of flowers which occupied the central place; and neither of them, in the shock and strangeness of the occasion, found a word to say. They were both paralysed, so to speak, by the unimaginable circumstances in which they found themselves, overwhelmed with an amazement which grew as the meal went on. Gervase, in his father's seat, ate voraciously, and laughed a good deal, but said little. Patty was mistress of the occasion. One glance of keen observation had shown her that Mrs. Osborne's dress was not even open at the throat; it was not covered with crape. It was the simplest of black gowns, with no special sign of "deep" mourning, such as on the evening of a funeral ought to have been indispensable. If Patty had ever entertained any doubt of herself it now vanished. It was she who was fulfilling all the duties necessary. The others were but outsiders. She had secured triumphantly her proper seat and sphere.

"It is unfortunate for us, Gervase," she said, "to come home on such a sad day; and to think we knew nothing of all the dreadful things that were going on till we learned it all with a shock when we arrived! It is true, we were moving about on our wedding-tour; but still, if the house hadn't been filled with those as—that—didn't wish us well, we might have been called back; and you, dear, might have had the mournful satisfaction——"

"You always said, Patty," said Gervase, "that you would stay a week away."

"And to think of my poor dear mother-in-law looking for us, holding out her poor arms to us—and us knowing nothing," said Patty, drying her eyes—"as if there were no telegraphs nor railways! Which makes it very sad for us to come home now; but I hope your dear father, Gervase, if he's rightly watched and done for, won't be any the worse. Oh, I hope not! it would be too sad. That Dunning, who has been thought so much of, does not seem to me at all fit for his place. To think of him to-day, such an agitating day, with nothing to give his master! I shall take the liberty of superintending Mr. Dunning in future," Patty said.

Gerald Piercey and Margaret Osborne ate what was set before them humbly, without raising their eyes. They were ridiculously silenced and reduced to subjection; even if they could have encouraged each other with a glance it would have been something, but they had not even that alleviation. What to say! They were ignored as completely as if they had been two naughty children. Gervase, more naughty still, but in favour, took advantage by behaving himself as badly as possible. He made signs to the butler to pour him out wine with a liberal hand, and gobbled his food in great mouthfuls. "I say, Meg," he whispered, putting his hand before his mouth, "don't tell! she can't see me!" while his wife's monologue ran on; and then he interrupted it with one of those boisterous laughs by which the Softy was known.

"What is it?" Patty cried sharply from the head of the table.

"Meg knows—Meg and me knows," cried Gervase from the other end.

"I must request," said Patty, "Margaret Osborne, that you will not make my husband forget, with your jokes, what day it is. You mayn't think it, perhaps, for my poor dear mother-in-law was not very kind to me—but I feel it to be a very solemn day. And you may be very witty and very clever, though you don't show it to me—but I won't have laughing and nonsense at my table on poor dear Lady Piercey's funeral day."

What was Margaret to do? She could not defend herself from so grotesque an accusation. She looked up with some quick words on her lips, but did not say them. It was intolerable, but it was at the same time ludicrous; a ridiculous jest, and yet the most horribly, absurdly serious catastrophe in the world.

"The laughing seems all on your husband's side," said Colonel Piercey, unable to refrain.

"Oh!" said Patty, fixing upon him a broad stare: and then she, too, permitted herself a little laugh. "It's the strangest thing," she said, "and I can't help seeing it's ridiculous—though laughing is not in my mind, however it may be in other people's, on such a day—here's a gentleman sitting at my table, and everybody knows him but me."

"I don't know him," cried Gervase, "not from Adam; unless it's Gerald Piercey, the soldier fellow that mother was so full of before I went off to get married: though nobody knew I was going to get married," he said, with a chuckle, "except little Osy, that gave me—— I say, where's little Osy, Meg?"

"I hope," said Patty severely, "that children are not in the habit of being brought down here after dinner as they are in some places. It's such bad style, and, I'm thankful to say, it's going out of fashion. It's a thing as I could not put up with here."

"Send some one upstairs," said Margaret, in a low voice to the footman who was standing by her, "to say that Master Osy is not to come down."

"What are you saying to the servant? I don't want to be disagreeable," said Patty, "but I object to a servant being sent away from his business. Oh, if the child comes usually, let him come, but it must be for the last time."

"If I may go myself," said Margaret, half rising, "that will be the most expeditious way."

"Not before you have finished your dinner," cried Patty; "oh, don't, pray. I should be quite distressed if you didn't have your dinner. And you had no tea. I know some ladies have trays sent upstairs. But I can't tolerate such a habit as having trays upstairs: so for goodness' sake, Margaret Osborne, sit still and finish your dinner here."

Colonel Piercey moved his chair a little; he managed to look beyond the bouquet at Margaret, sitting flushed and indignant, yet incapable of completing the absurdity of the situation by a scene at table before the servants. Colonel Piercey had run through all the gamut of astonishment, anger, and confusion; he had

arrived at pure amusement now. The momentary interchange of glances made the situation possible, and it was immediately and unexpectedly ameliorated by the melodramatic appearance of Dunning behind in the half-darkness at the door.

"Mr. Gervase, if you please, Sir Giles is calling for you," the man said.

Patty sprang up from her seat. "Sir Giles? the dear old gentleman! Oh, I foresaw this! He is ill, he is ill! Come, Gervase!" she cried.

"Not a bit," said Gervase; "it's only Dunning's way. He likes to stop you in the middle of your dinner. There's nothing the matter with the governor, Dunning, eh?"

"There's just this, that he's a-calling for Mr. Gervase, and not no other person," Dunning said, with slow precision.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Gervase; I'm the same as Mr. Gervase. Come, come, don't let's lose a moment! Moments are precious!" cried Patty, rushing to her husband and snatching him out of his chair, "in his state of health and at his age."

Margaret and the Colonel were left alone, but the fear of the servants was upon them. They did not venture to say anything to each other. They were helped solemnly to the dish which had begun to go round, and for a moment sat in silence like two mutes, with the inexorable bouquet between them. Then Colonel Piercey said, in very bad French, "This is worse than I feared. What are we to do?"

"I shall go to my room to Osy before she comes back."

"I have no Osy to go to," he said with a short laugh. "What a strange scene! stranger than any in a book. I am glad to have seen it once in a way."

"Not glad, I hope," said Margaret. "Sorry for Uncle Giles, and all the rest. But she is not so bad as that. No, no, she is not. You don't see—she wants to assert all her rights, to show you and me how strong she is, and how she scorns us. On ordinary occasions she is not like this."

"You are either absurdly charitable in your thoughts, or else you want to throw dust in my eyes, Cousin Meg."

"Nothing of the kind; I do neither. It is quite true. She is not bad in character at all. She will be kind to Uncle Giles, and probably improve his condition. We have all had a blind confidence in Dunning, and perhaps he doesn't deserve it. She wants to get Uncle Giles into her own hands, and she will do so. But he will not suffer; I am sure of it."

"Poor old gentleman! It is hard to be old, to be handed from one to another. And will he accept it?" Colonel Piercey said.

"She will be very nice and kind, and she is young and pretty."

"Oh, not—not that!"

"You are prejudiced, Cousin Gerald. She is pretty when you see her in her proper aspect, and there can be no doubt she is young. Her voice is nice and soft. It is almost like a lady's voice. Hush! I think I hear her coming back!" Margaret rose hurriedly. "Please say to Mrs. Piercey, Robert, that I am tired, and have gone to my room."

"Let me come too," said Gerald Piercey, following her into the hall. "I shall go away to-morrow, of course—and you, what are you going to do?"

"I cannot go to-morrow. I shall have to wait—until I am turned out, or till I can go."

"I wish you would come with me to my father's, where you would be most welcome: and he is a nearer relative than I am."

"Thank you; you go too far," said Margaret. "To think me a scheming woman only this morning, and at night to offer me a new home, where I might scheme and plot at my leisure? No, I will do that no more: I will go to nobody. We are not destitute."

"Meg! will you remember that you have nobody nearer to you than my father and me?"

"But I have," she said, "on my mother's side, and on my husband's side. We shall find relations wherever we go."

He answered by an impatient exclamation. "There is one thing, at least, on which we made a bargain a few hours since," he said.

The lamp in the hall did not give a good light. It was one of the things which Patty changed in the first week of her residence at Greystott. It threw a very faint illumination on Margaret Osborne's face. And she did not say anything to make her meaning clear. She did nothing but hold out her hand.

Patty, meanwhile, had made her way, pushing her husband before her, to Sir Giles' door. She pushed him inside with an earnest whisper. "Go in, and talk to him nicely. Be very nice to him, as nice as ever you can be. Mind, I'm listening to you, and presently I'll come in, too."

The room was closely shut up, though it was a warm night, and scarcely dark as yet, and Sir Giles sat in his chair with a tray upon the table beside him. But he had pushed away his soup. His large old face was excited and feverish, his hands performing a kind of tattoo upon his chair. "Are you there, my boy? are you there, Gervase?" he said. "Come in, come in and talk to me a little. I'm left all alone. I have nobody with me but servants. Where's—where's all the family? Your poor mother's gone, I know, and we'll never see her any more. But where's everybody? Where's—where's everybody?" the old gentleman said with his unsteady voice.

"I'm here, father, all right," Gervase said.

"Sir Giles, sir, he's fretting for company, and his game, and all that; but he ain't fit for it, Mr. Gervase, he ain't fit for it. He have gone through a deal to-day."

"I'll play your game, father. I'm here all right," Gervase repeated. "Come, get out the table, you old humbug, and we'll throw the men and the dice about. I'm ready, father; I'm always ready," he said.

"No, no," said Sir Giles, pushing the table away; "I don't want any game. I'm a sad, lonely old man, and I want somebody to talk to. Gervase, sit down there and talk to me. Where have you been all this long time, and your mother, your poor mother, wanting you? What have you been doing? You can go, Dunning; I don't want

you now. I want to talk to my boy. Gervase, what have you been doing, and why didn't you come home?"

"I've been—getting married, father," said Gervase, grinning from ear to ear. "I would have told you, but she wouldn't let me tell you. She thought you might have put a stop to it. A fellow wants to be married, father, when he's my age."

"And who has married you?" said the father, going on beating with his tremulous fingers as though keeping time to some music. "Who has married you, my poor boy? It can't be any great match, but we couldn't expect any great match. I saw—a young woman: I thought she was—that I had somehow seen her before."

"Well, she's—why, she's just married to me, father. She's awful proud of her new name. She signed her letter—for I saw it—Mrs. Gervase Piercey, as if she hadn't got any other name."

"She shouldn't do that, though," said the old man, "she's Mrs. Piercey, being the son's wife, the next heir. If Gerald had a wife, now, she'd be Mrs. Gerald, but not yours. I'm afraid she can't know much about it. Gervase, your poor mother was struck very suddenly. She always feared you were going to do something like that, and she had somebody in her mind, but she was never able to tell me who it was. Gervase, I hope it is somebody decent you have married, now your poor mother isn't here."

"Oh, yes, father; awfully decent," said Gervase, with his great laugh. "She would have given it to any one that wasn't civil. She was one that kept you on and kept you off, and as clever as Old Boots himself, and up to ___"

Patty had listened to this discussion till her patience was quite worn out. She had waited for a favourable moment to introduce herself, but she could not stand and hear this description, so far beneath her merits as she felt it to be. She came in with a little rush of her skirts, not disagreeable to the old man, who looked up vaguely expectant, to see her sweep round the corner of the large screen that shielded him from the draught. "I must come and tell you myself who I am, Sir Giles," she said. "I'm Patience; and though, perhaps, I shouldn't say it, I'm one that will take care of *that*, and take care of the house, and see that you are not put upon by your servants, nor made to wait for anything, but have whatever you wish. And I'll be a very good daughter to you, if you'll let me, Sir Giles," she said.

The old gentleman had passed a miserable week. First his wife's illness, so dreadful and beyond all human commiseration, and then her death, and the gloom of the house, and the excitement of the funeral, and the neglect of everything that made life bearable to him. It is true, that his soup and his wine and whatever food was allowed to him were supplied regularly, and no actual breach of his comforts had occurred. But his room had been darkened, and his backgammon had been stopped, and there had been no cheerful faces round him. Even little Osy's company had been taken away. The child had been stated to be "too much" for him. Parsons and Dunning had held him in their hands and administered him, and they were both determined that he should do and say nothing that was not appropriate to his bereaved condition. The old man was not insensible to his wife's death. It brought into his mind that sense of utter desolation, that chill sensation of an approaching end, which is, alas! not more palatable in many cases to an old man than to a young one. And Parsons and Dunning both thought it the most appropriate thing for him to sit alone and think of his latter end. But Sir Giles was not of that opinion. His old life was strong in him, though it was hampered with so many troubles. He wanted, rather, to forget that death was waiting for him, too, round the next corner. Who could tell how far off that next corner might be? He wanted to forget, not to be shut up helplessly with that thought alone. And Mrs. Osborne, with all the prejudices and bonds of the household upon her, had not had courage to break through the lines which had been formed around her uncle. She had believed, as it was the law of the family to believe, that Sir Giles' faithful attendant knew best. And thus it was, that when the young woman who was Gervase's wife came boldly in—a young person who was not afraid of Dunning, a stranger bringing a little novelty, a little stir of something unaccustomed into his life—he looked up with a kind of light in his dull eye, and relief in his mind. "Oh! you are Patience, are you?" he said. "Patience! it is a queer sort of a name, and I think I remember to have heard it before."

Oh, poor Miss Hewitt, in her red and yellow bonnet! If she had but known that this faint deposit of recollection was all that remained in her old lover's mind!

"But I should like you to call me Patty, Sir Giles." She went down on her knees at his feet, while the old gentleman looked on in wonder, not knowing what was going to happen. "You have not got that bandage quite straight," she said, "and I'm sure you're not so comfortable as you ought to be. I can put it on better than that. Look you here, Gervase, hold the candle, and in a minute I'll settle it all right."

Sir Giles was so much taken by surprise that he made no opposition; and he was amused and pleased by her silent movements, her soft touch and manipulation. The novelty pleased him, and the young head bent over his suffering foot, the pretty hair, the pleasant shape, were all much more gratifying than Dunning. He thought he was relieved, whether he was really so or not. And he was contented, and the spell of the gloom was broken. "But I'm not to be settled so easy as my foot," he said. "How dared you to take and marry my boy here, Mrs. Patty, or whatever your name is, without saying a word to me?"

Mrs. Gervase Piercey, or Mrs. Piercey, as she henceforward called herself, walked that night into the great state-room in Greyshott—where Sally Fletcher awaited her, trembling, bringing Patty Hewitt's small wardrobe roughly packed in one small box—with the air of a conqueror, victorious along all the line.

CHAPTER XXIX.

COLONEL PIERCEY left Greyshott the next morning after these incidents. There was no reason why he should stay. Even old Sir Giles had changed his note when his kinsman took leave of him. Mental trouble does not keep its hold long on a mind which has grown weak with bodily disease and much nursing, that prevailing invalidism and necessity for taking care of one's self which absorbs every thought; and though the old gentleman was still ready enough to mourn for the loss of his life-long companion, yet he was easily soothed and diverted by the needs of that older companion still, himself. Besides, now that the funeral was over, there was no alarming prospect before him, no terror of being compelled to act for himself. He took leave of the

Colonel not uncheerfully. "Going?" he said, when Gerald appeared in his room to say good-bye. "I'm glad you could stay so long; but it's been a sad visit. Another time, now there's young people in the house, they'll make it more cheerful for you, eh? Don't be long of coming again."

Colonel Piercey, somewhat stiffly—which was his nature, for he had not the understanding of human weakness which brings indulgence, and he could not forget that a few days before the old man had begged him with tears to stay—answered that he was glad to leave his uncle so much better and more satisfied about his son.

"Oh," said Sir Giles, "about satisfied I don't know, I don't know; I can't tell you at this moment, Gerald. She speaks fair, but then she's on her promotion, don't you see? Anyhow, she's young, and perhaps she'll learn; and she's nice-looking—and speaks not so badly for a girl without education; not so badly, does she, Gerald? We'll do; oh, I think we'll do. She'll look after Gervase, and keep him off me. And that's a great thing, don't you see? Though when I think what his mother would have said—Lord bless me, I tremble when I think what his mother would have said. She never would have borne it. She would have turned the house upside down and made everybody miserable; which makes me feel that being as it had to be, it's perhaps better—better, Gerald, though it's a hard thing to say, that his mother went first, went without knowing. You will say she suspected; and I believe she did suspect; she was a penetrating woman; but suspecting's not so bad as knowing; and I'm—I'm almost glad, poor soul, that she's gone. She would never have put up with it. And now this one may make something of Gervase—who knows? It is a kind of anxiety off my mind. Time for your train?" the old gentleman added cheerfully. "Well, thank you for your visit, my boy; I've enjoyed it—and come again, come soon again."

Sir Giles was as much delighted to be free of his visitor as he had been to welcome him to Greyshott. And it was evident that he was conforming his mind to the new state of affairs. Gerald had meant to appeal to his kindness for Margaret, but he had not patience or self-command enough to say anything. He had no thought of the anxieties that dwelt in the old man's mind—the dreariness of his conclusion that it was better his old wife was gone: the forlorn endurance of a state of affairs which he had no power to prevent. A little more sympathy might have made Sir Giles' endurance take a tragic aspect, the last refuge of a sanguine and simple spirit trying to be content with the hope that something might still be made of his only child. But Gerald Piercey only thought with mingled contempt and pity of the facile mind, and the drivel of old age, things entirely beyond his sympathy or thoughts.

He had an interview of a more interesting kind with Margaret before he went away. "I wish you could leave as easily as I do," he said.

"So do I—but that would be impossible in any case. I have Osy to think of. I must not allow myself to be carried away by any sudden impulse—even if it were for nothing else, for my poor old uncle's sake. He is fond of Osy. It might chill his poor old clouded life still more to miss the child."

"Oh, Uncle Giles! I think you may make your mind easy on that point. It's age, I suppose, and illness. One thing is just as good as another to him."

"I am not quite of your opinion," she said.

"I think you are never quite of any one's opinion except your own," he retorted, quickly.

"Well, that's best for me, don't you think?" she replied, with something of the same flash of spirit, "seeing that I have, as people say, nobody to think of but myself."

"And the boy? Meg, you have promised me that you will think of what I said about the boy. He should want for nothing. He should have all the advantages education could give, if you would trust him to me—or to my father, if that would give you more confidence."

"It is not confidence that is wanting," she said.

"Then, what is it? It cannot be that you think I speak without warrant. My father will write to you. I will pledge myself to you—as if he were my very own. His future should be my care; his education, his outset in the world—"

Margaret stood looking at him for some time in silence, a faint smile about her lips, which began to quiver, the colour forsaking her cheeks. What she said was so perfectly irrelevant, so idiotic, to the straightforward mind of the man who was offering her the most unquestionable advantage, and asking nothing but a direct answer—yes, or no—that he could almost have struck her in his impatience. He did metaphorically, with the severity of that flash in his eyes.

"And how there looked him in the face
An angel, beautiful and bright;
And how he knew it was a fiend,
That miserable knight."

—This was what Margaret said.

"What do you mean?" he cried; "is it I that am the fiend, offering the best I can think of?"

"Oh, the angel," said Margaret; "and is it my own heart that is the fiend, that makes the other picture? Oh, God help me! I don't know. My child is my life. But there are things better than life, and that might be given up. Yet, he is my duty, too, and not yours, Gerald. Prosperity and comfort, and your great warm-hearted, honourable kindness; or poverty and nature, and a poor mother—and love? Which would be the best for him? We cannot see a step before us; and the issues are of life and death."

"It is better not to exaggerate," he said, with an almost angry impatience. "There need be no cutting off. You should, of course, see the child when you liked, for his holidays and that sort of thing. There's no question of life or death, but of a man's career for the boy, under men's influence, or—I know, I know! You would teach him everything that is good, and put the best principles into him, and sacrifice yourself, and all that. In short, you would make a perfect woman of him, had Osy been a girl; but, as he is a boy—!"

"Don't you think you're a little sharp, Gerald," she cried, "bidding me cut out my heart and give it you, and showing me all the advantages!" She laughed, with her lips quivering, holding her hands clasped, fiercely

determined, whatever she did, not to cry, which is a woman's weakness.

"Meg, you are a sensible woman: not a girl, to know no better."

This was his honest thought: a girl, young and tender, is to be spared, though her youth has the elasticity of a flower, and springs up again to-morrow; but the woman who has passed that chapter, whose first susceptibilities are over, is a different matter. He was honestly bewildered when Margaret left him hurriedly with a choked "Thank you. Good-bye. I shall write"; and thus broke off the conversation, leaving him there astonished in the hall, with his coat over his arm, and his travelling bag in his hand: for this was how they had held their last consultation, the library and dining-room being both full of Patty, whose presence seemed to occupy the whole house, and who now came forth, with all the airs of the mistress of the house, to take leave of her guest.

"Well, Colonel Piercey, so you are going? I hope it is not because of the circumstances, though, of course, with a death and a marriage both in the house, it isn't very suitable for strangers, is it? But I'm not one that would ever wish to be rude to my husband's friends. I'm told you were going, anyhow, and I hope that's the case. And I'm sure you must feel I'm very thoughtful," said Patty, with a little laugh, "never to disturb you in your tender good-byes! Oh, I can sympathise with that sort of thing! I told Gervase, 'Don't disturb those poor things; there isn't a place where they can have a word quiet before they part.' But I hope you'll soon come and fetch her, Colonel Piercey. You and her, you are not like Gervase and me: you haven't any time to lose."

"I have not the honour of understanding you, Mrs. Piercey," said the Colonel, very stiffly. "I must leave with you my farewells to my cousin Gervase."

"Oh, you needn't; he's here, he's coming—he wouldn't be so wanting as not to see you off himself, though you're only a third or fourth cousin, I hear. But as for not understanding me, Colonel Piercey, I hope you understand Meg Osborne, which is more to the purpose, and that you've named the day. Marriage is catching, I've always heard, and you ain't going to treat a relation badly, I hope, in my house. I'm sure, after all the philandering and talking in corners, and——"

"I wish you good-day, Mrs. Piercey," the Colonel said. He jumped into the dog-cart with an energy which even the quiet fat horse of Greyshott training could scarcely withstand, and, seizing the reins from the groom's hands, drove that comfortable animal down the avenue at a pace to which it was entirely unaccustomed. To describe the ferment of mind into which he was thrown by Patty's last words would be impossible. He heard the loud, vacant laugh of Gervase, and a cry of "Hi! Hallo! Where are you off to?" sounding after him, but took no notice. He was a man of considerable temper, as has not been concealed, and there could be no doubt that it would have afforded him considerable satisfaction to take Patty by the arms and shake her, had that been a possible way of expressing his sentiments. He was furious, first, he said to himself, at the insult to Meg; but it is doubtful whether this really was so much the cause of his indignation as he believed. The causes were complicated, but chiefly had reference to himself, who was more interesting to him at present than Meg or any one else in the world. That he should be accused of philandering and talking in corners, or of treating a woman "badly," even by the most vulgar voice in the world, had something so exasperatingly inappropriate and unlikely in it that he said to himself it was laughable. Laughable, and nothing else! Yet he did not laugh; he felt himself possessed by the most furious gravity instead—ready to kill anybody who should so much as smile. Philandering—and with a middle-aged woman! This, no doubt, gave it a double sting. It had never occurred to Colonel Piercey, though he was forty, to think of himself as on an elderly level, or to imagine any connection of his name with that of any woman who was not young and fair, and in the first chapter of life. I have always been of opinion that men and women about the same age, when that age has passed the boundaries of youth, are each other's natural enemies rather than friends. They have fully learned that they are on opposite sides. There is a natural hostility between them. If some chance has not made them friends, and inclined to forget or pardon the difference of their sides, they are instinctively in opposition. To marry each other is the last thing that would occur to them. Of course, I am considering natural tendencies only, and not those of the fortune-hunter of either sex, or persons in quest of an establishment. The man of forty seeks a young bride; the woman of that age, or near it, finds devotion in a young man. (I don't say seeks it—for all women feel this question of age to be fantastically important.) Gerald Piercey had reached the Greyshott station, and flung himself and his bags and wraps into a carriage, before he had begun to get over the sting of the suggestion that he had been philandering (Heavens, what a word!), and that not with a girl—an imputation which he might have smiled at and pardoned—but with a widow, a mother, a middle-aged woman! Indignity could not go further. The little barmaid, the wretched little tavern flirt who had seized possession of the home of the Pierceys, had caught him full in the centre of his shield.

It was not till long after, when that heat had died away, that he recurred to what he had at first tried to persuade himself was the occasion of his wrath—the insult to Meg. Poor Meg! whose growing old he had himself so deeply and absurdly resented, as if it had been her own fault—how would she fare, left in the power of that little demon? She could not go off at a moment's notice, as he could. She would have to wait, he remembered with a horrified realisation, perhaps for her quarter-day, for the payment of her pension, before she would be able to budge at all. And, then, where would she go?—a woman who had been accustomed to Greyshott, which, though it was not very luxurious or refined, was still, in its way, a great house. Where would she go, with her hundred or two hundred, or some such nominal sum, a year? And, perhaps, not money enough in the meantime even to pay her journey, even to carry her away! She was a hot-headed, self-willed, argumentative woman; determined in her own opinions, caring not a straw for other people's; refusing, in the most unaccountable way, an advantageous suggestion—a proposal that would have left her free, without encumbrance, to get as much comfort as possible for herself out of her very small income; an entirely impracticable, unmanageable woman! but yet—to think of that little barmaid flouting her, insulting her, was too much for the Colonel. His wrath rose again, not so hot, but full of indignation—a creature not worthy to tie her shoe! He seemed to see her standing there, against the dark panelling of the wall, in her black dress. And, somehow, it occurred to him all at once that the slim, tall figure did not present the usual signs which distinguish middle age. How old was Meg Piercey, after all? A dozen years ago, when he had been at Greyshott last, she was a girl in her teens. Twelve years do not make a girl of nineteen middle-aged. She had married at four or five-and-twenty—not earlier; and Osy was seven or thereabouts. Gerald found himself

unconsciously calculating like an old woman. If she had married at twenty-four, and if Osy were seven, that did not make her more than two-and-thirty at the outside. At thirty-two one is not middle-aged; the Colonel did not feel himself so at forty. To be sure, a woman is different; but even for a woman, though it may not be so romantic as eighteen, it is not a great age—thirty-two. And to be turned out of her home; and to be left with next to nothing to live on; and to be insulted by that vulgar little village girl; and to be set down, even by a man, a relation, one bound to make the best of her, as almost an old woman—at thirty-two! Poor Meg Piercey! Poor Margaret Osborne! The home of her childhood gone, and the protection of her married life gone. And her child! What was the difficulty about her child? Something more, perhaps, when one came to think of it, than merely being left without encumbrance, freed from responsibility! When one came to think of it, and to think how other women were, with their children about them, perhaps, after all, it meant more than that. Poor Meg! poor Meg!

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. OSBORNE realised very fully all the weight of the trouble which had fallen upon her, but it is to be doubted whether she would have liked that compassionate apostrophe to “poor Meg!” any more than other things which had fallen from Gerald Piercey’s lips; or, indeed, whether she felt herself so much to be pitied as he did. Nobody knows like ourselves how hard and how heavy our troubles are; and yet, at the same time, our own case is generally less miserable to us than it is to the benevolent onlooker. The moment it becomes our own case it somehow becomes natural, and finds alleviations, or, if not alleviations, circumstances which prove it to be no such extraordinary thing. We change our position according to our lot, and even in the self-consciousness of crime become immediately aware of a whole world of people who are as badly off, or perhaps worse, than we are, without the same explanations of their conduct which exist in our case. Margaret, seeing what had befallen her, and what was about to befall her, instinctively changed her own point of view, and felt, along with the necessity, a new rising of life and courage. The long consideration of what she was to do, though perhaps a painful and discouraging deliberation, yet roused all her faculties and occupied her mind. At thirty-two (since we have arrived through Gerald Piercey’s calculations at something like her exact age), the thought of a new beginning can never be wholly painful. None of the possibilities of life are exhausted; the world is still before us where to choose. Nevertheless it was a confusing and not encouraging subject of thought. Margaret’s education, such as it was, had been completed before any new views about the education of women were prevalent; indeed, it would not have mattered much whether these ideas had been prevalent or not, for certainly it never would have entered into the minds of Sir Giles or Lady Piercey to send their niece to Girton, or even to any humbler place preparatory to Girton. They gave Margaret as little education as was indispensable, entertained reluctantly a governess for her for some years, and had her taught to play the piano a little, and to draw a little, and to have an awkward, not speaking acquaintance with the French verbs, which was all they knew or thought of as needful. What could she do with that amount of knowledge, even now, when she had supplemented it with a great deal of reading, and much thinking of her own? Nothing. No school would have her as a teacher, no sensible parent would trust her, all unaware of the technique of teaching as she was, with the education of their children. And what was there else that a woman, a lady, with all her wits about her, and the use of all her faculties, could do? That was the dreadful question. Margaret did not fall back with indignation on the thought that its chief difficulty arose from the fact that she was a woman; for she knew enough of life to be aware that a man of her own class in the same position, trained to nothing in particular, would be almost as badly off. There were “appointments” to be had, she knew, for men certainly, for woman too, occasionally, but she was perfectly vague about them, what they were. And the idea of going out to an office daily, which was her sole conception, and on the whole a just one, of what an “appointment” might mean, filled Margaret with a bewildering sense of inappropriateness and impossibility. It would not be she who could fill any such place. It would be something different from herself, a shadow or outward appearance of her, impossible for herself to realise. Impossible—impossible! She knew nothing but how to read, to think, to discharge the duties of a mother to her child, to live as English ladies live, concerned with small domestic offices, keeping life more or less in harmony, giving orders to the servants, and smoothing over the tempests and troubles which arose from the imperfect execution of these orders—and looking after the poor. To do all these things is to be a not unimportant servant to the commonwealth. Life would go far more roughly, with less advantage on both sides, were it not for functionaries of this kind: but then their services are generally to be had for nothing, and are not worth money; besides—which makes the matter more difficult still—these services lose a great part of their real value when they are done, not for love but for money, in which case the house lady of nature changes her place altogether and goes over to another and far less pleasing kind.

These thoughts had passed through Margaret’s mind vaguely, and without any pressure of an immediate emergency, many times already in the course of her speculations as to the future for Osy and for herself. She had often said to herself that she could not remain at Greyshott for ever; that the time must come when she would have to decide upon something; that the old couple who were her protectors could not live for ever; and that the house of Gervase, poor Gervase, however it might turn out, would probably be no home for her. She had gone over all those suggestions of what she could do to increase her small income, and to educate her child, with a ceaseless interest, but yet without any sharpness or urgency, as of a thing that might happen at any moment. And there was always a vague ground of probability behind—that either one or other of the old people, who were so fond of Osy, might leave him something to make his first steps easier, that they would not go out of the world without making some provision even for herself, who had served them like their own child, and knew no home but under their wing. There would be that, whatever it was, to make everything more possible. She had not calculated on it, and yet she had felt assured that some such thing would be. But now all those prospects had come to an end in a moment. Lady Piercey had left no will at all, and Sir Giles was no longer a free agent, or would not be so any longer. The prospect was cut off before her eyes, all that shadowy margin gone, nothing left but the bare certainty. Two hundred a year! There are very different ways of looking at two hundred pounds a year. It is not very long since the papers were full of letters

demonstrating the impossibility of supporting life with honesty and gentility on seven hundred a year. The calculations looked so very convincing, that one rubbed one's bewildered eyes if one had been accustomed to believe (as I confess I had) that there was a great deal of pleasant spending for two young people in seven hundred a year. On the other hand, I have just read a novel, and a very clever novel, in which it is considered quite justifiable for a young man to marry and take upon him the charge of his wife's mother and sister on a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Clearly there is a very great difference between these estimates, and I think it very likely that the author of the latter is more practically instructed as to what she is speaking of than the gentleman who made the other calculations. Who shall decide upon the fact that lies between these two statements? I can only say that Margaret Osborne's conclusion was not to waste her time in efforts to get work which she probably could not do well, and which would be quite inappropriate to her, but to try what could be done upon her two hundred pounds a year. Ah! how many, many millions of people would be thankful to have two hundred a year! How many honest, good, well-conditioned families, "bairdly chieles and clever hizzies," have been brought up on the half of it! But yet there are differences which cannot be ignored. The working man has many advantages over the gentleman, with his host of artificial wants—but, alas! we cannot go back easily to the rule of nature. Margaret was not so utterly unprovided for as her cousin Gerald had remorsefully imagined. She was not destitute, as she said. She had laid a little money aside for this always-threatening emergency; and she had spoken to Sarah, Osy's maid, who, though reluctantly and on a very distant and far-off possibility, had declared it possible that she might undertake to do the work of a small house. "But, oh! I wouldn't, ma'am," Sarah had said, "not if I was you; you would miss Greyshott and the nice big rooms, and nothing to do but ring the bell." Margaret had laughed at this conception of life, and laughed now as she recalled it. But no doubt it was true. She was not very apt at ringing of bells, nor did she require much personal service—still it would not be without a regret, a sense of the difference—but that was of too little real importance to be thought of now.

Indeed, all these thoughts were as nothing to the other which Gerald Piercey, in his desire to help her, had flung into her mind like an arrow of fire. To carry Osy away to that cottage, to deprive him of all those "advantages" which, even at his age, a child can understand—Osy would know very well what that sacrifice meant when he had no pony to ride on, no great rooms to run about in, no obsequious court of flatterers ready to carry him on their shoulders, to give him drives and rides on nobler animals, to bring him dainties, and all kinds of indulgences. Osy had been the favourite of the house, as well as of old Sir Giles and my lady. He had been as free of the housekeeper's room as of the library. There was nobody who had not bowed down before him and sought to please him. The child, though he was only a child, would understand what it was to relinquish all these, to have a small cottage, a little garden, nothing outside of them, and only a mother within. At seven years old to have this brought home to him, was early, very early. He would not understand how it was. If he heard, even at that early age, that he might have had another pony, another household to conquer by his pretty ways, and all the usual indulgences and pleasant things, but for his mother, would Osy's childish affection bear that test? Would he like her better than his pony? And, oh! still deeper, more penetrating question, was she better than the pony, better than the larger upbringing, the position of one who is born to command, the freedom of life, the influence of men, the "every advantage" of which Gerald Piercey had spoken? Would she, a woman not very cheerful, and who must in future be very full of cares and calculations how to make both ends meet, would she be better for him than all that? She? What question could be more penetrating? "It would be better for the child." Would it be better for him? Sometimes it comes about that in the very midst of the happiness of life, with every sail full, and the sun shining, and the horizon clear, there comes a sudden catastrophe, and some young woman whose life has been that of the group of children at her knee, has suddenly to stop and stand by with dumb anguish, and see one and another taken away from her by kind friends, kindest friends! benefactors only to be blessed and praised! while all around her other friends congratulate her, bid her feel that she must not stand in the way of the children, of their real advantage! Is it to their real advantage? Is it better to be the children of kindness or the children of love? to be brought up in your own home or in another's? Oh, poor little mother; often you have to smile out of your broken heart and bear it! Margaret Osborne had but one thing in the world; but she would have done like the others, and smiled and endured even to be severed from that only possession, had she been sure. Who can be sure? She said to herself that love, and his own home, and the ties of nature were best. And then Gerald Piercey's words came back and stung her like fiery serpents: "A man's career, under men's influence, or—" Or what? A poor woman's influence, a woman who was herself a failure, whom nobody cared much for under the sun. Which—which would be the best for Osy? This is the kind of argument that tears the heart in two. It is full of anguish while it is going on: and after the decision is made, it lays up poignant and dreadful recollections. If I had not done that, but the other—if I had not sent away my child into the careless hands of strangers; or, on the other hand, if I had not been so confident of myself; if I could but have seen how much better for him would have been the man's influence, the man's career!

This was the war that Margaret was waging with herself while she had to meet the immediate troubles of the day. It was inconceivable how soon the great house was filled with Patty's presence, how soon it became hers, from roof to basement, how she pervaded it in all the rooms at once, so to speak, so that nothing was out of her sharp sight for more than two minutes. Mrs. Osborne had retired upstairs with her heart full when she left Colonel Piercey in the hall; but in the restlessness of a disturbed mind she came down again about an hour afterwards, partly to put a stop, for a time, to that endless argument, partly to write a letter which she had promised, to inform Lady Hartmore of what had happened, and partly, perhaps, out of that curiosity and painful inclination to hasten a catastrophe which comes to the mind in the storms of existence. It is true that she had made up her mind to leave Greyshott, but she could not do so as Gerald, a visitor, did, nor was she sure how she could best arrange her retirement with dignity and composure. She felt that there must be no semblance of a quarrel, nor would she make matters worse for Gervase's wife by allowing it to appear to the county that her first act had been to drive Gervase's cousin out of the house. She had decided to wait a little, to endure the new *régime* until she could quietly detach herself without any shock to her old uncle or commotion in the house. Yet it cannot be denied that Margaret's nerves were very much disturbed, and that she was conscious of Patty's entrance while she sat writing her letter, and felt her heart jump when that active, bustling little step became again and again audible. Margaret was seated with her back to the door,

but the sound of this step, returning and returning, betrayed to her very clearly the impatience with which her presence was regarded. And her letter did not make much progress. She foresaw the coming attack, and she did not forestall it as she might have done by going away. At last a voice as sharp as the step broke the listening silence of the room.

"Margaret Osborne! how long are you going to be writing that letter? The housemaids are waiting, and I must have this room thoroughly done out. It wants it, I am sure! Oh, take your time! but if you will let me know about when you are likely to be done——"

"I can finish my letter upstairs, if it is necessary," Margaret said, turning round.

"Well, I think generally that is the best way. The library's generally supposed to be the gentlemen's room in a house. I mean to have the drawing-room put in order, and to use that, as it ought to be used. But not just this week, and poor mother so lately buried. I don't know what your feelings may be, but I can't sit in a dingy place like this," Patty said. "Oh, take your time," she added, with fine irony; "but if you could tell me within half an hour or so when you are likely to have done——"

"I will finish my letter in my own room."

"If I was you," said Patty, "I'd write them all there in future. New folks make new ways. I am very particular about my house. I like everything kept in its proper place—and every person," she added significantly. "The servants can't serve two masters. That is in the Bible, you know, so it must be true."

"I do not think," said Margaret, with a faint smile, "that you will be troubled by their devotion to me."

"No; I suppose you have let yourself be put upon," said Patty; "because, though you think yourself one of the family, you ain't exactly one of the family, and, of course, they see that. It's not good for a houseful of servants to have a sort of a lady, neither one thing nor another, neither a mistress nor a servant, in the house. It teaches them to be disrespectful to their betters, because they know you can't do anything to them. I would rather pension poor relations off than have them about the house putting everything out."

"It will not be necessary in my case," cried Margaret, with a sudden flame of anger and shame enveloping her all over. "I had fully intended to leave Greyshott, but wished to avoid any appearance of—— any shock to my uncle."

"Oh, take your time!" cried Patty, with a toss of her head; and she called to the housemaids, who appeared timorous and undecided at the door. "Come here, and I'll show how I wish you to settle all this in future," she said. "Oh, Mrs. Osborne's going! You needn't mind for her."

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was not worth while to be angry. She had known, of course, all along, how it must be. There had been no thought in her mind of resistance, of remaining in Greyshott as Patty's companion, of appealing to her uncle against the new mistress of the house. It had not been a very happy home for Margaret at any time; though, while Lady Piercey lived, it was a sure one, as well as habitual,—the only place that seemed natural to her, and to which she belonged. Perhaps, she said to herself, as she went hurriedly upstairs, with that sense of the intolerable which a little insult brings almost more keenly than a great sorrow, it was better that the knot should thus be cut for her by an alert and decisive hand, and no uncertainty left on the subject. She went into her room quickly, with a "wind in her going," a sweep of her skirts, an action and movement about her which was unlike her usual composure. Sarah was alone in her room, not seated quietly at work as was her wont, but standing at the window looking out upon some scene below. There was a corner of the stable yard visible from one window of Margaret's rooms, which were far from being the best rooms in the house.

"Where is Master Osy?" Mrs. Osborne said.

"He is with Sir Giles, ma'am. I—I was just taking a glance from the window before I began my work——"

"Sarah," said Margaret, "we shall have to begin our packing immediately. We are going away." How difficult it was not to say a little more—not to relieve the burden of her indignation with a word or two! for, indeed, there was nobody whom she could speak to except this round-faced girl, who looked up half frightened, half sympathetic, into her face.

"Oh, ma'am, to leave Greyshott! Where are you a-going to?" Sarah said; and her open mouth and eyes repeated with dismay the same question, fixed upon Margaret's face.

"Shall you be so sorry to leave Greyshott?" said Mrs. Osborne.

Sarah hung her head. She took her handkerchief from her pocket, and twisted it into a knot; finally the quick-coming tears rolled over her round cheeks. "Oh, ma'am!" she cried, and could say no more. A nurserymaid's tears do not seem a very tragic addition to any trouble, and yet they came upon Margaret with all the force of a new misfortune.

"What is it, Sarah? Is it leaving Jim? is that why you cry?"

"Oh, we was to be married at Christmas," the girl cried, in a passion of tears.

"Then you meant to leave me, Sarah? Why didn't you tell me so? Well, of course, I should not hinder your marriage, my good girl; but Christmas is six months off, and you will stay with Master Osy, won't you, till that time comes?"

Sarah became inarticulate with crying, but shook her head, though she could not speak.

"No!—do you mean no? I thought you were fond of us," said poor Margaret, quite broken down by this unexpected desertion. It was of no importance, no importance! she said to herself; but, nevertheless, it gave her a sting.

"Oh, don't ask me, ma'am, don't ask me! So I am, fond: there never was a nicer lady. But how do I know as Jim—— they changes so, they changes so, does men!" Sarah cried, among her tears.

"Well, well; you will pack for me, at least," said Margaret, with a faint laugh, "if that is how we are to part, Sarah,—but you must begin at once; no more looking out of the window, for a little while, at least. But Jim is a good fellow. He will be faithful—till Christmas." She laughed again; was it as the usual alternative to

crying? or was it because there are junctures of utter forlornness and solitude to which a laugh responds better than any crying? not less sadly, one may be sure.

Sarah dried her streaming eyes, but continued to shake her head. "It's out o' sight out of mind with most of 'em," she said. "I'll have to go and get the boxes, ma'am, and I don't know who there is to fetch 'em up, unless I might call Jim—and the others, they don't like to see a groom a-coming into the house."

"Then let the others do it, Sarah."

"Oh, Mrs. Osborne! they won't go agin the—the new lady, as they calls her. Oh, they calls her just Patty and nasty names among themselves, but if you asks them to do a thing, they says, 'We wasn't hired to work for the likes of you and your Missus, Sal.' Not a better word from one o' them men," cried Sarah, "not one of 'em! They're as frightened of her already as if she was the devil, and she isn't far short. I'll call him, ma'am, when they're at their dinners; and, perhaps, you'd give him a word, just a word, to say as how you think he's a lucky fellow to have got me, and that kind of thing—as a true friend."

"Is that the office of a true friend?" said Margaret. It is a great thing in this life, which has so many hard passages, when you are able to be amused. Sarah's petition and the words which she kindly put into her mistress's mouth, did Margaret more good than a great deal of philosophy. She went away after a time to look for her boy and to tell her uncle of the decision she had come to. They were out, as usual, in the avenue, Sir Giles being wheeled along by a very glum Dunning, and Osy babbling and making his little excursions round and about the old gentleman's chair.

"When I am a man," Osy was saying, "I s'all be far, far away from here. I s'all be a soldier leading my tompany. I s'an't do what nobody tells me—not you, Uncle Giles, nor Movver, nobody but the Queen."

"And I sha'n't be here at all, Osy," said the old man. "When you come back a great Captain like your cousin Gerald, there will be no old Uncle Giles to tell you what you said when you were a little boy."

"Why?" said the child, coming up close to the chair. "Will they put you down in the black hole with Aunt Piercey, Uncle Giles?"

"Master Osy, don't you speak of no such drefful things," said Dunning.

"But Parsons said, 'She have don to heaven,' " said the child. "I like Parsons' way the best, for heaven's a beau'ful place. I'd like to go and see you there, Uncle Giles. You wouldn't want Dunning, you'd have an angel to dwive you about."

"Oh, my little man!" said Sir Giles, "I don't think I am worthy of an angel. I'm more frightened for the angel than for the black hole, Osy. I don't think I want any better angel than you are, my nice little boy. I hope God will let me go on a little just quietly with Dunning, and you to talk to your old uncle. Tell me a little more about what you will do when you are a man. That amuses me most."

"Uncle Giles, Cousin Gervase doesn't do very much though he's a man. He's only don and dot marrwed. I'm glad he's dot marrwed. I dave him my big silver penny for a marrwage present. If he hadn't been marrwed he would have tooked it, and a gemplemans s'ouldn't never do that. So I'm glad. Are you glad, Uncle Giles?"

"Never mind, never mind, my boy. Are you sure you'll go to India, Osy, and fight all the Queen's battles? She doesn't know what a great, grand champion she's going to have, like Goliath," said the old man with his rumbling laugh.

"Goliath," said Osy, gravely, "wasn't a nice soldier. He was more big nor anybody and he bragged of it. It's grander to be the littlest and win. I am not very big, Uncle Giles, not at pwsent."

"No, Osy. That's true, my dear," said the old gentleman.

"But I'll twy!" cried the boy. "I'm not fwightened of big men. They're generwally," he added, half apologetically and with a struggle over the word, "nice to little boys. Cousin Colonel, he is wather like Goliath. He dave me a wide upon his s'oulder; but when he sawed Movver tomin, he— Are big men ever fwightened of ladies, Uncle Giles?"

"Sometimes, Osy," said Sir Giles, with a delighted laugh.

"Then it was that!" cried Osy. "I touldn't understand. Oh, wait, Uncle Giles; just wait till I tatch that butterfly. I'll tatch him; I'll tatch him in a moment! I'm a great one," the child sang, running off—"for tatching butterflies, for tatching— Movver, movver, you sended it away."

"What did the little shaver mean by giving a wedding present?" said Sir Giles. "Where's my money, Dunning? have I got any money? If he gave my boy a wedding present, it was the—the only one. They'll come in now, perhaps, when it gets known; but I'll not forget Osy for that, I'll not forget Osy for that. Did you ever see a child like him, Dunning? I never saw a child like him, except our first one that we lost," said the old man with a sob. "Did I ever tell you of our first that we lost? Just such a child; just such a child! And my poor Gervase was the dearest little thing when he was a baby, before—. Children are very different from men—very different, very different, Dunning. You never know how the most promising is to grow up. Sometimes they're a—a great disappointment. They're always a disappointment, I should say from what I've seen, comparing the little thing with the big man, as Osy says. But, please God, we'll make a man of that boy, whatever happens. Ah, Meg! is it you? I was just saying we must make a man of Osy—we must make a man of him—whatever happens."

"I hope he will turn out a good man, Uncle Giles."

"Oh, we shall make a man of him, Meg! not but what, as I was saying, they're always disappointments more or less. Your poor aunt would never let me say that, when she was breaking her poor heart for our first boy that we lost. I used to say he might have grown up to rend our hearts—but she would never hear me, never let me speak. It broke her heart, that baby's going, Meg." This had happened a quarter of a century before, but the old gentleman spoke as if it had been yesterday. "You may think she did not show it, and looked as if she had forgotten; but she never forgot. I saw it in her eyes when she saw Gerald Piercey first. She gave me a look as if to say, this might be him coming home, a distinguished man. For he was a delightful child—he might have grown to be anything, that boy!"

"Dear Uncle Giles! You must try to look to the future—to think that there may be perhaps other children

to love." Margaret laid her hand tenderly upon the old man's shoulder, which was heaving with those harmless sobs—which meant so little, and yet were so pitiful to the beholder. "I wanted to speak to you—about Osy, Uncle Giles."

"Yes, yes," said the old man, cheering up. "Did you hear that he gave my poor Gervase a wedding present? that little chap! and the only one—the only one! I'll never forget that, Meg, if I should live to be a hundred. And, please God, we'll pay it back to him, and make a man of him, Meg."

"It was precisely of that, Uncle, I wanted to speak." But how was she to speak? What was she to say to this old man so full of affection and of generous purpose? Margaret went on patting the old gentleman on the shoulder unconsciously, soothing him as if he had been a child. "Dear Uncle Giles, you know that now Gervase is married, they—he will want to live, perhaps, rather a different way."

"What different way?" said Sir Giles, aroused and holding up his head.

"I mean, they are young people, you know, and will want to, perhaps—see more company, have visitors, enjoy their life."

Sir Giles gave her an anxious, deprecating look.

"Do you think then, Meg, that—that she will do? that she will know how to manage? that she will be able to keep Gervase up to the mark?"

"I think," said Margaret, pausing to find the best words, "I think—that she is really clever, and very, very quick, and will adapt herself and learn, and—yes—I believe she will keep him up to the mark."

"God bless you for saying so, my dear! that is what I began to hope. We could not have expected him to make a great match, Meg."

"No, Uncle."

"His poor mother, you know, always had hopes. She thought some nice girl might have taken a fancy to him. But it was not to be expected, Meg."

"No, Uncle. I don't think it was to be expected."

"In that case," said Sir Giles—he was so much aroused and interested that there was a certain clearness in his thoughts—"in that case, it is perhaps the best thing that could have happened after all."

"Dear Uncle, yes, perhaps. But to give them every chance, to make them feel quite at ease and unhampered, I think they should be left to themselves."

"I will not interfere with them," he cried; "I will not meddle between them. Once I have accepted a thing, Meg, I accept it fully. You might know me enough for that."

"I never doubted you, Uncle; but there is more: I think, dear Uncle Giles, I must go away."

"You—go away!" he said, looking up at her, his loose lips beginning to quiver; "you—go away! Why, Meg, you can be of more use here than ever. You can show her how to—how to—why, bless us, we all know, after all, that though she's Mrs. Piercey, she was only, only—well, nobody, Meg! you know—don't bother me with names. She is nobody. She can't know how to—to behave herself even. I looked to you to— Dunning, be off with you: look after Master Osy. I know it's wrong to speak before servants, Meg, but Dunning's not exactly a servant, he knows everything; he has heard everything discussed."

"Too much, I fear," said Margaret half to herself. "Dear Uncle, perhaps you have not considered that mine has always been rather a doubtful position. I am your niece, and you have always been like my father, but Gervase's wife thinks me only a dependant. One can't wonder at it—neither mistress nor servant. She thinks a little as the servants do. I am only here as a dependant. She will not take a hint from me. She will be better without me here. For one thing, she would think I was watching her, and making unkind remarks, however innocent I might be. It is best, indeed it is best, dear Uncle, that I should go."

"Go! away from Greyshott, Meg!—why, why! Greyshott—you have always been at Greyshott."

"Yes, Uncle Giles, thanks to you; dear Uncle Giles, when I was an orphan, and had no one, you have done everything for me; but now the best thing I can do for you is to go away. Oh, I know it, and am sure of it; everything will go better without me. You may imagine I don't like to think that, but it is true."

There was an interval, during which the old man was quite broken down, and Dunning, rushing to his master's side, shot reproachful speeches, as well as glances, at Mrs. Osborne. "It appears," said Dunning, "that I'm never believed to know nothink, not even my own dooty to my master; but those as comes to him with disagreeable stories and complaints, and that just at this critical moment in the middle of his trouble, poor gentleman, knows less than me. Come, Sir Giles. Compose yourself, Sir Giles. I'll have to give you some of your drops, and you know as you don't like 'em, if you don't take things more easy, Sir Giles."

"I'm better," said the old gentleman, feebly; "better, better. But, Meg, you've got no money—how are you to live without money, Meg?"

"I have my pension, uncle."

"A pension! what is a pension? It isn't enough for anything. Even your poor aunt always allowed that."

"It is enough to live on, Uncle—for Osy and me."

"Osy, too," he cried—"Osy, that I was just saying we must make a man of! You are very, very hard upon me, Meg. I never thought you would be hard upon me." But already Sir Giles was wearied of his emotions, and was calming down.

"I hope there will be other children to make up to you, Uncle Giles."

"What!" cried the old man, "is there a prospect of that? Are there thoughts of that already, Meg? Now, that is news, that is news! Now you make up for everything. Whew!" Sir Giles uttered a feeble whistle, and then he gave a feeble cheer. "Hurrah—then there may be an heir to the old house still. Hurrah! Hurrah?"

"Shall I say it for you, Uncle Giles?" said Osy. "Stand out of the way, Movver, and let Uncle Giles and me do it. Hurrah!" cried the little fellow, waving his hat upon Sir Giles' stick. "Now, Uncle Giles, hip, hip, as the men do—hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THIS was about Osy's last performance in the house which was the only home he had ever known. He did not know what he was cheering for, but only that it was delightful to make a noise, and that his old uncle's tremulous bass, soon lost in an access of sobs and laughter, was very funny. Osy would willingly have gone on for half an hour with this novel amusement; but it must be allowed that when he found the great boxes standing about in the room that had been his nursery, and began to watch the mysteries of the packing, his healthy little soul was disturbed by no trouble of parting, but jumped forward to the intoxicating thought of a journey and a new place with eager satisfaction and wonder. Everything was good to Osy, whether it was doing exactly the same thing to-day as he had done every day since he was born, or playing with something that he had never done or known before. He was much more perplexed to be kept upstairs after dinner, and not allowed to go down to the library, than he was by the removal from everything he had ever known. And when next morning he was driven away in the big carriage to the railway station, he was as ready to cheer for the delight of the outset as he had been, without knowing why, for Uncle Giles' mysterious burst of self-gratulation. All things were joyful to the little new soul setting out upon the world.

Patty, however, was by no means delighted with Margaret's prompt withdrawal. She felt herself forestalled, which was painful, and the power of the initiative taken from her. She had intended to play for a little, as the cat plays with the mouse, with this fine lady, who had once been so far above Patty Hewitt, and to whom, in her schoolgirl days, she had been expected to curtsy as to the Queen. Patty's heart had swelled with the thought of bringing down pride (a moral process, as everybody knows), and teaching the woman who had no money, and therefore no right to set herself up above others, her proper place; and it vexed her that this fine *rôle* should be taken from her.

"Oh, you are going, are you?" she said. "I hope it isn't on my account. When I married Gervase I knew all that there was to put up with, and more than has turned out. I knew I shouldn't have my house to myself, like most new married ladies, and I had made up my mind to all that. I wouldn't have turned you out, not for the world—however you might have been in my way."

"I am afraid I have a strong objection," said Margaret, "to be in anybody's way."

"Ah, that's your pride," said Patty, "which I must say I wonder at in a person of your age, and that knows she has nothing to keep it up on. You've got a pension, haven't you, that's enough to live on? It's a fine thing having money out of all our pockets to spend as you please; but I never heard that a pension was much to trust to, and if you were to marry again you would lose it all. And your boy to bring up, too. My father-in-law has a tremendous idea of your boy. I think it's good for him, in one way, that you are taking him away; for it's ridiculous to bring up a poor child like that, who hasn't a penny, to think that he's as good as the heir, and treated by everybody as if he was really a gentleman's son, you know, with a good fortune at his back."

Margaret smothered with difficulty the indignation that rose to her lips, but she said quietly, "You must disabuse your mind of any such idea. Osy never could be my uncle's heir. The heir of Greystott after Gervase—and, of course, Gervase's children—is not Osy, but Gerald Piercely, our cousin who has just gone away."

Though this was precious information to Patty, she received it with a toss of her head.

"I hope," she said, "I know a little about the family I've married into; but I can tell you something more, and that is, that it'll never be your fine Colonel's, for all so grand as he thinks himself; for it's all in father-in-law's power, and rather than let him have it he'll leave it all away. I wouldn't see a penny go to that man that gives himself such airs, not if I were to make the will myself to take it away."

"I hope," said Margaret, with an effort, "that there will be natural heirs, and that there need be no question on that point."

"Oh, you will stand up for him, of course!" cried Patty; "but I'd like you to know, if you're making up the match on that score, that it'll never come to pass. Me and Gervase is both against him, and father-in-law won't go against us both, not when he gets used to me. I'd rather see it all go to an 'ospital than to that man. I can't bear that man, looking down upon those that are better than himself, as if he was on stilts!" Patty grew red and hot in her indignation. Then she shook out her dress airily, as if shaking away the subject and the objectionable person. "Oh yes," she said, "natural heirs!" with a conscious giggle. "It's you that has gone and put that in father-in-law's old head. But I told him it was early days. Dear old man. It's a pity he is silly. I don't think he ever can have been much in his head, any more than—. Do you?"

"My uncle is in very bad health. He is ill, and his nerves are much affected. But he has always been a man quite—quite able to manage his own affairs. A man," cried Margaret, faltering a little with indignation and distress, "of very good sense and energy, not at all like—not at all—"

"Well, well," said Patty, "time shows everything, you know, and he's quite safe with me and Gervase; at all events, whatever comes after, his only son comes first, don't he? And me and Gervase will see that the dear old man isn't made a cat's-paw of, but kept quite square."

It was with a sensation half of disappointment, yet more than half of satisfaction, that Patty found herself next morning alone in what she called so confidently her own house. Alone, for Sir Giles, of course, was in his own room, and was much better there, she felt, and Gervase, so long as he was kept in good humour, was not very troublesome. To be sure, it cost a good deal of exertion on her part to keep him in good humour. He felt, as so many a wooer of his simple mind has done, the want of the employment of courtship, which had so long amused and occupied him. He could no longer go to the Seven Thorns in the evening, a resource which was entirely cut off from his vacant life, from the fact of having Patty always with him, without the exercise of any endeavour on his own part. The excitement of keeping free of his mother's scrutiny; the still greater excitement of fishing furtively for Patty's attention, making her see that he was there, persuading her by all the simple wiles of which he was master to grant him an interview; the alarm of getting home, with all the devices which had to be practised in order to get in safely, without being called to account and made to say where he had been—and inspected, to see what he had been doing: all this took a great deal of the salt out of poor Gervase's life. He did not know, now that he had settled down again at home, and all the annoying sensations of the crises were over, what to do with himself in the evenings. Patty and he alone were rather

less lively than it had used to be when Sir Giles and Lady Piercey sat in their great chairs, and the game of backgammon was going on, and Meg about, and the child rampaging in all the corners. Even to have so many more people in the room gave it to him an air of additional animation. Patty told him it was the library that looked so dull. "Such a room for you all to sit in," she said, "so gloomy and dark, with these horrid old pictures, and miles of books. Wait till I have the drawing-room in order." But it didn't amuse Gervase to watch all the alterations Mrs. Patty was making, nor how she was having the white and gold of the great drawing-room furnished up. The first night they sat in that huge room, with all the lamps lit, and the two figures lost among all the gilding and the damask, and reflected over and over again, till they were tired of seeing themselves in the big mirrors, Gervase felt more lonely than ever. Never had Patty found so hard a task before her,—not when she had to attend to all the customers alone, and keep their accounts separate in her head, and to chalk up as much as was safe to the score of one toper, and cleverly avoid hearing the call of another who had exceeded the utmost range of possible solvability. Never, when she had all that to do, had she found it so heavy upon her as it was to amuse Gervase. She invented noisy games for him, she plied him with caresses when other methods failed, she endeavoured to revive the old teasings and elusions of the courtship; but as Gervase's imagination had never had much to do with his love-making, these attempts to return to an earlier stage were generally futile. He could not be played with—made miserable by a frown, brought back again by a smile, as had once been the case. And Patty had more than the labours of a Hercules in keeping her Softy in order. There was no one to defend him from now, no tyrannical mother to be defied, to make him feel the force of the wife's protection. When Sir Giles was well enough to come to the drawing-room after dinner, the task was quite beyond the powers of any woman; for it was needful to please the old gentleman, to give up everything for him, to represent to him that his company was always a delight to his children. Poor old Sir Giles had winked and blinked in the many lights of the great drawing-room. He had been dazzled, but he had not been ill-pleased.

"We never used this, you know, in your mother's time but for company," he said. It was Gervase whom he seemed to address, but it was Patty who replied.

"I thought it would be a little change for you," she said. "A change is always good, and there's more light and more air. You should always have plenty of air, and not the associations that are in the other room."

"Perhaps you are right, my dear," the old gentleman said with a sigh. It was she who was "my dear" now; and, indeed, she was very attentive to Sir Giles, never neglecting him, doing everything she could think of for his pleasure. It was on one of the evenings when she was devoting herself to him, playing the game he loved, and allowing him to win in the cleverest way, that Gervase, who was strolling about the room with his hands in his pockets, half jealous of his father, calling her, now in whispers, now loudly, to leave that and come to him, at last disappeared before the game was finished. Patty went on hurriedly with the backgammon, but she was on thorns all the while. She had established the habit of sending off Dunning, whom she was slowly undermining, less for any serious reason than because he was a relic of the past *régime*; and, therefore, she was now helpless; could not leave Sir Giles; could not interrupt the process of amusing and entertaining him. Where had the Softy gone? to prowl about the house looking for something that might amuse him; to fling himself dissatisfied upon his bed and fall asleep in the utter vacancy of his soul? An uneasy sense that something worse than this was possible oppressed Patty as she sat and played out the game of backgammon. Then there ensued another dreadful interval, during which Sir Giles talked and wondered what had become of his son. "He has gone to sleep somewhere, I shouldn't wonder," said Patty; "the nights are growing long, and poor dear Gervase wants a little amusement. I was thinking of suggesting, dear papa (this was the name she had fixed upon Sir Giles, who had resisted at first, then laughed, and finally accepted the title with the obedience of habit), that we should both play, he and I, against you. You are worth more than the two of us, you know."

"Nonsense, you little flatterer. You've a very pretty notion of the game. I had to fight for it that last round. I had, indeed. I had to fight for my life."

"Ah, dear papa!" said Patty, shaking her head at him. "You are worth far more than the two of us! but it would keep us all together, all the family together."

"I don't like Gervase to play with me," said Sir Giles fretfully. "He's too noisy, and he has no sense; he can't understand a refined game. I shouldn't wonder if he had gone out to some of his old haunts that his poor mother couldn't bear. The Seven—. I beg your pardon, my dear, I am sure," the old gentleman cried, colouring up to his eyes.

"Dear papa, why should you beg my pardon? But oh, no! Gervase has not gone to the Seven Thorns. He went there for me. That makes all the difference. Why should he go back now?"

"My dear," said Sir Giles again, "I must beg your pardon. I didn't intend to make any insinuation. Of course it was for you. But it's a dangerous thing to acquire a habit, especially for one that—for one that doesn't, don't you know, take in many ideas at a time."

"I know him better than that. I know where he is, the lazy boy. But, dear papa, fancy, it is ten o'clock; your bedtime. Oh, how soon ten comes when we have a pleasant game, and in such good company! I suppose I must ring for Dunning now."

"Yes, you had better ring for Dunning. If I am a little bit late, and should have a headache or anything, he throws it in my teeth. We have had a very pleasant game, and I must say that for you, my dear, that you know how to make the time pass. Well, Dunning, here I am, ready you see, ready to the minute, thanks to Mrs. Gervase, who is a great deal more careful of me than you are, you surly old beggar. Good night, my dear; but tell Gervase from me that it isn't good manners to break up the party; but he never was renowned for good manners, poor boy," the old gentleman said, shaking his head as he was wheeled away.

And then Patty had a bitter moment. She went to the library, where he sometimes took refuge, falling asleep upon the old sofa, where he had lain and kicked his heels as a child; and then to his room, where he sometimes went when he was dull, to throw himself upon his bed. But Gervase was not to be found in either place. He came stumbling to the old door which opened on the yew avenue, late at night, and she herself ran downstairs to admit him—angry, yet subduing herself. He had resumed his old habit, as his father had guessed: the habit which had been formed for Patty, and which she had so sharply shaken him out of with a

power and mastery which she no longer possessed. Patty felt in that moment the first drawback of that unexampled elevation which she had attained with such unexpected ease. Had she married in her own class, the publican's daughter would not have been very deeply wounded by her husband's return on an occasion in such a plight. But when she stole down through the sleeping house and admitted the future master of Greyshott, and led him upstairs, hushing his broken speech and stumbling gait, that nobody might hear, Patty learned something which no other manner of instruction could have conveyed to her. She found that there were things that were harder upon a lady (such as she flattered herself she had become) than on a village woman. She coaxed and soothed him to bed, like a nurse with a child, that nobody should suspect what had happened; and she ground her teeth and vowed vengeance upon her father, who had dared to take the Softy in and treat him like this. And thus there arose before Patty a prospect which appalled even her brisk and courageous spirit. What if she should not be able to put this down summarily and with the strong hand? Then what would become of her hopes of winning a place in the county, and being acknowledged by all the great people as worthy to make her entrance among them? After the first unexpected triumph of becoming mistress of a great house and a number of servants, her ambition had risen to higher flights; and this was what that over-vaulting ambition aimed at. But what would become of that hope, or of many others, if the Softy, startled out of himself for a moment by his marriage, should fall back into the beerhouse society which suited him best? Patty fell from the height of her dreams when she saw that sight which is always a pitiful one for a young wife. She felt the burden of "the honour unto which she was not born" come down for the first time with a crushing weight upon her. Oh, it was not so simple after all—so easy, so pleasant to be a lady! She had begun already to forget that it was to Gervase she owed her advancement, and to feel the burden of keeping him amused and employed. Now she felt that the Softy had it in his power to mar that advancement still. She had cleared every hostile influence out of the house; she had got rid of every rival. She had conquered Sir Giles, and gained possession of the keys, and become the acknowledged mistress of Greyshott. What a great thing, what a wonderful thing, for Patty Hewitt! And yet she felt, in the bitterness of her heart, that it might be better to be still Patty Hewitt, with all the world before her, than to be Mrs. Piercey, of Greyshott, with that Softy to drag her down.

This was the first big thorn that pierced Patty's foot, and reminded her that she was mortal, as she was marching on in her victorious way.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PATTY had been triumphantly successful in the first chapter of her career. She had an easy victory over her father-in-law. She had cleared the house of everybody whom she disliked or feared. First, Mrs. Osborne, and with her—not least in Patty's estimation—Sarah, Osy's maid, who had been at school with her, and whom she was still more anxious to get rid of than her mistress. Then Parsons, who knew a great deal too much of the family to be endurable for a moment; then the one servant in the house who had ventured to be rude to Gervase's wife, John the footman: a dreadful example, whose sudden fate had exercised the most salutary influence over the rest of the household. It is true that Dunning still remained Sir Giles' attendant, against whom there were the same objections as against Parsons; but for the moment, at least, Dunning was indispensable, and had to be borne with. She stood, however, after the first month of her sway on the very top-gallant of success, supreme in the house, her word a law, the oldest and most secure arrangements falling to pieces at her will, the entire order of affairs changed to please her. Everything had gone as she desired, and no head had been lifted up in rebellion. The great wardrobes were full of fine clothes. She had shuffled off Miss Fletcher, the village dressmaker, and procured the finest and most highly cultivated maid that ever advertised in the *Times*. Lady Piercey's stores of lace and linen, and even her old-fashioned jewellery, which was much more valuable than beautiful, were in Patty's hands. She had realised all her dreams, and more than all. But there is nothing perfect in human affairs, and now the reverse of her good fortune began to rise out of the mists before Patty's eyes.

The first trouble of all was, perhaps, the cutting off of her connection with her home and origin. Her father had come to see her very early in her story, had been received in the half-dismantled library for a short angry conference, and left with a crimson countenance and a volley of muttered oaths, and had never come again. But there was another member of the family who was less easy to get rid of. Miss Hewitt made a call in state, in her most splendid costume, with a bonnet still more exuberant in red and yellow than that in which she had witnessed the funeral of Lady Piercey. She descended upon Patty at an early hour, when Mrs. Gervase was still profoundly occupied with the restoration of the great drawing-room, and made her way there, regardless of the opposition of the polite butler. "Perhaps you are not aware that I am Mrs. Piercey's own aunt," that lady said fiercely; "I shall go to my niece wherever she is. I have no fear of not being welcome." The butler knew, also, too well who the visitor was, and he trembled for the consequences of his weakness as she pushed her way before him into the room where the carpenter and his apprentice and a couple of housemaids were executing Patty's orders, under her close superintendence. The men were on ladders cleaning the long mirrors, the maids were busy with the furniture, while Patty, seated in a gilt and brocaded chair sat in state looking on. "Place that table in the corner, there, and these two chairs beside it. Not that, you stupid; the deep gentleman's chair on one side, and this one without arms on the other—let me see. Yes, that will do, with a palm or a great fern behind." Patty held her head on one side to contemplate the effect, while the two housemaids stood looking on, not yet so much accustomed to the new sway that they did not exchange a glance, a "la! much she knows about it," when her attention was called away.

It was, indeed, with no small start and sensation that Patty's attention was called away. She was sitting thus, with her head on one side, contemplating the group of furniture, perhaps imagining herself in the chair without arms, with a silken train arranged about her feet (when her mourning should be over, for Patty was, in all things, a stickler for propriety), while some grand gentleman, a viscount at least, leant over the table entertaining her from the depths of the "gentleman's chair": when there suddenly burst upon her consciousness a bustle at the door, a quick throwing open, and a voice which was harsh and jarring, but alas, how well known and familiar!

"Patty, my pet, here I am! That man of yours wanted to put me in a waiting-room, but I said, Where she is there I'll go; and here I am, my little lovey, and a happy woman to see you in your own house."

"Oh!" cried Patty, rising quickly from her chair. Her wits were so much about her, even in this great and sudden shock, that she refrained from saying aunt in the hearing of that excited audience—which was foolish, indeed, since all the housemaids and all the carpenters in Greyshott parish knew very well that Miss Hewitt, of Rose Cottage, was Mrs. Piercey's aunt, and far the richest, consequently the most respectable of her kindred. Patty could not say much more, for she was enfolded in the heavy drapery of Miss Hewitt's Paisley shawl, and almost stifled in her close embrace. "And bless you, all's ended as I said it would; and ain't I glad I was the one to help you to it?" Miss Hewitt said in her enthusiasm, bestowing a large audible kiss on Patty's face.

"Oh, dear!" said Patty, as soon as she could speak. "This isn't the place to receive any one in. Jervis, why didn't you show the lady into the morning-room? I can't talk to you here, with all the servants about."

"Don't blame the man," said Miss Hewitt; "I wanted to see you free, without stopping whatever you were doing. It's not as if I were a mere visitor as couldn't make allowances. I just like to see everything, and what it was like before, and what you're doing. I know you, Patty. They won't know it for the same 'ouse afore you're done with it. Well, this is a nice room! but none too big for what you'll want when you get things your own way. Greyshott won't know itself with all the doings there'll be."

"Oh, but I can't receive any lady here," said Patty. "Let me take you into the morning-room; it's where I always sit in the morning. I couldn't possibly sit and talk with a caller before lunch in any other place. If you don't mind I'll show you the way."

The butler held the door open with an obsequious air in which there was, as that functionary was well aware, an over-acting of his part—but that did not occur to the ladies who swept out, Patty in advance, and to whom it would scarcely have seemed too much if Jervis had walked backwards before them. He stayed behind to make his comment with uplifted hands and eyes upon the spectacle. "Lord, ain't she a-going it!" said Jervis. It was, perhaps, not dignified for a person in his position to unbosom himself to the housemaids and the carpenter; but how could mortal man keep silent in circumstances so exciting? The ladies went to the morning-room in another frame of mind, both of them putting on silently their armour for the inevitable battle. When they had reached the room which was to be the scene of it, Miss Hewitt flung herself at once heavily into an easy chair. "Well! I call this a poky little place," she cried. "You might have sent the servants away, Patty. I liked that other place much better. Morning-room! why it's no better than my parlour," she cried.

"It would only hold the whole of your house, kitchen and all," cried Patty; "and it's where I choose people to come," she added decisively, "when they've that little sense as to come in the morning, when *no* lady receives."

"Oh, that's how I am to be met, is it?" said Miss Hewitt, "you little ungrateful wretch! It was nothing but dear aunt, and how good I was, when you came to me to help you. Ah! you had to come to me to help to secure him at the last—and him nothing but a Softy. If I had had somebody to stand for me like I did for you, Miss Patty, Greyshott would have been a very different place, and you'd never have got your nose in here!"

"Well, Aunt," said Patty, "if those are your ideas, you can't wonder that I shouldn't want you. For if you had married Sir Giles, which I suppose is what you mean, and would never have let me get my nose in, you'll understand that I don't want your nose in. I wouldn't have said it so plump if you hadn't begun. Though I don't believe Sir Giles ever thought of such a thing, now I know him well."

"He's not a Softy, you see," said the angry old lady, with a snort.

"No," said Patty, sedately; "he's not a Softy. I should think he'd had a good deal of common-sense in his day. But I don't want to quarrel," she added; "whatever you may do. No doubt you've come about your money, which is quite natural. You shall have your money, Aunt Patience. It wasn't so needful as I thought it would be, for Mr. Piercey had plenty for what was wanted; but, of course, I'm much obliged to you all the same."

"Oh, Mr. Piercey: that's what you call the Softy now!" cried Miss Hewitt, in high scorn.

"It's what I always called him, and it's his name and mine too. I'm Mrs. Piercey, as the heir's wife, and not Mrs. Gervase. My father-in-law says so, and he ought to know."

"Oh, your father-in-law," cried Miss Hewitt, with extreme bitterness; "you've changed all your relations, I see. When it comes to a person to disown their debts and their folks——"

"I do neither the one nor the other," cried Patty. "You shall have every penny of your fifty pounds—and interest, if you like, with that. And everybody knows my folks," she cried, with a toss of her head. "Oh, no fear that they'll ever be forgotten. Father's been here with the smell of beer about him like to knock you down, and when I told him I couldn't bear it, what does he do but fling out of the house cursing and swearing, and letting everybody see."

"Well, your father is a trial," Miss Hewitt allowed candidly. "I don't wonder, Patty, as you were hurt; but so was he, and he won't come back no more, won't Richard. You can't, anyhow, my pet, have the same objections to me."

Miss Hewitt held her head aloft, and her golden flowers nodded and rustled. The complacency of her smile, and the confidence that in her there was nothing to find fault with, was too much even for Patty. She could not say the words that came to her lips.

"Well, Aunt Patience," she said, in subdued tones, "I am treating you just the same as if you were Lady Hartmore."

"And no more than is my due, Patty. I might have been my lady many and many's the year if I'd had an Aunt Patience as would have done for me as I've done for you. Has she been to call already? She's one as always respects the rising sun."

"No," said Patty, still more subdued, "she has not been yet—but that's easy explained, where there's been so lately a death in the house."

"And a good thing for you, too! If ever there was a tyrant of a woman— But I see you're in deep crape, Patty, to show your grief."

"I hope I know better than to show any want of respect to my mother-in-law. And I think, Aunt Patience, you might have known better than to come to a house that's in such mourning with all these colours on your head."

"My bonnet!" cried Miss Hewitt. She caught sight of herself in a glass, and bridled and smiled at herself, instinctively arranging the bow of red ribbon that was tied under her chin. "I never had such a becoming bonnet in my life; and as for mourning, there's nobody could expect me to put on black for her."

"No," said Patty, "and that's why I hadn't expected even a call from you, Aunt Patience, during the mourning—not being in any way a real connection of the house."

Miss Hewitt fixed her eyes very wide open upon those of her niece, and the two maintained a silent combat by that method for at least a minute. It was the elder who gave in the first. "If that's how you're going to treat your own relations," she said, "Patty, you'll not see much of me. And I can tell you, as well as if it had happened already, you won't see much of other folks. There's none of the grand people as you're looking for that will come near the place. The rector'll call because he's bound to, and because you was once his show girl at the Sunday School; and the new curate will call to see if he can get a subscription for something, but, mark you my words: nobody else—no, not a soul! and when you've bundled everybody belonging to you out of your doors, then you'll see who you'll have to speak to. I'm sorry for you, Patty, I am indeed."

"Are you, Aunt Patience?" cried Patty, with defiance. "When it comes to that, I'll send for you back."

"It's a deal easier," said Miss Hewitt sententiously, "to whistle folks away than to bring them back."

But after this there was a cessation of hostilities, and in the end Miss Hewitt was taken over the house to see all its splendours, which, as much as possible, she depreciated. She was the only witness of her elevation whom Patty had as yet had, and though some sacrifice of pride and spirit was necessary, a natural longing to impress and dazzle her world, through the means of some spectator, was still stronger. Patty went so far as to offer her aunt some of those pairs of silk stockings which Parsons had been counting when her new mistress fell upon her. "They're such good stockings," Patty said, "but miles too big for me." "If you think I'll wear her old cast-off things!" cried Miss Hewitt, purple with rage, flinging them back into the drawers from which Patty had taken them. "And my foot, if anything, is a little smaller than yours," she added, with angry satisfaction. But when the visitor lingered and at last betrayed her desire to be asked to stay for "dinner"—a word which came out unadvisedly, and which she immediately corrected, with a blush—"Lunch, I suppose you call it,"—Patty assumed very high ground.

"My dear Aunt! if we were by ourselves of course it would not matter; but dear papa always takes his luncheon along with us."

"And who's dear papa?" asked Miss Hewitt, with natural derision.

"I mean Sir Giles, of course; he's in very delicate health, and we have to be very careful."

"Sir Giles," said Miss Hewitt grimly, "has seen me before."

"Yes—he said so when he heard my name—he said, Where have I heard that name before?"

"Patty, you're a little devil; he knows a deal more than that of me."

"Ah, well, perhaps once, Aunt; but his memory's gone now; and to bring in a stranger to the luncheon table! Perhaps you don't remember," said Patty severely, "that my poor dear mother-in-law has not yet been a fortnight in her grave."

Miss Hewitt was thus got rid of, though not without trouble; but Patty did not find it easy to forget what she had said, especially when it came true to the letter; for week after week went by and not a step, except that of the doctor, crossed the threshold of Greyshott. Patty took her place in the drawing-room every afternoon, with everything arranged very cleverly, and looking as like as an imitation could be to the little *mise en scène* of a young lady waiting for her guests; but no guests ever came. At length, after much waiting, there appeared—exactly as Aunt Patience had said—the rector! accompanied by his young daughter, for he was a widower. The rector called her Patty in the first moment of meeting, and though he amended that in a confused manner, and gave her finally her full honours as Mrs. Piercey, it was difficult to get over that beginning, which threw his young companion into utter discomfiture. And then, to make matters worse, he delivered a little lecture upon the responsibilities of her new position and the difficulty of the duties that would come upon her. "You must not let your mind dwell on your disadvantages," he said kindly; "everybody, after a while, will make allowances for you." "You are quite mistaken if you think I want to have allowances made for me," said Patty, provoked. And what could the rector reply? He said, "Oh!" thus showing the poverty of the English language, and how little a man in such a predicament can find to say for himself; and then he began hurriedly to talk parish talk, and ask Mrs. Piercey's patronage for various charities—charities by which Patty Hewitt might almost have been in a position to benefit so short a time ago. "That's well over," he said to his daughter, wiping his forehead, when they went out of the gates of Greyshott. And he did not come again, nor she—not even the girl. And nobody came; and of all the difficult things in the world Mrs. Gervase Piercey found nothing so difficult as to explain to her grand maid how it was that no visitor was ever seen at Greyshott. The thing itself was bad enough, but to explain it to Jerningham was still worse. "You see we are still in deep mourning," Mrs. Piercey said. "Yes, ma'am," said Jerningham, with a sniff of polite scepticism. For a lady who, however deep her mourning might be, had not a single friend to come to see her, was more than Jerningham could understand. And Patty sat alone in her fine drawing-room, and walked about her great house, and spoke to nobody but old Sir Giles and her own Softy; and thought many times, with a kind of alarm, of what Aunt Patience had said. Had it not already come true?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THIS, however, was after all but a small matter; it was not actual misfortune. Patty, indeed, felt it much, partly on account of Jerningham and the other servants, who she felt must triumph in this non-recognition of

her claims; and also a little for herself, for it was an extraordinary change from the perpetual coming and going of the Seven Thorns, and all the admiration and respect which she had there, the jokes, and the laughter and the talk, which if not refined, were good enough for Patty Hewitt—to the condition of having no one to speak to, not a soul—except old Sir Giles and her own Softy, whose conversation clever Patty could not be said to have enjoyed at any time. It was very dull work going on from day to day with nothing better than poor old Sir Giles' broken talk, which was about himself and his affairs—not about her, naturally the most interesting subject to Patty. Many times she was tempted to go upstairs and sit with Jerningham to unbosom herself and relieve her mind of all the unspoken talk, and make a companion and *confidante* of her maid. Jerningham was a person much better trained and educated than Patty. She could have instructed her in many of the ways of the fine ladies which Mrs. Piercey could only guess at, or painfully copy out of novels; but perhaps, if her mistress had yielded to this impulse it would have been Jerningham who would have held back, knowing her place and desiring no confidences. Patty, however, also knew her place, and that to confide in a servant was a fatal thing, so that she never yielded to this temptation. But how dull it was! It is a fine thing to be the mistress of a great house, to have a large household under your orders, to be served hand and foot, as Patty herself would have said; but never to have a gossip, never a jest with any one, she for whom every passer-by had once had a cheerful word, to have nobody to admire either herself or her dresses, to envy her good fortune, to wonder at her grandeur! that takes the glory out of any victory. Would Cæsar have cared to come back with all the joy and splendour of a triumphal procession had there been nobody to look at him? Patty had succeeded to the extent of her highest dreams, but, alas! there was nobody to see.

That, however, was merely negative, and there was always the hope that it might not last. She took her seat in the drawing-room every day with perennial expectation, still believing that somebody must come; and, no doubt, in the long run, her expectation would have come true. But Patty soon had actual trouble far more important than any mere deprivation. She had been afraid of Sir Giles, over whom her victory had been easy, and she had been afraid of the servants, whom she had now completely under her foot; but she never had any fear about the Softy, her husband, who had been her dog—a slave delighted with his chains—who had desired nothing better than to do what she told him, and to follow her about wherever she went. That Gervase should become the only rebel against her, that he should escape her authority and influence, and take his own way in opposition to hers, was a thing which had not entered into any of her calculations—Gervase, whose devotion had been too much, who had wearied her out with his slavish dependence on her, how had he emancipated himself? It was inconceivable to Patty. She had felt sure that whatever happened she could always control him, always keep him in subjection, guide him with a look, be absolute mistress of his mind and all his wishes. The first revelation of something more in Softy which she had not calculated upon had come when she first found the difficulty of amusing him in the long evenings (lit with so many wax candles, surrounded with so many glories!). Then it was revealed to Patty that she was not enough even for that fool. Then it began to dawn upon her faintly that the Seven Thorns itself had something to do with the attraction, and the excitement of the suspense, and the restraint and expectation in which she had held him: all these adjuncts were over now; he had Patty all his own, and he did not find Patty enough. Was that possible? could it be true?

Perhaps there was something in the very ease of Patty's triumph that had to do with this. Had his mother lived, and had Gervase experienced that protection of having a wife to stand by him, which he had anticipated, it is very likely that this result would have been long delayed, if, indeed, it had ever appeared at all. But there was nobody now against whom Gervase required to be protected. His father had never opposed him, and now that Sir Giles was, like everybody else in the house, under Patty's sway, not even the faint excitement of a momentary struggle with him chequered the Softy's well-being. The consequence was that he, as well as Patty, found it dull. He had no one to play with him, he longed for the movement of the alehouse, the sound of the carts and carriages, the slow jokes in the parlour, the smoke and the fun—also the beer; and perhaps that most of all. It was hard work even when Patty was devoted to his constant amusement, for the Softy had no intervals; he wanted to be entertained all the time: and when she flagged for a moment, he became sullen and tugged at his chain. But when Sir Giles came on the scene, and Patty's attention was distracted and her cares given to the old man, offence and sullen disgust arose in the mind of Gervase. He would not join in the game, as Patty called him to do; neither father nor son indeed wanted a third in the game: and Gervase, duller than ever and angry too, went to sleep for a night or two, tried to amuse himself another evening or two with cat's cradle or the solitaire board—then flung these expedients aside in impatience, and finally strolled off, through the soft, warm darkness of the night, to the Seven Thorns. The Seven Thorns! it was poetic justice upon Patty, but that made it only the harder to bear.

Then there came upon Patty one of those curses of life which fall upon women with a bitterness and horror of which probably the inflictors of the pain are never fully aware. It would have been bad enough if this had befallen her in her natural position as the wife of a country tradesman or small farmer. Domestic misery is the same in one class as in another; yet it would be vain to deny the aggravations that a higher position adds to primitive anguish of this kind. The cottager is not so much ashamed of her husband's backslidings. In many cases they are the subject of the long monologue of complaint that runs through her life. They cannot be hid, and they become a sort of possession, the readiest excuse for every failing of her own. But that the young master should stumble night after night up to Greyshott; that he should be seen by all the neighbourhood drinking among the dull rustics at the Seven Thorns; that a crowd of servants should listen and peep to hear his unsteady step, and his boisterous laugh, and the stammerings of excuse or explanations, or worse still, of noisy mirth, bursting from him in the middle of the quiet night—was something more terrible still. Patty—on that first occasion, when, long after every one else was in bed, she stole downstairs to admit him by that little door near the beech avenue, to which his unsteady footsteps naturally turned—was horrified and angry beyond description; but she did not doubt she could put a stop to it. Not for a moment did she hesitate as to her power. It should never happen again, she said to herself. Once was nothing. Henceforward she would be on her guard. He should not escape from her another time. She did not even upbraid Gervase—it was her own fault, who had never thought of that, taken no precautions; but it should never, never, she said to herself, with, perhaps unnecessary asseverations, happen again.

Gervase, upbraided as in sport by his laughing wife for forsaking her, as if he had been a naughty child,

did nothing but laugh and triumph in reply. "Weren't they just astonished to see me!" he said: "your father opened his mouth like this," opening his own large mouth with the moist hanging under-lip. "You should ha' seen him, you should ha' seen him, Patty—like I was a ghost! 'Hallo!' said he, and 'Hallo!' said I, 'here I am, you see.' There wasn't one of them could say a word; but afterwards I stood treat, and we had a jolly night."

"And, oh, how you did smell of beer, you naughty fellow, when you came in!"

"Did I? Well, not without reason, neither," said Gervase, with his loud laugh; "a set of jolly old cocks when you set them going. We only wanted you there in your old blue dress and your apron."

"That you will never see again, I can tell you; and it isn't very nice of you, Gervase, wishing your wife in such a place."

"It's a good enough place, and it's where you came from," said Gervase. "But I told 'em," he said, nodding his head, "what an awful swell you have grown—nothing good enough for you. Didn't the old fellows laugh and nod their old heads. Ho, ho! He, he!"

"Gervase, dear," said his wife, "you won't go there again? you won't go and leave me all by myself, longing and wondering when you'd come back? I thought you'd gone and fallen asleep somewhere. I thought every minute you'd come into the room. You won't go again, Gervase, dear, and leave your poor Patty alone?"

"Why, you had father," Gervase said.

"Oh, papa; yes, dear, and I kept on playing to amuse him, dear old gentleman, and to keep it from him that you had gone out. If he had known where you were, it would have vexed him sadly, you know it would."

"It vexed them both," said Gervase, "when I went there after you; but I didn't mind—nor you either, Patty."

"A young single man has to have his liberty," said Patty, "but when he's married— You wouldn't have gone off and left me—your Patty, whom you said you were so fond of—in those days?"

"Ah," said the Softy, with the wisdom of his kind, "but I've got you now fast, Patty, at home waiting for me; so I can take my pleasure a bit, and have you all the same." He looked at her with a cynical light in his dull eyes. He, and she also, felt the strength of the argument. No need to please her now, and conciliate her in her own ideas about beer and the parlour of the Seven Thorns. She could no longer cast him off, or leave him in the lurch. Consequently, Gervase felt himself free to indulge his tastes in his own way, whatever Patty might think. She was struck silent by that new light in his eyes. He was not capable of argument, or of anything but sticking to what he had once said, with all the force of his folly. She looked at him, and, for the first time, saw what was before her. It had never occurred to her before that he had the strength to resist her, or that she could not call him to her like a dog when her better sense saw it to be necessary. A docile fool is sometimes contemptible enough; but a fool resistant, a being whom reason cannot teach, who has no power of being convinced! Patty felt a cold dew come over her forehead. She saw what was before her with momentary giddiness, as if she had looked over the edge of a precipice. But she did not lose hope. She sent next day an imperative note to her father requiring his attendance: that he either should resist or refuse her call did not come into her mind. "Come up to Greystott," she wrote, "at once, for I have something to say to you;" as she might have written to one of her servants. But Richard Hewitt was not a man who could be defied with impunity. He never appeared in obedience to her summons; he took no notice of it. He replied only by that silence which is the most terrible of all kinds of resistance. And it was not long before Gervase disappeared again. After the second catastrophe, Patty swept down upon the Seven Thorns in her carriage—an imposing figure in her silk and crape. But Hewitt was not impressed even by the sight of her grandeur. "I'll not refuse no customer for you—there! and you needn't think you can come over me," he cried. "By George! to order me about—what I'm to do and whom I'm to have in this house. It's like your impudence; but I tell you, Miss, I'll see you d—d first," the angry man roared, bringing his clenched fist down upon the table, and making all the glasses ring. Patty was cowed, and had not a word to say.

And then there began for the triumphant young woman an ordeal enough to daunt the stoutest heart. It was true that she had not, like many a wife in such circumstances, the anguish of love to give a sting to everything. Patty had used the Softy partly as the instrument of her own elevation; but his folly had not disgusted or pained her as it might have done under other circumstances. She had a sober affection for him even, as her own property, a thing that belonged to her, and felt strongly the impulse of protecting him from scandal and injury: more, he was so involved still in all her hopes of advancement, that she was as much alarmed for the betrayal of his bad behaviour, as if (like so many) she had feared the loss of a situation or work which brought in the living of the family. And it must be added for Patty that she did her very best to keep all knowledge of Gervase's conduct from his father. She sat and played his game of backgammon, inventing almost every evening a new excuse. "Isn't he a lazy boy? He's gone to sleep again," was at first the easiest explanation. But Patty felt that would not do always. "What do you think, dear papa? Gervase has taken to reading," she said; "I gave him a nice novel, all hunting and horses, and he got so interested in it." "He never was any good outside a horse himself," Sir Giles said, with a little grumble. But he was easily satisfied. He asked nothing more than to have his mind relieved from that care for Gervase which Lady Piercey had always insisted he should share. "He's got his wife to look after him, now," Sir Giles said, when Dunning hinted a doubt that Mr. Gervase was sometimes out of an evening. He was thankful to wash his hands of all responsibility. That apparent selfishness of old age, which consists very much of weariness and conscious inability to bear the burden, came over him more and more every day. Had such a thing been possible as that Gervase should have married a girl in his own position, and made her miserable, the good in Sir Giles would have been roused to support and uphold the victim. But Patty knew very well what she was doing. Patty had accepted all the responsibilities. She was able to take care of herself. He had his wife to take care of him, and to keep him off his father. Patty accepted her share of that tacit bargain honestly; and, as for Sir Giles, it must be said that he was easily satisfied—received her explanations, and gave her as little trouble as possible. He nodded his head, and went on with his game. Perhaps, if truth had been told, it was a relief to the old man when the Softy—strolling about restlessly from place to place, interfering with the play, calling off his wife's attention, always troublesome and always ungainly—was not there.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PATTY had been married only about four months, when an incident happened that brought this period of humiliation and trouble after her triumph to a climax. The summer had gone, the dark days and long nights of early winter had come back, and Gervase's almost nightly visits to the Seven Thorns were complicated by the storms and rains of the season, which, however, were rarely bad enough to keep him indoors. Had Patty been free to keep a constant watch upon him, it was her opinion that she could have prevented his continual escape into the night. She could have made him so comfortable at home. By moments she had visions of what she could do to reclaim her husband and satisfy him, if the dreadful restraint of the old man and his nightly game were withdrawn. Once or twice, when Sir Giles was indisposed, she had, indeed, managed to do this. She had brewed him hot and fragrant drinks to take the place of the beer, and exhausted herself in talk to amuse him. Poor Patty! she thought to herself that surely she must, at least, be as amusing as the old fellows in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. Many a woman has thought the same: a brilliant young creature, full of knowledge and spirit, and wit and pleasantness, might not she think herself as attractive as the dull gossip of the club? But it is a dangerous conflict to enter into, and the race is certainly not to the swift nor the battle to the strong in this respect. And Patty was not an amusing conversationalist. She knew the methods of rustic flirtation, and how to hold off and call on a provoked and tantalised lover; and she could be very lively in talk about herself and what she meant to do; but the first was no longer a method to be employed with Gervase, who was now brutally conscious of being Patty's proprietor; and he was not even so much interested in what she meant to do as he once had been. He much preferred the heavy jokes, the great guffaw, the half-mocking attention that was paid to himself in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. He was not in the least aware that the big laugh that went round, and in which he himself joined with a sensation of truly enjoying himself, was chiefly at him and his folly. And his freedom to do what he liked, to drink as much as he liked, and babble and maunder at his pleasure, was very sweet to Gervase: he liked it better than anything else in the world; perhaps not better than Patty if there had been a conflict between the two—but then, as he said, he had Patty all the same whatever he might do, and why shouldn't he enjoy himself when it was so entirely in his power?

But when Patty sat the whole evening through playing backgammon with Sir Giles, her ears on the alert for every sound, her hopes sometimes raised by a footstep on the stairs to imagine that he had not gone out after all, or her fears excited by some noise to the terror of believing that he had come back earlier than usual, and was coming in—like the fool he was, to betray himself to his father! it was not wonderful if she looked sometimes with a suppressed bitterness at her old father-in-law fumbling at his game. What good was his life to that old man? He could not walk a step without assistance. He was bound to that chair whatever happened. He had nobody of his own age to speak to, no one except people of another generation, whom he was keeping out of what Patty called "their own." "Oh, if the old man were out of the way, how soon I could put everything right!" Patty said to herself. Though she had indeed failed, and received a grievous defeat, her confidence in herself was not shaken. It was only circumstances, she thought, that were to blame. If she had things in her own hands, if her evenings were unencumbered, if she could devote herself to her husband as she had intended to do, let us see how long the Seven Thorns would have stood against her! And, oh, what good was his life to that old man! If he were to die, what a blessed relief it would be! Full of aches and pains, his nerves shattered, unable to keep from crying when he talked, unable to think of anything except his walk (walk! in his chair driven by Dunning), and his dinner, which was chiefly slops, and his cups of beef tea, and his drops, and his game at night, which he was allowed to win to please him! Poor Sir Giles! It was not, indeed, a very pleasing programme: but it is to be supposed that it did not seem so miserable to him as to Patty, for Sir Giles showed no inclination whatever to die. He might have thought, if he had been an unselfish old man, that he was a burden, that he kept the young people from enjoying their lives, while getting so little good out of his own—that if he were but out of the way Patty would be my lady, and free to look after her own husband and keep him straight; but he did not do so. She sat all the evening through, and said: "Yes, dear papa," and "How capitally you play!" and "What luck you have!" and "I am nowhere beside you, dear papa," smiling and beaming upon him, and, to do her justice, exerting all her powers to amuse him; but all the time saying to herself, "Oh, what good is his life to him! Oh, how can he go on like this, keeping Gervase out of his right place, and keeping me that I can't do anything for my own husband! Oh, that we had the house to ourselves and I were free to keep Gervase straight!"

One evening, Patty had been feeling more keenly than usual this keen contrariety and hindrance of everything. Sir Giles had sat longer than he generally did, sending off Dunning when he appeared, demanding an hour's grace and another game. He was in higher spirits than usual. "Come, Patty," he said, "you're not tired. Have your revenge and give me a good beating. I'm in high feather to-night. I don't care that! for Dunning. Come back in an hour, and perhaps I'll go to bed."

"'Alf an hour, Sir Giles: and that's too long," Dunning said.

"Half an hour, dear papa—you must not really tempt Providence by staying any longer," said Mrs. Gervase. "Have my revenge? Oh, no! but I'll give you another chance of beating me all to atoms. Isn't Sir Giles well to-night, Dunning? He looks ten years younger."

"He's excited with all that play," said Dunning. "I don't 'old with so much backgammon. If he's ill in the morning I wash my hands of it. He knows well enough hisself he didn't ought to be so late."

"The white for me as usual," said Sir Giles. "I'm a sad, selfish, old fellow, always appropriating the winning colour, eh, Patty? Never mind, you are coming on beautifully—you play a very pretty little game. I'm training you to beat myself, my dear, if not to-night, well, some other night. Come along, don't let's waste any time if that old curmudgeon gives us only half an hour."

Patty drew her chair to the table again with her most smiling aspect. "Here I am, dear papa," she said. The renovated drawing-room, if it was, perhaps, in the taste of a past time and a little heavy and ungraceful, was a handsome room, abundantly lighted, with an atmosphere of warmth and luxurious comfort; and Patty in her black silk, with her hair carefully dressed *à la* Jerningham, and her dress from a fashionable mantua-maker, recommended by that accomplished attendant—was as good an imitation of what a lady at home ought to be, as it would be easy to find; and as she sat there ministering to her old father-in-law, keeping him

in comfort and good humour, giving up her time and her attention to play over again the same monotonous unending game—the picture, both moral and physical, was one that would have gained the admiration of any spectator. But as she drew her chair again towards the table, there flashed across Patty's mind a remembrance of another scene: the parlour at the Seven Thorns full of a cloud of smoke and a smell of beer; the rustic customers, with their slow talk, holding forth each to his neighbour, calling with knocks upon the floor and table for further supplies; while she, Patty, the same girl, hastened to see what was wanted, and to bring them what they called for—she, Mrs. Piercey, the wife of the heir of Greystott, the mistress of all this great house! And it was only four months ago. How clearly she saw that scene! The same thing would be going on to-night while she played backgammon with Sir Giles, and smiled, and talked to her dear papa—and with a thrill of mingled rage, vexation, and anxiety, Patty felt herself deserted and her husband there! It gave her a pang which was all the more keen from her confidence in what she could do, and her sense of the bondage which prevented her from doing it. Oh, why should this old man go on with his cackle and his dice, and his life which was no good to any one? Why, why couldn't he die and set her free? "Here I am, dear papa," she said.

"Perhaps that sleepy fellow, Gervase, will wake up and appear before we've done," said Sir Giles. "I wouldn't humour him too much, my dear. It's one thing to be devoted to your husband, and another thing to let him muddle his brains away. He sleeps a great deal too much, that's my opinion. He's not too bright at the best of times, and if you let him drowse about like this it'll do him harm—it'll do him harm. I don't see that he gets up any earlier in the morning for sleeping like this at night. His poor mother would never have permitted it. Sixes, my dear. No, no, you mustn't humour him too much."

"What luck you have, dear papa! Oh, yes, I know, I know, he's humoured too much. But some need more sleep than others: and don't you think, on the whole, it does him good? His mind comes out so much; he's so sensible when you talk to him. I couldn't wish for better advice than Gervase gives."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so, my dear; there's a great deal in him, poor boy; I always said so; more than anybody knows. But I wouldn't let him sleep like that. What, Dunning, you old rascal, here again already? It can't be half an hour yet."

"Oh, yes, dear papa," said Patty, "it is the half-hour; and that last throw has quite made an end of me. Good-night, and I hope you'll sleep well. And I'll go, as you say, and wake up that lazy boy. He *is* a lazy boy. But I'll try and break him of it now you've told me. I thought it was best to humour him. But I'll break him of it, now I know what you think."

"Do, my dear, do!" said Sir Giles, nodding his head at her as he was wheeled away. Dunning gave Mrs. Gervase a look behind his master's chair. Ah, you may keep such a secret from those whom it affects most, but to keep it from the servants is more than any one can do! Dunning knew well enough where Gervase was. He knew how Gervase returned home, at what hour, and in what condition. Dunning, in addition, thought he knew that it was Patty's doing, part of some deep-laid scheme of hers, and could not divine that the poor young woman's heart was beating under that fine gown with terror and anxiety. She gave a little gasp of relief when the sound of Sir Giles' chair died away, and his door was closed audibly. And then she rang to have the lights put out, telling the butler that Sir Giles and Mr. Piercey had both gone to bed; and then Patty, heroic as any martyr, placed herself under Jerningham's hands to have her hair brushed, going through all the routine that nobody might think from her demeanour that anything was wrong. She was quivering with anxiety in every limb when she sent the maid away; and then, in her dressing-gown, stole downstairs to open the side door, and strain her ears for the heavy footstep stumbling through the blackness of the night.

Poor Patty! what thoughts went through her mind as she kept that vigil! Fury and determination to do something desperate, to stop it at all hazards—and that this should be the last time, the very last! She would take him by the shoulder and shake the very life out of him rather than that this should go on. She would fling herself at his feet and implore him—alas, Patty knew very well that to implore and to threaten were alike useless, and that the fool would only open his moist mouth and laugh in her face. What could she do? what could she do? She would make an appeal to her father, she would threaten him with the loss of his licence, she would bribe him with all the money she could scrape together, she did not know what she would not do—but to bear this longer was impossible! And then she fell into a dreary calm, and thought over all that had happened, her wonderful triumph, the change in everything, the contrast. And yet what advance had she made if she never, never could separate herself from the Seven Thorns? Whether it was she who was there or her husband, what did it matter? Who would ever acknowledge them or give them their own place if this were to go on? Oh, if these county people had but done as they ought, if they had but shown themselves friendly and taken some notice of the young pair, people who had known Gervase all his life, and ought to have felt for him! Patty shed a few hot tears over the unkindness of the world, and then, as is so natural, her mind went back upon her own hopes, and the ideal she had formed of her life which, as yet, was so little realised. She had thought of herself as driving about the country, paying visits at those grand houses which had been to her as the abodes of the blest; her husband at her side, well-dressed and well set up, with everybody saying how much he had improved! And invitations raining upon them, and fortune smiling everywhere. Sir Gervase and Lady Piercey! how delightfully it had seemed to sound in her fortunate ears! To be sure all this could not be realised until poor old Sir Giles had been fully convinced that it was not for his advantage to live any longer; but that might have happened any day. Oh, if he could but be convinced of it now, and leave her free to care for her husband! Was not Gervase her first duty? Why should this old man go on living, keeping his son out of his own?

And then Patty's mind went back to the Seven Thorns, that place from which it appeared she could not get free. She saw herself there before anything was yet settled, while all her life was before her. As she sat alone and shivered and listened, the image of Patty, light-hearted and free, came up before her like a picture. How busy she had been, how everybody had admired her, even the old fellows in the parlour! And the young ones, how they had watched for a word with her, and some had almost come to blows! Roger, for instance, who had made so much fun of the Softy, who had looked such a gallant fellow in his brown velveteen coat and his red tie! She remembered how he had appealed to her not to do it, not to bind herself to a fool. The impudent fellow! to talk so of Gervase—Sir Gervase Piercey that was soon to be! Oh, poor Gervase, poor

Gervase! he was not, perhaps, very wise, but he could still be set right again and kept straight if she were but free to give herself up altogether to the care of him. Roger Pearson could never have been anything but a country fellow living in a cottage. It was true that he was handsome, and all that. Patty seemed to see him, too, though she did not wish it, with the light in his eyes, looking at her with his air of mastery, the Adonis of the village. Every girl in the place had wanted Roger, but he had eyes for only her. Why did he come before her now? She did not want to see him or to think of him—far from that. There was not a fibre of the wanton in Patty's nature. She had no understanding of the women who, with husbands of their own, could think of any other man. And if she had the choice to make over again, she knew that she would do the same; but still she could not help thinking of Roger Pearson, though she had no idea why.

This effect, however, was shortly after explained to her in the most trying way. The night grew darker and darker, and colder and colder. The Seven Thorns must have been closed long ago, and all its revellers dispersed to their homes. What could have happened to Gervase? where could he have gone? Could he have taken so much that he was made to stay there, as unable to take care of himself, a thing which Patty could remember to have happened in her time? She became afraid to look at her watch or to listen to a clock, in the sickness of her heart. It was impossible but that he must have reached home long ago had he left the Seven Thorns in the natural way. Oh, where was he? where was he? Where had he gone? what had happened to him? Patty dared not go upstairs to bed, even when she was convinced that he could not be coming now; for her father, she was sure, would turn him out in the early morning if this was what had happened. Yet how could she remain up, and on the watch, when the servants would be stirring, revealing what had happened to the whole household? Patty is, perhaps, not a person for whom to appeal to the reader's sympathies, but she was very unhappy, very anxious, not knowing what to think.

At last, in the blackest hour of the night, about three o'clock or so in the morning, her anxious ear heard, or seemed to hear, a faint sound. Steps, and then a pause, and then steps again, and the sound of the little side gate in the beech avenue pushed open. Patty was immediately on the alert, with unspeakable relief in her mind. But the sounds were not those of one man stumbling home. Sometimes there was a noise as of something being tugged along the grass, then another stop, and the steps again making the gravel fly, and then the sound as of a fall. In her terror she stole out into the darkness, fearing she knew not what, and at last, by faint perception through the gloom, by sound, and by almost contact in the stifling dark, perceived how it was—her husband, scarcely conscious, being dragged and hustled along through the dark by another man.

"Is it you, Gervase? oh, is it you, Gervase?" she cried.

Oh, poor Patty! is there any one so hard-hearted as to refuse to pity her in her misery? The voice that answered her out of the blackness of the night was not that of Gervase. He uttered no sound but that of heavy breath. Yet it was a well-known voice, a voice that made her heart jump to her throat with intolerable horror, anger, and shame—to hear how sober, manful, energetic, and capable it was.

"There's nothing wrong with him," it said, clearly and quickly, "except that he's drunk. Show a light and I'll get him in. I've had such a job, but I'll manage now; only for goodness' sake look sharp and show a light."

It was the voice of Roger Pearson, whom she had been thinking of, whose presence had sent some subtle intimation through the air to bring him to her thoughts.

Patty hurried back to the open door and brought out the candle, which burned steadily in the motionless blackness of the air. She said not a word. Of the pang it gave her to see the man whom she had rejected bringing back the man whom she had married she gave no sign. If she could have covered her face that he might not see her, she would have done so; but that being impossible, Patty never flinched. She held the light to direct him, while now and then roused to take a step of his own accord, but generally dragged by the other, Gervase was got in. She led the way to the library, which was on the same level, stepping with precaution not to be heard, shading the light with her hand, with all her wits about her. There was not a tinge of colour on Patty's face. She was cold, shivering with excitement and distress. It was not till Gervase had been laid upon the sofa that she spoke.

"I am sorry you have had this trouble," she said. "I hope you have not over-strained yourself with such a weight. Can I get you anything?" She looked at him courageously in the face. It was right to offer a man something who had brought, even were it only a strayed dog, home.

And he, too, looked at her, and for a moment said nothing. He stretched his arms to relax them.

"I'm not a man that cares for the stuff," he said, "but perhaps I'd be none the worse for a drop of brandy to take off the strain. He's safe enough there," he added. "You needn't be anxious. He'll wake up before the daylight, and then you can get him upstairs."

Patty did not say a word, but led the way to the dining-room, where there was brandy to be got. It was a thing any lady might have done, she said to herself, even through the wild beating of her heart, and the passion in her breast—the passion of rage, and exasperation, and shame. He was cool enough, thinking more of stretching and twisting himself to ease his muscles than of the silent anguish in which she was. When he had swallowed the brandy he advised her, with rough friendliness, "Take a little yourself. It's hard on you; you want something to give you a little strength!"

"Will you take any more?" said Patty, sharply.

"No, I don't want no more. It's awful good stuff; it runs through a man like fire. I'd been at a bit of an 'op over there by Coulter's Mill, and I nigh fell over him lying out on the moor. He might have got his death; so when I saw who it was, I thought I'd best bring him home. But he'll take no harm; the drink that's in him will keep the cold out."

"I am much obliged to you," said Patty. "If there's any reward you'd take——"

"Meaning money?" he said, with a suppressed roar of a laugh. "No, I won't take no money. I might say something nasty to you after that, but I won't neither. It ain't very nice for you, poor girl, to have your man brought home in that state by your old sweetheart. I feel for you; but you always had a sharp tongue, and you never would give in. I advise you to take more care of the Softy now you've got him back," he said as he went away.

Patty shut and locked the door with an energy of rage and humiliation which almost overcame the horror of being heard. And then she went into the library and sat beside her husband till he had sufficiently recovered from his stupor to be taken upstairs. What hours of vigil! All the sins of her triumph might have been expiated while she sat there and shivered through the miserable night.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PATTY had thoughts enough, surely, to occupy her that night, but it is doubtful whether there were any that came into her mind with the same reality—repeated again and again, as if by accident the recollection had been blown back upon her by a sudden wind—as those careless words uttered by Pearson when he had described how he had found Gervase: "I had been at a little hop at Coulter's Mill;" he said 'op, but though Patty had never used that manner of speech herself it did not hurt her. A little hop at Coulter's Mill. Such things were going on while she was shut up in the dismal grandeur of Greyshott. Girls were whirling round with their partners, receiving their attentions, which, though they might be rough and not very refined, were all that Patty knew of those delights of youth; while she, Patty, whom they all envied, who was now so far above them, sat and played backgammon with an old dotard, or watched half the night for her Softy's return. There were still such things, and Roger Pearson went to them! Patty had a soft place in her heart for Roger; she wished him no harm, and it might very well have been, had not Gervase and ambition come across her path, that she should have been his wife; and though she wished him nothing but good, Patty did hope that she had more or less broken his heart. She thought he would never have wished to go to those sort of places again, where every tune that was played and every dance would remind him of her. His careless speech took her, therefore, full in the breast, with a stupefying surprise. And he did not say it as if it was anything wonderful, but only as the calm ordinary of life, "I'd been at a little 'op at Coulter's Mill." And he was returning about two o'clock in the morning, which showed that he had amused himself well. Could such things be, and she out of them all? Every time this thought crossed her mind it gave her a new shock. It seemed almost impossible that such things could be.

But at all events, it was a comfort that Gervase at last was roused and got safely to his room before the servants were stirring, which it had been Patty's fear would not be possible. She had made up her story what to say in case she had been surprised by the early housemaid. She meant to keep the door closed, and to say that Mr. Piercey had been ill in the night and could not sleep, and now had fallen asleep on the sofa, and must not be disturbed. Happily, however, it was not necessary to burden her conscience with this additional fib. She got him upstairs safely, and to bed, and lay down herself upon the sofa with great relief. What a night! while all the girls who had been at the dance at Coulter's Mill would still be sleeping soundly, and if they ever thought of Patty, would think of her with such envy! Poor Patty, she was very brave. She snatched a little sleep, and was refreshed before Jerningham came to the door with that early cup of tea, which Patty understood all the fine ladies took in the morning. For once she was glad of that unnecessary refreshment. She told Jerningham that Mr. Piercey had been ill, and that she feared he had taken a bad cold; and then Patty closed the door upon the maid, who guessed, if she did not already know exactly, the character of the illness, and began to think steadily what she should do. She would tell Gervase that another night, if it happened again, he would be brought in dead, not alive. He would die, she would tell him, on the roadside like a dog. His was not a mind that could take in milder imaginations, but he would understand *that*. And Patty made up her mind to have another conversation with her father equally trenchant. She would tell him that if anything happened to Gervase she would have him tried for manslaughter. There would be abundant evidence, which she would not hesitate to bring forth, that the victim was half-witted, that he had been taken advantage of, and that the man who plied him with drink and then turned him out, his poor brain more clouded than ever, to find his way home, was his murderer and nothing else. Patty said to herself that she did not mind what scandals she would raise in such circumstances. If Richard Hewitt were brought to the scaffold she would not mind, though he was her father. She would tell him that she would drag him there with her own hands. She set here fierce little teeth, and vowed to herself that she would ruin him were he ten times her father, rather than let *this* go on. She would frighten Gervase to death; but before she was done she would set her foot on the ruins of the Seven Thorns.

Gervase, however, was too ill to be threatened the day after that dreadful vigil. He had caught cold lying out upon the moor, and he was very ill and in a high fever, quite unable to get up, or to have anything but nursing and kindness. Patty had the confidence of a woman well acquainted with the consequences of a debauch, that this would wear off in a short time and leave no particular results. She gave him beef-tea and gruel and kept him quiet, and told him, like a child, that he would be better to-morrow. "Gervase has caught a bad cold," she told Sir Giles, "but you must not be anxious, dear papa. I am keeping him in his warm bed, and he'll be all right to-morrow." "Right, right, my dear," said Sir Giles. "Bed is the best place. There is nothing like taking a cold in time, nothing like it. And we must remember he was always delicate. There's no stamina in him, no stamina." "He'll be all right to-morrow," Patty said, and she kept running up and down between the games to see if he was asleep, if he was comfortable, if he wanted anything. "Good creature!" said Sir Giles, half to himself, half to Dunning, who silently but consistently refused to appreciate Mrs. Piercey. "Now, what would you and I have done with the poor boy if he had been ill, and no wife on the spot to look after him?" "Maybe he wouldn't have had the same thing the matter with him," said Dunning, significantly. "Eh, what do you mean? What's the matter with him? He's got a bad cold," cried Sir Giles. "There are colds and colds," said the enigmatical Dunning. But Patty came back at the moment, saying that Gervase was quite quiet and asleep, and resumed her place for the second game. It was a longer game than usual, and Patty played badly, wishing her dear papa we will not venture to say how far off. But it came to an end at last, as everything does. "I hope you'll have a good night, my dear, and not be disturbed with him," the old gentleman said kindly. "Oh, I feel sure," cried Patty, "he'll be better to-morrow." But, as a matter of fact, she was not at all sure. The fumes of the drink ought to have died off by that time, but the fever had not died off. He was ill, and she was frightened and did not know what to do. And instead of being better in the morning, poor Gervase was worse, and the doctor had to be sent for, to whom, after various prevarications, poor Patty was obliged to

confess the truth. Impossible to look more grave than the doctor did when he heard of this. "It was enough to kill him," he said. Patty understood (with a private reserve of vengeance against her father, who had been the cause of it) that Gervase was really ill and had escaped something still worse. But she was confident in her own powers of nursing, and did not take fright. She was really an excellent nurse, having a great deal of sense, and the habit of activity, and no fear of giving herself trouble. She devoted herself to her husband quite cheerfully, and even during the two first nights went down in a very pretty dressing-gown to play his game with Sir Giles. "We must not look for any change just yet, the doctor says, but he'll soon be well, he'll soon be well," she said; and believed it so thoroughly that Sir Giles, too, was quite cheerful, notwithstanding that Dunning, in the background, shook his head. Dunning would have shaken his head whatever had been the circumstances. It was part of his position to take always the worst view. And the household in general also took the worst view. Nobody had said anything about that fatal lying out on the moor. Mrs. Gervase certainly had not said a word (except to the doctor), and Roger Pearson had resisted every temptation to betray his share in the matter; yet everybody knew. How did they know? It is impossible to tell. The butler shook his head like Dunning, and so did the cook. "He have no constitution," they said.

But it was not till some days after that Patty began to take fright. She said "He'll be better to-morrow," even after she saw that the doctor looked grave—and resisted the aid of a nurse as long as she could, declaring that for a day or two longer she could hold out. "For he's not going to be long ill," she said, cheerfully. "Perhaps not," the doctor replied, with a tone that was exasperating in its solemnity. What did he mean? "You must remember, Mrs. Piercely," he continued, "that your husband has no constitution. Fortunately he has had no serious illness before, but he has always been delicate. It's common in—in such cases. He never had any stamina. You cannot expect him to throw off an attack such as this like any other man."

"Why not like any other man?" cried Patty. She was so familiar with Gervase that she had forgotten his peculiarities. Except when she thought of it as likely to serve her own purpose with her father, she had even forgotten that he was the Softy. He was her husband—part of herself, about whom, assuredly, there was no fibre of weakness. "Why shouldn't he shake it off like any other man?" she cried angrily.

The doctor gave her a strange look. "He has no constitution," he said.

The words and the look worked in Patty's mind like some strange leaven, mingling with all her thoughts. She could not at first imagine what they meant. After a while, when she was relieved by the nurse and went into another room to rest, instead of going to sleep, as she had, indeed, much reason to do, she sat down and thought it all over in the quiet. No constitution—no stamina. Patty knew very well, of course, what these words meant; it was the application of them that was difficult. Gervase! He was a little loose in his limbs, not very firmly knit perhaps, with not so much colour as the rustics around—but he was young, and healthy, and strong enough. Nobody had ever imagined that he was not strong. As for being a little soft, perhaps, in the mind, that was because people did not know him; and even if they did, the mind had nothing to do with the body, and it was all in his favour, for he did not worry and vex himself about things as others did. Like other men—why wasn't he like other men? He was as tall as most, he was not crooked or out of proportion, he was

—
Did it mean that he might die?

Patty rose from her chair and flung her arms above her head with a cry. She was not without natural affection; she liked her husband, and was not dissatisfied with him, except in that matter of going to the Seven Thorns. She did not object to him because he was a fool; she was fond of him in a way. But when it suddenly flashed upon her that this might be the meaning of what the doctor said, it was not of Gervase's fate that she thought. Die! and deprive her of what she had made so many efforts to secure! Die! so that she never, never should be Lady Piercely, should she live a hundred years! Patty stood for a moment all quivering with emotion as she first realised this thought. It was intolerable, and not to be borne. She had married him, coaxed him, kept him in good humour, given up everything for him—only for this, that he should die before his father, and leave her nothing but Mrs. Piercely—Mrs. Piercely only, and for ever! Patty raised her hands unconsciously as if to seize him and shake him, with a long-drawn breath and a sobbing, hissing "Oh!" from the very bottom of her heart. She had it in her mind to rush to him, to seize him, to tell him he must not do it. He must make an effort; he must live, whatever happened. It was inconceivable, insupportable that he should die. He must not, should not die before his father, cheating his wife! She stood for a moment with her hands clenched, as if she had in reality grasped Gervase by his coat, and then she flung herself upon her face on the sofa in a passion of wild weeping. It could not, could not be; it must not be. She would not allow the possibility. Before his father, who was an old man—leaving all the honours to—anybody, whoever happened to be in the way, Margaret Osborne, for anything she knew—but not Patty, not she who had worked for them, struggled for them! It could not, and it must not be.

Patty did not sleep that day, though she had been up all night and wanted sleep. She bathed her face and her eyes, and changed her dress, and went back to her husband's bedside with a kind of fierce determination to hold by him, not to let him die. There was no change in him from what there had been when she left him, and the nurse was half offended by her intrusion. "I assure you, ma'am, I know my duties," she said, "and you'll break down next if you don't mind. Go, there's a dear, and get some sleep; you can't nurse him both by night and day. And there's no change, nothing to make you anxious."

"You are sure of that, nurse?"

"Quite sure. He's quite quiet and comfortable, so far as I can see."

"But they say he has no constitution," said Patty, gazing into the woman's face for comfort.

"Well, Mrs. Piercely; but most times it's the strongest man with whom it goes hardest," the nurse said.

And this gave Patty great consolation; it was the only comfort she had. It was one of those dicta which she had heard often both about children and men, and therefore she received it the more willingly. "It goes harder with the strong ones." That was the very commonest thing to say, and perhaps it was true. The old women often knew better than the doctors, she said to herself. Indeed, there was in her mind a far greater confidence in such a deliverance than in anything the doctors could say.

And nothing could exceed the devotion with which poor Gervase was nursed. His wife was by his side night and day. She never tired—never wanted repose; was always ready; the most careful and anxious of nurses.

"He's much better to-day, don't you think?" was her greeting to the doctor when he came. And Dr. Bryant said afterwards that Mrs. Piercey looked as if she would have flown at his throat when he looked grave. She could not bear to be contradicted or checked in her hopes. And every day she went downstairs and assured Sir Giles that his son would soon be better.

"We can't expect it to pass in a day," she said, "for it is a very serious attack."

"And he has no stamina, no stamina; we always knew it—we were always told that," said the old gentleman.

Mrs. Piercey looked fiercely at her father-in-law, too. She could not bear to hear this repeated.

"Dear papa," she said, "it comes hardest always on the strongest men."

"God bless you, my dear!" cried old Sir Giles, falling a-sobbing, as was his wont when his mind was disturbed, "I believe that's true."

Oh, how could he go on living—that old man for whom nobody cared; who did nothing but keep the younger ones out of their own! What had he to live for? Patty wondered, with a wild, yet suppressed rage which no words could express; old, helpless, not able to enjoy anything except that wretched, tedious backgammon, and keeping others out of their own; yet he would live and see Gervase die! He would go on, and on, and see his only child buried, as he had seen his wife, and forget all about it after a week, and play his backgammon, and be guarded by Dunning from every wind that blew. Dunning! Was it Dunning, perhaps, that kept him alive; that knew things which the doctors don't know? It was natural to Patty's education and training to think this, and that some private nostrum would do more than all the drugs in the world.

"Shall I send down a nurse to you for a moment," she said to Sir Giles suddenly, "and will you let Dunning come up and look at him?" Dunning could not refuse to go, but he looked at Patty suspiciously, as if she meant to betray him into some trap.

"I don't know nothing about that kind of illness," he said.

"Oh, but you don't know what kind of illness it is till you see him," cried Patty. She hastily led the man to her husband's bedside, and watched his looks while he stood awkwardly, holding as far aloof as he could, looking down upon the half-sleep, half-stupor, in which the patient lay.

"Oh, Dunning, what do you think?"

"I think as he looks very bad," Dunning said, in a subdued and troubled voice.

"That's not what I want you to tell me. I want you to think if there is anything we could give him to rouse him up. What he wants is to be roused up, don't you see? When you are roused to see the need of it, you can do a deal for yourself, however ill you may be. What could we give him, Dunning, to rouse him up?"

Dunning could see nothing but some unintelligible trap that was being laid for him in those words.

"I'm not a doctor," he said, sullenly. "I know what's good for Sir Giles, as is chronic; but I don't know anything about the like of this. I should say there's nothing to give him, but just wait and—trust in God," said Dunning.

"Oh, God!" said Patty, in the unintentional profanity of her hot terror and distress. He was so far off; so difficult to get at; so impossible to tell what His meaning was! whereas she had felt that this man might have known something—some charm, some medicine which could be given at once.

"You had better go back to Sir Giles," she said, shortly, and sat down herself by that hopeless bed. But it was not hopeless to Patty. As soon as Dunning was gone she began to take a little comfort even from what he had said: "Wait, and trust in God." Patty knew all that could be said in words about trusting in God, and she knew many collects and prayers; but, somehow, even she felt that to ask God by any means, whatever happened, to exert His power that she might be Lady Piercey in the end—that the old man might die and the young man live for this purpose—was a thing not thought of in any collect: her mouth was stopped, and she could not find a word to say.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

It was with nothing less than consternation that the county received the intelligence of Gervase Piercey's death, which flew from house to house nobody could tell how; told by the early postman on his rounds, conveyed with the morning's rolls from the villages, brought up at a pace much accelerated by the importance of the news by grooms with letter-bags, and every kind of messenger. Gervase Piercey was dead: the Softy of the village—poor Sir Giles' only son. Though he was a fool, he was Sir Giles' only child! There were ladies in the county who had wondered wistfully whether, if he were "taken up" by some capable woman, he might not have been so licked into shape as to have justified that capable woman in marrying him to her daughter. Nobody had been so brave as to do it, but several had speculated on the subject, thinking that, after all, to preserve a good old family from the dust, and hand on Greystott to better heirs, might be worthy the sacrifice of a few years of a girl's life. These ladies, though none of them had been brave enough to take the necessary steps, felt doubly outraged by his marriage when it took place; and the consternation in their minds at the receipt of this last piece of news was tinged with something like remorse. Oh, if they had but had the courage! Maud or Mabel, if she had been forced to marry that unfortunate simpleton, would, as they now saw, have been so swiftly released! but it is needless to go back upon what might have been, after the contrary events. And now what a conjunction was this—what a terrible position for the poor old father! his only son taken from him; left alone with that woman in the house! Nobody knew anything about Patty; it was enough that she was Patty, and that she had married that poor half-witted young man. And then the question arose in a great many houses—What were they to do? They had not called upon Mrs. Gervase—nobody had called upon Mrs. Gervase—but how were they to approach Sir Giles now, with that woman there? Poor old Sir Giles! he had allowed her to take possession of his house for his son's sake, no doubt, and for

peace, not being strong enough for any struggle, and what would he do now? Would he send her away, and thus be accessible again to his old friends, or what would he do? This question occupied the mind of the neighbourhood very much for the day or two after the news was received, and it became apparent that something must be done. The old man could not be left alone in his trouble, unsolaced by any friendly word; the details must be inquired into—the time of the funeral, so that proper respect might be paid. Many people sent cards, and servants to make the necessary inquiries, but one or two gentlemen went themselves, Lord Hartmore in particular, who as virtually the head of the county, and actually a very old friend, felt it incumbent upon him to carry his sympathy and condolence in person. Lord Hartmore was received by a young lady in very deep mourning, already covered in crape from top to toe, and crowned with the most orthodox of widows' caps. She was very quiet, but very firm.

"I cannot allow any one to disturb Sir Giles," she said; "he is very much broken down. Absolute quiet, and as little reference as possible to the details of our great trouble, are indispensable, the doctor says."

Lord Hartmore was much surprised at the self-possession of the young woman, and at her language.

"The tone of the voice was of course a little uneducated," he said, "but she talked, my dear, she talked as well as you or I, and made use of the same expressions!"

"Why, what other expressions could any one make use of?" cried Lady Hartmore.

"I said an old friend like myself should surely be made an exception; but she didn't give in. 'My father-in-law has seen none of his old friends for a long time,' she said quite pointedly; 'he is not accustomed to seeing them. It would be a great agitation to him, and I am charged to see that he is not disturbed.' I assure you," said Lord Hartmore, "I didn't know what to say. We have all deserted him in the most horrid way. The young woman was right: to put in an appearance just at this moment, not having shown since poor Lady Piercey's funeral, might quite probably be very discomposing to the old man!"

"And what about the funeral?" was the next question that was asked.

"There, again," said Lord Hartmore, "I can't blame her. She's met with no attention from us, and why should she take any trouble about us? The funeral is to be on Thursday; but she said, 'My father-in-law will not go. I can't put him to such a trial. I will follow my husband to his grave myself, and I don't know that I wish anybody else to take the trouble.' She carries things with a very high hand, but I can't blame her, I can't blame her," Lord Hartmore said. It must be added that the consternation of the county neighbours was increased by this report. Their consternation was increased, and so were their doubts as to what they should do; but at the same time their curiosity was piqued, and a certain sense of compunction rose in their bosoms. If it was merely the recklessness of disappointment and despair which moved Patty, or if it was severe and subtle calculation, at least her policy was wonderfully successful. There was a large attendance at poor Gervase's funeral, at which she appeared alone, occupying by herself the blackest of mourning coaches, and in such a depth of crape as never widow had worn before. But Mrs. Gervase was exceedingly *digne* in her woe. She made no hysterical demonstration. She had none of her own people in attendance upon her, as had been expected, though Richard Hewitt occupied a conspicuous position in the crowd, thrusting himself in among the county gentlemen in the procession. Patty stood by the grave all alone, and saw her hopes buried with real anguish. She fulfilled the part so well that Lord Hartmore (a candid man, as has been seen) could not contain himself for pity, and stepped quietly forward to her side and offered his arm. She took it silently, but with a trembling and evident need of support which went to the good gentleman's heart. Poor thing, poor thing! then she had been really fond of him after all. Lord Hartmore reflected silently that to a girl in her position the defects of the poor half-witted fellow might not be so apparent, and if she loved him, strange as that seemed! He led her back to her carriage with an almost fatherly friendliness, the whole village looking on, all the other gentlemen a little ashamed of themselves, and Richard Hewitt's red face blazing through the crowd. "My wife will call to inquire for you," he said, as he put her in, "and I hope that I may be admitted soon to see my dear old friend, Sir Giles." Patty answered only by a bow. It was all that could be expected of the poor young new-made widow, who had fulfilled this sad duty alone with no one to stand by her. The spectators were all impressed, and even overawed, by Patty's loneliness and her crape and her youth.

And she did in reality feel her downfall too much to get the good of Lord Hartmore's civility, or indulge the elation which sprang up in her mind, instinctively accompanying the consciousness that everybody saw her leaning upon Lord Hartmore's arm. Ah! what a thing that would have been a month ago! but now was it only a tantalising flutter before her eyes of what might have been, at present when all the reality was over? It would be unkind to Patty to say that no regret for poor Gervase in his own person was in her heart. She had not been without affection for Gervase, and the thought of his early death had been very sad to her at the moment. Poor Gervase, so young, and just when better things might have been in store for him! But the mind very soon familiarises itself with such an event when there is no very strong sentiment in question. It was not Gervase, but herself, whom Patty chiefly mourned. After all she had done and all she had gone through, to think that this was what was left to her—a position as insecure as that of any governess or companion, at the mercy of an old and ailing man, with one of her enemies at his ear. Oh, that it should be that old man, that useless, ailing old man, that should live and Gervase die! There seemed no justice in it, no equity, no sense of right. Sir Giles had lived his life and had all its good things, and there was no advantage to him or to any one in his continuance; whereas Gervase, Gervase! He, poor fellow, had it in his power to make his wife Lady Piercey, to secure her position so that nobody could touch it. And it was he that had gone, and not his father! Patty wept very real tears as she drove slowly home alone—real! they were tears of fire, and made her eyelids burn. Oh, how different from the last time when she drove along that same road, thrust in anyhow, clambering up without a hand to help her, sitting by Dunning's side—but with all the world before her, and the sense of a coming triumph in her veins! Patty did not deceive herself about her position now. A son's widow is a very different thing from a son's wife. The latter must be received, and has her certain place; the other is a mere dependant, to be neglected at pleasure. And it all rested with Sir Giles what was to become of her. He might keep her there as the mistress of his house, or he might make her a little allowance and send her away, desiring to see no more of her. Patty was altogether dependent, she felt, on the caprice of the old man. She had as good as nobody but he in the world, for she said to herself that nothing would induce her ever to speak to her father again, who had murdered Gervase and all her hopes. She would never look at him

with her free will, never speak to him. That he should have dared to come to the funeral was a sin the more. Never, never! Patty said to herself she would rather go out to service, rather starve! These five months had placed a gulf between her and the Seven Thorns which nothing could ever bridge over. If it was suggested to her that she should return home, as young widows often do, she would say that she had no home, and it would be true. She would rather be a servant, rather starve!

And then her mind went back to Sir Giles. What would he do with her? The old man liked her, she felt sure. And she had been good to him. Whatever her motives had been, whether they would bear scrutiny or not, she had been good to him. She had kept pain away from him as far as she could. She had taken care of all his comforts. She had not permitted him to be disturbed. Dunning and all the rest would have thought it essential that he should go to the funeral and undergo all the misery and excitement of that ceremony. But Patty had prevented that. He had reason to be grateful to her; but would he be grateful? This was the tremendous question. Would he keep her there as the mistress of his house, or would he send her away? Patty had in her jewel-case, carefully locked up, a letter from Margaret Osborne to her uncle, which she thought it wisest to keep back. If Sir Giles received it, it might make him think that Mrs. Osborne was the best mistress for his house, which she was not, Patty felt sure. She put it aside, saying to herself that some time, when the excitement was over and everything had settled down, she would give it—but not now: to what purpose now? Poor Sir Giles wanted to forget his trouble, not to have it forced upon him by condolences. Margaret had written to Patty also a short note full of sorrow for poor Gervase, and asking whether it would be desirable that she should come to Greysthott for his funeral; to which Patty had replied explaining that everything was to be very quiet in consequence of the condition of “dear papa.” “It is he that must be considered in everything,” Patty wrote; “I have the doctor’s orders to keep him as much as possible from all emotion. I will bury my dear husband myself. Nobody else, as you know, has ever been very fond of him, and I shall not ask anybody to come for the form’s sake. If possible, dear papa is not to be told even the day. He is very broken and miserable, but when he is let alone and not reminded, he forgets.” Margaret had accepted this as a refusal of her visit, and she had asked no more. It would have been a painful visit in any case. Colonel Piercey was abroad. There were, therefore, no relations to come to make the occasion more difficult for Patty, and yet there had been no want of “respect.” The county magnates had all attended the melancholy funeral—where the young wife alone was chief mourner. “Why did not Margaret come?” they all asked, and blamed her. But a feeling of sympathy arose for Patty all over the neighbourhood. The doctor spoke with enthusiasm of her devotion as a nurse, and her intelligence and understanding. Poor thing! Poor thing! Whatever her antecedents had been, and however she had acquired that place, she had certainly behaved very well; and now what was to become of her? people asked with pity. It was assumed that she would return to her friends, as other young widows did—though not in this case to her father’s house.

If they had but known how anxiously she was herself debating that question as she drove along in her crape and her woe, with the blinds down, and every symptom of desolation! Dunning had not allowed his master to dine out of his own rooms, or to indulge in any diversion in the evening, since the death of his son. If other people did not know or care what was right, Dunning did, and at all events poor Mr. Gervase should be respected in his own house as long as he lay there. Above all, on the evening of the funeral day, Dunning was determined there should be no relaxation of that rule. He was disposed to think, as were the rest of the servants, that Patty’s reign was over; but the others were more wary than Dunning, and did not show any signs of emancipation as yet. He did so with premature exultation, rejecting almost roughly her suggestion that Sir Giles should dine as usual on that gloomy evening. “Master’s not equal to it,” said Dunning, “and if he was he didn’t ought to be. I don’t hold with folks that dance and sing the day they’ve put their belongings in the grave—or eat and drink, it’s just the same.”

“You forget what the doctor says, that nothing must be allowed to upset him. I hope you don’t talk to Sir Giles on—melancholy subjects,” Patty said, with all the dignity of her widow’s cap.

“I don’t know what subjects there can be but melancholic subjects in this ‘ouse of mournin’,” Dunning said.

“Then I will come and see him myself,” said Patty. She went to Sir Giles’ room accordingly, after his too simple dinner had been swallowed, and devoted herself to him.

“I think we’ll send Dunning away for a little, dear papa,” she said. “We have things to talk of, haven’t we?—and Dunning has been on duty a long time, and a little society will make him more cheerful.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir Giles,” said Dunning, “but whatever some folks may think I don’t ‘old with being cheerful, not on the day of a funeral.”

“What does he say, my dear? what does he say?” said Sir Giles. “But look you here, Dunning, whatever it is I won’t have Mrs. Piercey contradicted. Do you hear, sir? Do as Mrs. Piercey tells you,” and he struck his stick upon the floor.

Dunning in consternation withdrew, for when Sir Giles was roused he was not to be trifled with.

“She’s found out some d—d trick to come over the old man,” he said in the housekeeper’s room to which he retired. But this was a mistake; for it was Sir Giles himself who had invented the trick. He turned to Patty with great tenderness when the man disappeared, and took her by both hands and drew her to a chair beside him.

“My dear,” he said, “I’ve forgotten, like an old sinner, what Meg Osborne told me. I’ve been allowing you to do all sorts of things and wear yourself out. But it sha’n’t happen again, it sha’n’t happen again. Now that my poor dear boy is gone we must be more careful than ever—for it’s our last hope both for you and for me to have an heir for the old house.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was Sir Giles himself who had found this charm which had so great an effect on the after-history of Greysthott. Patty, among other qualities which were not so praiseworthy, had the almost fierce modesty of the young Englishwoman, and would not have spoken on such a subject to a man, even so harmless a person as

an old man like Sir Giles, for any inducement. She did not even understand what he meant at first, and the same impulse of *farouche* modesty made her ashamed to explain, or do more than blush deeply and remonstrate, "Oh, dear papa!" as she would have done probably in any case, whether his supposition had been false or true. The old gentleman in his melancholy and confused musings over Gervase, had suddenly remembered, the thought being recalled by some merest trifle of association, the hurrahs of little Osy which had mingled with his own feeble cheer on some forgotten occasion. He remembered it suddenly as the strangest contrast to his feelings now. What had the old father, desolate and childless, to cheer about? What had he heard that could have produced that cheer? It was when Meg was going away—when she had told him she was going to take Osy away from him. That was nothing to cheer about. What was it that had made him forget Osy, but which the dear little fellow had caught up and shouted over, though it was an unkindness to himself? and then he recollected all at once. What Mrs. Osborne had said had been the most common and ordinary wish that children might arise in the old house, which was the most natural thing, the most certainly to be expected. She had meant no more: but Sir Giles had at once attributed to Meg a knowledge which was at the moment impossible, without reflecting either that she was the last person to receive the confidence of Patty. He forgot now that it was months since this had been said, and only remembered that it had been said, and that the prospect was like life from death. Life from death! That was what it would be—from his dead son an heir, in whom the old house might blossom and grow glad again. He took up the idea where he had dropped it with a sudden exhilaration which drove away all sorrow. An heir to the old house, a thing all made of hope, with none of poor Gervase's deficiencies, a being whom the old man fondly hoped to "make a man of" even yet before he died.

And it would not be too much to say that the first feeling of Patty, when she understood what the old gentleman meant, was one of consternation. She did not know how to answer him, how to tell him that she had no such hope. Her lips were closed partly by the tradition of silence on such subjects which an unsophisticated Englishwoman seldom surmounts, and partly because she was so utterly astonished and taken aback by the suggestion. She did not even see the advantage in it, nor how it placed this feeble old man whose life hung on a thread in her hands. It was not till after she had left him and was alone, and could think, that these advantages occurred to Patty; and there was probably no suggestion of a treacherous kind which it would have seemed to her so impossible to make use of. The scruples of life are very much things of circumstance, that seeming quite legitimate and right to one which is the height of immodesty and indelicacy to another. Patty had one distinct object in her mind, now that all her hopes were over, which was to induce her father-in-law, by whatever means were possible, to make a provision for her. He was really, she felt, the only one to whom she could now cling, her sole support and protection, and she meant to be also his protector, to take care of him as he had never been taken care of before. All this she steadfastly intended, meaning nothing but good to the ailing and desolate old man; but she also intended that he should provide for her, as was her right as his son's wife. Should Sir Giles die at the present moment, Patty was strongly and painfully aware that she would be in no way the better for having taken that step which had seemed so prodigious a one, which had raised her so high above all her antecedents and belongings, by becoming Gervase Piercely's wife. She was Mrs. Piercely, but she was without a penny, poorer by the burden of that name than Patty Hewitt could ever have been. Her first duty, her first determination was to be provided for, in whatever manner it might be most possible to do that. But it is only just to her to say that this way of influencing her father-in-law, and of moving him to do what she wished, had never occurred to her, and even when thus suggested it was very repugnant to her—the last thing she desired to do. But Patty, shut up in her room of widowhood and mourning, with her cap with its long, white streamers visible upon the table, and everything black about her, even the dressing-gown which she had put on to sit by the fire, and her mind so alert and unfatigued going over everything, speculating how best to pluck from the nettle danger the flower of safety, could not shut out the suggestion from her thoughts. It might even yet prove to be so, she said to herself, blushing hotly, even though she was alone. And if not, why shouldn't she permit Sir Giles to think so? It would give him a great deal of pleasure, poor old gentleman. It would tide him over the worst time, the immediate crisis of his son's death, and it would double her every claim upon him, and make it more than ever necessary that he should put her at once beyond the reach of want or suffering of any kind. Still, it was with reluctance that she accepted this weapon which had been thrust into her hand.

Sir Giles could not get his new discovery out of his head. He told Dunning of it before he went to bed. It was whispered all through the house in the morning; and though some of the women scoffed and declared it to be an invention, yet it was, of course, the most natural idea in the world. From Patty not a word came, either in assertion or denial. She said nothing; she understood no hints; she never allowed herself to be betrayed into reference to her supposed hopes. Sir Giles alone talked to her on the subject with joyous laughter and chuckles, and a loudly expressed determination that she should be obeyed and not contradicted, which was of priceless value to Patty, at the moment when her sway was a little uncertain, and when expectation was strong in the household that she should be displaced and Mrs. Osborne sent for in her place. The household by no means desired Mrs. Osborne in Patty's place. Margaret had been too much and too long a dependant to be popular among the servants; and Patty, who was so peremptory, who had acted upon her convictions, and managed to turn out everybody whom she feared or disliked, had powerful recommendations in her imperious authority. She meant what she said, and could not be driven or persuaded out of it; and she knew when work was well done, and gave the capable housemaid or cleaner of plate the praise which was his or her due. And she was not unjust, save in the case of personal disrespect to herself, which she never pardoned—a quality which the servants' hall entirely approved. Mrs. Osborne could be got to "look over" anything by judicious entreaty or representation, especially if it was a mere offence against herself, and was less respected and considered in consequence. It was not, therefore, in any way desired that she should take up the reins; yet, all the same, it made a great difference to Patty that Sir Giles had taken it into his head that she must not be contradicted. It established her once more firmly in her seat.

And the little group in the great drawing-room in the evening was all the more cheerful in consequence. It was, to look at, a forlorn group enough: the old gentleman, more feeble than ever, with Dunning behind his chair, ready to move it according to his caprice, and the young widow in her deep crape, a black spot upon the white and gold of the room. Patty had been requested by Sir Giles to "take that thing off her head," and

did so obediently in her father-in-law's presence, though she was far too determined to do her duty by her dead husband to dispense with that symbol of grief on any other occasion. They sat with the backgammon-board between them, playing game after game. There was in Patty's mind unutterable relief from the misery and suspense which she had suffered in Gervase's lifetime; but other thoughts, scarcely less anxious, occupied her fully. Yet she talked to the old gentleman with an endeavour to please and amuse him which was heroic. It was a great strain upon Patty. She could talk of herself without difficulty; she could have talked, had she thought it expedient, of her father and aunt, and their sins against her; she could have talked of Gervase; but these subjects being all tabooed, it was very hard upon Patty to find anything to say. She knew nobody whom Sir Giles knew. She could not tell him the news, for she knew none, except the affairs of the village, which interested herself, and which she seized on greedily from every possible channel. But Patty could not talk on any other subject. She had to talk about the backgammon, to remind him of the wonderful stroke he had played last night, and the wonderful luck he had always; and how it was such an amazing chance for her to play, a poor ignorant thing as she was, with such an accomplished player as dear papa. This was but a scanty thread to spin through night after night, and had it not been made up so much of applause it is very doubtful how long it would have sufficed. But there is nothing of which the ordinary mind can swallow so much as praise; and when the interest of life is reduced to a game, the player thinks as much of his lucky chances and his skilful movements as if it were something of the highest importance; so that, on the whole, this talk did very well and kept them going. But still Patty had not ventured to introduce her great subject—that provision for herself which she felt became more and more important every day; for who could tell whether any morning Sir Giles might not be found to have passed away from this life altogether, or to be enclosed in the living tomb of paralysis, unable to act or devise anything more.

Lady Hartmore did not call next day as her lord had promised, but she did call, and was received by Patty in full panoply of mourning and with a heart that beat loudly with suppressed excitement. Lady Hartmore was neither so much touched by the sight of the young widow, nor so sympathetic as her husband had been. She examined Patty curiously, with searching eyes, full not only of the superciliousness of rank, but of the experience of a much older woman, which Mrs. Gervase would have opposed with defiance, but for the false pretence which, though she had never put it forth, and though it had arisen most innocently, gave her something of a sensation of guilt. This, however, though Patty was not aware of it, did her service with the great lady. It subdued her natural determination, and gave an apparent softness to her aspect which did not belong to it by nature. Lady Hartmore put a great many questions to the young widow: did she think of remaining at Greysthott, which must be so melancholy a place nowadays? did she think this last shock had very much shaken Sir Giles? did she not feel it a great responsibility to be left in charge of him? and many other such questions. To these Patty replied very properly that she could not possibly leave Sir Giles alone; that he had been very kind to her, like a father, and that nothing would induce her to desert him; that he was very well on the whole, "quite himself," and that she tried to be as cheerful as she could on his account. She took no notice of the question about leaving Greysthott. It was not indeed necessary to reply to it, when she had already made that answer about the impossibility of leaving Sir Giles.

"But you must want somebody to speak to,—somebody to take care of you, too," said the great lady, meaning more than she said.

"Oh, no," said Patty; "I have always had very good health, I have never been delicate. I am very fond of my dear father-in-law. He does not want very much—he is very easily amused, and so kind, always so kind. We do very well all by ourselves—as well," Patty added, with a sigh, "as in the circumstances we could possibly do."

What could any one say to such perfect sentiments? Lady Hartmore was baffled in her inquiries. "Still," she said, "I should have thought that some one who was a relation—some one of your own family—a woman to speak to—"

"I am sure," said Patty, "that Lady Hartmore knows my family are not likely to be welcome at Greysthott; and I have but an old aunt who was never married, and therefore has no experience." She blushed as she said this, and Lady Hartmore was very quick to take up the inference for which she was prepared. But Patty was too wise to be led into any further disclosures or to answer any of the searching questions which her ladyship proceeded to put.

"How did you find the poor thing?" her husband asked when he joined her in the carriage—for Lord Hartmore had visited Sir Giles while Lady Hartmore thus did her duty by Patty.

"I found the poor thing very well and extremely well able to take care of herself," said the lady. "I don't think you need waste so much sympathy upon her." But Lord Hartmore was full of feeling, and could not be persuaded to take this view.

"The poor old fellow is quite exultant," he said. "It is a wonderful blessing for him, whatever you may think of it in any other connection. It has given him a new lease."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Hartmore.

"Oh, come!" cried her husband. "It is one thing to trust your own judgment, which is an excellent one, I don't gainsay it—but quite another to set it up against those who must know the facts best. By the way, he bewildered me by saying Meg told him. Has Meg been here?"

"Not that I know of; but she may have made a hurried run to see her uncle. If Meg told him——" said Lady Hartmore, in subdued tones. She added after a pause, "I shall think more of her if Meg is her *confidante*."

Thus on the whole the impression was favourable to Patty, even though the grounds upon which it was formed were false.

After this visit Patty took her first active step towards the accomplishment of her desires. Sir Giles, who had been pleased with the Hartmore visit and augured great things from it, opened the way by asking if she had not liked Lady Hartmore and found her kind? "A nice woman, a good-hearted woman," he said.

"Yes, dear papa; but one thing she said gave me a great deal of pain; for she seemed to think I should go back to my family, and leave you," she said, putting her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Leave me? nonsense!" said Sir Giles, "I sha'n't let you leave me, my dear. I shouldn't have sent you away, anyhow, you may be sure; no, no, I shouldn't have sent you away; but in present circumstances, my dear—Why, you're all our hope at Greyshott, you're all our stand-by, you're—you're our sheet-anchor."

"How kind, how kind you are, dear papa! I try to do my best to keep everything straight, though I never could pretend to be of so much consequence as that. But people feel free to speak," said Patty, with a sigh, "because they know I have no ground to stand on. I wasn't dear Gervase's equal when he married me, and there were no settlements or anything, you know; and I am quite dependent, quite dependent, as much as a servant—but without any wages," Patty added, with a faint laugh.

It was at one of the rare moments when Dunning was absent, intervals of which Patty eagerly took advantage. Dunning was, indeed, a thorn in her flesh, though after mature deliberation she had decided that it was wiser to retain him, that he might take the responsibility of Sir Giles' health.

"Dependent!" cried Sir Giles, "nonsense, nonsense! A servant, my dear? Don't let me hear such a word again. No, no; no, no; never could have been so, for you've been quite a daughter, quite a daughter. But, in the present circumstances——"

"Ah, dear papa, don't let us think of that. I love to be with you—it's the only comfort I have; but still I can't forget that I have no provision. I might have to go away and work for my living, if somebody were to over-persuade you, or if you were—ill or anything. A Mrs. Piercey having to work for her living—or perhaps take a situation! I shouldn't mind it for myself, but when I think, dear papa, of your name."

"Good Lord!" cried Sir Giles, "you must be out of your mind, my dear, to think of such a thing. My poor boy's wife, and a good wife to him, too, if he had but lived to profit by it. That's all nonsense, all nonsense, my dear."

"Ah, dear papa! but it would not be nonsense if I had not you to trust to," cried Patty, laying her hand upon his arm. "It is you who are my sheet-anchor. I have not a penny of my own, not even to pay for my mourning; and I can't earn any for myself, don't you know, because of dear Gervase and your name—the first in the county. I couldn't take in needlework, could I, in Greyshott? and a woman, you know, has always little expenses——"

"My dear," said Sir Giles, "have all the fal-lals you can set your face to, and send in the bills to me; you've nothing to do but send in the bills to me."

"Dear papa! as if I ever doubted your kindness. It is not fal-lals I am thinking of; this," cried Patty, holding up her crape, "is not much of a fal-lal, is it? But what I am thinking of is the time to come, when I shall require to have a little provision or income or salary of my own."

"Do you mean," cried the old man, in the half-sobbing tone into which he was betrayed by any emotion, "when—when—I'm no more; when I'm dead? Is that what you mean?"

Patty stooped down and laid her face against the large old limp hand, which reposed on the arm of Sir Giles' chair. "I hope I'll be dead, too, before that," she said; "for what should I have to live for then?"

This, it need not be pointed out, was no answer to his question; but it seemed so, and Sir Giles was much affected and sobbed, which Patty echoed with a deep sigh or two which seemed to give a more refined expression to his feeling. He put his other hand upon her head.

"Please God, we'll see better days before that," he said.

And then Dunning came back, and a new game was begun.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

It was not till some days after this, that Sir Giles referred to the subject again. Patty thought it had entirely failed to make any impression on his mind, and that she must herself renew the conversation, when he surprised her by saying suddenly, as if there had been no interval, "It won't be necessary, my dear, it won't be necessary. As his mother, everything will be in your hands."

"Dear papa!" she cried, with a quite natural start; "how you frightened me!"

"I don't want to frighten you, my dear; anything but that—anything but that! But you must see that any little arrangements we might make would be all needless, quite needless. Of course, everything will go to the natural heir. There will probably be a long minority, for you know, my dear, with the best intentions in the world, an old fellow like me—— though I would give half my kingdom to see him come of age—half my kingdom! But no, no, that's a selfish thought; for I should wish him to have the property unimpaired, if not added to—if not added to. You'll take great care of it, I am sure. You're quite a woman of brains." Sir Giles spoke very fast, to get through this long effort of thought and consideration before Dunning came back. Then he added, with his usual mingled outburst of laughing and sobbing, patting her arm with his large old nerveless hand, "So you see it's needless, needless, my dear, for everything will be in your hands."

"Dear papa!" cried Patty. She was silent for some time in confusion and embarrassment. Then, "There's nothing certain in this world," she said.

"What, what?" cried Sir Giles. "Nothing's happened—nothing's happened, my dear? I hope you don't mean to tell me that?"

"Nothing has happened, dear papa," cried Patty, with a painful flush upon her face. She had not meant to deceive him, and certainly not in this way. It was indeed hard upon her that she had, without any fault of hers, this fiction to keep up. "But there's nothing certain in this world," she said. "Who would have thought five months ago that I should need to be thinking of a little provision for myself—I, that was Gervase's wife, and had no need to think of anything? I married him without a thought of having anything settled on me, or even wanting a penny but what he gave me." Patty put her handkerchief to her eyes to absorb some real tears, for though her grief for poor Gervase could scarcely be expected to be very profound, her pity for herself was sincere and lasting. "Dearest papa! I can't bear to ask for myself. I've always been used to work, and I could get my own living at any time. It is just that I can't bear, being Mrs. Piercey, that I should have to

do it in that way—Gervase's widow, with *your* name."

"Don't, my dear, don't! For goodness' sake don't agitate yourself! Don't cry, my dear, don't cry!" said Sir Giles, anxiously.

"Oh, I wouldn't cry if—if I could help it. I would do nothing to vex you, dear papa. But when I think of all that has happened—oh, who should know so well as I that there's nothing certain in this world!"

"My dear, my dear, I'll send for Pownceby to-morrow. You must not upset yourself—you mustn't, indeed. What should I do, and everybody, if—if anything was to happen?" Sir Giles cried. And he became so excited in his anxiety to calm her, that Patty was compelled to conquer herself and regain her self-command. She looked up with a mournful smile from her pocket-handkerchief. "Dear papa," she said, "we are two of us that mustn't do that. If you get upset it will upset me, and that will upset you still more; so we must each hold up for the sake of the other. Suppose we have another game?"

"You always know exactly what I want," said the old gentleman, his sob turning into a laugh, as his laugh so often turned into a sob. There was not, in fact, much difference between the two; and the rest of the evening was passed as usual in admiring exclamations on Patty's part as to his wonderful play and wonderful luck, so that even Dunning did not suspect that there had been anything more.

Patty reminded her father-in-law next morning when she went to him, as she had begun to make a practice of doing, to see if he wanted any letters written, that he had spoken of some Mr. Pownceby who was to be written to. "I don't know who Mr. Pownceby is, but you said something about him, dear papa!" And the result was that in a day or two Mr. Pownceby came, the family solicitor, whom Patty indeed did not know, but of whose faculties and position in the matter she had a shrewd guess. She had to entertain the little gentleman to luncheon after he had been closeted with Sir Giles all the morning; and Mr. Pownceby was much impressed by Mrs. Piercely's dignified air, and her crape and her widow's cap. "I suppose it's within the range of possibilities that a girl in that position might be fond even of a poor fellow like Gervase Piercely," he said to himself doubtfully; and he made himself very agreeable to the young widow. He informed her that he had received instructions to charge the estate with an annuity of a thousand pounds a year for her, of which the payments were to begin at once. "A very proper arrangement," he said, and he was impressed by the composure with which Patty received the information. She was not indeed at all elated by it. A thousand pounds a year was a great thing for Patty Hewitt of the Seven Thorns. She would have thought it a princely revenue when she became Gervase Piercely's wife; but a few months' familiarity with the expenditure of Greystott had made a great change in Patty's views. To descend into a small house like the Rectory, for instance (she had once thought the Rectory a palace), and to do without a carriage, was far from an agreeable prospect. "How shall I ever do without a carriage?" Patty said to herself, and she thought with scorn of the little basket-work pony-chaise which was all the rector could afford. Was it possible that she should ever come down to that? Mr. Pownceby, when he went away, held her hand for a moment, and asked whether a very old friend of the family, who had known poor dear Gervase from his birth, might be permitted to say how pleased and thankful he was that there were hopes—? which made Sir Giles so very happy, poor old gentleman? "And I fear, I fear, my dear old friend has not many days before him," the lawyer said; "he's quite clear in his mind, but it was not to be expected that a worn-out constitution could bear all those shocks one after another. We'll not have him long, Mrs. Piercely, we'll not have him long!"

"Does the doctor say so?" asked Patty.

"My dear lady, the doctor says he has the best of nursing; and everything so much the better for a lady in the house." It was with this *douceur* that the solicitor took his leave, being a man that liked to please everybody. And there can be no doubt that a softened feeling arose in the whole neighbourhood about Patty, who was said to be such a good daughter to Sir Giles. "Thrown over her own people altogether—no crowd of barbarians about the house, as one used to fear; and quite gives herself up to her father-in-law; plays backgammon with him half the day, which can't be lively for a young woman; and expects—" These last were the most potent words of all.

Patty was, indeed, very good to her father-in-law, and that not altogether for policy, but partly from feeling; for he had been kind to her, and she was grateful. The winter was dreary and long, and there were sometimes weeks together when Sir Giles could not get out, even into the garden, for that forlorn little drive of his in the wheeled chair. Patty gave herself up to his service with a devotion which was above all praise. She bore his fretfulness when weakness and suffering made the old man querulous. She was always at hand, whatever he wanted. She looked after his food and his comfort, often in despite of Dunning and to the great offence of the cook, but both these functionaries had to submit to Patty's will. Had she not carried everything with a very high hand, it is possible that her footing might not have been so sure; for the women soon penetrated the fiction, which was not indeed of Patty's creation, and Dunning even ventured upon hints to Sir Giles that all was not as he thought. The old gentleman, however, got weaker day by day; one little indulgence after another dropped from him. March was unusually blustery, and April very wet. These were good reasons why he should not go out; that he was more comfortable in his chair by the fire. Then he got indifferent to the paper, which Dunning always read to him in the morning, and only took an interest in the scraps of news which Patty repeated to him later on.

"Why did not Dunning read me that, if it is in the paper? The fellow gets lazier and lazier; he never reads the paper to me now! He thinks I forget!" When Dunning would have remonstrated Patty checked him with a look.

"You must never contradict Sir Giles!" she said to him aside.

"And he says I'm never to contradict *her!*" Dunning said indignantly in the housekeeper's room, where he went for consolation; "between them a man ain't allowed to say a word!"

The women all cried out with scorn that Sir Giles would find out different from *that* one o' these days.

"Then he'll just die," said Dunning. Things had come to a very mournful pass in the old melancholy house.

By degrees the backgammon, too, fell out of use. Patty sat with him still in the evening, but it was in his own room, often by his bedside, and many, many conversations took place between them, unheard by any

one. Dunning would catch a word now and then, as he went and came, and gathered that Sir Giles was sometimes telling her of things he would like to have done, and that sometimes she was telling him of things she would wish to be done.

"As if she had aught to do with it!" Dunning said with indignation. Dunning, observing everything, imagined, too, that Sir Giles began to grow anxious about those expectations which were so long delayed. His attendant sometimes heard mutterings of calculation and broken questioning with himself from the old gentleman.

"It's a long time to wait—a long time—a long time!" he said.

"What is a long time, Sir Giles?" Dunning ventured to ask—but was told to hold his tongue for a fool.

One day, towards the end of April, he suddenly roused from a long muse or doze by the fire, and called to Dunning to send a telegram for Pownceby.

"Tell him to come directly. I mayn't be here to-morrow," Sir Giles said.

"Are you thinking of changing the air, Sir Giles?" said the astonished servant.

The rain was pouring in a white blast across the park, bending all the young trees one way, and pattering among the foliage.

"Air!" said the old man; "it's nothing but water; but I'm soon going to move, Dunning, as you say."

"Well, it might do you good, Sir Giles, a little later—when the weather's better."

Sir Giles made no reply, but Dunning heard him muttering: "She always says there's nothing certain in this world."

Mr. Pownceby came as quick as the railway could bring him.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked of Mrs. Piercey, who met him at the door.

"Oh, I am afraid he's very bad," said Patty; "I am afraid he's not long for this world."

"Why does he want me? Does he want to change his will?"

"I don't know—I don't know. Oh, Mr. Pownceby, I don't know how to say it. I am afraid he is disappointed: that—that you said to me last time——"

"Was not true, I suppose?" said the father of a family, who was not without his experiences, and he looked somewhat sternly at Patty, who was trembling.

"I never said it was," she said. "It was not I. He took it into his head, and I did not know how to contradict him. Oh, don't say to him it's not true! rather, rather let him believe it now. Let him die happy, Mr. Pownceby! Oh, he has been so good to me! Say anything to make him die happy!" Patty cried.

The lawyer was angry and disappointed, too; but Patty's feeling was evidently genuine, and he could not help feeling a certain sympathy with her. Sir Giles was sitting up in bed, ashy white with that pallor of old age which is scarcely increased by death.

"I'm glad you're come in time, Pownceby—very glad you're come in time. I'm—I'm going to make a move; for change of air, don't you know, as Dunning says. Poor Dunning! he won't get such an easy berth again. My will—that's it. I want to change—my will. Clear it all away, Pownceby—all away, except the little legacies—the servants and that——"

"But not Mrs. Piercey, Sir Giles? If—if she's been the cause of any—disappointment; it isn't her fault."

"Disappointment!" said the old man. "Quite the contrary. She's been just the reverse. It was a good day for me when she came to the house. No, I don't mean that it was a good day, for it was my poor wife's funeral; but if anybody could have made a man of Gervase she would have done it. She would have done it, Pownceby. Yes, yes; sweep her away! sweep everybody away! I give and bequeath Greyshott and all I have—all I have, don't you know? Gerald Piercey can have the pictures if he likes; she won't care for them to——"

The old man was seized with a fit of coughing, which interrupted him at this interesting moment. Mr. Pownceby sat with his pen in his hand and many speculations in his mind. To cut off his daughter-in-law's little income even while he praised her so! And who was the person to whom it was all to be left without regard for the rest? Meg Piercey, perhaps, who was one of the nearest, though she had never been supposed to have any chance. The lawyer sat with his eyes under his spectacles intently fixed upon Sir Giles, and with many remonstrances in his mind. Mrs. Gervase might be wrong to have filled the poor man with false hopes; but to leave her to the tender mercies of Meg Piercey, whom she had virtually turned out of the house, would be cruel. Sir Giles began to speak before his coughing fit was over.

"She says, poor thing," and here he coughed, "she s—says that there's nothing—nothing certain in this world. She's right, Pownceby—she's right. She—generally is."

"There's not much risk in saying that, Sir Giles."

"No, it's true enough—it's true enough. It might grow up like its father. God grant it otherwise. You remember our first boy, Pownceby? Wasn't that a fellow! as bold as a lion and yet so sweet. His poor mother never got over it—never; nor I neither, nor I neither—though I never made any fuss."

Was the old man wandering in his mind?

"I hoped it would have been like him," said Sir Giles, with a sob. "I had set my heart on that. But none of us can tell. There's nothing certain, as she says. It might grow up like its father. I'll make all safe, anyhow, Pownceby. Put it down, put it down—everything to——"

"Sir Giles! to whom? Everything to——?"

"Why, Pownceby, old fellow! Ah, to be sure he doesn't know the first name. Sounds droll a little, those two names together. Quick! I want it signed and done with, in case I should, as Dunning says—don't you know, change the air."

"But, Sir Giles!" cried the lawyer, in consternation: "Sir Giles!" he added, "you don't mean, I hope, to leave the property away from the family and the natural heir?"

"What a muddlehead you are, Pownceby!" said Sir Giles, radiant. "Why, it will be the natural heir. It will be the head of the family. And it will grow up like our first boy, please God. But nothing is certain; and

supposing it was to turn out like its father? My poor boy, my poor Gervase! It wasn't as if we weren't fond of him, you know, Pownceby. His poor mother worshipped the very ground he trod on. But one can't help hoping everything that's good for It, and none of the drawbacks—none of the drawbacks. Make haste, Pownceby; draw it out quick! You're quicker than any clerk you have, when you'll take trouble. Nothing's certain in this world; let's make it all safe, Pownceby, however things may turn out."

"I'll take your instructions, Sir Giles—though I don't like the job. But it's a serious matter, you know, a very serious matter. Hadn't you better think it over again? I'll have the will drawn out in proper form, and come back to-morrow to have it signed."

"And how can you tell that you'll find me to-morrow? I may have moved on and got a change of air, as Dunning says. No, Pownceby, draw up something as simple as you like, and I'll sign it to-day."

The solicitor met Mrs. Piercey again in the hall as he went out. He had not been so kind on his arrival as she had found him before; but now he had a gloomy countenance, almost a scowl on his face, and would have pushed past her without speaking, with a murmur about the train which would wait for no man. Patty, however, was not the woman to be pushed aside. She insisted upon hearing his opinion how Sir Giles was.

"I think with you that he is very ill," he replied, gloomily, "and in mind as well as in body——"

"Oh no," cried Patty, "not that, not that! as clear in his head, Mr. Pownceby, as you or me."

He gave her a dark look, which Patty did not understand. "Anyhow," he said, "he's an old man, Mrs. Piercey, and I don't think life has many charms for him. We have no right to repine."

Mr. Pownceby had known Sir Giles Piercey all his life, and liked him perhaps as well as he liked any one out of his own family. But to repine—why should he repine, or Patty any more, who stood anxiously reading his face, and only more anxious not to betray her anxiety than she was to hear what, perhaps, he might tell? But he did not do this. Nor would he continue the conversation, nor be persuaded to sit down. He asked that he might be sent for, at any moment, if Sir Giles expressed a wish to see him again. "I will come at a moment's notice—by telegraph," he said, with a gloomy face, that intended no jest. And he added still more gloomily, "I believe it will be for your advantage, too."

"I am thinking of my father-in-law and not of my advantage," Patty said with indignation. The anxiety in her mind was great, and she could not divine what he meant.

CHAPTER XL.

MARGARET OSBORNE had lost no time in settling down in a cottage proportioned to her means, with her little boy and the one maid, who did all that was necessary, yet as little of everything as was practicable, for the small household. The place she had chosen was not very far from Greyshott, yet in the impracticability of country roads, especially during the winter, to those who are out of railway range, almost as far apart as if it had been at the other end of England. The district altogether had not attained the popularity it now enjoys, and the village was very rural indeed, with nobody in it above the rank of the rustic tradesmen and traffickers, except the inevitable parson and the doctor. The vicar's wife seized with enthusiasm upon the new inhabitant as a representative of society, and various others of the neighbouring clergywomen made haste to call upon a woman so well connected, as did also the squire of the place, or, at least, the ladies belonging to him. But Mrs. Osborne had no such thirst for society as to trudge along the muddy roads to return their visits, and her income did not permit even the indulgence of the jogging pony and homely clothes-basket of a little carriage, in which many of the clerical neighbours found great comfort. She had to stay at home perforce, knowing no enlivenment of her solitude, except tea at the vicarage on rare occasions. Tea at the vicarage in earlier and homelier days would have meant a quiet share of the cheerful evening refreshments and amusements, when the guest was made one of the family party, and all its natural interests and occupations placed before her. But tea, which is an afternoon performance and means a crowd of visitors collected from all quarters, in which the natural household is altogether swamped, and the guest sees not her friends, but their friends or distant acquaintances, of whom she neither has nor wishes to have any knowledge—is a very different matter. At Greyshott there had been occasional heavy dinner-parties, in which it was Margaret's part to exert herself for the satisfaction, at all events, of old friends, most of whom called her Meg, and had known her from her girlhood. These were not, perhaps, very entertaining evenings, but they were better than the modern fashion. She lived, accordingly, very much alone with Osy, and the maid-of-all-work, whom, knowing so little as she did of the practical arrangements of a household, she had to train, with many misadventures, which would have been amusing had there been anybody with whom she could have laughed over her own blunders and Jane's ignorance. But alas! there was no one. Osy was too young to be amused when his pudding was burned or his potatoes like stones. He was more likely to cry, and his mother's anxiety for his health and comfort took the fun out of the ludicrous, yet painful, errors of her unaccustomed house-keeping. It depends so much on one's surroundings whether these failures are ludicrous or tragical. In some cases they are an enlivenment of life, in others an exaggeration of all its troubles. These, however, were but temporary; for Mrs. Osborne, though she knew nothing to begin with, and did not even know whether she was capable of learning, was, in fact, too capable a woman, though she was not aware of it, to be long overcome by troubles of this kind; and it soon became a pleasure to her and enlivenment of her life to look after her own little domestic arrangements, and carry forward the education of her little maid-servant. There was not, after all, very much to do—plenty of time after all was done for Osy's lessons, and for what was equally important, Margaret's own lessons, self-conducted, to fit her for teaching her boy. At seven years old a little pupil does not make any very serious call upon his teachers, and though Margaret was aware of having no education herself, she was still capable of as much as the little fellow wanted, except in one particular. Osy had, as many children have in the first stage, a precocious capacity for what his mother called "figures," knowing no better; for I doubt whether Margaret knew what was the difference between arithmetic and mathematics, or where one ends and the other begins. Osy did in his own little head sums which made his mother's hair stand erect on hers. She was naturally all the more proud of this achievement that she did not understand it in the least. She was even delighted when Osy found her all wrong in an answer she had

carefully boggled out to one of those alarming sums, and laughed till the tears came into her eyes at the pitying looks and apologetic speeches of her little boy. "It isn't nofing wrong, Movver," Osy said. "Ladies never, never do sums." He stroked her hand in his childish compassion, anxious to restore her to her own esteem. "You can wead evwyfing you sees in any book, and write bof big hand and small hand, and understand evwyfing; but ladies never does sums," said Osy, climbing up to put his arms round her neck and console her. These excuses for her incapacity were sweeter to Margaret than any applause could have been, and such incidents soon gave pleasure and interest to her life. It is well for women that few things in life are more delightful than the constant companionship of an intelligent child, and Margaret was, fortunately, capable of taking, not only the comfort, but the amusement, too, of Osy's new views of life. These, however, we have not, alas! space to give; and as she was obliged to engage the instructions of the village schoolmaster for him in the one point which was utterly beyond her, Osy's mathematical genius and his peculiar phraseology soon died away together. He learned to pronounce the "th," which is so difficult a sound in English, and his condition of infant prodigy in respect to "figures" and all the wonders of his mental arithmetic came to an end under the prosaic rules of Mr. Jones, as such precocities usually do.

Margaret's life, however, had thus fallen into a tolerably happy vein, full of cheerful occupation and boundless hope and love—for what eminence or delight was there in the world which that wonderful child might not reach? and to be his mother was such a position, she felt, as queens might have envied—when the news of her cousin's death broke upon her solitude with a sudden shock and horror. She had heard scarcely anything about him in the interval. One or two letters dictated to Dunning had come from her uncle in answer to her dutiful epistles, but naturally there was no communication between her and Patty, and Gervase had scarcely ever written a letter in his life. Sometimes at long intervals Lady Hartmore had taken a long drive to see her, but that great lady knew nothing about a household which nobody now ever visited. "I might give you scraps I hear from the servants," Lady Hartmore said,—“one can't help picking up things from the servants, though I am always ashamed of it,”—but these scraps chiefly concerned the "ways" of Mrs. Piercey, which Margaret was too loyal to her family to like to hear laughed at. Gervase dead! it seemed one of those impossibilities which the mind feels less power of accustoming itself to than much greater losses. Those whom our minds can attend with longing and awe into the eternal silence, who are of kin to all the great thoughts that fill it, and for whom every heavenly development is possible, convey no sense of incongruity, however overwhelming may be the sorrow, when they are removed from us. But Gervase! How hard it was to think of him gaping, incapable of understanding, on the verge of that new world. Who could associate with him its heavenly progress, its high communion? Gervase! why should he have died? it seemed harder to understand of him whose departure would leave so slight a void, whose trace afar would be followed by no longing eyes, than of one whose end would have shaken the whole world. The news had a great and painful effect upon Margaret, first for itself, and afterwards for what must follow. She wrote, as has been said, to her uncle, asking if she might go to him, if a visit from her would be of any comfort to him; and she wrote to Patty with her heart full, forgetting everything in the pity with which she could not but think of hopes overthrown. Patty replied with great propriety, not concealing that she had kept back Margaret's letter to Sir Giles, explaining how little able he was for any further excitement, and that all that could be done was to keep him perfectly quiet. "He might wish to see you, but he is not equal to it," Patty said; and she ended by saying that her whole life should be devoted to Sir Giles as long as he lived, "for I have nothing now upon Earth," Patty said, with a big capital. All that Margaret could do was to accept the situation, thinking many a wistful thought of her poor old uncle, from whom everything had been taken. Poor Gervase, indeed, had not been much to his father, but yet he was his son.

The winter was long and dreary—dreary enough at Greyshott, where the old gentleman was going daily a step farther down the hill, and often dreary, too, to Margaret, looking out from the window of her little drawing-room upon the little row of laurels glistening in the wet, with now and then a passer-by and his umbrella going heavily by. There are some people who have an invincible inclination to look out, whatever is outside the windows, were it only chimney-pots; and Margaret was one of these. She got to know every twig of those glistening laurels shining in the rain, and to recognise even the footsteps that went wading past. There was not much refreshment nor amusement in it, but it was her nature to look out wherever she was. And one afternoon, in the lingering spring, she suddenly saw a figure coming up the village road which had never been seen there before, which seemed to have fallen down from the sky, or risen up from the depths, so little connection had it with anything there. Mrs. Osborne owned the strangeness of the apparition with a jump of the heart that had been beating so tranquilly in her bosom. Gerald Piercey here! He had been for a long time abroad, travelling in the East, far out of the usual tracks of travellers, and had written to her three or four times from desert and distant places, whose names recalled the Arabian Nights to her, but nothing nearer home. The letters had always been curt, and not always amiable: "I note what you say about having settled down. If you think the stagnant life of a village the best thing for you, and your own instructions the best thing for a boy who will have a part to play in the world, of course it is needless for me to make any remark on the subject." Margaret received these missives with a little excitement, it must be allowed, if not with pleasure. She confessed to herself that they amused her: "a boy who will have a part to play in the world!" Did he think, she asked herself with a smile, that Osy was seventeen instead of seven? At seven what did he want beyond his mother's instructions? But it cannot be denied that letters, with curious Turkish hieroglyphics on the address, dated from Damascus, Baghdad, and other dwellings of the unknown, had an effect upon her. To receive them at Chillfold, in Surrey, was a sensation. The Vicarage children, who collected stamps, were much excited by the Turkish specimens, and she could not help a pleasurable sensation as she bestowed them. Even Osy's babble about Cousin Colonel was not displeasing to his mother's ears. Gerald was far away, unable to take any steps, or even to say much about Osy. She liked at that distance to have such a man more or less belonging to her. The feeling of opposition had died away. He had been fond of Osy, wanted to have him for his own—as who would not wish to have her beautiful boy?—and what could be more ingratiating to his mother than that sentiment, so long as it was entertained by a man at Baghdad, who certainly could not take any steps to steal the boy from his mother? Into this amicable, and even vaguely pleased state of mind she had fallen—when suddenly, without any warning, without even having seen him come round the corner, Gerald Piercey stood before her eyes.

Margaret went away from the window and sat down in the corner by the fire, which was the corner most in the shade and safe from observation. That her heart should beat so was absurd. What was Gerald Piercey to her, or she to Gerald Piercey? He might make what propositions he pleased, but he could not force her to give up her boy. At seven it was ridiculous—out of the question! At seventeen it might be different, but that was ten long years off. If this was what his object was, was not her answer plain?

He came in very gravely, not at all belligerent, though he looked round with an air of criticism, remarking the smallness of the place, which recalled to some extent Mrs. Osborne's old feelings towards him. He had no right to find the cottage small. She thought him looking old, worn, and with care in his face. He, on the other hand, was astonished to see her so young. The air of Chillfold, the tranquillity and freedom, had been good for Margaret. The desert sun and wind had baked him black and brown. The quiet of the cottage, the life of a child which she had been living, had brought all her early roses back.

"I have come," he said, taking her hand in his, "on a sad errand." And then he paused and cried hurriedly, "What have you done to yourself? Why, you are Meg Piercey again."

"Margaret Osborne at your service," she said, as she had said before; but with a very different feeling from that which had moved her on the previous occasion: to be recognised with surprise as young and fair, is a very different thing from being accused angrily of having lost your freshness and your youth,—"but what is it, what is it?"

"Uncle Giles is dying, Cousin Meg."

"Uncle Giles!" She drew her hand from him and dropped back into her chair. For a moment she did not speak. "But I am not surprised," she said. "I looked for it: how could he go on living with nobody—not one of his own?"

"He might have had you. Poor old man! it is not the time to blame him."

"Me?" said Margaret. "I was not his child; nothing, and nobody, can make up for the loss of what is your very own."

"Even when it is—Gervase Piercey?"

"Poor Gervase!" said Margaret. "Oh, Gerald Piercey, you are a man with whom things have always gone well. What does it matter what our children are? they are our children all the same. And if it were nothing but to think that it was Gervase—and what poor Gervase was."

Though she was perhaps a little incoherent, Gerald did not object. He said: "At all events, I am very sorry for my poor old uncle. Mrs. Gervase wrote to me to say that he was sinking fast, should I like to come? and that she was writing to you in the same sense. I had only just arrived when I got her letter, and I thought that the best thing was to come to you at once, in case you were going to see him."

"Of course, I should wish to go and see him; but I have had no letter. I must see him if she will let me. Dear old Uncle Giles, he was always good and fatherly to me."

"And yet he let you leave your home—for this."

"Cousin Gerald," said Margaret, "don't let us begin to quarrel again. This is very well—it suits me perfectly—and I am very happy here. It is my own. My dear old uncle was not strong enough to struggle in my favour, but he was always kind. I must go to see him, whether she wishes it or not."

"I have a carriage ready. I thought that would be your decision. We shall get there before dark."

"We?" she said, startled; then added, almost with timidity, "you are going—?"

"Certainly I am going. You don't, perhaps, think what this may be to me. My father will be the head of the house—"

"And you after him. I fully understand what it is to you," she said.

He gave her a singular look, which she did not at all understand, except that it might mean that with this increased power and authority he would have more to say about Osy. "And to you too," he said.

CHAPTER XLI.

PATTY received her two visitors without effusion, but with civility. Her demeanour was very different from all they had known of her before. She had been defiant and impertinent, anxious to offend and disgust, rather than to attract, with the most anxious desire to get rid of both, and to make them feel that they had no place nor standing in Greysthott. She had, indeed, been so frightened lest she herself should be overthrown, that all the "manners" in which Patty had been brought up deserted her, and she behaved like the barmaid dressed in a little brief and stolen authority, which they believed her to be. Indeed, the "manners" which Patty had been taught chiefly consisted in the inculcation of extreme respect to her "betters;" and her revolt from this, and conviction that she had now no betters in the world, carried her further in the opposite direction than if she had had no training at all. But in her calm tenure of authority for nearly a year, Patty had learned many things. She had learned that the mistress of a house does not need to stand upon her authority, and that a right, acknowledged and evident, does not require to be loudly asserted. It might have been supposed, however, that a certain awe of the heir-at-law—a humility more or less towards the man to whom shortly she must cede her keys, her place, and all the rights upon which she now stood, would have shown themselves in her. But this was not at all the case. She was quite civil to Colonel Piercey, but she treated him solely as a guest—her guest—without any relationship of his own towards the house in which she received him. To Margaret she was more friendly, but more careless in her civility. "I ordered them to get ready for you the room you used to have. I thought you would probably like that best," she said. Colonel Piercey was lodged quite humbly in one of the "bachelor's rooms," no special attention of any kind being paid to him, which was a thing very surprising to him, though he could scarcely have told why. To be aware that you are very near being the head of the house, and to be treated as if you were a very ordinary and distant relation, is startling in a house which is full of the presence of death. That presence, when it brings with it no deep family sorrow, brings a sombre business and activity, a sense of suppressed preparations and watchfulness for the end,

which is very painful to the sensitive mind, even when moved by no special feeling. Waiting for an old man to die, it is often difficult not to be impatient for that event, as for any other event which involves long waiting. Patty went about the house with this air of much business held back and suspended until something should happen. She was called away to have interviews with this person and that. She spoke of the "arrangements" she had to attend to. "Would it not be better that Colonel Piercey should relieve you of some part of the trouble?" said Margaret. "Oh, no; one should always do one's own business. Outsiders never understand," said Patty, with what would have been, had she been less dignified, a toss of her head in her widow's cap.

Was Gerald Piercey an outsider in the house that must so soon be his own? He had given Margaret to understand during their long drive that his father would not change his home or his life, and that it was he, Gerald, who would occupy Greyshott. I think Colonel Piercey was of opinion that he had made something else clear, though it had not been spoken of in words—namely, that there was but one mistress possible for Greyshott in its new life; but Mrs. Osborne did not by any means clearly understand him, having her mind preoccupied by the belief that his feelings to her were not of an affectionate kind, and that his first object was to deprive her of her child. She felt, however, that he was kind—bewilderingly kind, and that there was something in him which wanted explanation; but all the more, Margaret was anxious and disturbed by this attitude of "outsider" attributed to him. If Gerald Piercey was an outsider in Greyshott on the eve of his uncle's death, to whom he was natural heir, who else could have any right there? He did not remark this, as was natural. He was not surprised that Patty should hold him at arm's length. It was quite to be expected that she should feel deeply the mere fact that he was the heir. Poor girl! He wondered what provision had been made for her—if any; and if there should be none, promised himself that his father's first act, as Sir Francis, should be to set this right. He was, in fact, very sorry for Mrs. Patty, whose ambitions and schemes had come to so summary an end. She should never require to go back to the alehouse, but should be fitly provided for as the wife of the once heir of Greyshott ought to be. He confided these intentions to Margaret at the very moment when Mrs. Osborne's mind was full of Patty's speech about the outsider. "You mean if Uncle Giles has not done so already," Margaret said.

"It is very unlikely he should have done so. Of course there could be no settlement; and who was there to point out to him that such a thing was necessary?" Colonel Piercey was so strong in his conviction that Margaret did not like to suggest even that Patty might herself have pointed it out. But her own mind was full of vague suspicion and alarm. An outsider! Gerald Piercey, the natural heir of the house?

Late that night the two visitors were called to Sir Giles' room. "He is awake and seems to know everybody; I should like you to see him now," Patty said, going herself to Mrs. Osborne's room to call her. Colonel Piercey was walking up and down in the hall, with an air of examining the old family pictures, which Patty had not thought it necessary to meddle with, though she had removed those that had been in the library. He was not really looking at them, except as accessories to the scene—silent witnesses of the one that was passing away, and the other that was about to come. Gerald Piercey had a deep sadness in his heart, though he could not keep his thoughts from the new life that was before him. The very warmth of the rising of that new life and all its hopes made him feel all the more the deep disappointment and loss in which the other was ending. Poor Gervase would never have been a fit representative of the Pierceys, but as Margaret said, as she had always said, he was his father's son, and the object of all the hopes of the old pair who had reigned so long in Greyshott. And now this branch was cut off, their line ended, and the old tree falling that had flourished so long. He wondered if it would really be any comfort to poor old Sir Giles, dying alone in his desolate house, that there were still Pierceys to come after him: the same blood and race, though not drawn from his source. It seemed questionable how far he would be comforted by this; perhaps not at all, perhaps rather embittered by the fact that it was a cousin's son and not his own, who should now be the head of the house.

"Come now, come now," cried Patty eagerly, "as long as he is so conscious and awake. He sleeps most of his time, and it's quite a chance—quite a chance. I want you to see with your own eyes that he's all himself, and has his faculties still." She had an air of excitement about her perhaps not quite appropriate to the moment, as if her nerves were all in motion, and she could scarcely keep her fingers still or subdue the quiver in her head and over all her frame. She led the way hurriedly, opening the doors one after another in an excited way, and pushing into the sick room with a "Look, dear papa, who I've brought to see you." Sir Giles was sitting up in his bed, his large ashy face turned towards the door, his dim sunken eyes looking out from fold upon fold of heavy eyelid, his under-lip hanging as that of poor Gervase had done. "Ah," he stammered, "let 'em come in—to the light, my dear. I'm not in a state—to see strangers; but to please you—my dear."

"Uncle Giles," said Margaret, with an exclamation of pain, "surely you know me?"

"Eh? let her stand—in the light—in the light; why, why, why—Meg: it's Meg,—that's Meg." She kissed him, and he made an effort to turn his feeble head, and with his large moist lips he gave a tremulous kiss in the air. "I'm—I'm glad to see you, Meg. You were the first to—tell me—to tell me: I'll be always grateful to you—for that."

"For what, dear uncle? It is I who owe everything to you. Oh, Uncle Giles, if I could only tell you how much and how often I think of it! you were always kind, always kind; and dear Aunt Piercey; you gave me my home, the only home I ever had."

"Eh! eh! What is she saying, my dear? You'll—you'll look after Meg—never let her come to want. She was the first to tell me. The greatest news that has come—to Greyshott. You remember, Meg—and Osy, bless him, how he cheered! There's—there's something for Osy. He cheered like a little trump, and he gave—he gave my boy his only wedding present, the—the only one. Dunning, where is my purse? Osy must have a tip—two tips for that."

"Dear papa," cried Patty, "don't disturb yourself; oh, don't disturb yourself! I'll see to it."

"My—my purse, Dunning!" The purse was procured while they all stood by, and the old man fumbling, got with difficulty, one after another, two sovereigns, which fell out of his trembling fingers upon the bed. "One for—for cheering; and one for—for the other thing. Give 'em to Osy, Meg, bless him; and my blessing. When it comes and all's right, that'll be a friend for Osy—always a friend, better than an old man."

"Dear papa," cried Patty, pushing forward again, "here is some one else to see you—Colonel Piercey,

dear, don't you remember? Colonel Piercey—Gerald—that once paid you a long visit; I know you'll remember if you try. Here," she said, seizing his arm, pulling him forward, "stand in the light that he may see you."

She was vibrating with excitement like a creature on wires. The touch of her hand on Gerald's arm was like an electric cord; and to be pushed forward thus, and accounted for as if he had been an absolute stranger, to be brought with difficulty to the mind of the dying man, was to Gerald Piercey, as may well be supposed, an insupportable sensation. He drew back, saying hastily, "I cannot disturb him. I will not have him disturbed for me—let him alone, let him alone."

"Eh? what? who's that? somebody else? Gerald?" said Sir Giles. He held out his hand vaguely into the air, not seeing where his attention was called, the large old limp grey hand, with so little volition or power left in it. "Ah, Gerald, come to see the end of the old man? that's kind! that's kind! My poor wife and I used to think if our first boy had lived, don't you know, he might have been a man like you. Well, Gerald, I've nothing to give you, but my blessing—but my blessing. You won't mind if your nose is put out of joint, you know, as the old folks say. And you'll stand by it, Gerald, a—a good fellow like you."

"Dear papa, I think they'll go now; it's late, and you ought to go to sleep."

"Not yet," said Sir Giles, who had fallen into the old strain of faint sobbing and laughing; "plenty—plenty of time for sleep. Thousands of years, don't you know, till it's all—all over. Where are they? eh, Meg. I scarcely see you; eh!" he kissed the air again with his hanging, lifeless lips, "good-night; and t'other man. Gerald, be kind to her, my boy; a good girl, Meg, a good girl. She's been married, which some might think a drawback; but if you're fond of her, and she's fond of you. Eh, Dunning? well I'm not tired, not tired a bit—let him be the god-father, my dear; and good-night to you, good-night to you—all."

He died in the night.

The third funeral within a year from Greyshott! What a melancholy record was that—father and mother, and the only child! Sir Giles was the only one of the three who could be said to have been beloved. His wife had always been an imperious woman, his son had been a fool; but the old man was full of gentleness and kindness, and had been a model country gentleman in his day, known to everybody, and always genial to rich and poor. Once more the avenue was full of carriages, and the house of mourners, and there were some tears, and many kind recollections, and a great deal of talk about him as they carried him away. "It will be a long time before we see the like of him again," the country folk and tenants said, while the gentlemen of the county congratulated themselves that the old name was not to be extinct nor the land transferred to other hands. The new baronet was not there; he was also an old man, and not fond of much movement, but Colonel Piercey was his representative, and an excellent representative, a man of whom the whole district might be proud. He was looked to by every one, pointed out to those who did not know him, and surrounded by a subtle atmosphere of suspended congratulation and welcome, notwithstanding the universal grief for Sir Giles. The old man's dying words had not made a very deep impression on Colonel Piercey, except those which concerned Margaret. He had not understood the allusions, nor indeed thought of them, save as the wanderings of weakness. It seemed all of a piece to him—the thought that Sir Giles' firstborn, the boy dead some thirty years ago, might have grown such a man as he, and his nose being put out of joint, and the petition that he should be good to some one, and stand by it. All these wild and wandering words Gerald Piercey put out of his head as meaning nothing. It was, perhaps, the "first boy," whom he had never heard of before, whom he was to be good to, yet who would put his nose out of joint. It was all a muddle, and Gerald did not attempt to grope his way through it. He was deeply impressed and touched by the image of the old man dying; but he had no doubt as to his own prospects, and thought of no disaster. How could there be any doubt? If there had been a new will made since the death of Gervase, no doubt the estate had been charged with an adequate provision for Gervase's wife; if there had been no will made, his father and he, as the next-of-kin and heir-at-law, would of course take that into their own hands, and secure it at once. Beyond this and the natural legacies, Gerald suspected no new thing.

Margaret, on the other hand, had been deeply alarmed and startled by what she heard. She did not remember what she had said on the occasion to which her uncle referred, but she remembered his outburst of cheering, and Osy, with his legs wide apart and his hat waving in his hand, giving forth his hip, hip, hurrah. Was it possible that the old man had made out to himself some fiction of what might be going to happen, some illusion which buoyed him up with false hopes? Was it possible that Patty—? Margaret did not know what to think. She would fain have confided her alarm to Gerald, and taken counsel with him; but those other words of Sir Giles had been too broadly significant, and he was the last person in the world to whom she could talk on any subject that would recall them. She had avoided Gerald, indeed, since that scene, and it had not been referred to again between them. But her mind was full of perplexity and doubt. The bearing of Patty (always *digne*, always just what a daughter-in-law's chastened grief should be,—not too demonstrative), so confident, so authoritative, so determined to do everything herself, without assistance from an "outsider," increased this sensation of alarm and uncertainty in Margaret's mind. She did not know in the least what was coming. But it seemed to her certain that something was coming which was not in the course of nature, or according to the common expectation. Her mind grew more and more confused, yet more and more certain of this as the crisis approached; for Patty never had been so independent, so confident, so sure of being the head of everything, as on the funeral day.

Yet Patty had her troubles, too, which she had to bear alone, and without any aid at this crisis of her career. Miss Hewitt, whose indignation at her reception on her first visit had been so great that she had made a vow never to see her ungrateful niece again, had, by the time that Sir Giles' dangerous condition had become publicly known, got over her fury. She had been paid her fifty pounds, and she had begun to believe in Patty's continued success and in her cleverness and power. There had been a pause of alarm in the family after the death of Gervase, when they had all feared (little knowing her spirit) that Patty would be sent back on their hands. But when that alarm was well over and Patty was found to hold her own, the admiration of her relations was doubled. Her father was the first to claim a renewal of friendship; but his reception was so alarming, and his daughter poured forth upon his head such torrents of wrath, telling him that, but for the exposure of family affairs, she would have him tried for manslaughter, that the landlord of the Seven Thorns slunk off completely cowed and without a word to say. This added to Miss Hewitt's regard for her brave and

victorious niece, who feared no one, and she had in the meantime made many attempts to obtain a footing at Greystott. Partly to impress still more sensibly upon her father her utter and unchangeable hostility, and partly because some one to speak to became a necessity, Patty had admitted her aunt on various occasions; and now Miss Hewitt demanded, with a persistence which all Patty's spare moments had been spent in resisting, first an interview with Sir Giles, and then a place in the carriage which conveyed her niece to his funeral. Patty had not yielded in respect to the first, but in the extreme state of mental excitement in which she was, her resolution gave way before the second prayer. It had not been her intention to "mix herself up with any of the Hewitts," but in face of the scene which she anticipated at the reading of the will, it gradually came to appear more and more desirable to her to have some one to stand by her, some one to be dazzled by her position and good fortune, and to take her part whatever opposition she might meet with. Patty did not know what might happen at the reading of the will. She had a prevision, but not even now any absolute certainty, what the will was. And if it were as she believed, she did not know what powers might be brought into action against her, or what might be done. She decided at last that to have her aunt, who at bottom was a thoroughly congenial spirit, to defend and stand by her, would be an advantage. And this was how it was that Miss Hewitt attained the lugubrious triumph of her life, the satisfaction of following her former lover in his old carriage, his wife's carriage, whom she considered her triumphant rival, to his grave.

CHAPTER XLII.

It was a strange triumph, and yet it was one. Miss Hewitt closely followed her niece, once more wrapt in a new extravagance of crape; and these ladies had the satisfaction of seeing Mrs. Osborne quietly take her place opposite to them on the front seat of the carriage. This gave both to Patty and her aunt an acute sensation of pleasure, which would have been greater, however, had the victim seemed in any way conscious of it. But Margaret was full of many thoughts, recollections, and anticipations. She, too, looked forward to the disclosure of her uncle's will with a curiosity and anxiety which had nothing to do with any expectations of her own. She had put away the two sovereigns so tremulously extracted from his purse by the dying man with a half smile and a tear. That, she concluded, was all that Osy would ever have from his great-uncle, who might so easily have made a provision for the boy. She had never expected it, she said to herself, but that was a different thing from this certainty that it never would be; still there was a tender familiarity about the "tip" for the child which went to Margaret's heart. Poor old uncle! If he had been left to himself, if he had been able to think, he would have acted differently. She put away the two pieces of money for Osy without any grudge, with a tender thought of the old man who had been as good as a father to her all her life. And now was this the end of Greystott so far as she was concerned? or was there a strange something looming out of the clouds, another life of which she would not think, which she could not understand, to which she did not consent? She put all thought out of her mind of anything that concerned herself, or tried her best to do so—but the family was dear to her still. Was there any plot threatening the name, the race, the old, old dwelling of the Pierceys? There was a subdued triumph in Patty's look, a confidence in her voice and step, and the authoritative orders she gave, which did not look like a woman who after to-day would have no real authority in Sir Francis Pierce's house. She could not imagine what it could mean; but the advent of the elder woman, also in crape, and full of ostentatious sympathy and regret, strengthened all her apprehensions, though she did not know of what she was afraid.

One or two of the oldest friends remained for the reading of the will. It was felt on all sides that the grief which attended Sir Giles to his tomb was of a modified kind. No one except Mrs. Osborne could be supposed to regard the old gentleman with filial love or sorrow, and the party which assembled round the luncheon table was serious, but put on no affectation of woe. Patty took her place at the head of the table with a quiet assurance to which nobody objected. She had too much sense to talk of "dear papa" before all these people, and if she showed the composure of an authorised and permanent mistress of the house, it was probably because she had been accustomed to do so. Lord Hartmore, if his sympathies were not so much aroused as on the day of Gervase's funeral, still retained a sort of partisan feeling for the young widow. She was his *protégée*. His wife had not fallen in with his views, except in the most moderate way, merely to honour the promise he had made for her. Lady Hartmore did not attempt to improve her acquaintance with Patty. She was quite at her ease at the other end of the table by the side of Colonel Piercey, who now was *de facto*, in her assured belief, the master of the house. Margaret was not present at the luncheon, and Miss Hewitt, who was elated beyond expression by finding herself seated among all the great people, on the other side of Lord Hartmore, felt herself the principal person at table, and demeaned herself accordingly. "To think," she said, "my lord, that I should find myself 'ere on such an occasion; me that once thought to be the mistress; but oh! the ideas of the young is different from what comes to pass in life. 'Im as we have laid in his grave, dear gentleman, was once— Well, Patty, love, as you say, this ain't a time to talk of such things. Still, it do come upon me sitting at 'is table, and 'im not 'ere to bid me welcome. But it's a mournful satisfaction to see the last of 'im all the same."

"Aunt was an old friend of my dear father-in-law," Patty explained, curtly. "I believe, Lord Hartmore, that you know more of Margaret Osborne than I do. Margaret Osborne has not shown very much sympathy to me, and all this winter I have never been able to get out for such a purpose as making calls. I couldn't have taken a three hours' drive to be away so long, not if it had been a matter of life and death. That means almost a whole day, and dear Sir Giles never liked to let me out of his sight."

"Ah, 'e always knew them that were really fond of 'im," said Miss Hewitt. "You couldn't blind 'im, my lord, with pretences. I was kep' back by my family, and thoughts of what the world might say; but 'e knew that Patty was the same stuff like, and 'e took to her the double of what 'e would have done on that account. Oh, your lordship, what a man 'e was! You're too young to remember 'im at 'is best: 'andsome is as 'andsome does, folk say—but a gentleman like 'im can't always act as 'e would like to. You must know that from yourself, my lord. Sometimes the 'eart don't go where the 'and 'as to be given."

"Well, that is certainly sometimes the case," said Lord Hartmore, with a subdued laugh, "though I don't think I know it by myself."

"Aunt's so full of her old times," cried Patty. "If there was anything that was ever wanted for the little Osborne boy, Lord Hartmore, I should always be pleased to help. He got too much for my dear father-in-law latterly, being noisy, and such a spoiled little thing; but he was fond of him, and spoke of him at the very last." "I can never forget that," said Patty, putting her handkerchief lightly to her eyes. "And if there should be need of a little help for his education, or setting him out in life—but I should have a delicacy in saying so to Margaret Osborne, unless you'd be so good as to do it for me."

"Oh, you're very kind, Mrs. Piercey," said Lord Hartmore, confused. "Our dear Meg is rather a formidable person to approach with such a proposal."

"Yes, isn't she formidable?" cried Patty, eagerly. "That's just the word; one is frightened to offer to do her a good turn."

"Let us hope," said Lord Hartmore, "that her good uncle has left her beyond the need of help."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Patty, with a very serious face.

"I feel sure of it," said Lord Hartmore, with genial confidence. "He was far too good a man, and too kind an uncle. Mrs. Piercey, I see my friend Gerald looking this way, and Mr. Pownceby wriggling in his chair, as if ——" He made a slight movement as if to rise—which perhaps was not the highest breeding in Lord Hartmore; but it was very slight and accompanied by a look of deference, suggesting a signal on her part.

"Mr. Gerald Piercey is not master here, nor is Mr. Pownceby," said Patty, with dignity. "They may look as they please, but in my own house it's my part to say when people are to leave the table."

"She do have a spirit, Patty does," Miss Hewitt murmured under her breath.

Lord Hartmore settled himself in his chair again, abashed. "I beg your pardon," he said; and then, in a subdued tone, "Most likely Pownceby has a train to catch."

"In that case I don't mind stretching a point," said the lady of the house, "though Mr. Pownceby is no more than a hired servant paid for his time, and it is no business of his to interfere."

A hired servant! Old Pownceby, who had all the secrets of the county in his hands, and most of its business! Lord Hartmore grew pale with awe at this daring speech. He looked straight before him, not to see the signals of his wife telegraphing to him from Gerald Piercey's side. "I'll have nothing to do with it," he said to himself; and, indeed, in his consternation, Lord Hartmore was the last to get up when the movement of the chairs convinced him that Mrs. Piercey had condescended to move. He offered that lady his arm humbly, on an indication from her that this was expected. "I suppose we shall see Mrs. Osborne in the library?" he said.

"Oh, Margaret! I suppose she'd better be there for form's sake, though I don't suppose it matters much. Aunt, will you tell Margaret Osborne to come directly, please? I have never," said Patty, with a smile, "got into the way of calling her Meg, as you all do."

Lord Hartmore could scarcely dissimulate the little start of consternation with which he heard this. The forlorn young widow, for whom he had been so sorry, was appearing in a new light; but, of course, it was only her ignorance, he said to himself. The party had all assembled in the library when the voice of Miss Hewitt was heard outside calling to some one who seemed to be following: "This way, Margaret—this way. They're all in the library. I don't know the 'ouse so well as I might, but this is the way. Come along please, quick, and don't keep the company waiting," Miss Hewitt said.

Gerald Piercey started forward to open the door, for which Miss Hewitt rewarded him with an "Oh! thank you, but I'm quite at 'ome, quite at 'ome." Margaret came in in the wake of that bustling figure, pale, and with an air of suspense. "Was it necessary to send for me in that way?" she said to Gerald. He had placed a chair for her beside Lady Hartmore. "Oh, Heaven knows what is necessary!" said that lady. "You know the proverb about beggars on horseback." She was not so careful to subdue her voice as she might have been, but in the commotion it was not observed. Gerald Piercey stood with his hand on the back of his cousin's chair. They were the family, the only persons present of the Piercey blood. The old friends of the house stood near them. At the upper end of the room were Patty and her aunt. Mr. Pownceby stood in front of the large fireplace with a paper in his hand.

"I must explain," he said, "how the will I have to read is so very succinct a document. Sir Giles had made his will like other men, and as there was a good deal to leave, there were a number of bequests. The late Mr. Gervase Piercey was, of course, the heir, under trustees, as he was not much—acquainted with business. Sir Giles thought fit to change this, as was to be expected, after his son's death. He sent for me hastily one day, and gave me instructions which surprised me. I begged him to allow me to take these back with me in order that the new will should be properly written out, proposing to come back next day to execute it, and, in short, hoping that he might reconsider the matter; but he would hear of no delay. This document I will now read."

Gerald Piercey stood quite undisturbed, with his hand on the back of Margaret's chair. He was not anxious. It had not occurred to him that the house of his fathers could be alienated from him, and short of that, his poor old uncle's wishes would, he sincerely felt, be sacred whatever they were. He was glad to hear that there was a new will made, which, no doubt, provided for Mrs. Piercey; and waited with an easy mind to hear what it was. As for Margaret, the event about to happen began to dawn clearly upon her. She saw it in Patty's eyes, in her pose, sitting up defiant in Lady Piercey's chair. She looked up at her cousin with an eager desire to warn him, to support him, but was daunted by the calm of his look, fearing no evil. "Gerald, Gerald," she said, instinctively. The lines of his face melted suddenly; he looked down upon her with an encouraging, protecting smile, and took her hand for a moment, saying "Meg!" and no more. He thought she was appealing to him for his care and protection in face of a probable disappointment to herself.

Mr. Pownceby cleared his throat and waved his hand. He ran over the exordium, name, and formula, of sound mind, etc., etc., to which everybody listened impatiently, "do give and bequeath the whole of my estates, property, real and personal, etc., to—" here he paused a little, as if his own throat were dry—"Patience Piercey, my daughter-in-law, and companion for the last six months, to be at her entire disposal as it may be best for the interests of the family, and in remainder to her child. This I do, believing it to be best for meeting all difficulties, and in view of any contingency that might arise.

"Signed, Giles Piercey," added the lawyer, "and dated Greyshott, 16th June, just a fortnight ago."

There was a pause. Even now it did not seem to have struck Colonel Piercey what it meant. He listened

with a half smile. "And—?" he said, waiting as if for more.

"That is all, Colonel Piercey, every word. The house, estates, money, everything. Even the servants are cut out. He said she'd look after them. Mrs. Piercey takes everything—house, lands, money, plate, everything. It is a very unusual and surprising will, but that is all."

And then there was another pause, and a general deep-drawn breath.

"It is a very surprising will indeed," said Lord Hartmore.

It was a sort of remark to himself, forced from him by the astonishment of the moment; but in the silence of the room it sounded as if addressed like an oration to all who were there.

"Pardon me," cried Colonel Piercey, "but Greyshott? Do you mean that Greyshott, the original home of the family—?"

"I represented that to Sir Giles, but he would hear nothing. It is Mrs. Piercey's with all the rest."

"It is the most iniquitous thing I ever heard," cried Lady Hartmore, rising quickly to her feet. "What! not a word of anybody belonging to him, nothing of Meg and her boy, nothing of his natural heirs, nothing of old Dunning even, and the old servants?—The man must have been mad."

Here Patty rose and advanced to the conflict. She was very nervous, but collected. "Mr. Pownceby can bear me witness that I knew nothing about it," she said. "I wasn't there."

"No, you were not there," said the lawyer.

"I thought it right I should have a provision," said Patty, "and so it was right; and if my dear father-in-law thought that the one that stood by him, and nursed him through all his illness, when everybody else forsook him, was the one that ought to have it, who's got anything to say against that? I didn't want it; but now that I've got it, I'll stick to it," cried Patty defiantly, confronting Lady Hartmore, who had been the only one to speak.

"I have no doubt of it," cried that lady, "but if I were Colonel Piercey, I shouldn't stand it; no, not for a moment! Why, the old man was in his dotage, no more equal to making a will than— than his son would have been."

"Mary!" cried her husband in dismay.

"Well!" said Lady Hartmore, suddenly brought to herself by the consciousness of having said more than she ought to have said, "I am glad, I am quite glad, Hartmore, for one thing, that you'll now see things in their proper light."

"And a very just will, too," cried Miss Hewitt, coming to her niece's side,— "just like 'im, as was a very right-thinking man. Patty was an angel to 'im, that she was, night and day. And it is nothing but what was to be expected, that 'e should give 'er all as 'e had to give. And not too much, neither, to the only one as nursed 'im, and did for 'im, and gave up everything. Oh! I always said it—'e was a right-thinking man."

Colonel Piercey said nothing after that exclamation of "Greshott!" but he retired with the lawyer into a corner as soon as the spell of consternation was broken by the sudden sound of these passionate voices. He had seized Margaret by the arm and drawn her with him. "We are the representatives of the family," he said, hurriedly; and Mrs. Osborne was too much startled (though she had foreseen it), too sympathetic, and too much excited, to object to the manner in which he had drawn her hand within his arm. "Our interests are the same," he said, briefly, with a hurried nod to Mr. Pownceby; and they stood talking for some minutes, while a wonderful interchange of artillery went on behind. This was concluded by a sudden clear sound of Patty's voice in the air, ringing with passion and mastery. "I believe," she said, "Lord Hartmore's carriage is at the door." And then there arose a laugh of sharp anger from the other side. "We are turned out," cried Lady Hartmore, "turned out of Greyshott, where we were familiar before that chit was born." It was a little like scolding, but it was the voice of nature all the same.

"And I think," said Colonel Piercey, "Meg, that you and I had better go, too."

"Oh, as you please!" cried Patty; "Meg can stay if she likes, and I've already said I shouldn't mind giving any reasonable help to educate the little boy. And as for you, Gerald Piercey, you can do what you like, and I can see you are bursting with envy. You can't touch me!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

It was thus in wrath and in consternation that the party dispersed. Patty stood in the hall, flushed and fierce, with defiance in every look, supported by her aunt, who stood behind her, and gave vent from time to time to murmurs of sympathy and snorts of indignation. Patty had almost forgotten, in her mingled triumph and rage, the anxiously chastened demeanour which she had of late imposed upon herself. She was a great deal more like Patty of the Seven Thorns than she had ever been since her marriage. The opposition and scorn of Lady Hartmore had awakened all her combative tendencies, and made her for the moment careless of consequences. What did she care for those big wigs who looked down upon her? Was she not as good as any of them, herself a county magnate, the lady of Greyshott? better than they were! For the Hartmores were not so rich as comported with their dignity; and Patty was now rich, to her own idea enormously rich, and as great a lady as any in England. Was she not Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott, owning no superior anywhere? It is curious that this conviction should have swept away for the moment all her precautions of behaviour, and restored her to the native level of the country barmaid, as ready to scold as any fishwife, to defy every rule of respect or even politeness. She waited to see Lady Hartmore to the door, having swept out of the room before that astonished lady with a bosom bursting with rage. Truth to tell, Lady Hartmore was much disposed to fight, too. She would have liked, above all things, to give the little upstart what humbler persons call a piece of her mind. Her pulses, too, were beating high, and a flood of words were pressing to her lips. It was intolerable to her to accept the insult to herself and the wrong to her friends without saying anything—without laying the offender low under the tempest of her wrath. As for Lord Hartmore, it must be owned that he was frightened, and only anxious to get his wife away. He held her arm tightly in his, and gave it an additional pressure as he led her past the fierce little adversary who, no doubt, had a greater command of

appropriate language than even Lady Hartmore had, whose style was probably less trenchant, though more refined. "Now, Mary, now, my dear," he said soothingly. The sight of the carriage at the door was delightful to him as a safe port to a sailor. And though the first thing Lady Hartmore did when safely ensconced in her corner, was to turn upon him the flood of her suppressed wrath with a "So this is your interesting little widow, Hartmore!" he was too glad to get away from the sphere of combat to attempt any self-defence. He, too, was saying "the little demon!" under his breath.

Patty still stood there, when Margaret, who had hastily collected the few things she had brought with her, came down to join Colonel Piercey in the hall. He had been standing, as he had been on a previous occasion, carefully examining one of the old portraits. It was not a very interesting portrait, nor was he, I suppose, specially interested in it; but his figure, wrapt in silence and abstraction, made a curious contrast to that of Patty, thrilling with fire and movement. It was evident that she could not long restrain herself, and when Margaret appeared coming down the great stairs, the torrent burst forth.

"Oh, you are there, Meg Osborne: I wonder you didn't go with your great friends, the first people in the county, as you all think, insulting me in my own house! Ah, and I'll teach you all it's my own house! I won't have nobody here turning their backs to me, or going out and in of my place without as much as a thank you! You're studying my pictures, Colonel Piercey, are you? They're my pictures, they're not yours; and I'll have you to know that nobody sha'n't even look at them without my consent."

Colonel Piercey turned round, almost angry with himself for the fury he felt. "I beg your pardon," he said, very gravely, yet with a sort of smile.

"Oh, you beg my pardon! and you laugh as if it were a joke! I can tell you it's no joke. They're all mine, willed by him as knew best who he wanted them to go to; and I'll keep them, that I will, against all the beggarly kinsfolk in the world; coming here a-looking as soon as the old man's in his grave for what they can devour!"

"Are you ready, Margaret?" Colonel Piercey said.

"Don't you turn it off to her, sir: speak to me! It's me that has to be considered first. You are going off mighty high: no civility to the head of the house, though I've taken you in and given you lodging in my house, at least Meg there, near a week? Oh, you laugh again, do you? And who is the head of the house if it's not me? I'm Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott. The pictures are mine, and the name's mine, as well as everything else; and you are nothing but the son of the younger brother, and not got as much to do with it as Pownceby there, the lawyer."

"My dear Mrs. Piercey," said Mr. Pownceby, "however much you may despise Pownceby the lawyer, he knows a little more on that subject than you do: a lady is rarely, if ever, the head of a house, and certainly never one who belongs to the family only by marriage. One word, if you please: Colonel Piercey's father, now Sir Francis Piercey, is the undoubted head of the house."

"Oh, you'll say anything, of course, to back them up; you think they're your only friends and will pay you best. But you'll find that's a mistake, Mr. Pownceby the lawyer, just as they'll find it's a mistake. What do you want here, Dunning? What business has servants, except my footman to open the door, here? You've been a deal too much petted in your time, and you'll find out the difference now."

"Mr. Pownceby, sir," said Dunning, who had suddenly appeared on the scene, exceedingly dark and lowering, "Is it true, sir, what I hear, that none of us old servants, not me, sir, that looked after him night and day, is named in my old master's will?"

"I am sorry to say it is quite true, Dunning," Mr. Pownceby said; "but I don't doubt that Mrs. Piercey will remember your long service, as Sir Giles wished her to do."

"How do you know what Sir Giles wished? I know best what Sir Giles said I was to do," cried Patty. "As for long service, yes, if holding on like grim death and taking as little trouble as possible is what you mean."

"Me take little trouble!" cried Dunning, foaming. "I've not had a night's rest, not an unbroken night, since Lady Piercey died—not one. Oh, I knowed how it would be! when she come about him, flattering him and slaving him, and the poor dear old gentleman thought it was good for Mr. Gervase; and then after, didn't she put it upon him as she was in the family-way, and she never was in the family-way, no more than I was. Hoh! ask the women! Hoh! look at her where she stands! He thought as there was an heir coming, and there ain't no more of an heir coming than——"

"Let us go, please, let us go," cried Margaret, in distress. "Cousin Gerald, Mr. Pownceby, we have nothing, nothing surely, to do with this. Oh, let us get away."

"Put that fellow out of my house!" cried Patty, "put him out of my house! You're a nice gentleman, Gerald Piercey, to stand there and encourage a man like that to insult a lady. Robert, take that man by the shoulders and put him out."

"He had just best try," said Dunning, squaring his shoulders. But Robert, who was young and slim, knew better than to try. He stood sheepishly fumbling by the door, opening it for the party who were going out. Dunning was not an adversary to be lightly encountered. Colonel Piercey, however, not insensible to the appeal made to him, laid his hand on Dunning's shoulder.

"This lady is right," he said; "we must not insult a woman, Dunning. You had better come with us in the meantime. It will do you no good to stay here."

"Ah, go with them and plot, do," cried Patty; "I knew that's how it would end. He knows I can expose him and all his ways—neglecting my dear old father-in-law; he knows he'll never get another place if people hear what I've got to say of him! Oh, yes, go with 'em, do! They thought they were to have it all their own way, and turn me out. But all of you, every one, will just learn the difference. If he had behaved like a gentleman and her like a lady, I might have given them their old rubbish of pictures. I don't care for that trash; they're no ornament to the place. I intend to have them all taken down and carted off to the first auction there is anywhere. I don't believe they'd bring above a few shillings; but all the same they are mine, and I'll have no strangers meddling with them," Patty cried. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Aunt Patience, hold your tongue, and let me manage my affairs myself."

"The only thing is just this, ladies and gentlemen," said Miss Hewitt. "She's got put out, poor thing, and I

don't wonder, seeing all as she's 'ad to do; but she don't mean more than a bit of temper, and she'll soon come round if you'll have a little patience. This is the gentleman that come to me, and that I first told as my niece was married to Gervase Piercey, and no mistake. 'E is a very civil gentleman, Patty, and, Lord, why should you go and make enemies of 'im and of this lady, as I should say was a-going to be 'is good lady, and both belonging to the family! Nor I would not go and make an enemy of Mr. Pownceby, as 'as all the family papers in his 'ands and knows a deal, and could be of such use to you. I'd ask them all to stay, if I was you, to a nice bit of family dinner, and talk things over. What *is* the good of making enemies when being friends would be so much more use to you?" said Miss Hewitt, with triumphant logic. But Patty, who had heard with impatience and many attempts to interrupt, turned away before her oration was over, and, turning her back upon her recent guests, walked away as majestically as was possible, with her long train sweeping over the carpet, to the drawing-room, where she shut herself in, slamming the door. Miss Hewitt threw up her hands and eyes. "That's just 'er," she cried, "just 'er! Thinks of nothing when 'er temper's up; but I 'ope you won't think nothing of it neither. She'll be as good friends in a hour as if nothing had 'appened; and I'll go and give her a good talking to," the aunt said.

When Miss Hewitt reached the drawing-room she found Patty thrown upon the sofa in the second stage of her passion, which was, naturally, tears. But these paroxysms did not last long. "I let you talk, Aunt Patience," she said. "It pleased you, and it looked well enough. But I know my affairs better than you. Enemies! of course they're all my enemies, and I don't blame them. What I said I said on purpose, not in a temper. I had them here on purpose to see the old gentleman before he died, so that they might know for themselves that he was in his right mind, and all that; and old Pownceby knows; and I wanted to show them that I wasn't afraid of them, not a bit. However, that's all over, and you needn't trouble your head about it. I have a deal to do before the trial——"

"The trial!" said Miss Hewitt, in consternation. "Is there going to be a trial?"

"Of course there will be a trial. They won't let Greyshott go without a try for it, and you'll see me in all the papers, and the whole story, and I don't know that there's anything to be ashamed of. The thing I've got to find out now is who to have for my lawyers. I want to have the best—the very best; and some one that will make it all into a story, and tell all I did for the poor old man. I was good to him," said Patty, with an admiration of herself which was very genuine—"I was indeed. Many a time I've wanted to get a little pleasure like other folks—to enjoy myself a bit. Oh, there was one night! when Roger Pearson was here and had been at a dance, and I knew all the girls were at it, and all as jolly as——, and me cooped up, playing backgammon with the old gentleman, and—and worse beside."

"Good Lord, Patty!" cried Miss Hewitt. "Roger Pearson! where ever did you see Roger Pearson? I thought *that* was all over and done with!"

"What did you please to mean by that remark?" said Patty, with great dignity. "It doesn't matter where I saw him. I did see him; and there's not many girls would have gone on with the backgammon and—the rest, as I did, just that night. Aunt Patience, you may know a few things, but you don't know the trials of a married woman."

"The trials!" said Miss Hewitt. "I've known a many that have boasted of the advantage it was. But trials—no. You'll be very willing, I shouldn't wonder, to have 'em again."

"That depends upon many things; but I think not," said Patty.

"You mightn't be lucky the first time, and yet be lucky the second," said her aunt; "but it can't be said to be unlucky, Patty, when it leaves you here, not twenty-five yet, with this grand property all to yourself. Lord! I thought you was lucky at the first, when you got 'im; for I knew they couldn't put 'im out of 'is rights, Softy or no Softy; but just think the luck you've had since; 'is mother dead afore you come home, and that was a blessing, and then 'imself just a blessed release, and then——"

"I'll thank you, Aunt Patience, not to speak of my husband in that way. A release! Who'd have dared to say a word if Gervase had been here? Oh!" she said, springing up from her seat, and stamping her foot upon the carpet, "and here I am for ever and ever just what I am now, when I would have been my lady all my life, and nobody to stop me, if he had lived but six months more!"

"Dear, and that's true," said Miss Hewitt deeply struck with the tragedy of the event. "I do pity you, my pet! my poor darling! That's true, that's true!"

While this scene was going on in Greyshott, Gerald and Margaret were jogging on towards Chillfold in their hired chaise. They had a great deal to say, and yet there were long silences between them. Gerald was more angry, Margaret more sad.

"I should have minded nothing else," the Colonel said, "if he had kept the old house for us, the house that has produced us all—Greyshott, that has never belonged but to a Piercey; and, Meg, if he had done justice to you."

"There was no justice owing to me," she said. "I left the house at my own free will. I belong to another house and another name——"

"That might have been true," said Colonel Piercey, with something of his old stiffness and severity, "if ——"

"It is true," she said, "I am of the family of my child."

"Oh," he cried, "what folly, at your age! I was angry to have lost you; but now, I can't tell how it is, you are Meg Piercey again."

"You have got used to my changed looks," she said. "You have accepted the fact that I am no longer in my teens. But this is not worth discussing when there is so much more to think of. What shall you do? or, indeed, what can you do?"

"Fight it, certainly," he said. "As soon as I have taken you home, I am to meet old Pownceby, and lay the whole case before the best man we can get. Thank Heaven, I am not without means to fight it out. Poor Uncle Giles! It is hard to call him up to a reckoning before all the world; but he could not have meant it; he could never have meant it."

"I have his little tip for Osy," said Margaret, with tears in her eyes.

"His little tip! when he ought to have provided for the boy!"

"Poor Uncle Giles! He was never very strong; and I believe she was very kind to him, and he was fond of her."

"Do you want me to accept this absurd will, this loss to the race, because she was kind to him (granting that)—and an old man, in his dotage, was fond of a scheming woman?"

"Don't call names," said Margaret. "He was not in his dotage. We saw him——"

"Ah—called on purpose, that we might help to establish the fact," said Colonel Piercey, fiercely. "What do you call it but dotage—that tip over which you are inclined to weep; and the reason alleged for it, that you had been the first to tell him something? Yes, I know what that means. Pownceby told me. That's—how long since? But he believed it, just the same as ever, in the same kind of distant hope. What is that but dotage, Meg?"

"And must it all, everything—the mere foolish hope I expressed to please him, and anything she may have said—must it all be dragged before the public, and poor Uncle Giles' foolish hopes?"

"Would you like me to throw it all over, and leave that woman to enjoy her ill-gotten gains? Do you say I am to do that, Meg?"

"I—say? Oh, no. What right have I? No, Cousin Gerald, I do not think you should give up your claim. I think"—she paused a moment, and her face lighted up, the words seemed to drop from her lips. Other thoughts flashed up in her eyes—an expectation, the light of happiness and peace. The carriage had turned a corner, and Chillfold, with her cottage in it, and her boy, brought the relief and ease of home to Margaret's face. Her companion watched her eagerly. He saw the change that came over her. His thoughts followed hers with a quick revulsion of sympathy. He laid his hand upon hers.

"Meg," he said, "do you know there has never been anybody in the world whose face has lighted up like that for me?"

"You had a mother, Gerald," she said quickly, almost ashamed of her self-revelation; "but you forget—as Osy also will forget."

"At my age one wants something different from a mother," he said, "and one does not forget."

She did not say anything. She did not meet his look; but she gave a little pressure, scarcely perceptible, to the hand that held hers. Their long duel had come, at least, to peace—if nothing more.

CHAPTER XLIV.

PATTY had a great deal to do before the trial; for it is needless to say that no time was lost in bringing the matter to a trial. It was in some respects an unequal contest, for, clever as she was, she knew no more to whom she should apply, or in whose hands she should place her cause, than any other person of her original position. Mr. Pownceby was the only representative of law with whom she was acquainted, he and the shabby attorney of the village, who was the resort of litigious country folk. And Mr. Pownceby, whom she had insulted, was, as she had foreseen, on the other side. There was no help to be found in Miss Hewitt for any such need, except in so far that after many years' strenuous reading of all the trials in the papers, the names of certain distinguished advocates in various *causes célèbres* and otherwise were at that lady's finger ends. The idea of the two women was to carry their business at once, without any intervention of an intermediate authority, to one of the very greatest of these great men, with whom, indeed, Patty herself managed to obtain an interview, with the boldness of ignorance. The great man was much amused by Patty, but he did not undertake her case. He even suggested to her that it would be a good thing to compromise matters, and agree with her adversary in the way, which did not at all commend itself to Mrs. Piercey. She would rather, she declared, spend to the half of her kingdom than tamely compromise her "rights," and leave Greyshott to the heir-at-law. The Solicitor-General (I think it was that functionary) was very kind. He was amused by her story, by her youth and good looks, by her fierce determination and her ignorance. It was seldom that he had so genuine a study of human nature before him, and that instinct of human nature which makes our own cause always seem the one that is most just and right. He was moved to advise her to avoid litigation rather from a desire to keep that piquant story for his private gratification, instead of casting it abroad to all the winds, than from any higher motive. And yet he did a great deal for her, telling her who were the solicitors in whose hands she ought to place herself, with a sense that Mrs. Piercey would not be too particular about the means used to secure her success; and suggesting counsel with something of the same idea, and a somewhat malicious amusement and delighted expectation of what would be made of the case by such advocates. He would no more have suggested either the one or the other to Margaret Osborne, than he could have justified himself on moral grounds for recommending them to Mrs. Piercey. Like clients like advisers, he said to himself. He felt that Patty in the witness-box, manipulated by his learned brother, would be a sight for the—well, not perhaps for the gods, unless it were the gods of the shilling gallery, whom such an advocate would cause to weep over the young widow's woes—but for the delectation of the observant and cynical spectator. How wicked and wrong this was it is needless to say; and yet in the mingled issues of human concerns it was very kind to Patty, who was not, as he divined, particular about the modes to be employed in her campaign.

I will not enter into all those preparations for the trial which brightened life immensely to Mrs. Piercey, and made her feel that she had scarcely lived before, and that, however the trial might turn out, this crowded hour of glorious life was worth the age without a name which would have been her fate had all been peaceful and undisturbed. She had constant visits from her solicitors or their emissaries; constant correspondence; a necessity often recurring for running up to town, which opened to her many new delights. No expense was spared in these preliminaries, the lawyers, to whom the speculative character of the whole proceedings was clearly apparent, thinking it well (they were, as has been said, not scrupulous members of their class) to make as much out of it in the meantime as possible; and Patty herself having, in a different degree, something of the same feeling. She was ready, as has been said, to sacrifice half of her kingdom in order to

win her plea, and, at the same time, she indulged freely in the pleasure of spending, with the idea before her that even in the event of losing, that pleasure could not be taken from her. Whatever she acquired now would, in that respect, be pure gain. Therefore there can be no doubt that she enjoyed her life during this interval. She had committed one or two imprudencies, which her advisers much regretted and gently condemned. She had made an enemy of Dunning for one thing, which they blamed greatly, and she had alienated the sympathies of her neighbours by her behaviour in the first flush of her triumph, which Lady Hartmore did not fail to publish. But if the client were not foolish sometimes, to what good would be the cleverness of her guides and counsellors? Patty, for her part, declared that she had no fear of Dunning. What could Dunning say that could affect her position? He could describe Sir Giles' hopes, which, it was evident, must have been mistaken; but she could swear, with a good conscience, that she had never said anything about those hopes to Sir Giles. Patty's modesty, the instinct that had made her really incapable of taking advantage of Sir Giles' delusion, had, it is to be feared, by this time, by dint of familiarity with the subject, become much subdued. She had shrunk with a blush from any such discussion, even with her old father-in-law; but she was not afraid now of the ordeal of being examined and cross-examined on the subject before all the world. She was not, indeed, at all afraid of the examination which nowadays frightens most people out of their wits. This, no doubt, was partly ignorance, but it was partly also a happy confidence in her own power to encounter and discomfit any man who should stand up to question her. This confidence has been seen in various cases of young women who have encountered jauntily an ordeal in which it is difficult for the strongest not to come to grief; but an ignorant girl often believes in her own sharp answers more than in any inquisition in the world.

Except these advisers-at-law, however, and her aunt, whom she by no means permitted to be always with her, Patty had actually no supporters or sympathisers. She lived in her great house alone: nobody entering it save one of these advisers; nobody sitting at her table with her; nobody taking any share in the excitement of her life. She had indeed waylaid the rector one day, and compelled him to come to her carriage door to speak to her, which he did with great reluctance, being openly and avowedly on the other side. "What have I ever done to you that you should be against me?" she said; "you used to be my friend once——"

"I hope I am everybody's friend—who does well," said the rector.

"And haven't I done well? If to nurse old Sir Giles night and day, and lay myself out in everything to please him wasn't doing well, why, then I must have been taught my duty very badly, for I thought it was 'I was sick and ye——'"

"Oh! that is how people force a text and put their own meaning to it," said the rector, with a gesture of impatience. "But," he added, in a more subdued tone, "nobody denies, Mrs. Piercey, that you were kind to the old man."

"And wasn't that my duty?" said Patty, triumphantly; but though she silenced her spiritual instructor she did not convince him that it was his duty to support her. No text about the wrongs of the widow had any effect upon him. He stood and looked down at the summer dust in which his feet were planted, and shook his head. It is a great thing to have the enthusiasm of a cause to prop you up, and to have lawyers coming and going from town, and a great deal of business on hand; but to have nobody to speak to, nobody to give you either help or sympathy at home, is hard. When Patty came home from London, after one of the expeditions in which she had been more or less enjoying herself, the blank of the house, in which there was not a soul who cared whether she won or lost, whether she lived or died, was sometimes more than she could bear. One evening, late in July, she went out for a walk, which was a very unusual thing with her, upon the great stretch of common land which lay outside the beech avenue. Patty had begun by this time to grow so much accustomed to the use of a carriage, that she no longer felt it the most delightful mode of conveyance. She had at first, when she came into the possession of that luxury, felt it impossible to walk half a dozen steps without her carriage at her heels; but now she became a little bored by the necessity of a daily drive, and loved to escape for a little walk. She had been in town all day, and it had been hot and uncomfortable. Patty had nowhere to go to in town for a little lunch and refreshment, as ladies have generally. It seemed a wrong to her that ladies had that; that they went in twos and threes enjoying their shopping and their little expedition, laughing and talking to each other, as some did who had gone to town in the same carriage with her, and again had travelled with her coming down, full of news and chatter and purchases. Patty had no one to go with her—there was no house in town where there were friends who expected to see her at lunch; and when she came back, though she might have bought the most charming things in the world, though there might be diamonds in her little bag, there was nobody to wish to see them, to exclaim over their beauty, and envy their happy possessor. These ladies sometimes spoke to her when they did not know her, but often looked askance and whispered to each other; and anyhow, the contrast they made with herself inflamed her very soul with anger. They could wander out, too, in the cool of the evening, still talking, laughing over their adventures, while she was always alone. It was soothing to see that many of them drove home from the station in a bit of a pony carriage or shabby little waggonette with one horse, while her carriage waited for her in lonely grandeur. Sometimes, even, they walked, carrying their parcels, while Patty looked down upon them with immeasurable contempt. But a carriage is not good for everything, and Patty sometimes strayed out alone, thinking the exercise would be good for her, but in reality hoping to escape a little from herself.

It was seldom that she met any one on that lonely moor, but on this particular evening there came towards her, with the glow behind him of the setting sun, a figure, which Patty felt to be, somehow, familiar; though as she did not expect to meet with any one here equal to her quality, she was not at all curious, but even contemptuous of any pedestrian who was not, like herself, walking for pleasure, but might probably be obliged to walk. He carried a long cricket-bag in his hand, and was in white flannels, which made a little brightening in the dimness of the evening, and had a light cap of a bright colour on his head. A well-made, manly figure, slim but strong, and a long swinging step clearing the intervening distance swiftly, made Patty think of some one who had been like that, who would not have let her, in other days, be alone if he could have helped it. She remembered very clearly who that was, and with a little shiver how she had last seen him, and the dance he had been to, and how the thought of that dance moved her to the depths. But this could not be Roger. He had always been fond of cricket—too fond, the village said—liking that better than steady work. But to be dressed like this, in flannels, and a cap of a "colour," was not for common men like him; that was

the dress gentlemen put on for the play which was their only work to so many. Indeed, Patty was close upon him before she saw that it was indeed Roger, who took off his cap when he saw her, and would have passed on with that respectful salutation had, not Patty stopped almost without meaning it, in the start of recognition. "Is it you?" she said in her surprise, upon which Roger took off his cap again.

"Seems as if I'd risen in the world," he said, "but it's more seeming than fact. I've been playing for the county," he added, with scarcely concealed pride. "It don't do a man much good, perhaps, but we're pleased enough all the same."

"It's a long time since I have seen you," said Patty, scarcely knowing what she said. "I—I took you for one of the gentlemen."

"And it's a long time since I've seen you—and I'd like to say that I'm sorry, Pa——, Mrs. Piercey, for all that's happened—and for the trouble, if it is a trouble, you're in now."

"It is no trouble," said Patty, hotly. "I'm going to defend my rights, if that's what you mean."

"Well, I hope that's what it is," said Roger, "but I don't like to hear of any one I care for beginning with the law. It just skins you alive and wastes good money that might be spent far better—bring you in a deal more pleasure, I mean."

"You don't know very much, Roger, about the pleasure money brings in!"

"Oh, don't I, Patty! Well, if one of us remembers the old days the other must, too. Cricketing about all over the place as I'm doing, runs through a good lot, I can tell you, if it didn't bring a little more in."

"Don't you do anything but cricket, nowadays?" she said.

"Not much; but it pays well enough," said Roger, pushing back his cap from his forehead.

The evening, it is true, was getting a little dim, though not dark; but didn't he look a gentleman! No one would have guessed he wasn't a gentleman, was the thought that passed through Patty's mind like a dart.

"And I live a lot among the swells, now," he said, "and I hear what they say; I don't want to offend you, Patty, far from it—but ain't it a bore living all by yourself in that big lonesome house, with all the deaths and things that have happened in it?"

"You forget it's my home," said Patty, drawing herself up.

"Well, is it your home? All right if it had been your husband's or if there had been an heir; but I don't hold myself with a place going out of the family like that—that has been in it for hundreds of years. I don't like the thoughts of the Seven Thorns even going out o' the name of 'Ewitt. It's no concern of mine, but I don't."

"Perhaps you think I should go back there, out of my own place, and keep it up!"

"I don't say as I meant that," said Roger, turning his cap, which he had taken off, round and round in his hands, "but I wouldn't be the one to take it out of the family if it was me. I'd say, Look here now, what'll you give me? You be happy in your way, and I'll be happy in mine."

"Well, I shall take your advice, Mr. Pearson. I'll be happy in my own way. It's not yours, and never will be. But that don't matter, seeing we've nothing on earth to do with each other, and are in quite different ranks of life. I wish you good-night, and I hope the cricketing business will be a good one and pay, or else I might say, 'Mind, there's the winter coming on'—if a lady could take upon her to give advice to a sporting man."

"Patty," he cried, calling after her, "don't part with a fellow like this; I didn't mean to offend you—far from it. I only thought I'd warn you what folks said."

"Folks is fools for the most part," cried Patty fiercely, using a much-cited sentiment, which she had never heard of, by the light of nature, "and I don't want to hear what they say. Mr. Pearson, I wish you good-night."

"There! I've been and put my foot in it—I knew I should," Roger said. He stood, the image of despondency, in the middle of the moor, his white figure standing out against the western light as Patty turned at a sharp angle to go home. She could see him with the corner of her eye without looking at him. He stood there silent for a moment, and then dashed his fist into the air with a profane exclamation. "That's not what I meant at all," he said, and lifted his cricket-bag and sped away.

What was it that went out of the evening with him, when Patty, venturing to glance round, saw the landscape empty of the man who had offended her so deeply, who had ventured to blame her—her a lady so far above him—Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott, while he was only a cricketer, an idle fellow about the country, no good, as even the village people said? But yet a dreariness settled down upon the world; night came on and that loneliness which seemed now Patty's fate. Well, she said to herself, what did she care? She had her fine estate, her name that was as good as the best, her grand house, as much money to spend as she chose, and nobody to dictate to her what she should do—no, nobody to dictate to her—nobody even to advise, to say, "That's right, Patty!" Her Aunt Patience did that, it was true, but then Aunt Patience's approval, save in the very extremity of having nobody else, did not count for much. She hurried in; but it was lonely, lonelier even than the moor—nobody to speak to, nobody to break the long row of chairs and sofas which were there with the intention of accommodating half the county, but now had nobody to sit down upon them but Patty's self, moving from one to another with a futile feeling of breaking the solitude. But nothing was to be had to break that solitude except Aunt Patience. Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be sent at once to the village to fetch Miss Hewitt immediately, without a minute's delay! That she could do—send out her carriage, and her horses, and her secretly-swearing servants for any caprice at any moment. For Miss Hewitt! It was what might be called an anti-climax, if Patty had known what that meant. She did know what it meant deeply to the bottom of her heart, though she was not acquainted with the word. To go through all that she had gone through, to do all she had done, for the sake of having the company of Miss Hewitt and her sympathy and encouragement! could there be a greater drop of deepest downfall from the highest heights than this?

But the trial was coming on, and soon all England would be ringing with Patty's name and story and fortunes. She would have crowds of people to admire and wonder at her. She would win her cause in the sight of all England. She would be the heroine of the day, in everybody's mouth. Surely there would be some

compensation in that.

CHAPTER XLV.

I REFRAIN from attempting to describe the great trial *Piercey v. Piercey*, which made the whole country ring. It was, indeed, a *cause célèbre*, and may be found, no doubt, by every one who wishes to trace it, in the history of such notable romances which exists in the legal records. It was so managed by the exceedingly clever advocates whom Patty had been fortunate enough to secure, as to entertain the country, morning after morning in the columns of the *Times*, by a living piece of family history, a household opened up and laid bare to every curious eye, which is, perhaps, the thing of all others which delights the British public (and all other publics) the most. Poor old Sir Giles, in his wheeled chair, with his backgammon board and all his weaknesses, became as familiar a figure to the reader of the newspapers as anything in Dickens or Thackeray—more familiar even than Sir Pitt Crawley, because he reached a still larger circle of readers and was a real person, incontestable fact, and only buried the other day. England for the moment became as intimately acquainted with the Softy, as even the old labourers in the parlour at the Seven Thorns. The story, as it was unfolded by the prosecution, was one not favourable to the heroine—a girl out of a roadside tavern, who had married the half-witted son of the squire, who had almost forced her way into the house on the death of its mistress, who had contrived so to cajole the poor old gentleman that he gave himself up entirely to her influence, and finally left her his estates and everything of which he was possessed—leaving out even his old servants whom he had provided for in his previous will, and giving absolute power to the little adventuress. This was a story which did not conciliate the favour of the public. But when it came to the pleadings on the other side, and Patty was revealed as a ministering angel, both to her husband and father-in-law, as having worked the greatest improvement in the one, so that it was hoped he would soon take his place among his country neighbours; and as having protected and solaced the failing days of the other, and been his only companion and consoler, a great change took place in the popular sentiment. It soon became apparent to the world that this little adventuress was one of those rare women who are never out of place in whatever class they may appear in, the lowest or the highest, and are always in their sphere doing good to everybody. The drama was unfolded with the greatest skill: even those “hopes” which it was not denied Sir Giles had greatly built upon, and the disappointment of which, when the young widow found herself deceived in her fond anticipations, was the crudest blow of all. The women who were present shed tears almost without exception over poor Patty’s delusion; and that she should have implored the lawyer not to dispel that delusion, to let poor Sir Giles die happy, still believing it, was made to appear the most beautiful trait of character. And indeed, as a matter of fact, Patty had meant well in this particular, and it would have been highly to her credit had it been separated from all that came after. Dunning’s testimony, which had been much built upon by the prosecution, was very much weakened by the account given of his various negligences; especially of the fact proved by the lady herself that he had accompanied his master to Lady Piercey’s funeral, without providing himself with any restorative to administer to the old gentleman on an occasion of so much excitement and distress, and of such unusual fatigue. “I would not permit it even to be thought of, that he should attend my husband’s funeral. It would have been too much for him,” Patty said, with all the eloquence of her crape and her widow’s cap to enhance what she said. But, indeed, I am here doing precisely what I said I would not attempt to do—and I was not present at the trial to give the details with the confidence of an eye-witness. The consequence, however, was, as all the world knows, that the verdict was for the defendant, and that Patty came out triumphantly mistress of the field, and of Greyshott, and of all that old Sir Giles had committed to her hands.

A romance of real life! It was, indeed, a disappointment and loss to the whole country when the great *Piercey* case was over. Even old gentlemen who were supposed to care for nothing but politics and the price of stocks, threw down the *Times* with an angry exclamation that there was nothing in it, the first dull morning or two after that case was concluded. Thus Patty was a benefactor to her kind without any intention of being so. People were generally sorry for the *Pierceys*, who, there was no doubt, had a right to be disappointed and even angry to see their ancient patrimony thus swept away into the hands of a stranger. For nobody entertained the slightest doubt that Patty would marry and set up a new family out of the ashes of the old. And why shouldn’t she? the people cried who knew nothing about it. Was it not the very principle of the British constitution to be always taking in new blood to revive the old? Was not the very peerage constantly leavened by this process; new lords being made out of cotton and coals and beer and all the industries to give solidity to the lessening phalanx of the sons of the Crusaders? Old Sir Francis *Piercey*, who was the plaintiff, was well enough off to pay his costs, and he ought to be able at his age to reconcile himself to the loss! To be sure, there was his son, a very distinguished soldier. Well! he had better marry the young widow, everybody said, and settle the matter so.

The county people did not, however, take this view. They were wroth beyond expression on the subject of this intruder into their midst. Nobody had called upon her but Lady Hartmore, whose indignation knew no bounds; who had never forgiven her husband, and never would forgive him, she declared, for having betrayed her into that visit. “But to be sure I never should have known what the minx was if I had not seen her!” that lady said. Patty was completely tabooed on every side. Even the rector turned off the highroad when he saw her carriage approaching, and ran by an improvised path over the fields not to meet her. Wherever she might find companions or friends it was evidently not to be in her own district. Her old friends were servants in one great house or another, or the wives of cottagers and labourers; and Patty was altogether unaware of their existence. When she drove about the county, as she did very much and often in the impulse of her triumph, her eyes met only faces which were very familiar but which she would not know, or faces glimpsed at afar off which would not know her. She was undisputed mistress of Greyshott, and all its revenues and privileges. All the neighbouring land belonged to her, and almost every house in the village; but except to Miss Hewitt, her aunt, and the servants of the house, and, occasionally, some much-mistaken woman from one of the cottages, who felt emboldened to make a petition to the lady of Greyshott on the score of having been at school with her, Patty spoke to nobody, or rather had nobody to speak to, which is a better statement of the case.

With one large exception, however, so long as the trial lasted, when lawyers and lawyers' clerks had constant missions to Greyshott, and the distinguished barrister who won her cause for her, came over on a few days' visit. That visit was, in fact, though it was the greatest triumph and glory to Patty, one of the most terrible ordeals she had to go through. He was a most amusing visitor, with endless stories to tell and compliments to pay, and would have made almost any party, in any country house which had the good fortune to receive him, "go off," by his own unaided exertions. But it is to be doubted if this brilliant orator and special pleader had ever in his life formed the whole of a country-house party, with a little, smart, under-bred person and a village spinster for his sole hosts. He was appalled, it must be allowed, and felt that a curious new light was thrown upon the story which he made into a romance of real life; but all the same, it need not be said, this gentleman exerted himself to make the three days "go off" as if the house had been full, and the Prime Minister among the guests. But to describe what this was to Patty would require something more than the modest store of words I have at my disposal. She was not so ignorant as Miss Hewitt, who enjoyed the good the gods had provided for her without *arrière pensée*, and began to laugh before the delighted guest had opened his lips. Patty knew that there should be people invited "to meet" a man so well known. She knew that there ought to have been a party in the house, or, at least, distinguished company to dinner. And she had nobody, not even the rector! She did her best to invent reasons why So-and-so and So-and-so could not come, and made free use of the name of Lord Hartmore, who, she thought, with the instinct of her kind, had been made to give her up by his wife. She even made use of the fact that most people in the county were displeased with her on account of the trial, and because they wished the Pierceys to be still at Greyshott. "And so they are, in the person of much the most attractive member of the family," the great man said, who would have been still more amused by his position between these two ladies if he had not been in his own person something of a black sheep, and a little on the alert to see himself avoided and neglected. Patty was not aware that he would not have ventured to pay these compliments to another kind of hostess; but she suffered intently from the fact that she had nobody to invite to meet him, nobody who would come to her even for a night, to keep her guest in countenance. She demeaned herself so far as to write to the rector begging of him to come. But the rector had another engagement and would not, or could not, consent. Poor Patty! She suffered in many ways from being thus, as it were, out of the bonds of all human society, but never so much as in that dreadful three days. He was (as she thought) old, and he was fat, and not at all well-looking, though he was so amusing; but he gave her to understand before he went away that he would not mind marrying Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott. And so did one of the solicitors who instructed him, the younger one, who was unmarried; and there was a head clerk, nothing more than a head clerk, who looked very much as if a similar proposal was on his lips. "Like his impudence!" Patty said, though she really knew nothing of the young man. Three proposals, or almost proposals of marriage, within a week or two! This pleased the natural mind of Patty of the Seven Thorns, but it gave Mrs. Piercey occasion to think. They were all concerned with securing property for her, and assuring her in its possession, and they thought naturally that nobody had so good a right to help her take care of it. But this reasoning was not by any means agreeable to Patty, who, flattered at first, became exceedingly angry afterwards when she found herself treated so frankly as an appendage to her property.

"Of course I knew it was always like that as soon as you had a little money!" she said, indignantly.

"Not with 'im, Patty, not with 'im," said Miss Hewitt, upon whom the brilliant barrister had made a great impression.

"Him!" cried Patty, "a fat old man!"

"You can't have everything," said her aunt. "For my part I'd rather 'ave a man like that, that's such fine company, and as you never could be dull as long as 'e was there, than a bit of a cock robin with an 'andsome face, and nothing behind it!"

"If you are meaning my Gervase, Aunt Patience, I——"

"Lord, I never thought o' your Gervase! Bless us, 'e 'ad no 'andsome face, whatever else!" the old lady cried. She was sent home that evening in the carriage, and Patty, angry, indignant, desolate, remained altogether alone. It was hard to say which was worst, the dreadful consciousness of having "nobody to meet" a guest, or being without guests altogether. She walked up and down her solitary house, entering one room after another; all deserted and empty. The servants, as well-bred servants should, got out of the way when they heard her approaching, so that not even in the corridor upstairs did she see a housemaid, or in the hall below a shadow of butler or footman to break the sensation of solitude. To be sure, she knew where to find Jerningham seated in her light and pleasant chamber sewing; but Jerningham was somewhat unapproachable, occupied with her work, quite above idle gossip, and indisposed to entertain her mistress; for Jerningham flattered herself that she knew her place. What was Patty to do? The under-housemaid was a Greyshott girl who had been at school with her; therefore it may be perceived how great was the necessity for remembering always who she was, and never relaxing her dignity. She might have gone abroad, which she was aware was a thing that was done with great success sometimes by ladies who could travel about with maid and footman, and no need to think of expense. But Patty felt that she could not consent to descend among the common herd in search of acquaintances, and that her grandeur was nothing to her unless it was acknowledged and enjoyed at home. And then the winter was coming on, Patty was not yet sufficiently educated to know that winter was precisely the time to go abroad. She knew nothing in the world but Greyshott, and it was only for applause and admiration at Greyshott that she really cared.

It was in these circumstances that the winter passed, the second winter only since Patty's marriage, which had lifted her so far above all her antecedents and old companions. It was a long and dreary winter, with much rain, and that dull and depressing atmosphere of cloud, when heaven and earth is of the same colour, and there is not even the variety of frost and thaws to break the monotonous languor of the long dead dark weeks. Patty did not bate an inch of her grandeur either for her loneliness or for the aggravation of that loneliness which was in the great rooms, untenanted as they were. She did not take to the little cheerful morning-room in which Lady Piercey had been glad to spend the greater part of her life in such wintry weather. Patty dined alone in the great dining-room, which it was so difficult to light up, and she sat alone all the evening through in the great drawing-room, with all its white and gold, where her little figure, still all

black from head to foot, was almost lost in a corner, and formed but a speck upon the brightness of the large vacant carpet, and lights that seemed to shine for their own pleasure. Poor Patty! She sat and thought of the last winter, which was melancholy enough, but not so bad as this: of old Sir Giles and his backgammon board, and Dunning standing behind backs. It was not exciting, but it was "company" at least. She thought of herself sitting there, flattering the old gentleman about his play, smiling and beaming upon him, yet feeling so sick of it all; and of that night—that night! when Roger Pearson had been at the dance, and brought Gervase in from the moor, to be laid on the bed from which he was never to rise. Her mind did not dwell upon Gervase, but it is astonishing how often she thought upon that dance at which her rejected lover had been enjoying himself, while she sat playing backgammon with her father-in-law, and listening for her husband. What a contrast! The picture had been burned in upon her mind by the event connected with it, and now had much more effect than that event. She could almost see the rustic couples with their arms entwined, and the romping flirtations of the barn, and the smoky lamps hung about, so different, so different from the steady soft waxen lights which threw an unbroken illumination upon her solitary head! It was bad then, but it was almost worse now, when she had no company at all, except Aunt Patience from time to time, as long as Mrs. Piercey could put up with her. And this was all—all! that her rise in the world had brought her! She had done nothing very bad to procure that rise. If Gervase had lived it would have been good for him that she had married him, she still felt sure, notwithstanding that in actual fact it had not done him much good; and it was good for Sir Giles to have had her society and ministrations in the end of his life. Everybody allowed that—even the hostile lawyer at the trial, even the sullen Dunning, who had occasion to dislike her if anybody had, who had lost his legacy and almost his character by her means. Even he had been instrumental in proving to the world how she had cheered and comforted the old man. And she had got her reward—everything but that title, which it was grievous to her to think of; which, perhaps, if she had got it—if Gervase had only had the sense to live six months longer—would have made all the difference! She had got her reward, and this was what it had come to—a quietness in which you could hear a pin drop; a loneliness never broken by any voice except those of her servants, of whom she must not, and dared not, make friends. Poor Patty! once so cheerful, so admired and considered at the Seven Thorns, with her life so full of bustle and liveliness—this was all she had come to after her romance in real life.

I cannot help thinking that if there had been a lady at the rectory, this state of affairs would have been mended, and that a good mother, with her family to set out in the world, would have seen the advantage for her own children of doing her best to attract acquaintances and company to Greyshott. But the rector was only a man, and a timid one, fearing to break the bonds of convention, and his daughters were too young to take the matter into their own hands. They might have done it had Mrs. Piercey waited for a few years; but then Patty had no inclination to wait.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MRS. PIERCEY went to town after Easter, as she was aware everybody who respected themselves, who were in Society, or who had any money to spend, did. But, alas! she did not know how to manage this any more than to find the usual solace in country life. She was, indeed, still more helpless in town; for no doubt in the country, if she had been patient, there would at last have been found somebody who would have had courage to break the embargo, to defy Lord and Lady Hartmore and all the partisans of the old family, and to call upon the lady of Greyshott. But in town what could Patty do? She knew nobody but the distant cousins somewhere in the depths of Islington, to whom she had gone at the time of her marriage, but whom she had taken care to forget the very existence of as soon as her need for them was over. Mrs. Piercey went to a fashionable hotel, and engaged a handsome set of rooms, and sat down and waited for happiness to come to her. She had her maid with her, the irreproachable Jerningham, who would not allow her mistress to demean herself by making a companion of her; and she had Robert, the footman, and her own coachman from Greyshott, and a new victoria in which to drive about—all the elements of happiness—poor Patty! and yet it would not come. She had permitted herself, by this time, to drop the weight of her mourning, and to blossom forth in grey and white; and she drove in the Park in the most beautiful costumes, with the old fat Greyshott horses, who were in themselves a certificate that she was somebody, no mushroom of a *parvenue*. So was the coachman, who was the real old Greyshott coachman, and (evidently) had been in the family for generations. She drove steadily every day along the sacred promenade, and was seen of everybody, and discussed among various bands of onlookers, whose only occupation, like the Athenians, was that of seeing or hearing some new thing. Who was she? That she was not of the style of her horses and her coachman was apparent at a glance. Where had she got them? Was it an attempt on the part of some visitor from the ends of the earth to pose as a lady of established family? Was it, perhaps, a daring *coup* on the part of some person, not at all *comme il faut*, to attract the observation and curiosity of the world? Patty's little face, with its somewhat fast prettiness, half abashed, half impudent, shone out of its surroundings with a contradiction to all those suppositions. The Person would not have been at all abashed, but wholly impudent, or else quite assured and satisfied with herself; and in any case she would not have been alone. A stranger, above all, would not have been alone. There would have been a bevy of other women with her, making merry over all the novelty about them, and this, probably, would have been the case had the other idea been correct. But who was this, with the face of a pretty housemaid and the horses of a respectable dowager? Some of the gentlemen in the park, who amused themselves with these speculations, would, no doubt, have managed to resolve their doubts on the subject had not Patty been, as much as Una, though she was so different a character, enveloped in an atmosphere of such unquestionable good behaviour and modesty as no instructed eye could mistake. Women, who are less instructed on such matters, may mistake; but not men, who have better means of knowing. Thus Patty did make a little commotion; but as she had no means of knowing of it, and no one to tell her, it did her no good in the world.

And she went a good many times to the theatre, and to the opera, though it bored her. But this was a great ordeal: to go into a box all alone, and subject herself to the opera-glasses of the multitude. Patty did not mind it at first. She liked to be seen, and had no objection that people should look at her, and her diamonds;

and there was a hope that it might lead to something in her mind. But how could it lead to anything? for she knew nobody who was likely to be seen at the opera. When she went home in the evening she could have cried for disappointment and mortification. Was this all? Was there never to be anything more than this? Was all her life to be spent thus in luxury and splendour; always alone?

At first she had dined in solitary state in her rooms, as she thought it right, in her position, to do. But when Patty heard that other people of equal pretensions—one of them the baronet's lady, whom it was her despair not to be—went down to the general dining-room for their meals, she was too happy to go there too, thinking she must, at least, make some acquaintance with the other dwellers in the hotel. But things were not much better there, for Mrs. Piercey was established at a little table by herself in great state, but unutterable solitude, watching with a sick heart the groups about her—the people who were going to the theatre, or to such delights of balls and evening parties as Patty had never known. There was but one solitary person beside herself, and that was an old gentleman, with his napkin tucked into his buttonhole, who was absorbed by the *menu* and evidently thought of nothing else. Patty watched the groups with hungry eyes—the men in their evening coats, with wide expanses of white; the ladies, who evidently intended to dress after this semi-public dinner. Oh, how she longed to belong to some one, to have some one belonging to her! And such a little thing, she thought, would do it: nothing more than an introduction, nothing beyond the advent of some one who knew her, who would say, "Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott," and the ice would be broken. But then that some one who knew her, where was he or she to be found?

Alas! there came a moment when both he and she were found, and that was the worst of all. She was seated listlessly in her usual solitude, when she saw a pair of people who were taking their seats at a table not far off. They had their backs turned towards her, and yet they seemed familiar to Patty. They were both tall, the gentleman with a military air, the lady with a little bend in her head which Patty thought she knew. There was about them that indefinable air of being lately married which it is so very difficult to obliterate, though they did not look very young. The lady was quietly dressed, or rather she was in a dress which was the symbol of quiet—quakerly, or motherly, to our grandmothers: grey satin, but with such reflections and shadows in it, as has made it in our better instructed age one of the most perfectly decorative of fabrics. Patty, experienced by this time in the habits and customs of the people she watched so wistfully, was of opinion that they were going to the opera. Who were they? She knew them—oh, certainly she knew them; and they evidently knew several of the groups about; and now at last Patty's opportunity had surely come.

I think by this time Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott had acquired a forlorn look, the consequence of her many disappointments. It is not pleasant to sit and watch people who are better off than we are, however philosophical and high-minded we may be; and Patty, it need not be said, was neither. Her mouth had got a little droop at the corners, her eyes a little fixity, as of staring and weariness in staring. She was too much dressed for the dining-room of a hotel, and she had very manifestly the air of being alone, and of being accustomed to be alone. I think that, as so often happens, Patty was on the eve of finding the acquaintance for whom her soul longed, at these very moments when her burden was about to become too much for her to bear; and she certainly had attained recognition in the world outside, as was to be proved to her no later than to-night. Such coincidences are of frequent occurrence in human affairs. It had become known in the hotel to some kind people, who had watched her solitude as she watched their cheerful company, who she was; and the matron of the party had remembered how much that was good had been said of Patty on the trial, and how kind she had been to the old man who had left her all his money without any doing of hers. "Poor little thing! I shall certainly take an opportunity of speaking to her to-morrow," this lady was saying, as Patty watched with absorbed attention the other people. Indeed, the compassion of this good woman might have hastened her purpose and made her "speak" that very night, had not Patty been so bent upon those other people whom she was more and more sure she knew; and what a difference—what a difference in her life might that have made! But she never knew—which was, perhaps, in the circumstances, a good thing.

It was while Patty's attention was called away perforce by the waiter who attended to her, that the other people at whom she had been gazing became aware of her presence. The gentleman had turned a bronzed face, full of the glow of warmer suns than ours, in her direction, and started visibly. He was a man whom the reader has seen habitually with another expression—that of perplexity and general discontent; a man with a temper, and with little patience, though capable of better things. He had apparently got to these better things now. His face was lighted up with happiness; he was bending over the little table, which, small as it was, seemed too much to separate them, to talk to his wife, with the air of a man who has so much and so many things to say, that he has not a minute to lose in the outpouring of his heart. She was full of response, if not perhaps so overflowing; but on her aspect, too, there had come a wonderful change. Her beautiful grey satin gown was not more unlike the unfailing black which Mrs. Osborne always wore, than the poor relation of Greyshott was to Gerald Piercey's wife, Meg Piercey once again. It would be vain to enter upon all the preliminaries which brought about this happy conclusion. Margaret had many difficulties to get over, which to everybody else appeared fantastical enough. A second marriage is a thing which, in theory, few women like; and to cease to belong solely to Osy, and to bear another name than his, though it was her own, was very painful to her. Yet these difficulties had all been got over, even if I had space to enter into them; which, seeing that Patty is all this time waiting, dallying with her undesired dinner, and wondering who these people are whom she seems to know, would be uncalled for in the highest degree.

When the waiter came up to the solitary lady at the table, and Colonel Piercey turned his face in that direction, he started and swore under his breath, "By Jove!" though he was not a man addicted to expletives. Then he said, "Meg! Meg!" under his breath; "who do you think is sitting behind you at that table? Don't turn round. Mrs. Piercey, as sure as life!"

"Mrs. Piercey?" She was bewildered for a moment. "There are so many Mrs. Pierceys. Whom do you mean?"

"One more than there used to be, for my salvation," the bridegroom said; and then added, with a laugh, "but no other like this one, Meg—Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott—"

"Patty!" cried Margaret, under her breath.

"If you dare to be so familiar with so great a lady—the heroine of the trial, poor Uncle Giles' good angel

—

"Oh, don't be bitter, Gerald! It is all over and done with; and who knows, if it had been otherwise——"

"Whether we should ever have come together?" he said: "you know best, so far as that goes, my love; and if it might have been so, good luck to Greyshott, and I am glad we have not got it. Yes, there she is, the identical Patty; and none the better for her success, I should say, looking very much bored and rather pale."

"Who is with her?" asked Margaret.

"There is nobody with her that I can see. No, she is quite alone, and bored, as I told you; and in a diamond necklace," he said with a laugh.

"Alone, and with a diamond necklace, in the dining-room of a hotel!"

"Well, why not? To show it and herself, of course; and probably a much better way than any other in her power to show them."

"Oh, Gerald, don't be so merciless. She has got your inheritance; but still, it was really Uncle Giles' will, and she was kind to him—even old Dunning could not deny that. And if Gervase had lived——"

"It was as well he did not live, poor fellow, for her as well as for himself, though I should certainly, myself, have preferred it; for then we should have had none of this fuss, either of anticipation or disappointment—and no trial, and no costs; and no useless baronetcy that brings in nothing."

"Don't say that; your father likes it, and so will you in your day."

"My father likes to be head of the family, and so shall I. We'll have our first quarrel, Meg, over that little hussy, then."

"Not our first quarrel by a great many," she said, letting her hand rest for a moment on his arm. "But don't call her names, Gerald: all alone in a hotel in London, in the middle of the season, without a creature to speak a word to her! And I heard she was perfectly alone all the winter at home. Lady Hartmore goes too far. She has made it a personal matter that nobody should call. Poor little Patty! Gerald——"

"Poor little Patty, indeed! who has cost us not only Greyshott, but how many thousand pounds; who has made you poor, Meg."

"There is poor and poor. Poor in your way is not poor in mine. I am rich, whatever you may be. Is she still there—alone—Gerald, with that white little face?" Margaret had managed, furtively, to turn her head, still under shadow of the waiter, and get a glimpse of their supplanter.

"What does it matter if her face is white or not? She has chalked it, perhaps, as she might rouge it on another occasion, to play her part."

"You have no pity," said Margaret; "to me it is very sad to see a poor woman like that alone, trying to enjoy herself. I think, Gerald, I will——"

"Will what? You are capable of anything, Meg. I shall not be surprised at whatever you propose."

"Well, since you have so poor an opinion of me," she said with a smile, "I think I'll speak to her, Gerald."

"Do you remember that she turned you out of your home? that she insulted you so that it was with difficulty I kept my temper?"

"You never did keep your temper, dear," said Margaret with gentle impartiality, shaking her head; "and," she added with a smile, "you insulted me far worse than ever Patty did. Should I bear malice? I will say a word to her before we go."

When they rose, and when Patty saw who they were, the chalk which Colonel Piercey thought she was capable of using to play her part, yielded to a crimson so hot and vivid that its truth and reality were thoroughly proved. She half rose, too, then sat down again more determinedly than before.

"Mrs. Piercey," said Margaret, "we saw you, and I could not pass you without a word."

"You are very kind, I am sure, Margaret Osborne; but you could have left your table very well without coming near me."

"Yes, perhaps," said Margaret; "I should have said that, seeing you alone——"

"Oh, if I am alone it is my own fault!" cried Patty, with a heat of angry despair which almost took away her voice. Then it occurred to her that to show this passion was to lessen herself in the eyes of those to whom she most wished to appear happy and great. She forced her cry of rage into a little affected laugh. "I don't often come here," she said; "I dine generally in my own apartments. But to-day I expected friends who could not come, and so I thought I'd amuse myself by coming down here to see the wild beasts feed."

As she said this, her eyes fell accidentally upon the kind lady who had made up her mind to make the acquaintance of this forlorn little woman, and startled that amiable person so that she sat gazing open-mouthed and open-eyed.

"In that case I am afraid I am only intruding," said Margaret; "but I thought perhaps—if you are alone here, I—or my husband," she added this with a sudden blush and smile, "might have been of some use——"

"Oh, your husband! I wish him joy, I am sure. So you stuck to him, though he hasn't got Greyshott? Well, he'll have the baronetcy, to be sure, when the old man dies—I hadn't thought of that—without a penny! You must have been dead set on him, to be sure."

And Patty, bursting with fury and despite, jumped up, almost oversetting the table, and with a wave of her hand as if dismissing a supplicant, but with none of her usual regard for her dignity and her dress in threading a crowd, hurried away.

"You got rather more than you looked for," cried Colonel Piercey, triumphant, as Margaret came back to him and hastily took his arm. He had not heard what passed.

"I suppose there was nothing else to be expected," Margaret said in a subdued voice.

Patty went to the opera that night, as she had intended, her heart almost bursting; for that she should have hoped to meet somebody who would introduce and help her, and then to find that somebody was Margaret Osborne, was almost more than she could bear; but soon she was soothed by perceiving that more opera-glasses were fixed on her than ever, and that the people in the boxes opposite, and in the stalls, were

pointing her out to one another. She caught the sound of her own name as she sat well forward in her box, that her diamonds might be well seen and her own charms appreciated; and she almost forgot the indignity to which she had been, as she thought, subjected. But as she went out, poor Patty could not but hear some remarks which were not intended for her ear. "That was the woman," somebody said, "the heroine of the great case, Piercey *versus* Piercey; don't you remember? the woman who married an idiot, and then got his father to leave her all the property." "What a horror!" said the lady addressed: "a barmaid, wasn't she? and the poor creature she married quite imbecile—and now to come and plant herself there in the front of a box. Does she think anybody will take any notice of her, I wonder?" "Impudent little face, but rather broken down—begins to see it won't pay," said another man.

Patty caught Robert, her footman, by the arm, and shrieked to him to take her out of this, or she should faint, which the crowd around took for an exclamation of real despair, and made way for the lady, to let her get to the air. And Patty left town next day.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SHE left town next day in a tempest of wrath and indignation, and something like despair. She said to herself that she would go home, where no one would dare to insult her. Home! where, indeed, there would be nobody to insult her, but nobody to care for her; to remark upon her even in that contemptuous way; to say a word even of reprobation. A strong sense of injustice was in her soul. I am strongly of opinion that when any of us commits a great sin, it immediately becomes the most natural, even normal thing in our own eyes; that we are convinced that most people have done the same, only have not been found out; and that the opinion of the world against it is either purely fictitious, a pretence of superior virtue, or else the result of prejudice or personal hostility. Patty had not committed any great sin. She had sought her own aggrandisement, as most people do, but she had gained wealth and grandeur far above her hopes by nothing that could be called wrong; indeed, she had done her duty in the position in which Providence and her own exertions had placed her. It was not her business to look after the interests of the Piercey family, but to take gratefully what was given her, which she had the best of right to, because it had been given her. This was Patty's argument, and it would be difficult to find fault with it. And to think that the whole cruel world should turn upon her for that; all those gentlefolks whom she despised with the full force of democratic rage against people who supposed themselves her betters, yet felt to the bottom of her heart to be the only arbiters of social elevation and happiness, the only people about whose opinion she cared! She came back to Greyshott in a subdued transport of almost tragic passion. She would seek them no more, neither their approval nor their company. She would go back to her own class, to the class from which she had sprung, who would neither scorn her nor patronise her, but fill Greyshott with admiring voices and adulation, and make her feel herself the greatest lady and the most beneficent. She called for Aunt Patience on her way from the station and carried her back to Greyshott. "You're going to stay this time," she said; "I mean to live in my own way, and have my old friends about me; and I don't care that," and Patty snapped her fingers, "for what the county may say."

"The county couldn't say nothing against your having me with you, Patty—only right, everybody would say, and you so young, and men coming and going."

"Where are the men coming and going?" said Patty; "I see none of them. I dare say there would be plenty, though, if it wasn't for the women," she added, with a self-delusion dear to every woman upon whom society does not smile.

"You take your oath of that!" said Miss Hewitt, who was naturally of the same mind.

"But I mean to think of them no more," cried Patty; "the servants shall say 'not at home' to any of those ladies as shows their face here! I'll bear it no longer! If they don't like to call they can stay away,—what is it to me? But I'm going to see my old friends and give dinners and dances to them that will really enjoy it!" Patty cried.

Miss Hewitt looked very grave. "Who do you mean, Patty, by your old friends?" she said.

"Who should I mean but the Fletchers and the Simmonses and the Pearsons and the Smiths and the Higginbothams?" said Patty, running on till she was out of breath.

"Lord, Patty! you'd never think of that!" cried Miss Hewitt, horrified.

"Why shouldn't I?—they'd be thankful and they'd enjoy themselves; and I'd have folks of my own kind about me as good as anybody."

"Oh, Patty, Patty, has it come to that? But you're in a temper and don't mean it," Aunt Patience cried.

It would, perhaps, have been better for this disinterested relation had she supported Patty in her new fancy, as undoubtedly it would have been glorious and delightful to herself to have posed before her own village associates as one of the mistresses of Greyshott. But Miss Hewitt had been influenced all her life by that desire for the society of the ladies and gentlemen which is so strong in the bosom of the democrat everywhere. She could not bear that Patty should demean herself by falling back upon "the rabble"; and many discussions ensued, in which the elder lady had the better of the argument. Patty's passionate desire to be revenged upon the people who had slighted her resolved itself at last into the heroic conception of such a fête for the tenants and peasantry as had never been known in the county before. Indeed, the county was not very forward in such matters; it was an old-fashioned, easy-going district, and new ways and new education had made but small progress in it as yet. The squires and the gentry generally had not begun to feel that necessity for conciliating their poorer neighbours, with whom at present they dwelt in great amity—which has now become a habit of society. And the fame of the great proceedings at Greyshott travelled like fire and flame across the county. No expense was spared upon that wonderful fête. Patty knew exactly what her old friends and companions liked in the way of entertainment. She made a little speech at the dinner, which began the proceedings, to the effect that she had not invited any of the fine folks to walk about and watch them as if they were wild beasts feeding (using over again in a reverse sense the metaphor which she had already found so effectual), but preferred that they should feel that she was trusting them like friends and wished them to enjoy themselves. And to see Patty and Miss Hewitt walking about, sweeping the long trains

of their dresses over the turf in the midst of these revellers, with a graciousness and patronage which would have made Lady Hartmore open her eyes, was a sight indeed. No Princess Royal could have been more certain of her superior place than Patty on this supreme occasion, when, flying from the hateful aristocrats, who would not call upon her, she had intended to throw herself back again into the bosom of her own class. And Miss Hewitt looked a Grand Duchess at the least, and showed a benign interest in the villagers which no reigning lady could have surpassed. "Seven? have you really? and such fine children; and is this the youngest?" she said, pausing before a family group; to the awe of the parents, who had known old Patience Hewitt all their lives, and knew that she knew every detail of their little history; but this will show with what gusto and fine histrionic power she was able, though really almost an old woman, to take up and play her part. But had it not been the ideal and hope of her life?

There was, however, one person at the Greyshott fête whom it was difficult to identify with the heroes of the village. When Patty saw approaching her across the greensward a well-knit manly figure in irreproachable flannels, with a striped cap of red and white on his head, a tie of the same colour, a fine white flannel shirt encircling with its spotless folded-down collar a throat burnt to a brilliant red-brown by the sun, her heart gave a jump with the sudden conviction that "a gentleman" had come, even though uninvited, to see her in her glory. It gave another jump, however, still more excited and tremulous, when this figure turned out to be Roger Pearson—not a gentleman indeed, but a famous personage all over England, the pride of the county, whose rise in the world was now fully known to her. She had seen him before, indeed, in this costume, but only in the dusk, when it was not so clearly apparent. How well it became him, and what a fine fellow he looked! handsome, free, independent, as different from all his rustic friends as Patty was from her old school-fellows in their cotton dresses, but in how different a way; for Roger, it was well known, was hand-and-glove with many of the greatest people of England, and yet quite at home in the village eleven which he had come to lead in the match which was one of the features of the day. Patty, though she was the lady of Greyshott, could not but feel a pang of delight and pride when he walked by her side through the crowd. He was the only one whom she could not patronise. She thought furtively that any one who saw them would think he was the young squire; that was what he looked like—the master, as she was the lady. He had no need to put on those airs which Patty assumed. Nobody disputed his superiority, or even looked as if they felt themselves as good as him. And it seemed to be natural, as the afternoon went on, that he should find himself again and again by Patty's side, sometimes suggesting something new, sometimes offering his services to carry out her plans, sometimes begging that she would rest and not wear herself out. "Go and sit down quiet a bit, and I'll look after 'em; I can see you're doing too much," he said. It was taking a great deal upon him, Miss Hewitt thought, but Patty liked it! She gave him commissions to do this and that for her, and looked on with the most unaccustomed warmth at her heart while he fulfilled them. Just like the young master! always traceable wherever he moved in the whiteness of his dress, that dress which the gentlemen wore and looked their best in; and nobody could have imagined that Roger Pearson was not a gentleman, to see him. "Well! and weren't there ways of making him one?" Patty thought to herself.

But, notwithstanding her indignant determination to throw herself back into the bosom of her own class, it was to Roger alone that she made any overtures of further intercourse. He stayed behind all the others when the troops of guests went away, and told her it was a real plucky thing to do, and had been a first-rate success. He looked, indeed, like a gentleman, but he had not adopted the phraseology of the Vere de Veres; and perhaps Patty liked him all the better. She said, "Come and see me any day; come when you like," when he held her hand to say good-night; and she said it in an undertone, so that Aunt Patience might not hear.

"I will indeed," he said in the same tone, "the first vacant day I have——" Her breast swelled to see that he was a man much sought after, though this had not been her own fate.

But either he did not have a vacant day, or, what Patty's judgment quite approved, he did not mean to make himself cheap. And Patty fell into a worse depth of solitude than ever, notwithstanding the presence of Aunt Patience, to whom she had said in the rashness of her passion that she should henceforth stay always at Greyshott, but whom now she felt to be an additional burden when perpetually by her side. There had been a little quarrel between them after luncheon one day in July, for they were both irritable by reason of that unbroken *tête-à-tête*, and of the fact that they had said ten or twelve times over everything they had to say; and Miss Hewitt had flounced off upstairs to her room, where, after her passion blew off, she had lain down on the sofa to take a nap, leaving Patty to unmitigated solitude. It was raining, and that made it more dreary than ever: rain in July, quiet, persistent, downpouring; bursting the flowers to pieces; scattering the leaves of the last roses on the ground; and injuring even those sturdy uninteresting geraniums which are the gardener's stand-by—is the dreariest of all rains. It is out of season, even when it is wanted for the country, as there is always some philosopher to tell us; and it is pitiless, pattering upon the trees, soaking the grass, spreading about us a remorseless curtain of grey. Patty, all alone, walked from window to window and saw nothing but the trees under the rain, and a little yellow river pouring across the path. She sat down and took up the work with which Aunt Patience solaced the weary hours. It was the old-fashioned Berlin woolwork, which only old ladies do nowadays. She contrived to put it all wrong, and then she threw it down and went to the window again. And then she was aware of a figure coming up the avenue, a figure clothed in a glistening white mackintosh and under an umbrella. She could not see who it was, but something in the walk struck her as familiar. It looked like a gentleman, she said to herself; though to be sure, in these days of equality, it might be only the draper's young man with patterns, or the lawyer's clerk. Patty felt that she would have been glad to see even the lawyer's clerk.

But when it was Roger Pearson that came into the room, what a difference that made at once! It was almost as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds for a moment, although he was not a gentleman, but only a professional cricketer. He was not dressed this time in his flannels, which suited him best, but in a grey suit, which, however, was very presentable. Patty felt that if the first lady in the county was to choose this particular wet day to call, which was not likely, she would not need to blush for her visitor. And she was unfeignedly glad to see him in the desolation of her solitude. She could tell from the manner in which he looked at her that he was admiring her, and he could tell that she was admiring him, and what could two young people require more of each other? Roger told her quite frankly a great deal about himself. He acknowledged that he had been "a bit idle" in his earlier days, and liked play better than work; but that had

all come in very useful, for such play was now his work, and he had a very pleasant life, going all over the country to cricket matches, and seeing everything that was going. "And all among the swells, too," he said, "which would please you."

"Indeed, you're mistaken altogether," said Patty. "Swells! I loathe the very name of them. Since I've lived among 'em I know what they are; and a poorer, more cold, stuck-up, self-seeking set——"

"I don't make no such objections," said Roger, who, it has been said, took no trouble to use the language of gentlemen. "They're good fellows enough. I don't want no more of them than they're willing to give me—so we gets on first rate."

"They try to crush your spirit," cried Patty, flaming, "and then, perhaps, when they've got you well under their fist, they'll condescend to take a little notice. But none of that sort of thing for me!"

"Well!" said Roger, looking round him, "this is a fine sort of a place, with all these mirrors and gilt things; but I should have said you would have been more comfortable with a smaller house, and things more in our own way, like what we've been used to, both you and me."

"I have been used to this for a long time now," said Patty, with spirit, "and it's my own house."

"Yes, I know," he said, "and it ain't for me to say anything, for I'm not a swell like these as you have such a high opinion of."

"I have no high opinion of them. I hate them!" cried Patty, with set teeth.

"Well, I've often thought," said Roger, "though I know I've no right to—but just in fancy don't you know—as Patty Hewitt of the Seven Thorns would have been a happier woman in the nice little 'ouse as I could give her now, and never harming nobody, than a grand lady like Mrs. Piercey, with so much trouble as you have had, and no real friends."

"How do you know," cried Patty, "that I have no friends?" and then, after a moment's struggle to keep her self-command, she burst into a violent storm of tears. "Oh, don't say anything to me!" she cried, "don't say anything to me! I haven't had a kind word from a soul, nor known what it was to have an easy heart or a bit of pleasure, not since the night you came to the little door, Roger Pearson—no, nor long before."

There was a silence, broken only by her passionate sobs and the sound of the weeping which she could not control, until Roger moved from his chair and went up to the sofa on which she had thrown herself, hiding her tears and flushed face upon the cushions. He laid his hand upon her shoulder with a caressing touch, and said, softly, "Don't now, don't now, Patty dear. Don't cry, there's a love."

"And when you think all I've gone through," said Patty, among her sobs, "and how I've given up everything to do my duty! When you said to me that night you had been at a dance—Oh! and me never seeing a soul, never anything but waiting on them, and serving them, and nursing them, or playing nonsense games from morning to night! And then when the old gentleman died and left me what I never asked him for, then everybody taking up against me as if I had committed a sin; and never one coming near me, never, never one, but Meg in London coming to speak out of charity, because I was alone. Yes, and I was alone," said Patty, raising herself up, drying her eyes hastily, with a nervous hand, "and I'll be alone all my life; but I'll never take charity as if I was some poor creature, from her or from him!"

"You needn't be alone a moment more than you like, Patty," said Roger. "I was always fond of you, you well know. You jilted me to marry 'im, poor fellow, but I'll not say a word about that. You're not 'appy in this great 'ouse, and you know it, nor you'll never be. I'm not saying anything one way or another about them ladies and swells: maybe they might have been a little kinder and done no 'arm. But you're an interloper among them, you know you are; and I'm not one as 'olds with putting another man's nose out of joint, or taking his 'ouse over 'is 'ead. I wouldn't, if it was a bit of a cottage, or your father's old place at the Seven Thorns; and no more would I here. There ain't no blessing on it, that's my opinion."

"I don't know, Roger Pearson, that your opinion was ever asked," Patty said.

"It wasn't asked; but you wouldn't cry like that before anybody but me, nor own as you were in trouble. Now, 'ere's my 'and, if you'll have it, Patty; I'll not come 'ere to sit down at another man's fireside, but I'll stand by you through thick and thin; and I'm making a pretty bit of money myself, and neither me nor you—we don't need to be beholdin' to nobody. Let's just set up a snug place of our own, and I'd like to see the man—the biggest swell in the world—or woman either, that would put a slight upon my wife."

"What!" said Patty, with a smile that was meant to be satirical, "give up Greyshott and my position and all as I've struggled so hard for, for you, Roger Pearson? Why, who are you? nobody! a man as is a good cricketer; and that's the whole when all's said."

"Well," said Roger, good-humouredly, "it's not a great deal, perhaps, but it's always something; and it's still me if I never touched a bat. You wouldn't marry my cricketing any more than you'd marry his parliamenteering, or sporting, or what not, if you did get a swell; and you take my word, Patty, you'll never get on with a swell like you would do with me. We've been brought up the same, and we understand each other. I know how you're feeling, just exactly, my poor little girl: you'd like to be 'appy, and then pride comes in. You say, 'I've worked hard for it and I'll never give it up.'"

"If you mean I'll not give up being Mrs. Piercey of Greyshott, with the finest house in the county, to go to a cottage with you——"

"Don't now, don't," said Roger, protesting, yet without excitement; "I never said a cottage, did I? What I said was a 'andsome 'ouse, with all the modern improvements and furnished to your fancy, instead of this old barrack of a place, and a spanking pair of 'osses, a deal better than them old fat beasts, as goes along like snails; and some more in the stable, a brougham, and a victoria, and a dogcart for me; that's my style. I don't call that love in a cottage. I call it love very well to do, with everything comfortable. Lord! if you like this better, this old place—full of ghosts and dead folks' pictures, I don't agree with your taste, my dear, and that's all I've got to say."

Patty looked at her matter-of-fact lover, raising her head high, preparing the sharpest speeches. She sat very upright, all the tears over, ready, quite ready, to give him his answer. But then there suddenly came over Patty a vision of the winter which was coming, the winter that would be just like the last—the monotonous,

dreadful days, the long, lingering, mortal nights, with Aunt Patience for her sole companion. And her thoughts leapt on before to the 'andsome 'ouse; for being, as Roger said, of his kind, and understanding by nature what he meant, her imagination represented to her in a flash as of sunshine, that shining, brilliant, high-coloured house—with all the last improvements and the newest fashions, plate-glass windows, shining fresh paint which it would be a delight to keep like a new pin, everything new, clean, delightful; carpets and curtains of her own choosing, costing a great deal of money, and of which she could say to every guest, "It's the best that money could buy," or "I gave so much a yard for it," or "Every window stands me in fifty pounds there as you see it." All this appeared to Patty in a flash of roseate colour. And the pair of spanking horses at the door, and a crowd of cricketing men, yes, and cricketing ladies; and meetings in her own grounds, and great luncheon parties, and quantities of other young couples thinking of nothing but their fun and their pleasure, the wives dressing against each other, the young men competing in their batting and bowling, and in their horses and turn-outs, but all in the easiest, noisiest, friendly way, and all surrounding herself, Patty, with admiration and homage as the richest among them. Oh, what a contrast to grey old Greyshott, with its empty, echoing rooms and its dark solitude, and the pictures of dead people, as Roger said, and not a lively sight or sound, nothing but Jerningham and the other servants and Aunt Patience. To think of all that, and Roger added to it,—Roger, who sat looking at her so kindly, with his handsome good-humoured face, not hurrying her in her decision, looking as if he knew beforehand that she could not resist him and his offer of everything she liked best in the world.

All this came to Patty in a moment, as she sat with her sharp speeches all arrested on her lips. The pause she made was not long, but it was long enough to show him that she had begun to think, and we all know that the woman who deliberates is lost; and it was in the nature of the practical-minded lover, who was not given to the sentimental, as it was also in Patty's nature, to carry things by a *coup de main*. He sprang up from the seat he had taken opposite to her, and suddenly, before she was aware, gave Patty a hearty kiss which seemed to sound through all the silent house.

"Don't you think any more about it," he said, holding her fast; "you jilted me before, but you're not going to jilt me again. I 'ave the 'ouse in my eye, and I know the jolly life we'll live in it: lots of company and lots of fun, and two folks that is fond of one another; that's better than living all alone—a little more grand, but no fun at all."

And to such a triumphant and convincing argument, which her heart and every faculty acknowledged, what could Patty reply?

CHAPTER XLVIII.

It was only a few weeks after this that there appeared in the newspapers, which had all reported at such length the great trial of Piercey *versus* Piercey, a paragraph which perhaps caused as much commotion through the county as the news of any great public event for many years. Parliament had risen, and the papers were very thankful for a new sensation of any kind. The paragraph was to this effect:—

"Our readers have not forgotten the trial of Piercey *v.* Piercey, which unfolded so curious a page of family history, and roused so many comments through the whole English-speaking world. It is seldom that so many elements of human interest are collected in a single case, and the effect it produced on the immense audience which followed its developments day by day was extraordinary. The public took sides, as on an affair of imperial importance, for and against the heroine, who, from the bar-room of a roadside inn, found herself elevated in a single year to the position of a considerable landowner, with an ancient historical house and a name well known in the annals of the country. How she attained these honours, whether by the most worthy and admirable means, by unquestionable self-devotion to her husband and father-in-law, or by undue influence, exercised first on a young man of feeble intellect, and afterwards on an old gentleman in his dotage, was the question debated in almost every sociable assembly.

"The partisans and opponents of this lady will have a new problem offered to them in the new and startling incident which is now announced as the climax of this story. Those who have all along believed in the disinterestedness of the young and charming Mrs. Piercey will be delighted to hear that she has now presented herself again before the public, in the most romantic and attractive light by freely and of her own will resigning the Manor of Greyshott, to which a jury of her countrymen had decided her to be fully entitled, to the heirs-at-law of the late Sir Giles Piercey, together with all the old furniture, pictures, family plate, etc., contained in the manor house—a gift equally magnificent and unexpected. It is now stated that this has all along been Mrs. Piercey's intention, and that but for the trial, which put her at once on her defence, she would have made this magnanimous renunciation immediately after coming into the property. Her rights having been assailed, however, it is natural that a high-spirited young woman should have felt it her first duty to vindicate her character; and that she should now carry out her high-minded intention, after all the obloquy which it has been attempted to throw on her, and the base motives imputed to her, is a remarkable instance of magnanimity which, indeed, we know nothing to equal. It is, indeed, heaping coals of fire on the heads of her accusers, for whom, however, it must be said that their irritation in finding themselves so unexpectedly deprived of the inheritance they had confidently expected, was natural and justifiable. It must be a satisfaction to all that a *cause célèbre* which attracted so much attention should end in such a fine act of restitution, and that an ancient family should thus be restored to their ancestral place. We are delighted to add that Mrs. Piercey, who still retains a fine fortune bequeathed to her by the love and gratitude of her father-in-law, whom she nursed with the greatest devotion till his death, is about to contract a second marriage with a gentleman very well known in the cricketing world."

"In the name of Heaven, what is the meaning of that?" cried old Sir Francis Piercey, who was a choleric old gentleman, flinging down the newspaper (which only arrived in the evening), and turning a crimson countenance, flushed with astonishment and offence, to his son Gerald and his daughter-in-law Margaret, who had returned to their home in the north only a few days before. Sir Francis was a very peppery old man, and constantly thought, as do many heads of houses conscious of having grown a little hard of hearing, that nothing was told him, and that even in respect to the events most interesting to the family he was

systematically kept in the dark.

"The meaning of what?" Margaret asked, without excitement. She had no newspaper, being quite content to wait for the news until the gentlemen had read everything and contemptuously flung down each his journal with the remark that there was nothing in it. Mrs. Gerald Piercey did not imagine there could ever be anything in the paper which could concern her or her belongings; and it was a quiet time in politics, when Parliament was up, and nothing very stirring to be expected. She rose to put down by her father-in-law's side his cup of tea; for though he was so fiery an old gentleman, he loved the little feminine attentions of which he had been for many years deprived.

"Let me see, Grandpapa," said Osy, coming to the front with the air of a man who could put all straight.

"By Jove!" cried Colonel Piercey, who had come to the same startling announcement in his paper. And the father and son for a moment sat bolt upright, staring at each other as if each supposed the other to be to blame.

"What is it?" said Margaret, beginning to be alarmed.

She was answered by the sudden opening of the door, and the entrance, announced by a servant quite unacquainted with him, who conferred upon him an incomprehensible name, of Mr. Pownceby, pale with excitement and tired with a journey. He scarcely took time for the ceremonious salutations which Sir Francis Piercey thought needful, and omitted altogether the "how-d'ye-do's" owing to his old friends, Margaret and Gerald, but burst at once into the subject that possessed him. "Well, I can see you've seen it! Sharp work putting it in so soon; but it's all true."

"What is all true? We have something to do with its being false or true, I suppose?" cried Colonel Piercey, placing himself in a somewhat defiant attitude, in an Englishman's usual position of defence before the fire.

"What are you saying, sir? what are you saying? I am a little hard of hearing. I desire that all this should be explained to me immediately. You seem all to understand, but not a syllable has reached my ears."

"I assure you, Sir Francis," said Mr. Pownceby, "I started the first thing this morning. I have not let the grass grow under my feet. Her solicitors communicated with me only yesterday. It is sharp work getting it into the papers at once, very sharp work, but I suppose she wanted to get the honour and glory; and it is quite true. I have the deed in my pocket in full form; for those solicitors of hers, if not endowed with just the best fame in the profession, are——"

"But you're going a great deal too fast, Pownceby," cried Colonel Gerald. "I don't see that either my father or I can accept anything from that woman's hand."

"The deed in full form, Sir Francis," said the lawyer, too wise to take any notice of so hotheaded a person, "restoring Greyshott and all that is in it to the lawful heir—yourself. I don't pretend to know what is her motive; but there it is all in black and white: and for once in a way I can't but say that I admire the woman, Sir Francis, and that she's got perception of what is right in her, after all."

"God bless my soul!" was all Sir Francis said.

"But we can't take it from that woman, Pownceby! Why, what are you thinking of? Receive from her, a person we all despise, a gift like this! Why, the thing is impossible! It is like her impertinence to offer it; and how you could think for a moment——"

Margaret, who had hastily taken up the paper and read the paragraph, here put it down again and laid her hand on her husband's arm. "You must wait," she said, "you must wait, Gerald, for what your father says."

"The woman of the trial?" said Sir Francis, getting it with difficulty into his head, "the baggage that married poor Gervase, and made a fool of his father—that woman!" He added briskly, turning to his son: "I was always against that trial, you know I was. Don't throw away good money after bad, I always said: let be; if we don't get it in the course of nature we'll never get it, was what I always said. You know I always said it. Those costs which you ran up in spite of me, almost broke my heart."

There was a pause, and then Colonel Piercey said with a half laugh, "We all know, father, that you did not like the costs."

"I said so!" said Sir Francis, "I was always against it. I thought the woman might turn out better than you supposed. A very remarkable thing, Mr. Pownceby, don't you think it's a very remarkable thing? after she had won her cause and had everything her own way. Do you recall to memory ever having heard of a similar incident? I never did in all my experience; a very extraordinary thing indeed!"

"No," said Mr. Pownceby, "no; I don't think I ever did hear anything like it. They generally stick to what they have got like grim death."

"I think that must be rather a remarkable woman," said Sir Francis; "I retract anything I may have been induced to say of her in a moment of annoyance. I consider she has acted very creditably, very—very—I may say nobly, Mr. Pownceby. I beg that I may never hear a word in her disparagement from any of you. I hope that we might all be capable of doing anything so—so—magnanimous and high-minded ourselves."

"But, father," cried Colonel Piercey, "we can't surely accept a gift like this from a woman we know nothing of—whom we've no esteem for—whom we've prosecuted—whom——"

"Not accept it, sir?" cried Sir Francis—"not accept a righteous restitution? I should like to know on what principle we could refuse it? If a man had taken your watch from you, would you refuse to take it if he brought it back? Why, what would that be but to discourage every good impulse? I shall certainly accept it. And I hope, Mr. Pownceby, that you will convey my thanks—yes, my thanks, and very high appreciation to this young lady. I think she is doing a very noble thing. Whether I benefited by it or not, I should think it a very noble thing. Don't be stingy in your praise, sir! It's noble to say you've been wrong—many haven't the strength of mind to do it. I'll drink her very good health at dinner. We'll have a toast, do you hear?"

"Yes, Grandpapa," cried Osy, always ready; "and shall it be with what Cousin Colonel calls the honours? You give the name, and I'll stand up upon a chair and do the 'Hip, hip, hurrah!' "

Upon what rule it was that old Sir Francis, rather a severe old gentleman to most people, had become grandpapa to Osy, while Colonel Piercey remained only, as of old, Cousin Colonel, is too subtle a question to

enter into; but it was so to the perfect satisfaction of the two persons chiefly involved. And thus for the second time Osy cheered for Patty with the delighted readiness of an unbiassed soul.

Mrs. Piercey left Greyshott shortly after this, having left everything in the most perfect good order, and all the servants in the house, without saying a word of any new arrangements, though I need not say they had all read that paragraph in the newspapers. She went to London, where she spent a few weeks very pleasantly, and ordered a great many new dresses. Here she dismissed Jerningham, who carried away with her a number of black and white gowns, and the best recommendations. Patty plunged into pinks and blues with the zest of a person who has long been deprived of such indulgences, and the world learned by the newspapers that, on the 20th of August, Patience, widow of the late Gervase Piercey, Esq., of Greyshott, was married at St. George's, Hanover Square, to Roger Pearson, Esq., of Canterbury House. The happy pair went abroad for their honeymoon, but did not enjoy the Continent, only entering into full and perfect bliss when they returned to the glistening glories of their new house. There had been various storms between them before the question of Greyshott had been decided, and it had required all Roger's power and influence to carry his scheme to a successful conclusion. His determination not to sit down by another man's fireside, and to have nothing to say to the old house, which he declared gave him the shivers to look at, were answered by many a scornful request to take himself off then, if he didn't like it, and leave it to those who did.

"That's just what I want—to leave it to those that like it: you don't, Patty, and never will!" cried the bold lover. "How do I know? Oh, I know! You've gone through a lot, and you think you'll have something for it, anyhow. Well, so you shall have something for it. Wait till you see the 'ouse that is just waiting till you say the word—ten times better an 'ouse, and folks all about us will be delighted to see you, and as much fun as you can set your face to!" Oh, how powerful and how sweet these arguments were! But to give Greyshott back was a bitter pill to Patty.

"I'll sell it, then," she said; "it'll bring in a deal of money;" and this was what Miss Hewitt, who was almost mad with opposition, advised, arguing and beseeching till the foam flew from her mouth.

But Roger was obstinate. He declared that he would not be instrumental in taking any man's home from him. "Money's a different thing," he said. "One sovereign's just like another, but one 'ouse ain't like another." The telling argument, however, was one which Roger had the cleverness to pick up from a cricket reporter on a daily paper, to whom he had confided his romance.

"By George!" cried the journalist, "what a paragraph for my paper!" He said "par," no doubt, but Patty would not have understood what this meant. When she did take up the idea, and understood that her praises were to be sung and her generosity extolled in every paper, and that the Pierceys would be made to sing small before her, Patty was overcome at last. Her heart swelled as if it would burst with triumph and a sense of greatness when she read that paragraph. She felt it to be altogether just and true. If they had not prosecuted, there was no telling what magnanimity she might not have been equal to, and she accepted the praise as one who had deserved it to the very utmost.

"They've been in it hundreds and hundreds of years," she said to the new friends to whom her bridegroom introduced her in London—among whom were several newspaper men, and one who insisted upon getting her portrait for an illustrated paper—"as we have been in the Seven Thorns. Being of an old family myself, I have always felt for them." This was reported in the little biographical notice which was appended to Mrs. Piercey's portrait in the illustrated paper, where it was also told that she had been known far and wide as the Lily of the Seven Thorns, and had been carried off by the Squire's son from many competitors. It made up for much, even for the fact, still bitter to her, that she had been cheated out of her title, and would never be Lady Piercey,—a loss and delusion which sometimes brought tears into her eyes long after she was Roger Pearson's wife.

But when Patty settled down in her own 'Andsome 'Ouse, it was soon proved that Roger had not said a word too much. The cricketing world rallied round him. He ceased to be a professional, and became a gentleman cricketer and a member of the M.C.C. The cricket pitch within the grounds of Canterbury House was admirable, and matches were played there, in which not only the honour of the county, but the honour of England, was involved. Patty gave cricket luncheons and even cricket dinners, to which the golden youth of England came gladly, and where even great ladies, watching the cricket for one side or another, were content to be entertained. Patty drove her two spanking horses over the county, calling at the best houses; while even Lady Hartmore, after the restitution as she called it, paid her a visit of ceremony, which Mrs. Roger Pearson, swelling with pride and triumph, never returned. Not to have returned Lady Hartmore's visit was almost as great a distinction as to have received one from the Queen. And all the lesser ladies in the county envied Patty the strength of mind which made her capable of such a proof of independence.

Colonel Piercey and his wife became shortly afterwards the inhabitants of Greyshott, which suited Sir Francis better than to have his long-accustomed quiet permanently disturbed. "Though I'd like to keep the boy," he said. It cost a good deal to Colonel Pierce's pride, but it lay with his father to decide, and there was nothing more to say. They were not rich, for Greyshott was a difficult place to keep up on a limited income; but it was something, no doubt, after the shock of the restoration, to have the old house still.

And Patty flourishes and spreads like a green baytree. She is not so careful of etiquette, so anxious to be always correct and do what other ladies do. She is beginning to grow stout; her colour is high; her nursery is full; and she is, beyond all question, a much happier woman than she ever could have been in Greyshott, even had Lady Hartmore called and all gone well—now that she and her husband live in continual jollity in their own 'Andsome 'Ouse.

THE END.

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