

NEIGHBOURS
ON THE GREEN

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT

“Old wives’ tales”

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK

1889

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BUNGAY.

PR
5113
N36
v. 2

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN	I
LADY ISABELLA	156
AN ELDERLY ROMANCE	278 265

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

NEIGHBOURS ON THE GREEN

Neighbours on the Green

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

THERE were a great variety of houses on the Green ; some of them handsome and wealthy, some very old-fashioned, some even which might be called tumbledown. The two worst and smallest of these were at the lower end of the Green, not far from the "Barleymow." It must not be supposed however that they were unpleasantly affected by the neighbourhood of the "Barleymow." They were withdrawn from contact with it quite as much as we were, who lived at the other end ; and though they were small and out of repair, and might even look mouldy

and damp to a careless passer-by, they were still houses for gentlefolk, where nobody need have been ashamed to live. They were built partly of wood and partly of whitewashed brick, and each stood in the midst of a very luxuriant garden. At the time Mr. Reinhardt, of whom I am going to speak, came to East Cottage, as it was called, the place had been very much neglected; the trees and bushes grew wildly all over the garden; the flower-beds had gone to ruin; the kitchen-garden was a desert, with only a dreary cabbage or great long straggling onion-plant run to seed showing among the gooseberries and currants, which looked like the copsewood in a forest. It is miserable to see a place go to destruction like this, and I could not but reflect often how many poor people there were without a roof to shelter them, while this house was going to ruin for want of an inhabitant. "My dear lady, that is communism, rank communism," the Admiral

said to me when I ventured to express my sentiments aloud ; but I confess I never could see it.

The house belonged to Mr. Falkland, who was a distant relation of Lord Goodwin's, and lived chiefly in London. He was a young man, and a barrister, living, I suppose, in chambers, as most of them do ; but I wondered he did not furnish the place and keep it in order, if it had been only for the pleasure of coming down with his friends from Saturday to Monday, to spend Sunday in the country. When I suggested this young Robert Lloyd, Mrs. Damerel's brother, took it upon him to laugh.

“ There is nothing to do here,” he said. “ If it were near the river, for boating, it would be a different matter, or even if there was a stream to fish in ; but a fellow has nothing to do here, and why should Falkland come to bore himself to death ? ” Thus the young man ended with a sigh for himself, though he had begun with a laugh at me.

“If he is so afraid to be bored himself,” said I—for I was rather angry to hear our pretty village so lightly spoken of—“I am sure he must know quantities of people who would not be bored. Young barristers marry sometimes, I suppose, imprudently, like other young people——”

“Curates, for instance,” said Robert, who was a saucy boy.

“Curates, and young officers, and all sorts of foolish people,” said I; “and think what a comfort that little house would be to a poor young couple with babies! Oh no, I do not like to see such a waste; a house going to rack and ruin for want of some one to live in it, and so many people famishing for want of fresh air, and the country. Don’t say any more, for it hurts me to see it. I wish it were mine to do what I liked with it only for a year.”

“Communism, rank communism,” said the Admiral. But if that is communism, then I am a communist, and I don’t deny

it. I would not waste a Christian dwelling-place any more than I would throw away good honest wholesome bread.

However this state of things came to an end one spring, a good many years ago. Workmen came and began to put East Cottage in order. We all took the greatest interest in the work. It was quite a place to go to for our afternoon walks, and sometimes as many as three and four parties would meet there among the shavings and the pails of plaster and whitewash. It was being very thoroughly done up. We consulted each other and gave our opinions about all the papers, as if it mattered whether we liked them or not. The Green thought well of the new tenant's taste on the whole, though some of us had doubts about the decoration of the drawing-room, which was rather a dark little room by nature. The paper for it was terribly artistic. It was one of those new designs which I always think are too mediæval

for a private house—groups of five or six daisies tied together, with long stalks detached and distinct, and all the hair on their heads standing on end, so to speak; but we who objected had a conviction that it was only our ignorance, and merely whispered to each other in corners, that we were not quite sure—that perhaps it was just a little——but the people who knew better thought it showed very fine taste indeed.

It was some time before we found out who the new tenant was. He did not come down until after everything had been arranged and ready for some weeks. Then we found out that he was a Mr. Reinhardt, a gentleman who was well-known, people said, in scientific circles. He was of German extraction, we supposed, by his name, and as for his connections, or where he came from, nobody knew anything about them. An old housekeeper was the first person who made her appearance, and then came an old man-servant; both of them looked

the very models of respectability, but I do not think, for my own part, that the sight of them gave me a very pleasant feeling about their master. They chilled you only to look at them. The woman had a suspicious, watchful look, her eyes seemed to be always on the nearest corner looking for some one, and she had an air of resolution which I should not have liked to struggle against. The man was not quite so alarming, for he was older and rather feeble on his legs. One felt that there must be some weakness in his character to justify the little deviousness that would now and then appear in his steps. These two people attracted our notice in the interval of waiting for their master. The man's name was White—an innocent, feeble sort of name, but highly respectable—and he called the woman something which sounded like Missis Sarah; but whether it was her Christian name or her surname we never could make out.

It was on a Monday evening, and I had gone to dine at the Lodge with Sir Thomas and Lady Denzil, when the first certain news of the new tenant of East Cottage reached us. The gentlemen, of course, had been the first to hear it. Somehow, though it is taken for granted that women are the great traffickers in gossip, it is the men who always start the subject. When they came into the drawing-room after dinner they gave us the information, which they had already been discussing among themselves over their wine.

“Mr. Reinhardt has arrived,” Sir Thomas said to Lady Denzil; and we all asked, “When?”

“He came yesterday, I believe,” said Sir Thomas.

“Yesterday! Why, yesterday was Sunday,” cried some one; and though we are, as a community, tolerably free from prejudice, we were all somewhat shocked; and there was a pause.

“ I believe Sunday is considered the most lucky day for everything abroad,” said Lady Denzil, after that interval ; “ for beginning a journey, and no doubt for entering a house. And as he is of German extraction——”

“ He does not look like a German,” said Robert Lloyd ; “ he is quite an old fellow—about fifty, I should say—and dark, not fair.”

At this speech the most of us laughed ; for an old fellow of fifty seemed absurd to us, who were that age, or more ; but Robert, at twenty, had no doubt on the subject.

“ Well,” he said, half offended, “ I could not have said a young fellow, could I ? He stoops, he is awfully thin, like an old magician, and shabbily dressed, and——”

“ You must have examined him from head to foot, Robert.”

“ A fellow can't help seeing,” said Robert, “ when he looks ; and I thought you all wanted to know.”

Then we had a discussion as to what notice should be taken of the new comer. We did not know whether he was married or not, and, consequently, could not go fully into the question; but the aspect of the house and the looks of the servants were much against it. For my own part, I felt convinced he was not married; and, so far as we ladies were concerned, the question was thus made sufficiently easy. But the gentlemen felt the weight proportionably heavy on their shoulders.

“I never knew any one of the name of Reinhardt,” Sir Thomas said with a musing air.

“Probably he will have brought letters from somebody,” the Admiral suggested: and that was a wonderful comfort to all the men.

Of course he must have letters from somebody; he must know some one who knew Sir Thomas, or Mr. Damerel, or the Admiral, or General Perronet, or the Lloyds.

Surely the world was not so large as to make it possible that the new comer did not know some one who knew one of the people on the Green. As for being a scientific notability, or even a literary character, I am afraid that would not have done much for him in Dinglefield. If he had been cousin to poor Lord Glyndon, who was next to an idiot, it would have been of a great deal more service to him. I do not say that we were right; I think there are other things which ought to be taken into consideration; but, without arguing about it, there is no doubt that so it was.

The Green generally kept a watchful eye for some time on the East Cottage. There were no other servants except those two whom we had already seen. Sometimes the gardener, who kept all the little gardens about in order—"doing for" ladies like myself, for instance, who could not afford to keep a gardener—was called in to assist

at East Cottage ; and I believe (of course I could not question him on the subject ; I heard this through one of the maids) that he was very jocular about the man-servant, who was a real man-of-all-work, doing everything you could think of, from helping to cook, down to digging in the garden. Our gardener opened his mouth and uttered a great laugh when he spoke of him. He held the opinion common to a great many of his class, that to undertake too much was a positive injury to others. A servant who kept to his own work, and thought it was "not his place" to interfere with anything beyond it, or lend a helping hand in matters beyond his own immediate calling, was Matthew's model of what a servant ought to be, and a man who pretended to be a butler, and was a Jack-of-all-trades, was a contemptible object to our gardener : "taking the bread out o' other folks's mouths," he said. He thought the man at the East

Cottage was a foreigner, and altogether had a very poor opinion of him. But however what was a great deal worse was the fact that neither the man-servant, nor the woman, nor the master, appeared to care for our notice, or in any way took the place they ought to have done in our little community. They had their things down from London; they either did their washing "within themselves" or sent it also away to a distance; they made no friends, and sought none. Mr. Reinhardt brought no letters of introduction. Sometimes—but rarely—he might be seen of an evening walking towards the Dell, with an umbrella over his head to shield him from the setting sun, but he never looked at anybody whom he met, or showed the least inclination to cultivate acquaintance, even with a child or a dog. And the worst of all was that he certainly never went to church. We were very regular church-goers on the Green. Some of us preferred sometimes to

go to a little church in the woods, which was intended for the scattered population of our forest district, and was very pretty and sweet in the midst of the great trees, instead of to the parish. But to one or other everybody went once every Sunday at least. It was quite a pretty sight on Sunday morning to see everybody turning out—families all together, and lonely folk like myself, who scarcely could feel lonely when there was such a feeling of harmony and friendliness about. The young people set off walking generally a little while before us ; but most of the elder people drove, for it was a good long way. And though some rigid persons thought it was wrong on the Sunday, yet the nice carriages and horses looked pleasant, and the servants always had time to come to church ; and an old lady like Lady Denzil, for instance, must have stayed at home altogether if she had not been allowed to drive. I think a distinction should be made in such cases. But when all the houses

thus opened their doors and poured forth their inhabitants, it may be supposed how strange it looked that one house should never open and no figure ever come from it to join the Sunday stream. Even the housekeeper, so far as we could ascertain, never had a Sunday out. They lived within those walls, within the trees that were now so tidy and trim. One morning when I had a cold, and was reading the service by myself in my own room, I had a glimpse of the master of the house. It was a summer day, very soft and blue, and full of sunshine. You know what I mean when I say blue—the sky seemed to stoop nearer to the earth, the earth hushed itself and looked up all still and gentle to the sky. There were no clouds above, and nobody moving below ; nothing but a little thrill and flicker of leaves, a faint rustle of the grass, and the birds singing with a softer note, as if they too knew it was Sunday. My room is in the front of the house, and overlooks all the Green. The window was open,

and the click of a latch sounding in the stillness made me lift my head without thinking from the lesson I was reading. It was Mr. Reinhardt, who had come out of his cottage. He came to the garden gate and stood for a moment looking out. I was not near enough to see his face, but in every line of his spare, stooping figure there was suspicion and doubt. He looked to the right and to the left with a curious prying eagerness, as if he expected to see some one coming. And then he came out altogether, and began to walk up and down, up and down. The stillness was so great that, though he walked very softly, the sound of his steps on the gravel of the road reached me from time to time. I stopped in my reading to watch him, in spite of myself. Every time he turned he looked about him in the same suspicious, curious way. Was he waiting for some one? Was he looking out for a visitor? or was he (the thought sprang into my mind all at once) insane perhaps, and had escaped

from his keepers in the cottage? This thought made my heart jump, but a little reflection calmed me, for he had not the least appearance of insanity. The little jar now and then of his foot when he turned kept me in excitement ; I felt it impossible to keep from watching him. When I found how abstracted my mind was getting, I changed my place that I might not be tempted to look out any more, feeling that it was wrong to yield to this curiosity ; and when I had finished my reading the first carriage—the Denzils' carriage—was coming gleaming along the distant road in the sunshine, coming back from church, and the lonely figure was gone. I did not know whether he had gone in again or had extended his walk. But I felt somehow all that day, though you will say with very little reason, that I knew something more about our strange neighbour than most people did on the green.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER II.

THIS seclusion and isolation of East Cottage did not however last very long. Before the summer was over Sir Thomas, who, though he stood on his dignity sometimes, was very kind at bottom, began to feel compunctious about his solitary neighbour: now and then he would say something which betrayed this. "It worries me to think there is some one there who has been taken no notice of by anybody," he would say. "Of course it is his own fault—entirely his own fault." The next time one met him he would return to the subject. "What a lovely day! Everybody seems to be out-of-doors—except at East Cottage, where they

have the blinds drawn down." This would be said with a pucker of vexation and annoyance about his mouth. He was angry with the stranger, and sorry, and did not know what to do. And I for one knew what would follow. But we were all very curious when we heard that Sir Thomas had actually called. The Stokes came running in to tell me one afternoon. "Oh, fancy, Mrs. Mulgrave, Sir Thomas has called!" cried Lucy. "And he has been admitted, which is still greater fun," said Robert Lloyd, who was with them. I may say in passing that this was before Robert had passed his examination, when he was an idle young man at home, trying hard to persuade Lucy Stoke that he and she were in love with each other. Their parents, of course, would never have permitted such a thing for a moment, and fortunately there turned out to be nothing in it; but at present this was the chief occupation of Robert's life.

“ I am very glad,” said I. “ I knew Sir Thomas never would be happy till he had done it.”

“ And oh, you don't know what funny stories there are about,” said Lucy. “ They say he killed his wife, and that he is always thinking he sees her ghost. I wonder if it is true? They say he can never be left alone or in the dark; he is so frightened. I met him yesterday, and it made me jump. I never saw a man who killed his wife before.”

“ But who says he killed his wife?”

“ Oh, everybody; we heard it from Matthew the gardener, and I think he heard it at the ‘ Barleymow,’ and it is all over the place. Fancy Sir Thomas calling on such a person! for I suppose,” said Lucy, “ though you are so very superior, you men, and may beat us, and all that, it is not made law yet that you may kill your wives.”

“ It might just as well be the law: for I am sure there are many other things

quite as bad," said Lottie, while Robert, who had been appealed to, whispered some answer which made Lucy laugh. "Poor man, I wonder if she was a very bad woman, and if she haunts him. How disappointed he must have been to find he could not get rid of her even that way!"

"Lottie, my dear, here is Sir Thomas coming; don't talk so much nonsense," said I hurriedly.

I am afraid however that Sir Thomas rather liked the nonsense. He had not the feeling of responsibility in encouraging girls to run on, that most women have. He thought it was amusing, as men generally do, and never paused to think how bad it was for the girls. But to-day he was too full of his own story to care much for theirs. He came in with dusty boots, which was quite against his principles, and stretched his long spare limbs out on the beautiful rug which the Stokes had worked for me in a way that went to my heart.

That showed how very much pre-occupied he was; for Sir Thomas was never inconsiderate about such matters.

“Well,” he said, pushing his thin white hair off his forehead, and stretching out his legs as if he were quite worn out, “there is one piece of work well over. I have had a good many tough jobs in my life, but I don’t know that I ever had a worse.”

“Oh, tell us what happened. Is he mad? Has he shut himself in?” Has he hurt you?” cried the Stokes.

Sir Thomas smiled upon this nonsense as if it had been perfectly reasonable, and the best sense in the world.

“Hurt me! well, not quite: he was not likely to try that. He is a little mite of a man, who could not hurt a fly. And besides,” added Sir Thomas, correcting himself, “he is a gentleman. I have no reason to doubt he is a perfect gentleman. He conducts himself quite as—as all the rest

of us do. No, it was the difficulty of getting in that bewildered me."

"Was there a difficulty in getting in?"

"You shall hear. The servant looked as if he would faint when he saw me. 'Mr. Reinhardt at home?' Oh! he could not quite say; if I would wait he would go and ask. So I waited in the hall," said Sir Thomas with a smile. "Well, yes, it was odd, of course; but such an experience now and then is not bad for one. It shows you, you know, of how little importance you are the moment you get beyond the circle of people who know you. I think really it is salutary, you know, if you come to that—and amusing," he added, this time with a little laugh.

"Oh, but what a shame: how shocking! how horrid! You, Sir Thomas, whom everybody knows!"

"That is just what makes it so instructive," he said. "I must have stood in the hall a quarter of an hour: allowing for the tediousness of waiting, I should say certainly

a quarter of an hour ; and then the man came back and asked me, what do you think ? if I had come of my own accord, or if some one had sent me ! It was ludicrous," said Sir Thomas with a half laugh ; " but if you will think of it, it was rather irritating. I am afraid I lost my temper a little. I said, ' I am Sir Thomas Denzil. I live at the Lodge, and I have come to call upon your master,' in a tone which made the old fool of a man shake, and then some one else appeared at the top of the stairs. It was Mr. Reinhardt, who had heard my voice."

" What did he say for himself ?" I asked.

" It was not his fault," said Sir Thomas ; " he knew nothing of it. He is a very well-informed man, Mrs. Mulgrave. He is quite able to enter into conversation on any subject. He was very glad to see me. He is a sort of recluse, it is easy to perceive, but quite a proper person ; very well-informed, one whom it was a pleasure to converse with, I assure you. He made a thousand apologies.

He said something about unfortunate circumstances, and a disagreeable visitor, as an excuse for his man; but whether the disagreeable visitor was some one who had been there or who was expected——”

“Oh, I know,” cried Lucy Stoke, with excitement. “It was his wife’s ghost.”

Sir Thomas stopped short aghast, and looked at me to ask if the child had gone mad.

“How could they think Sir Thomas was the wife’s ghost?” cried Lottie, “you little goose! and besides, most likely it is not true.”

“What is not true?” asked Sir Thomas in dismay.

“Oh, they say he killed her,” said Lucy, “and that she haunts him. They say his man sleeps in his room, and the housekeeper just outside. He cannot be left by himself for a moment: and I do not wonder he should be frightened if he has killed his wife.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” said Sir Thomas, raising his voice. “Nonsense!” he was quite angry. He had taken up the man and felt

responsible for him, "My dear child, I think you are going out of your little wits," he cried. "Killed his wife! why, the man is a thorough gentleman. A most well-informed man, and knows my friend Sir Septimus Dash, who is the head of the British Association. Why, why, Lucy! you take away my breath."

"It was not I who said it," cried Lucy. "It is all over the green—everybody knows. They say she disappeared all at once, and never was heard of more; and then there used to be sounds like somebody crying and moaning; and then he got so frightened, he never would go anywhere, nor look any one in the face. Oh! only suppose; how strange it would be to have a haunted house on the green. If I had anybody to go with me I should like to walk down to East Cottage at midnight."

"Let me go with you," whispered Robert; but fortunately I heard him, and gave Lucy a look. She was a silly little girl certainly, but not so bad as that.

“ This is really very great nonsense,” said Sir Thomas. “ A haunted house at this time of day ! Mrs. Mulgrave, I hope you will use all your influence to put down this story if it exists. I give you my word, Mr. Reinhardt is quite an addition to our society, and knows Sir Septimus Dash. A really well-bred, well-informed man. I am quite shocked, I assure you. Lucy, I hope you will not spread this ridiculous story. I shall ask your mother what she thinks. Poor man ! no wonder he looked uncomfortable, if there is already such a rumour abroad.”

“ Then he did look uncomfortable ? ” said Lottie.

“ No ; I can't say he did. No ; I don't mean uncomfortable,” said Sir Thomas, seeing he had committed himself. “ I mean — it is absurd altogether. A charming man ; one whom you will all like immensely. I think Lady Denzil must have returned from her drive. We are to see you all to-morrow, I believe, in the afternoon ? Now

Lucy, no more gossip ; leave that to the old women, my dear."

"Sir Thomas does not know what to make of it," said Lottie, as we watched him cross the green. "He has gone to my lady to have his mind made up whether he ought to pay any attention to it or not."

"And my lady will say not," said I ; "fortunately we are all sure of that. Lady Denzil will not let anybody be condemned without a hearing. And, Lucy, I think Sir Thomas gave you very good advice ; when you are old it will be time enough to amuse yourself with spreading stories, especially such dreadful stories as this."

Lucy took offence at what I said, and went away pouting—comforted by Robert Lloyd, and very indignant with me. Lottie stayed for a moment behind her to tell me that it was really quite true, and that the report had gone all over the green, and everybody was talking of it. No one knew quite where it had come from, but it was already

known to all the world at Dinglewood, and a very unpleasant report it was.

However time went on, and no more was heard of this. In a little place like Dinglewood, as soon as everybody has heard a story, a pause ensues. We cannot go on indefinitely propagating it, and renewing our own faith in it. When we all know it, and nothing new can be said on the subject, we are stopped short; and unless there are new facts to comment upon, or some new light thrown upon the affair, it is almost sure to die away, as a matter of course. This was the case in respect to the report about Mr. Reinhardt. We got no more information, and we could not go on talking about the old story for ever. We exhausted it, and grew tired of it, and let it drop; and thus, by degrees, we got used to him, and became acquainted with him, more or less.

The other gentlemen called, one by one, after Sir Thomas. Mr. Reinhardt was asked,

timidly, to one or two dinner-parties, and declined, which we thought at first showed, on the whole, good taste on his part. But he became quite friendly when we met him on the road, and would stop to talk, and showed no moroseness, nor fear of any one. He had what was generally pronounced to be a refined face—the features high and clear, with a kind of ivory paleness, and keen eyes, which were very sharp to note everything. He was, as Sir Thomas said, very well-informed. There seemed to be nothing that you could talk about that he did not know; and in science, the gentlemen said he was a perfect mine of knowledge. I am not sure however that they were very good judges, for I don't think either Sir Thomas or the Admiral knew much about science. One thing however which made some of us still doubtful about him was the fact that he never talked of *people*. When a name was mentioned in conversation he never said, "Oh, I know him very well—I knew

his father—a cousin of his was a great friend of mine,” as most people do. All the expression went out of his face as soon as we came to this kind of talk; and it may be supposed how very much at a loss most people were in consequence for subjects to talk about. But this, though it was strange, was not any sort of proof that he had done anything wicked. It might be—and the most of us thought it was—an evidence that he had not lived in society. “He knows my friend, Sir Septimus Dash,” Sir Thomas always said in his favour; but then, of course, Sir Septimus was a public personage, and Mr. Reinhardt might have made his acquaintance at some public place. But still, a man may be of no family, and out of society, and yet not have murdered his wife. After a while we began to think, indeed, that whether he had killed her or not, it was just as well there was no wife in the question—“Just as well,” Mrs. Perronet said, who was great in matters of

society. "A man whom nobody knows does not matter ; but what should we have done with a woman ?"

"He must have killed her on purpose to save us the trouble," said Lottie. But the General's wife was quite in earnest, and did not see the joke.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER III.

IT is a good thing, on the whole, to have a house with a mystery about it in one's immediate neighbourhood. Gradually we ceased to believe that Mr. Reinhardt had anything criminal about him. But it was quite certain that there was a mystery—that we knew nothing about him, neither where he came from, nor what his family was. For one thing, he had certainly no occupation: therefore, of course, he must be sufficiently well off to do without that: and he had no relations—no one who ever came to see him, nor of whom he talked; and though the men who called upon him had been admitted, they were never asked to

go back, nor had one of us ladies ever crossed his threshold. It would seem indeed that he had made a rule against admitting ladies, for when Mrs. Damerel herself called to speak of the soup-kitchen, old White came and spoke to her at the gate, and trembled very much, and begged her a hundred pardons, but nevertheless would not let her in—a thing which made her very indignant. Thus the house became to us all a mysterious house, and, on the whole, I think we rather liked it. The mystery did no harm, and it certainly amused us, and kept our interest alive.

Thus the summer passed, and Dinglefield had got used to the Scientific Gentleman. That was the name he generally went by. When strangers came to the green, and had it all described to them—Sir Thomas here, the Admiral there, the General at the other side, and so on, we always gave a little special description of Mr. Reinhardt.

“He is a Fellow of the Royal Society,” one

would say, not knowing much what that meant. "He belongs to the British Association," said another. "He is a great scientific light." We began even to feel a little proud of him. Even I myself, on the nights when I did not sleep well, used to feel quite pleased, when I looked out, to see the Scientific Gentleman's light still burning. He was sitting up there, no doubt, pondering things that were much beyond our comprehension—and it made us proud to think that, on the green, there was some one who was going over the abstrusest questions in the dead of the night.

It was about six months after his arrival when, one evening, for some special reason, I forget what, I went to Mrs. Stoke's to tea. She lives a little way down the lane, on the other side of the "Barleymow." It is not often that she asks any one even to tea. As a rule, people generally ask her and her daughters, for we are all very well aware of her circumstances; but on this

particular night, I was there for some reason or other. It was October, and the nights had begun to be cold ; but there was a full moon, and at ten o'clock it was as light as day. This was why I would not let them send any one home with me. I must say I have never understood how middle-aged women like myself can have a pretty young maid-servant sent for them, knowing very well that the girl must walk one way alone, and that, if there is any danger at all, a young woman of twenty is more in the way of it, than one who might be her mother. I remember going to the door to look out, and protesting that I was not the least nervous—nor was I. I knew all the roads as well as I knew my own garden, and everybody round about knew me. The way was not at all lonely. To be sure, there were not many people walking about ; but then there were houses all along—and lastly, it was light as day. The moon was shining in that lavish sort of way which she

only has when she is at the full. The houses amid their trees stood whitened over, held fast by the light as the wedding-guest was held by the eye of the Ancient Mariner. The shadows were as black as the light was white. There was a certain solemnity about it, so full of light, and yet so colourless. After I had left the house, and had come out—I and my shadow—into the full whiteness, it made an impression upon me which I could scarcely resist. My first idea when I glanced back was that my own shadow was some one stealing after me. That gave me a shake for a moment, though I laughed at myself. The lights of the “Barleymow” neutralized this solemn feeling, and I went on, thinking to myself what a good story it would be for my neighbours—my own shadow! I did not cross the green, as I generally did, partly from a vague feeling that, though it was so light and so safe, there was a certain company in being close to the houses—not that

I was the least afraid, or that indeed there was any occasion to fear, but just for company's sake. By this time, I think it must have been very nearly eleven o'clock, which is a late hour for Dinglefield. All the houses seemed shut up for the night. Looking up the green, the effect of the sleeping place, with the moon shining on the pale gables and ends of houses, and all the trees in black, and the white stretch of space in the centre, looking as if it had been clean swept by the moonlight of every obstacle, had the strangest effect. I was not in the least afraid. What should I be afraid of, so close to my own door? But still I felt a little shiver run over me—a something involuntary, which I could not help, like that little thrill of the nerves, which makes people say that some one is walking over your grave.

And all at once in the great stillness and quiet I heard a sound quite near. It was very soft at first, not much louder than a sigh. I hurried on for a few steps frightened,

I could not tell why, and then, disgusted with myself, I stopped to listen. Yes, now it came again, louder this time ; and then I turned round to look where it came from. It was the sound of some one moaning either in sorrow or in pain ; a soft, interrupted moan, now and then stopping short with a kind of sob. My heart began to beat, but I said to myself, it is some one in trouble, and I can't run away. The sound came from the side of East Cottage, just where the little railing in front ended ; and, after a long look, I began to see that there was some one there. What I made out was the outline of a figure seated on the ground with knees drawn up, and looking so thin that they almost came to a point. It was straight up against the railing, and so overshadowed by the lilac-bushes that the outline of the knees, black, but whitened over as it were with a sprinkling of snow or silver, was all that could be made out. It was like something dimly seen in a picture, not like flesh and blood. It gave

me the strangest sensation to see this something, this shrouded semblance of a human figure, at Mr. Reinhardt's door. All the stories that had been told of him came back to my mind. His wife! I would have kept the recollection out of my mind if I could, but it came without any will of mine. I turned and went on as fast as ever I could. I should have run like a frightened child had I followed my own instinctive feeling. My heart beat, my feet rang upon the gravel; and then I stopped short, hating myself. How silly and weak I was! It might be some poor creature, some tramp or wandering wretch, who had sunk down there in sickness or weariness, while I in my cowardice passed by on the other side frightened lest it should be a ghost. I do not know to this day how it was that I forced myself to turn and go back, but I did. Oh! what a moaning, wailing sound it was; not loud, but the very cry of desolation. I felt as I went, though my heart beat so, that such

a moaning could only come from a living creature, one who had a body full of weariness and pain, as well as a suffering soul.

I turned back and went up to the thing with those sharp-pointed knees ; then I saw the hands clasped round the knees, and the hopeless head bowed down upon them, all black and silvered over like something cut out of ebony. I even saw, or thought I saw, amid the flickering of the heavens above and the shadows below, a faint rocking in the miserable figure ;—that mechanical, unconscious rocking which is one of the primitive ways of showing pain. I went up, all trembling as I was, and asked “What is the matter ?” with a voice as tremulous. There was no answer ; only the moaning went on, and the movement became more perceptible. Fortunately, my terror died away when I saw this. The human sound and action, that were like what everybody does, brought me back

at once out of all supernatural dread. It was a woman, and she was unhappy. I dismissed the other thought—or rather, it left me unawares.

This gave me a great deal of courage. I repeated my question; and then, as there was no answer, went up and touched her softly. The figure rose with a spring in a moment, before I could think what she was going to do. She put out one of her hands, and pushed me off.

“Ah! have I brought you out at last?” she cried wildly; and then stopped short and stared at me; while I stared, too, feeling, whoever it might be she had expected, that I was not the person. Her movement was so sudden, that I shrank back in terror, fearing once more I could not tell what. She was a very tall, slight woman, with a cloak tightly wrapped about her. In the confusion of the moment I could remark nothing more.

“Are you ill?” I said, faltering. “My

good woman, I—I don't want to harm you ; I heard you moaning, and I—thought you were ill——”

She seized me by the arm, making my very teeth chatter. The grasp was bony and hard like the hand of a skeleton.

“Are you from that house? Are you from him?” she cried, pointing behind her with her other hand. “Bid him come out to me himself; bid him come out and go down on his knees before I'll give in to enter his door. Oh! I've not come here for nought—I've not come here for nought! I've come with all my wrongs that he's done me. Tell him to come out himself; it is his part.”

Her voice grew hoarse with the passion that was in it, and yet it was a voice that had been sweet.

I put up my hand, pleading with her, trying to get a hearing, but she held me fast by the arm.

“I have not come from that house,” I said.

“ You frighten me. I—I live close by. I was passing and heard you moan. Is there anything the matter? Can I be—of any use?”

I said this very doubtfully, for I was afraid of the strange figure, and the passionate speech.

Then she let go her hold all at once. She looked at me and then all round. There was not another creature visible except, behind me, I suppose, the open door and lights of the “ Barleymow.” She might have done almost what she would to me had she been disposed;—at least, at the moment that was how I felt.

“ You live close by?” she said, putting her hand upon her heart, which was panting and heaving with her passion.

“ Yes. Are you—staying in the neighbourhood? Have you—lost your way?”

I said this in my bewilderment, not knowing what the words were which came from my lips. Then the poor creature leaned back upon the wall and gasped and

sobbed. I could not make out at first whether it was emotion or want of breath.

“Yes, I’ve lost my way,” she said; “not here, but in life; I’ve lost my way in life, and I’ll never find it again. Oh! I’m ill—I’m very ill. If you are a good Christian, as you seem, take me in somewhere and let me lie down till the spasm’s past; I feel it coming on now.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She put her hand upon her heart and panted and gasped for breath. Poor wretch! At that moment I heard behind me the locking of the door at the “Barley-mow.” I know I ought to have called out to them to wait, but I had not my wits about me as one ought to have.

“Have you no home?” I asked; “nowhere to go to? You must live somewhere. I will go with you and take you home.”

“Home!” she cried. “It is here or in the churchyard, nowhere else—here or in the churchyard. Take me to one or the

other, good woman, for Christ's sake: I don't care which—to my husband's house or to the churchyard—for Christ's sake."

For Christ's sake! You may blame me, but what could I do? Could any of you refuse if you were asked in that name? You may say any one can use such words—any vagabond, any wretch—and, of course, it is true; but could you resist the plea—you who are neither a wretch nor a vagabond?—I know you could not, any more than me.

"Lean upon me," I said; "take my arm; try if you can walk. Oh! I don't know who you are or what you are, but when you ask for Christ's sake, you know, He sees into your heart. If you have any place that I can take you to, tell me; you must know it is difficult to take a stranger into one's house like this. Tell me if you have not some room—some place where you can be taken care of; I will give you what you want all the same."

We were going on all this time, walking slowly towards my house; she was gasping, holding one hand to her heart and with the other leaning heavily on me. When I made this appeal to her she stopped and turned half round, waving her hand towards the house we were leaving behind us.

“If that is Mr. Reinhardt’s house,” she said, “take me there if you will. I am—his wife. He’ll leave me to die—on the doorstep—most likely; and be glad. I haven’t strength—to—say any more.”

“His wife!” I cried in my dismay.

“Lord have mercy upon us!” cried the panting creature. “Ay! that’s the truth.”

What could I do? She was scarcely able to totter along, panting and breathless. It was her heart. Poor soul! how could any one tell what she might have had to suffer? I took her, though with trembling—what could I do else?—to my own house.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER IV.

I CANNOT attempt to describe what my feelings were when I went into my own house with that strange woman. Though it was a very short way, we took a long time to get there. She had disease of the heart evidently, and one of the paroxysms had come on.

“I shall be better by and by,” she said to me, gasping as she leaned on my arm.

My mind was in such a confusion that I did not know what I was doing. She might be only a tramp, a thief, a vagabond. As for what she had said of being Mr. Reinhardt's wife—my head swam, I could neither understand nor explain to myself

how this had come about. But, whether she was good or bad, I could not help myself; I was committed to it. Every house on the green was closed and silent. The shutters were all put up at the "Barleymow," and silence reigned. No, thank heaven! in the Admiral's window there were still lights, so that if anything happened I could call him to my aid. He was my nearest neighbour, and the sight of his lighted window gave me confidence.

My maid gave a little shriek when she opened the door, and this too roused me. I said, "Mary, this—lady is ill; she will lie down on the sofa in the drawing-room while we get ready the west room. You will not mind the trouble, I am sure, when you see how ill she is."

This I said to smooth matters, for it is not to be supposed that Mary, who was already yawning at my late return, should be quite pleased at being sent off to make up a bed and prepare a room unexpectedly

as it were in the middle of the night. And I was glad also to send her away, for I saw her give a wondering look at the poor creature's clothes, which were dusty and soiled. She had been sitting on the dusty earth by Mr. Reinhardt's cottage, and it was not wonderful if her clothes showed marks of it. I made her lie down on the sofa, and got her some wine. Poor forlorn creature! The rest seemed to be life however to her. She sank back upon the soft cushions, and her heavy breathing softened almost immediately. I left her there (though, I confess, not without a slight sensation of fear), and went to the west room to help Mary. It was a room we seldom used, at the end of a long passage, and therefore the one best fitted to put a stranger, about whom I knew nothing, in. Mary did not say anything, but I could feel that she disapproved of me in every pat she gave to the fresh sheets and pillows. And I was concilia-

tory, as one so often is to one's servants. I drew a little picture of how I had found the "poor lady" panting for breath and unable to walk—of how weak and how thin she was—and what a terrible thing to have heart-disease, which came on with any exertion—and how anxious her friends must be.

All this Mary listened to in grim silence, patting now and then the bedclothes with her hand, as if making a protest against all I said. At length, when I had exhausted my eloquence, and began to grow a little angry, Mary cleared her throat and replied,

"Please, ma'am, I know it ain't my place to speak——"

"Oh! you can say what you please, Mary, so long as it is not unkind to your neighbours," said I.

"I never set eyes on the—lady—before, so she can't be a neighbour of mine," said Mary; "but she's been seen about the

green days and days. I've seen her myself a-haunting East Cottage, where that poor gentleman lives."

"You said this moment that you never set eyes on her before."

"Not to know her, ma'am," said Mary; "it's different. I saw her to-day walking up and down like a ghost, and I wouldn't have given sixpence for all she had on her. It ain't my place to speak, but one as you don't know, and as may have a gang ready to murder us all in our beds—— Mother was in service in London when she was young, and oh! to hear the tales she knows. Pretending to be ill is the commonest trick of all, mother says, and then they get took in, and then, when all's still——"

"It is very kind of you, I am sure, to instruct me by your mother's experiences," said I, feeling very angry. "Now you can go to bed if you please, and lock your door, and then you will be safe. I shall not want you any more to-night."

“Oh! but please, ma'am, I don't want to leave you by yourself—please, I don't!” cried Mary, with the ready tears coming to her eyes.

However I sent her away. I was angry, and perhaps unreasonable, as people generally are when they are angry; though, when Mary went to bed, I confess it was not altogether with an easy mind that I found myself alone with the stranger in the silent house. It is always a comfort to know that there is some one within reach. I went back softly to the drawing-room: she was still lying on the sofa, quite motionless and quiet, no longer panting as she had done. When I looked at her closely I saw that she had dropped asleep. The light of the lamp was full on her face, and yet she had dropped asleep, being, as I suppose, completely worn out. I saw her face then for the first time, and it startled me. It was not a face which you could describe by any of the lighter words of admiration as

pretty or handsome. It was simply the most beautiful face I ever saw in my life. It was pale and worn, and looked almost like death lying back in that attitude of utter weakness on the velvet cushions; and, though the eyes were closed, and the effect of them lost, it was impossible to believe that the loveliest eyes in the world could have made her more beautiful. She had dark hair, wavy and slightly curling upon the forehead; her eyelashes were very long and dark, and curled upwards; her features, I think, must have been perfect; and the look of pain had gone from her face; she was as serene as if she had been dead.

I was very much startled by this: so much so that for the moment I sank down upon a chair, overcome by confusion and surprise, and did not even shade the lamp, as I had intended to do. You may wonder that I should be so much surprised, but then you must remember that great beauty is

not common anywhere, and that to pick it out of the ditch as it were, and find it thus in the person of one who might be a mere vagabond and vagrant for aught you could tell, was very strange and startling. It took away my breath; and then, the figure which belonged to this face formed so strange a contrast with it. I know, as everybody else does, that beauty is but skin-deep; that it is no sign of excellence, or of mental or moral superiority in any way; that it is accidental and independent of the character of its possessor as money is, or anything else you are born to: I know all this perfectly well; and yet I feel, as I suppose everybody else does, that great beauty is out of place in squalid surroundings. When I saw the worn and dusty dress, the cloak tightly drawn across her breast, the worn shoes that peeped out from below her skirt, I felt ashamed. It was absurd, but such was my feeling; I felt ashamed of my good gown and lace, and

fresh ribbons. To think that I, and hundreds like me, should deck ourselves, and leave this creature in her dusty gown! My suspicions went out of my mind in a moment. Instead of the uneasy doubt whether perhaps she might have accomplices (it made me blush to think I had dreamt of such a thing) waiting outside, I began to feel indignant with everybody that she could be in such a plight. Reinhardt's wife! How did he dare, that mean, insignificant man, to marry such a creature, and to be cruel to her after he had married her! I started up and removed the lamp, shading her face, and I took my shawl, which was my best shawl, an Indian one, and really handsome, and covered her with it. I did it—I can't tell why—with a feeling that I was making her a little compensation. Then I opened one of the windows to let in the air, for the night was sultry; and then I put myself into my favourite chair, and leant back my head, and made myself as comfortable as

I could to watch her till she woke. I should have thought this a great hardship a little while before, but I did not think it a hardship now. I had become her partisan, her protector, her servant, in a moment, and all for no reason except the form of her features, the look of that sleeping face. I acknowledge that it was absurd, but still I know you would have done the same had you been in my place. I suspected her no more, had no doubts in my mind, and was not the least annoyed that Mary had gone to bed. It seemed to me as if her beauty established an immediate relationship between us, somehow, and made it natural that I, or any one else who might happen to be in the way, should give up our own convenience for her. It was her beauty that did it, nothing else, not her great want and solitude, not even the name by which she had adjured me ;—her beauty, nothing more. I do not defend myself for having fallen prostrate before this primitive power ;

I could not help it, but I don't attempt to excuse myself.

I must have dozed in my chair, for I woke suddenly, dreaming that some one was standing over me and staring at me—a kind of nightmare. I started with a little cry, and for the first moment I was bewildered, and could not think how I had got there. Then all at once I saw her, and the mystery was solved. She had woke too, and lay on her side on the sofa, looking intently at me with a gaze which renewed my first impression of terror. She had not moved, she lay in the same attitude of exhaustion and grateful repose, with her head thrown back upon the cushions. There was only this difference—that whereas she had then been unconscious in sleep, she was now awake, and so vividly, intensely conscious that her look seemed an active influence. I felt that she was doing something to me by gazing at me so. She had woke me no doubt by that look.

She made me restless now, so that I could not keep still. I rose up, and made a step or two towards her.

“Are you better? I hope you are better,” I said.

Still she did not move, but said calmly, without any attempt at explanation: “Are you watching me from kindness or because you were afraid I should do some harm?”

She was not grateful: the sight of me woke no kindly feeling in her: and I was wounded in spite of myself.

“Neither,” said I; “you fell asleep, and I preferred staying here to waking you; but it is almost morning and the oil is nearly burnt out in the lamp. There is a room ready for you; will you come with me now?”

“I am very comfortable,” she said; “I have not been so comfortable for a very long time. I have not been well off. I have had to lie on hard beds and eat poor

fare, whilst all the time those who had a right to take care of me——”

“Don't think of that now,” I said. “You will feel better if you are undressed. Come now and go to bed.”

She kept her position, without taking any notice of what I said.

“I have a long story to tell you—a long story,” she went on. “When you hear it you will change your mind about some things. Oh, how pleasant it is to be in a nice handsome *lady's* room again! How pleasant a carpet is, and pictures on the walls! I have not been used to them for a long time. I suppose he has every kind of thing, everything that is pleasant; and, if he could, he would have liked to see me die at his door. That is what he wants. It would be a pleasure to him to look out some morning and see me lying like a piece of rubbish under the wall. He would have me thrown upon the dust-heap, I believe, or taken off by the scavengers as

rubbish. Yes, that is what he would like, if he could."

"Oh, don't think so," I cried. "He cannot be so cruel. He has not a cruel face."

Upon this she sat up, with the passion rising in her eyes.

"How can you tell?—you were never married to him!" she said. "He never cast you off, never abandoned you, never ——" Her excitement grew so great that she now rose up on her feet, and clenched her hand and shook it as if at some one in the distance. "Oh, no!" she cried; "no one knows him but me!"

"Oh, if you would go to bed!" I said. "Indeed I must insist: you will tell me your story in the morning. Come, you must not talk any more to-night."

I did not get her disposed of so easily as this, but after a while she did allow herself to be persuaded. My mind had changed about her again, but I was too

tired now to be frightened. I put her into the west room. And oh! how glad I was to lie down in my bed, though I had a stranger in the house whom I knew nothing of, and though it only wanted about an hour of day!

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN I got up, about two hours after, I was in a very uncomfortable state of mind, not knowing in the least what I ought to do. Daylight is a great matter to be sure, and consoles one in one's perplexity; but yet daylight means the visits of one's friends, and inquiries into all that one has done and means to do. I could not have such an inmate in my house without people knowing it. I was thrusting myself as it were into a family quarrel which I knew nothing of—I, one of the most peaceable people—!

When I went down stairs the drawing-room was still as I had left it, and the

sofa and its cushions were all marked with dust where my poor visitor had lain down. I believe, though Mary is a good girl on the whole, that there was a little spite in all this to show me my own enormity. A decanter of wine was left on the table too, with the glass which had been used last night. It gave the most miserable, squalid look to the room, or at least I thought so. Then Mary appeared with her broom and dust-pan, severely disapproving, and I was swept away, like the dust, and took refuge in the garden, which was hazy and dewy, and rather cold on this October morning. The trees were all changing colour, the mignonette stalks were long and straggling, there was nothing in the beds but asters and dahlias and some other autumn flowers. And the monthly rose on the porch looked pale, as if it felt the coming frost. I went to the gate and looked out upon the green with a pang of discomfort. What would everybody think ?

There were not many people about except the tradespeople going for orders and the servants at their work. East Cottage looked more human than usual in the hazy autumn morning sun. The windows were all open, and White was sweeping the fallen leaves carefully away from the door. I even saw Mr. Reinhardt in his dressing-gown come out to speak to him. My heart beat wildly and I drew back at the sight. As if Mr. Reinhardt was anything to me! But I was restless and uncomfortable and could not compose myself. When I went in I could not sit down and breakfast by myself as I usually did. I wanted to see how my lodger was, and yet I did not want to disturb her. At last I went to the door of the west room and listened. When I heard signs of movement inside I knocked and went in. She was still in bed; she was lying half smothered up in the fine linen and downy pillows. On the bed there was an eiderdown coverlet covered with crimson silk, and she had

stretched out her arm over it and was grasping it with her hand. She greeted me with a smile which lighted up her beautiful face like sunshine.

“Oh, yes, I am better—I am quite well,” she said. “I am so happy to be here.”

She did not put out her hand, or offer any thanks or salutations, and it seemed to me that this was good taste. I was pleased with her for not being too grateful or affectionate. I believe if she had been very grateful and affectionate I should have thought that was best. For again the charm came over me—a charm doubled by her smile. How beautiful she was! The warm nest she was lying in, and the pleasure and comfort she evidently felt in being there, had brought a little colour to her cheeks—just a very little—but that became her beauty best. She was younger than I thought. I had supposed her to be over thirty last night, now she looked

five or six-and-twenty, in the very height and fulness of her bloom.

“Shall I send you some breakfast?” I said.

“Oh, please! I suppose you don’t know how nice it is to lie in a soft bed like this, to feel the nice linen and the silk, and to be waited upon? You have always been just so, and never known the difference? Ah! what a difference it is.”

“I have been very poor in my time,” said I.

“Have you? I should not have thought it. But never so poor as me. Let me have my breakfast please—tea with cream in it. May I have some cream? and—anything—whatever you please; for I am hungry; but tea with cream.”

“Surely,” I said; “it is being prepared for you now.”

And then I stood looking at her, wondering. I knew nothing of her, not even her name, and yet I stood in the most familiar

relation to her, like a mother to a child. Her smile quite warmed and brightened me, as she lay there in such childish enjoyment. How strange it was. And it seemed to me that everything had gone out of her mind except the delightful novelty of her surroundings. She forgot that she was a stranger in a strange house, and all the suspicious, unpleasant circumstances. When Mary came in with the tray she positively laughed with pleasure, and jumped up in bed, raising herself as lightly as a child.

“You must have a shawl to put round your shoulders,” I said.

“Oh, let me have the beautiful one you put over me last night. What a beauty it was! Let me have that,” she cried.

Mary gave me a warning look. But I was indignant with Mary. I went and fetched it almost with tears in my eyes. Poor soul! poor child! like a baby admiring it because it was pretty. I put it

round her, though it was my best ; and with my cashmere about her shoulders, and her beautiful face all lighted up with pleasure, she was like a picture. I am sure the Sleeping Beauty could not have been more lovely when she started from her hundred years' sleep.

I went back to the dining-room and took my own breakfast quite exhilarated. My perplexities floated away. I too felt like a child with a new toy. If I had but had a daughter like that, I said to myself—what a sweet companion, what a delight in one's life ! But then daughters will marry ; and to think of such a one, bound to a cruel husband, who quarrelled with her, deserted her—Oh, what cruel stuff men are made of ! What pretext could he have for conduct so monstrous ? She was as sweet as a flower, and more beautiful than any woman I ever saw ; and to leave her sitting in the dust at his closed door ! I could scarcely keep still ; my indignation

was so great. The bloodless wretch ! without ruth, or heart, or even common charity. One has heard such tales of men wrapt up in some cold intellectual pursuit ; how they get to forget everything, and despise love and duty, and all that is worth living for, for their miserable science. They would rather be fellows of a learned society than heads of happy houses ; rather make some foolish discovery to be written down in the papers, than live a good life and look after their own. I have even known cases—certainly nothing so bad as this—but cases in which a man for his art, or his learning, or something, has driven his wife into miserable solitude, or still more miserable society. Yes, I have known such cases : and the curious thing is, that it is always the weak men, whose researches can be of use to no mortal being, who neglect everything for science. The great men are great enough to be men and philosophers too. All this I said in my heart with a

contempt for our scientific gentleman which I did not disguise to myself. I finished my breakfast quickly, longing to go back to my guest, when all at once Martha and Nelly, the Admiral's daughters, came running in, as they had a way of doing. They were great favourites of mine, or, at least, Nelly was—but I was annoyed more than I could tell to see them now.

“We came in to ask if you were quite well,” said Nelly. “Papa frightened us all with the strangest story. He insists that you came home quite late, leaning on Mary's arm, and was sure you must have been ill. You can't think how positive he is, and what a story he made out. He saw you from his window coming along the road, so he says; and now I look at you, Mrs. Mulgrave, you are a little pale.”

“It was not I, you can tell the Admiral,” I said. “I wonder his sharp eyes were deceived. It was a—friend—I have staying with me.”

“A friend you have staying with you? Fancy, Nelly! and we not to know.”

“She came quite late—yesterday,” said I. “She is in—very poor health. She has come to be—quiet. Poor thing, I had to give her my arm.”

“But I thought you were at the Stokes’ last night?” said Martha.

“So I was; but when I came back it was such a lovely night; you should have been out, Nelly, you who are so fond of moonlight. I never saw the green look more beautiful. I could hardly make up my mind to come in.”

Dear, dear, dear! I wonder if all our fibs are really kept an account of? As I went on romancing I felt a little shiver run over me. But what could I do?

Nelly gave me a look. She was wiser than her sister, who took everything in a matter-of-fact way. She gave me a kiss, and said, “We had better go and satisfy papa. He was quite anxious.”

Nelly knew me best, and she did not believe me. But what story could I make up to Lady Denzil, for instance, whose eyes went through and through me, and saw everything I thought?

Then I went back to my charge. She had finished her breakfast, but she would not part with the shawl. She was sitting up in bed, stroking and patting it with her hand.

"It is so lovely," she said, "I can't give it up just yet. I like myself so much better when I have it on. Oh! I should be so much more proud of myself than I am if I lived like this. I should feel as if I were so much better. And don't ask me, please! I can't—I can't get up to put myself in those dusty hideous clothes."

"They are not dusty now," I said, and a faint little sense of difficulty crossed my mind. She was taking everything for granted, as if she belonged to me, and had come on a visit. I think if I had offered to

give her my Indian cashmere and all the best things I had she would not have been surprised.

She made no answer to this. She continued patting and caressing the shawl, laying down her beautiful cheek on her shoulder for the pleasure of feeling it. It was very senseless, very foolish, and yet it was such pretty play that I was more pleased than vexed. I sat down by her, watching her movements. They were so graceful always—nothing harsh, or rough, or unpleasant to the eye, and all so natural—like the movements of a child.

I don't know how long I sat and watched her—almost as pleased as she was. It was only when time went on, and when I knew I was liable to interruption, that I roused myself up. I tried to lead her into serious conversation. “You look a great deal better,” I said, “than I could have hoped to see you last night.”

“Better than last night? Indeed, I

should think so. Please, don't speak of it. Last night was darkness, and this is light."

"Yes, but——I fear I must speak of it. I should like to know how you got there, and if some one perhaps ought to be written to——some one who may be anxious about you."

"Nobody is anxious about me."

"Indeed I am sure you must be mistaken," I said. "I am sure you have friends, and then——I don't want to trouble you, but you must remember I don't know your name."

She threw back the shawl off her shoulders all at once, and sat up erect.

"My name is Mrs. Reinhardt : I told you," she said, "and I hope you don't doubt my word."

It was impossible to look in her face, and say to her, "I don't know anything about you. How can I tell whether your word is to be trusted or not?" This was true, but I could not say it.

I faltered, "You were ill last night, and we were both excited and confused. I wish very much you would tell me now once again. I think you said you would."

"Oh, I suppose I did," she said, throwing the shawl away, and nestling down once more among the pillows. A look of irritation came over her face. "It is so tiresome," she said, "always having to explain. I felt so comfortable just now, as if I had got over that."

There was an aggrieved tone in her voice, and she looked as if, out of her temporary pleasure and comfort, she had been brought back to painful reality in an unkind and uncalled-for way. I felt guilty before her. Her face said plainly, "I was at ease, and all for your satisfaction, for no reason at all, you have driven me back again into trouble." I cannot describe how uncomfortable I felt.

"If I am to be of any use to you," I said apologetically, "you must see that I ought

to know. It is not that I wish to disturb you."

"Everybody says that," she murmured, with an angry pull at the bedclothes; and then, all at once, in a moment, she brightened up, and met my look with a smile. My relief was immense.

"I am a cross thing," she said; "don't you think so? But it was so nice to be comfortable. I felt as if I should like to forget it all, and be happy. I felt good——But never mind; you cannot help it. I must go back to all the mud, and dirt, and misery, and tell you everything. Don't look distressed, for it is not your fault."

Every word she said seemed to convince me more and more that it *was* my fault. I could scarcely keep from begging her pardon. How cruel I had been! And yet, and yet——My head swam, what with the dim consciousness in my mind of the true state of affairs, and the sense of her view of the question, which had impressed itself so

strongly upon me since I came into the room. Which was the right view I could not tell for the moment, and bewilderment filled my mind. I could only stare at her, and wait for what she pleased to say.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

P A R T I I.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER my visitor had got over her little fit of passion I took up my shawl—my good shawl, which she had flung from her—and put it away ; and then I sat down by the bedside to hear her story. She had begun to think ; her face had changed again. Her bewildered sort of feeling (which I could not understand, but yet which seemed so natural) that she had got over all that was disagreeable, passed away, and her life came back to her, as it were. She remembered herself, and her past, which I did not know. She did not speak for some time, while I sat there waiting. She kept

twitching at the clothes, and moving about restlessly from side to side. The look of content and comfort which had filled up the thin outline of her beautiful face, and given it for the moment the roundness of youth, disappeared. At last she looked up at me almost angrily as I sat waiting.

“ Oh, you are so calm,” she said. “ You take it all so quietly. You don’t know what it is to have your heart broken, and your character destroyed, and yourself driven mad. To see you so calm makes me wild. If I am to tell you my story I must get up ; I must be my own self again ; I must put on my filthy clothes.”

“ They are not filthy now. There are some clean things, if you like to use them,” I said softly ; but I was very glad she should get up. I left her to do so with an easier mind, and had the fire made up in the dining-room that she might not be in the way of visitors. It was a long time before she came, and when she at last made her appear-

ance I found she had again wrapped herself in my Indian shawl. To tell the truth, I did not like it. I gave a slight start when I saw her, but I could not take it from her shoulders. She had put on her old black gown, which had been carefully brushed and the clean cuffs and collar I had put out for her, and had dressed her hair in a fashionable way. She was dressed as poorly as a woman could be, and yet it appeared she had all the pads and cushions, which young women were then so foolish as to wear, for her hair. She was tall, and very slight, as I had remarked last night, but my shawl about her shoulders took away the angularity from her figure, and made it dignified and noble. To find fault with such a splendid creature for borrowing a shawl! I could as soon have remonstrated with the Queen herself.

“This is not the pretty room you brought me to last night,” she said.

“No ; this is the dining-room. I thought

it would be quieter and pleasanter for you, in case any one should call."

"Ah! yes, that was very considerate for my feelings," she said, "but I am used to it, I am always thrust into a corner now. It did not use to be so before that man came and ruined me. Whereabouts is it that he lives?"

"You can see the house from the window," said I.

Then she went to the window and looked out. She shook her clenched fist at the cottage; her face grew dark like a sky covered by a thunder-cloud. She came back and seated herself in front of me wrapping herself close in my shawl.

"When I married him I was as beautiful as the day. That was what they all said," she began. "I was nineteen, and the artists used to go on their knees to me to sit to them. I might have married anybody. I don't know why it was that I took him, I must have been mad; twenty years older than

me at the least, and nothing to recommend him. Of course he was rich. Ah! and I was so young, and thought money could buy everything, and that it would last for ever. We had a house in town and a house in the country, and he gave me a lovely phaeton for the park, and we had a carriage and pair. It was very nice at first. He was always a curious man, never satisfied, but we did very well at first. He was not a man to make a woman happy, but still I got on well enough till he sent me away."

"He sent you away!"

"Yes. Oh! that was nothing; that got to be quite common. When he thought I was enjoying myself, all at once he would say, 'Pack up your things; we shall go to the country to-morrow;' always when I was enjoying myself."

"But if he went with you, that was not sending you away."

"Then it was taking me away—which is much the same—from all I cared for;

and he did not always go with me. The last two times I was sent by myself as if I had been a prisoner. And then, at last, after years and years of oppression, he turned me out of the house," she said—"turned me out! He dared to do it. Oh! only think how I hated him. He said every insult to me a man could say, and he turned me out of his house, and bade me never come back. One day I was there the mistress of all, with everything heart could desire, and the next day I was turned out, without a penny, without a home, still so pretty as I was, and at my age!"

"Oh! that was terrible," I cried, moved more by her rising passion than by her words—"that was dreadful. How could he do it? But you went to your friends—?"

"I had no friends. My people were all dead, and I did not know much about them when they were living. He separated me from everybody, and he told lies

of me—lies right and left. He had made up his mind to destroy me,” she cried, bursting into sobs. “Oh! what a devil he is! Everything I could desire one day, and the next turned out!”

Looking at her where she sat, something came into my throat which choked me and kept me from speaking: and yet I felt that I must make an effort.

“Without any—cause?” I faltered with a mixture of confusion and pain.

“Cause?”

“I mean, did not he allege something—say something? He must have given some—excuse—for himself.”

She looked at me very composedly, not angry, as I had feared.

“Cause? excuse?” she repeated. “Of course he said it was my fault.”

She kept her eyes on me when she said this; no guilty colour was on her face, no flush even of shame at the thought of having been slandered. She was a great deal

calmer than I was; indeed I was not calm at all, but disturbed beyond the power of expression, not knowing what to think.

“He is very clever,” she went on. “I am clever myself, in a kind of a way, but not a match for him. Men have education, you see. They are trained what to do; but I was so handsome that nobody thought I required any training. If I had been as clever as he is, ah! he would not have found it so easy. He drove me into a trap, and then he shut me down fast. That is four years ago. Fancy, four years without anything, wandering about, none of the comforts I was used to! I wonder how I gave in at the time: it was because he had broken my spirit. But I am different now; I have made up my mind, until he behaves to me as he ought, I will give him no peace, no grace!”

“But you must not be revengeful,” I said, knowing less and less what to say. “And

if you were not happy together before, I am afraid you would not be so now."

She did not make any answer ; a vague sort of smile flitted over her face, then she gave a little shiver as of cold, and wrapped the shawl closer. "A shawl suits me," she said, "especially since I am so thin. Do you think a woman loses as much as they say by being thin? It is my heart-disease. When it comes on it is very bad, though afterwards I feel just as well as usual. But it must tell on one's looks. Could you tell that I was thin by my face?"

"No," I said, and I did not add, though it was on my lips, "O woman, one could not tell by your face that you were not an angel or a queen. And what are you? What are you?" Alas! she was not an angel I feared.

A little while longer she sat musing in silence. How little she had told me after all. How much more she must know in that world within herself to which she had now

retired. At length she turned to me, her face lighted up with the most radiant smile. "Shall I be a great trouble to you?" she asked. "Am I taking up anybody's room?"

She spoke as a favourite friend might speak who had arrived suddenly, and did not quite know what your arrangements were, though she was confident nothing could make her coming a burden to you. She took away my breath.

"N—no," I said; and then I took courage and added: "But your friends will be expecting you—the people where you live: and you are better now——"

I could not, had my life depended on it, have said more.

"Oh, they will not mind much," she said. "I don't live anywhere in particular. When one thinks that one's own husband, the man who is bound to support one, has a home, and is close at hand, how do you think one can stay in a miserable lodging! But he does

not care : he will sit there doing his horrible problems, and what is it to him if I were to die at his door ! He would be glad. Yes, he would be glad. He would have me carted away as rubbish. He cares for nothing but his books and his experiments. I have sat at his door a whole night begging him to take me in, begging out of the cold and the snow, and his light has burnt steady, and he has gone on with his work, and then he has gone to bed and taken no notice. Oh, my God ! I should have let him in had he been a cat or a dog."

"Oh, surely, surely you must be mistaken," I cried.

"I am not mistaken. I heard the window open ; he looked down at me, and then he went away. I know he knew me : and so he did last night. He knew I was there ; and he had a fire lighted in the room where he works. So he knew it was cold, too ; and I his wife, his lawful wedded wife, sitting out in the chill. Some time or other he

thinks it will be too much for me, and I shall die, and he will be free."

"It is too dreadful to think of," said I. "I don't think he could have known that you were there."

She smiled without making any further reply. She held out her thin hands to the fire with a little nervous shiver. They would have been beautiful hands had they not been so thin, almost transparent. She wore but one ring, her wedding-ring; and that was so wide that it was secured to her finger with a silk thread. I suppose she perceived that I looked at it. She held it up to me with a smile.

"See," she said, "how worn it is. But I have never put it off my finger; never gone by another name, or done anything to forfeit my rights. Whatever he may say against me, he cannot say that."

At this moment she espied a chair in a corner which looked more comfortable than the one she was seated in, and rose and

wheeled it to the fire. She said no "By'r leave" to me, but did it as if she had been at home; there was something so natural and simple in this that I did not know how to object to it, but yet—I have had many a troublesome responsibility thrown upon me by strangers, but I was never so embarrassed or perplexed in my life. She drew the easy chair to the fire, she found a footstool and put her feet on it, basking in the warmth. She had my velvet slippers on her feet, my Indian shawl round her shoulders, and here she was settled and comfortable—for how long? I dared not even guess. A sick sort of consciousness came upon me that she had established herself and meant to stay.

After a while, during which I sat and watched, sitting bolt upright on my chair and gazing with a consternation and bewilderment which I cannot express upon her graceful attitude as she reclined back, wooing every kind of comfort, she suddenly drew her chair

a little nearer to me and put her hand upon my knee.

“Look here,” she said hurriedly, “you must see him for me. If any one could move him to do his duty it would be you. You must see him, and tell him I am—willing to go back. Perhaps he may not listen to you at first, but if you keep your temper and persevere——”

“I?” said I, dismayed.

“Yes, indeed, who else? only you could do it. And if you are patient with him and keep your temper—the great thing with him is to keep your temper—I never could do it, but you could. It would not be difficult to you. You have not got that sort of a nature, one can see it in your face.”

“But you mistake me, I—I could not take it upon myself,” I gasped.

“Not when I ask you? You might feel you were not equal to it, I allow. But when I ask you? Oh, yes, you can do it. It is not so very hard, only to keep your temper,

and to take no denial—no denial! Make him say he will not be so unkind any more. Oh, how tired it makes me even to think of it!” she cried, suddenly putting up her hands to her face. “Please don’t ask me any more, but do it—do it! I know you can.”

And then she sat and rocked herself gently with her hands clasped over her face. This explanation had been too much for her, and somehow I felt that I was blamable, that it was my fault. I sat by her in a kind of dream, wondering what had happened to me. Was I under a spell? I did not seem able to move a step or raise a hand to throw off this burden from me. And the curious thing was that she never thanked me, never expressed, nor apparently felt, any sort of gratitude to me, but simply signified her will, and took my acquiescence as a right.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER VII.

I CANNOT tell how I got through that day: she got through it very comfortably, I think. In the evening she asked me to go into the pretty room she had been in last night.

“ I am so fond of what is pretty,” she said ; “ I like everything that is nice and pleasant. I never would sit in any but the best rooms in the house if I had a house like this.”

“ But—some one might come in,” I said. “ To be sure the time for callers is over, but still my neighbours are very intimate with me, and some one might come in.”

“ Well ? ” she said, looking up in my face.

“If they do, I don't mind. You may have objections perhaps but I have none. I don't mind.”

“Oh! if you don't mind,” I said in my consternation; and I took up the cushion she had placed in her chair, and carried it humbly for her, while she made her way to the drawing-room.

I think I was scarcely in possession of my senses. I was dazed. The whole position was so extraordinary. I was ashamed to think of any one coming in and finding her there: not because I was ashamed of *her*, but for my own sake. What was I to say to anybody? How was I to explain myself? I had taken her in without knowing anything of her, and she had taken possession of my house. Fortunately, no one came that night. She placed herself on the sofa, where she had lain in her wretchedness the night before. She stretched herself out upon it, lying back with an air of absolute enjoyment. She had got a book—a novel—

which she was reading, not taking very much notice of me ; but now and then she would pause to say a word. I think had any one seen us seated together that evening, without knowing anything of the circumstances, he would have decided that she was the lady of the house and I her humble and rather stupid companion. But I was more than rather stupid—I felt like a fool ; and that in nothing more than this—that I could not for my life tell what to do.

“ Nobody is coming to night, I suppose ? ” she said at last, putting down her book.

“ No, I suppose not.”

“ I thought from what you said you had always some one coming ; and I like seeing people ; I should like of all things to see some of the people here. Do you think if they saw me it would make any difference——? Oh, I can't tell you exactly what I mean. I mean—but it is so very unpleasant to be always obliged to explain ; ” and then she yawned : and then she said : “ I am so tired ; I think

I shall go to bed. Hush! was not that some one at the door?"

"It is my next neighbour going home," I said.

"Does Reinhardt know the people about here?"

"He has not gone into society at all; but many of them know him to speak to," said I.

"Ah! that is always the way; you hide me out of sight, and you send word to your people not to come; but everybody is quite ready to make friends with him. Oh! I am so tired—I am tired of everything; life is so dull, so monotonous, always the same thing over, no pleasure, no amusement."

"I live a very dull, quiet life," I said, as firmly as I could; "I cannot expect it to suit you; and perhaps to-morrow you will be able to make arrangements to go to your own home."

"Ah!" she said, giving a curious little cry. She looked at me, catching her breath;

and then she cried, "My own home!—my own home! That is at the cottage yonder; you will open the door for me, and take me back there——"

"But how can I? Be reasonable," I said. "I scarcely know—your husband; I don't know—you; how can I mediate between you? I don't know anything of the circumstances. There must have been some cause for all this. Indeed it will be a great deal better to go home and get some one to interfere who knows all."

"Don't you believe in feelings?" she said suddenly. "I do. The first time I saw Reinhardt I had the feeling I ought not to have anything to do with him, and I neglected it. When I saw you, it went through and through me like an arrow: 'This is the person to do it.' And I always trust my feelings. I am sure that you can do it, and no one else."

"Indeed—indeed you are mistaken."

"Oh! I am so tired," she cried again.

“Let me go to bed. I can’t argue to-night ; I am so dreadfully tired.”

This was her way of getting over a difficulty, and what could I do? I could not stop her from going to bed ; I could not turn her out of my house. I went to the door of the west room with her, more embarrassed and uncomfortable than could be described. She turned round and waved her hand to me as she shut the door. The light of the candle which she held shone upon her pale, beautiful face. She had my shawl still round her. I, too, had a candle in my hand, and as I strayed back through the long passage I am sure I looked like a ghost. Bewilderment was in my soul. Had I taken a burden on my shoulders for life? Was I never to be free again? Never alone as I used to be? It had only lasted one day ; but there seemed no reason why it should ever come to an end.

Then I went back and sat over the fire in the drawing-room, till it died away into white

ashes, trying to decide what I should do. To consult somebody was of course my first thought ; but whom could I consult ? There was not one creature on the green who would not blame me, who would not be shocked at my foolishness. I did not dare even to confess it to Lady Denzil. I must keep her concealed till I could persuade her to go away. And to think she should have been disappointed that nobody came ! Good heavens ! if anybody did come and see her, what should I do ? Looming up before my imagination, in spite of all my resistance to it, came a picture of a possible interview with Mr. Reinhardt. It drove me half wild with fear to think of such a thing, and yet I felt as one sometimes does, that out of mere terror I should be driven to do it, if I could not persuade her to go away. That was my only hope, and I felt already what a forlorn hope it was.

And thus another day passed, and another

night. She was quite well-behaved, and sometimes her beauty overwhelmed me so that I felt I could do anything for her ; and sometimes her strange calmness and matter-of-course way of taking everything filled me with irritation. She never looked or spoke as if she were obliged to me, neither did she ever imply, by anything she said or did, that she meant to go away. She would stand for a long time by the window, gazing at the East Cottage ; she even stepped out into the garden through the drawing-room window, and went and stood at the gate, looking out, though I called her back, and trembled lest she should be seen (and, of course, she was seen) ; but the answer she gave me when I objected put a stop to the controversy.

“ You are afraid to let people see me,” she said ; “ but I don’t mind. There is nothing to be ashamed of in looking at Reinhardt’s house. If any one calls, it is quite the same to me. Indeed I would rather

be seen than otherwise. I think it is right that people should see me."

To this I made no answer, for my heart was growing faint. And then she turned, and seized my arm—it was in the garden.

"Oh!" she said, "listen to me. When are you going to see him? Are you going to-day?"

As she spoke the sound of footsteps quite close to us made me start. I had my back to the gate, and she was standing close to the verandah, so that she saw who was coming though I could not. She dropped my arm instantly; she subdued her voice; she put on a smile; and then she half-turned, and began to gather some rosebuds from the great monthly rose, with the air of one who is waiting to be called forward.

"Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave! we have found you at last," said a voice in my ear, and, turning round, I saw the Stokes—Lottie and Lucy, and their brother Everard, a short way behind, following them on to the lawn.

“At last?” I said.

“Yes, and I think we have a very good right to complain. Why, you have shut yourself up for two whole days. The green is in a commotion about it,” said Lottie, as she kissed me; and she threw a quick glance at the stranger, whom she did not know, and asked me, “Who is that?” with her eyes.

“And somebody said you had visitors, but we would not believe it,” Lucy began, open-mouthed.

“And so she has—one visitor, at least,” said my guest, turning round, with her hand full of roses. Then she stopped short, and a look, which was half alarm, crept over her face. Everard Stoke was coming up behind.

“How do you do, Mrs. Mulgrave?” he said in his languid way. “It is not my fault if I came in unceremoniously. It’s the girls who are to blame.”

“There is no one to blame,” said I, turning round, and holding out my hand to him.

But even in the moment of my turning round a change had come over him. He gave a slight start, and he looked straight over my shoulder at my companion. I said to myself that perhaps they knew each other, and forgave him his rudeness. But the next moment he went on hastily, "We must not stay now. Lottie, I have just remembered something I promised to do for my mother. I have just thought of it. Mrs. Mulgrave will excuse me. Come away quick, please."

"Why, we have but just arrived!" said Lucy, full of a girl's resistance.

"Come!" her brother said; and before I could speak he had swept them away again, leaving me in greater consternation than ever. My companion had turned back, and was busy again among the roses, gathering them. I had not even her to respond to my look of wonder. What was the meaning of it? Could they have known each other, Everard and she?

"Your friends are gone very soon," she

said without turning to me; "it is rather strange; but I suppose they are strange people. Oh! how sweet these roses are—I never thought such pale roses could be so sweet."

I made her no answer, and, what was strangest of all, she did not seem to expect it, for immediately after she went back into the drawing-room, and the next minute I heard her voice singing as if on the way to her own room. The more I thought of it the more strange it seemed.

That night she began to question me about my neighbours on the green, and somehow managed to bring the conversation to the people who had called.

"I thought I knew the man's face; I must have met him out," she said, looking at me steadily.

Everard Stoke did not bear a good character on the green. To have known him was no recommendation to any one; and this encounter did not increase my happiness.

But after that first evening it did not disturb her. Next day went on like the previous one. I told the servants not to admit any visitors, and I felt as if I must be going mad. I could think only of one subject, my imagination could bring forward but one picture before me, and that was of a meeting with Mr. Reinhardt, which I kept going over in my mind. I said to myself "I could not do it—I could not do it," with an angry vehemence, and yet I seemed to see just how he would look, and to hear what we were to say. It seemed to be the only outlet out of this impossible position in which I stood.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER VIII.

“LADY DENZIL says she must see you, please, ma'am,” said Mary at my room door.

It had lasted for a week and I was downright ill. She would not go away ; when I represented to her that I could not go on keeping her, that she must go to her own home, wherever that was, she either moaned that she had no home, or that I must open a way for her back to her husband. She was quite unmoved by my attempts to dislodge her. I told her I had people coming, and she assured me she did not mind, that there was plenty of room in the house, and that, if I wished it, she would change into a smaller chamber. This drove me almost

out of my senses, I could not turn her out by force. I dared not face the criticisms of my neighbours: I shut myself up. I got a headache which never left me, and the result was, that I was quite ill. I had been lying down in my own room to try to get a little quiet and respite from the pain in my head; and I was impatient in my trouble, and felt disposed to turn my back on all the world.

I cannot see her," I said impatiently. "I am not well enough to see any one."

"Please, ma'am, is that what I am to say?" asked Mary.

Then I recollected myself. Lady Denzil was my close friend and counsellor. I had been admitted into the secret places of her life, and she knew me in every aspect of mine. I would not send such a reply to my old friend. I rose from my sofa and went stumbling to the door, feeling more miserable than I can say. "Tell her I have a very bad headache, Mary. I will try to see her

to-morrow. Give her my love, and say that I could not talk to-day, nor explain anything. If she will please leave it till to-morrow!—”

“Please, ma’am,” said Mary earnestly, “I think it would be a deal better if you could make up your mind to see my lady to-day.”

“I cannot do it—I cannot do it!” I said. “If you but knew how my head aches! Give her my dear love, but I must keep quiet. If you tell her that, she will understand.”

“If you won’t give no other answer, ma’am—” said Mary disapprovingly; and I had lost my wits so completely that I actually locked the door when she went down stairs, in case some one should force the way. I went back to my sofa and lay down again. I had closed the shutters, I don’t know why—not that the light hurt me, but because I did not feel able to bear anything. I never lost my head in the same way before. I

was irritable to such a degree that I could not bear any one to speak to me—this was, I suppose, because I felt that nobody would approve of me, and was ashamed of myself and my weakness. While I lay thus, *she* began to sing down stairs; she had a pretty voice; there was a quaver in it, which was in reality a defect, but did not appear so when she sang. Her voice, I felt sure, could be heard half over the green, and Lady Denzil would be sure to hear it, and what would they think of me? They would think she was a relation, somebody belonging to me, whom I had a motive for hiding. No one would believe that she was a mere stranger whom I knew nothing of.

I kept as much away from her as I could during the day, and in the evening, when I came down stairs, I managed to steal out by myself for a walk. I thought the fresh air would do me good, and, as all the people were at dinner, I was not likely to meet any one. When I felt

myself outside and free, I stood still for a moment, and in my weakness three or four different impulses came upon me. In the first place I had a temptation to run away. It seems absurd to write it, but my feeling of nervous irritation was so great that I actually entertained for a moment the idea of abandoning my own house because this strange woman had taken possession of it. And then I thought of rushing to Lady Denzil, whom I had not long before sent away from my door, and entreating her to come and save me. When I had made but a few steps from my own gate a nervous terror made me pause again, and, turning round suddenly, I almost ran against some one coming in the opposite direction. I made a half-conscious clutch at him when I saw who it was, and then tried to hurry past in the fluctuations of my despair. But he stopped, struck, I suppose, by the strangeness of my looks.

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked.

“Oh, yes—everything!” I gasped forth, not knowing what I said.

“I! That is strange—that is very strange! but if it should be so!—Will you lean upon my arm, Mrs. Mulgrave? you are very much agitated.”

“Yes,” I said, “I am very much agitated, but I will not lean upon you, for perhaps you will think I am your enemy—though I don’t mean to be anybody’s enemy, heaven knows.”

“Ah!” he said. This little cry came from him unawares, and he fell back a step, and his face, which was like ivory, took a yellower pale tint. I do not mean that I observed this in my agitation at the moment, but I felt it. His countenance changed. He already divined what it was.

“I am very sure of that—that you mean only to be kind to all the world,” he said. He had a slight foreign accent, a roll of the *r* which is not in an English voice, and he spoke very deliberately, like one to

whom English was an acquired language. I think this struck me now for the first time.

Then we paused and looked at each other—he on his guard; I, trembling in every limb trying to remember what I had said in my imaginary interviews with him, and feeling as if my very mind had gone. I made a despairing attempt to collect myself, to state her case in the best possible way, but I might as well have tried any impossible feat of athletics. I could not do it.

“There is a lady,” I faltered, “in my house.”

A kind of smile crossed his face at the first words. He gave a nod as if to say, “I know it;” but again a change came over him when I finished my sentence.

“In your house!”

“Yes, in my house,” I went on, finding myself at last wound up to speech. “I found her on Friday last at your door—seated in the dust, almost dying.”

Here he stopped, making an incredulous

movement—a shrug of the shoulders, an elevation of the eyebrows.

“It is true,” I said : “she has heart-disease : she could scarcely walk the little distance to my house. Had you seen her, as I did, panting, gasping for very breath——”

“I should have thought it a fiction,” he said, bitterly, “and I know her best.”

“It was no fiction. Oh, you may have had your wrongs. I say nothing to the contrary,” I cried ; “for anything I can tell, you may have been deeply wronged ; but she is so beautiful, and so young, and loves pleasure and luxury so——”

I think he heard only the half of what I said, and that struck him like an unexpected arrow. He turned from me and walked a few steps away, and then came back again. “So beautiful and so young,” he cried. “Who should know that so well as I ?—who should know that so well as I ?”

“You know it, and still you let her sit at your door all through the lonely night ? I would

not let a tramp shiver at mine if I could help it. You let her perish within reach of you. You condemn her at her age, with her lovely face, unheard——”

He put out his hand to stop me. He was as much agitated as I was. “Her lovely face,” he said to himself,—“oh, her lovely face!” That was the point at which I touched him. It woke recollections in him which were more eloquent than anything I could say.

“Yes,” I said, “think of it.” I do not know by what inspiration I laid hold upon this feature of the story—her beauty ; perhaps because it was the real explanation of the power she had acquired over me.

But in a minute more he had overcome his agitation ; he came to a sudden pause in front of me and looked me in the face, though there were signs of a conflict in his. “It is vain to attempt to move me,” he said, hoarsely. “I do not know why you should take it in hand, or why you should try to attain your object in this way. I did not

expect it from such as you. Her lovely face—does that make her good or true or fit for a man's wife?"

"No doubt it was for that you married her," said I, with an impulse I could not restrain.

He turned away from me again; he made a few hasty steps and then he came back. "I do not choose to discuss my own history with a stranger," he said; and then softening into politeness: "You said I could do something for you. What can I do?"

This question suddenly brought me to a standstill, for even in my perplexity and confusion, and the state of semi-despair I had been thrown into by my visitor, a vestige of reason still remained in my mind. After all he must know her and his own concerns better than I could. His question seemed to stop my breath. "She is in my house," I said.

"You are too charitable, Mrs. Mulgrave," he answered harshly. His voice sounded loud and sharp to me after the subdued tone

in which we had been speaking, for we were the only two living creatures visible on the green. Everything was quiet around us, and the night beginning to fall.

“I did not mean to be charitable,” I said, feeling that there was, without any consciousness of mine, a tone of apology in my voice. “I did not expect—what has happened. I meant her to leave me—next day.”

“She will never leave you as long as you will keep her and give her all she wants,” he said, in the same sharp, harsh voice.

“Then heaven help me!” I cried, in my confusion, “what am I to do?”

He seized my arm, so that he hurt me, in what seemed a sudden access of passion. “It will teach you not to thrust yourself into other people’s concerns, or meddle with what does not concern you,” he said. He had come quite close to me, and his face was flushed with passion. I think it was the only time I was ever so spoken to in my life. The effect was bewildering,

but I was more surprised than afraid. In short, the curious shock of this unexpected rage, the rude, sudden touch, the angry voice, brought me to myself.

“I think you forget yourself, Mr. Reinhardt,” I said.

Then he dropped my arm as if the touch burned him, and turned away, and shook, as I could see, with the effort to control himself. His passion calmed me, but it swept over him like a storm. He muttered something at length, hurriedly, in which there was the word “pardon,” as if he were forced most unwillingly to say it, and then he turned round upon me again: “I may have forgotten myself, as you say; but you force me to face a subject I would give the world to forget, and in the only way that makes it unavoidable. Good heavens! your amiability, and your Christianity, and all that, force me to take up again what I had put from me for ever. And you look for politeness, too!”

I did not make any answer: what was the

use? At bottom, I did blame myself; I should not have interfered; I should have been firm enough and strong enough to take her to her home, wherever it was: I did not stand upon my defence. I let him say what he would; and I cannot tell how long this went on. I suppose the interval was not nearly so long as it seemed to me. He stood before me, and he smiled and frowned, and ground his teeth and discharged, as it were, bitter sentences at me. Englishmen can be brutal enough, but no Englishman, I think, would have done it in this way. He seemed to take a pleasure in saying everything that was most disagreeable. When he scowled at me I could bear it, but when he smiled and affected politeness I grew so angry that I could have struck him. Poor wretch! perhaps there was some justification for him after all.

“Because you are a woman!” he cried. “A woman!—what it is to be a woman! It gives you a right to set every power of

hell in motion, and always to be spared the consequences; to upset every arrangement of the world, and disturb the quiet, and put your fingers into every mess, and always to be held blameless. That is your right. Oh, I like those women's rights! I should have knocked down the man who had interfered as you have done; but, because you are a woman, I must come out of my quiet, I must derange my life, to save you from your folly. God in heaven! was that what those creatures, those slaves, those toys were made for? To interfere—for ever to interfere—and to be spared the consequences at any cost to us?"

I don't know how I bore it all. I got tired after a while of the mere physical effort of standing to listen to him. I did not try to answer at first, and after the torrent began I could not, he spoke so fast and so vehemently. But at length I turned from him and walked slowly, as well as I was able, to my own door. He paused for a moment as if

in surprise, and then turned and walked on with me, talking and gesticulating. "Nothing else would have disturbed me," he said; "I had made my arrangements. How was I to tell that a fool, a woman,—would thrust herself into it, and put it on my honour as a gentleman to free her? What has honour to do with it? Why should I trouble more for a woman—an old woman—than for a man? Bah! Ah, I will be rude; yes, I am rude; it is a pleasure—it is a compensation. You are plain; you are old. You have lost what charms. Therefore, what right have you to be considered? Why should you not bear your own folly? Why should I interfere?"

"Pray make yourself quite easy about me," I said, roused in my turn. "I did not appeal to you on my account, and anything you can do for me would be dearly purchased by submitting to this violence. Go your own way, and leave me to manage my own concerns."

He stopped, bewildered; and then he asked

with confusion, "What do you call your own concerns?"

"Nothing that can any way affect you," I said, and in my passion I went in at my own gate and closed it upon him. I stood on one side defying him, and he stood on the other with confusion and amazement on his face.

"You do not wish my help any more?"

"No more. I shall act for myself, without thought of you," I said. He stood and gazed at me for a moment, and then suddenly he turned round and left me. I looked after him as he walked rapidly away, and I confess that, notwithstanding my indignation and pride my heart sank. He was the only creature who could help me, and I had driven him away. I had taken once more upon myself the task which it had made me half frantic to think of. My heart fell. I looked back upon my house, which had been such a haven of quietness and rest for so many years, and felt that the Eden was spoiled—that it was

no longer my paradise. And yet I had rejected the only help! I was very forlorn, standing there with my hand upon my gate under the chilly October stars, having thrust all my friends from me, and refused even the only possible deliverance. "I cannot allow myself to be insulted," I said to myself, trying to get some comfort from my pride, but that was cold consolation. I turned round to go in, sighing and ready to sink with fatigue and trouble; and then I suddenly heard moans coming from the house, and Mary calling and beckoning from the open door.

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER IX.

“ OH, ma'am, the poor lady's took bad—the poor dear lady's took very bad !” This was Mary's cry as she hurried me in. The windows were all wide open to give her air. She was lying on the sofa gasping for breath, her mouth and her eyes open, two hectic circles of red upon her cheeks, and that wildly anxious look upon her face which always accompanies a struggle for breath. I did not feel at all sure that she was not dying. I called out to my cook to run instantly for the doctor. Both the women had been in the room running about as she gave them wild orders, opening the windows one after another, fetching her fans, eau-de-cologne, water, wine—as one

thing after another occurred to her. She stretched out her hands to me as I came in, and grasped and pulled me to her ; she said something which I could not make out in her gasping, broken voice, and I nodded my head and pretended to understand, saying, "Yes, yes," to calm her—"Yes, yes." It did not seem to matter what one said or promised at such a moment. For some time, every gasp looked to me as if it must be her last. I bathed her forehead with eau-de-cologne, I wetted her lips with wine ; I had hard ado not to cry out, too, in sympathy with her distress. I shut down now one window, now another, fearing the cold for her, and then opening them again, in obedience to her gestures to give her air. I seem to see and to feel now, as I recall it, the room so unlike itself, with the cold night air blowing through and through it, and the great squares of blackness and night, with a bit of sky in one, which broke confusedly the familiar walls, and made

it doubtful to my bewildered and excited mind whether I was out of doors or in—whether the chairs and sofa and the lamp on the table had been transported into the garden, or the garden had invaded the house. The wind made me shiver; the flame of the lamp wavered even within its protecting glass; darkness and mystery breathed in; and, in the centre absorbing all thoughts, was this struggle between, as I thought, death and life. I cannot tell how time passed, or how long we were in this suspense; but it seemed to me that half the night must have been over before the doctor came, in evening dress, with huge white wristbands, as if he were going to perform an operation. Notwithstanding the anxiety I was in, this fantastic idea flashed across my mind: for his cuffs were always too long and white. But it was a relief beyond description when he came: the responsibility, at least, seemed to be taken off my shoulders. I had scarcely permitted myself to hope before that the

paroxysm was already beginning to subside ; but now it became evident to me ; and Dr. Houghton gave her something, which at once relieved her. I sat down beside the sofa, feeling half stupefied with the sensation of relief, and watched her breathing gradually grow calmer, and the struggle abate. I think my own brain had given way slightly under the tension. It seemed to me that the room behind me was full of people whispering and flitting about, and that all kinds of echoes and murmurs of voices were coming in at the open windows. I suppose it was only my own maids, and Susan from the Admiral's next door who had come to see what was the matter ; but the strange sensation of being almost in the open air, and the worn-out state in which I was, produced this effect. I could not move however to put a stop to it. I could do nothing but sit still and watch. And thus the scene of the first evening, when I brought this strange in-

mate home to my house, reproduced itself, with another bewildering effect, before my eyes. She was no longer dusty and miserable ; her poor black dress was neat and covered by my shawl ; her hair had been elaborately dressed, and, though a little disordered, still showed how carefully it had been arranged ; but otherwise, the attitude, the look, were exactly the same. Her head was thrown back in utter exhaustion upon the dark velvet pillow, which showed it in relief, like a white cameo on the dark background of the *pietra dura*. Her eyes were softly closed, and her lips. The doctor, who had gone away to write a prescription, was struck by her wonderful beauty, as I had been that night. He started in his surprise when he came back and saw how she had dropped asleep. He drew me aside in his amazement ; the discovery flashed upon him all in a moment, as it had done on me. When a woman is very ill, when one's mind is full of anxiety for her, her beauty is the

last thing one thinks of. So that the sudden sight of her confounded him. "How beautiful she is!" he said in my ear with a certain agitation; and though I am only a woman, I had been agitated, too, when I found it out.

It was just when the doctor had said this that my eye was suddenly caught by a strange figure at one of the open windows. It stepped on to the sill, dark against the blackness without, and there paused a moment. Had this occurred at any other time, I should, no doubt, have been very much frightened, I should have rushed to the window and demanded to know what he wanted, with terror and indignation; but to-night I took it as a matter of course. I did not even move, but kept still by the side of my patient's sofa and looked at him: and when he came in it seemed to me the most natural thing in the world. He entered with a sudden, impetuous movement as if something had pushed him forward. He

advanced into the middle of the room—into the little circle round the sofa. It was Mr. Reinhardt. He had never been in my house before, or in any house on the green, and Dr. Houghton looked at him and looked at me with positive consternation. For my part, I gave him no greeting. I did not say a word. It seemed natural that he should come, that was all.

There was a curious sort of smile upon his face; he was wound up to some course of action or other. What he thought of doing I cannot tell. His face looked as if he had come with the intention of taking her by the shoulders and turning her out. I don't know why I thought so, but there was a certain mixture of fierceness, and contempt, and impatience in his look which suggested the idea. "I have come to put a stop to all this. I shall not put up with it for a moment longer." Though he did not speak a word, this seemed to sound in my ears, somehow, as if he had said it in his mind. But

when he came to the sofa and saw her laid out in that dead sleep, her face white as marble, the blue veins visible on her closed eyelids, the breath faintly coming and going, he came to a sudden pause. I think for the first moment he thought she was dead. He gave a short cry, and then turned to me wildly, as if I were responsible. "You have killed her," he said. He was in that state of suppressed passion in which anything might happen. He would have railed at her had he found her conscious, he would have railed at me if I would have let him: he was half mad.

"Tell him," I said, turning to the doctor. Dr. Houghton was a man of the world, and tried very hard not to look surprised. He put his hand upon Mr. Reinhardt's shoulder to draw him away: but he would not be drawn away. He stood fast there, with his brows contracted and his eyes fixed on the sleeping face: he listened to the doctor's explanations without moving or looking up. He said

not a word further to any one, but drew a chair in front of the sofa and sat down there with his eyes fixed upon her. Oh, what thoughts must have been going through his mind. The woman whom he had loved—I do not doubt passionately in his way—whom he had married, whom he had cast away from him! And there she lay before him unconscious, unaware of his presence, beautiful as when she had been his, like a creature seen in a dream.

“He had better be got to go away before she wakes,” Dr. Houghton said in my ear. “Do you think you can make one more exertion, Mrs. Mulgrave, and send him away? Can you hear what I am saying? She will be in a very weak state, and any excitement might be dangerous. I don’t know what connection there is between them, but can’t you send him away? Who is this next?”

This time it was a very timid figure at the window, a halting, furtive old man peeping in. And somehow this, too, seemed quite

natural to me. I felt that I knew everything that happened as if I had planned it all before-hand. "It is his servant come to look for him," said I. And the doctor went to the window with impatience and pulled poor old White in, and shut it down.

"The draught goes through and through one," he said, with a shiver. It was quite true; I was trembling with cold where I sat by the sleeping woman's side; but it had not occurred to me to shut the window; everything seemed unchangeable, as if we had nothing to do with it except to accept whatever happened. When White came in he looked round him with great astonishment, and made me a very humble, frightened bow, while he whispered and explained to the doctor how it was he had taken the liberty. Then he gradually approached his master;—but when he saw the figure on the sofa consternation swallowed up all his other sentiments. He flung his arms above his head and uttered a stifled cry, and then he rushed at his master with a

sudden vehemence which showed how deeply the sight had moved him. He put his hand upon Mr. Reinhardt's shoulder and shook him gently.

"Sir, sir ;" he cried ; then stooped to his ear and whispered, " Master ; Mr. Reinhardt ; master !" Reinhardt took no notice of the old man, he sat absorbed with his eyes fixed on that marble, beautiful face. " Oh, sir, come with me ! Oh ! come with me, my dear master ;" said the old man. " You know what I'm saying is for your good—you know it's for your good. It's getting late, sir, time for the house to be shut up. Oh, Mr. Reinhardt—sir, come away with me ! come with me—do !"

Mr. Reinhardt pushed him impatiently away, but did not answer a word ; he never removed his eyes from her for a moment. They seemed to me to grow like Charon's eyes, like circles of fire, while he gazed at her. Was it in wrath—was it in love ?

"Mrs. Mulgrave, ma'am," cried White, turning to me, but always in a voice which was

scarcely above a whisper, "Oh, speak to him! It ain't for his good to sit and stare at her like that. I know what comes of it. If he sits like that and looks to her it'll all begin over again. He ain't a man that can stand it, he ain't indeed. Oh, my lady, if you'll be a friend to him, speak and make him go."

"Ah!" said a soft, sighing voice. "Ah! old White!" We all started as if a shell had fallen among us: and yet it was not wonderful that she should wake with all this conversation going on by her bed—and besides she had slept a long time, more than an hour. She had not changed her position in the least, all she had done was to open her eyes. I don't know whether it was simply her supreme yet indolent self-estimation which kept her from paying us the compliment of making any movement on our account, or if it was from some consciousness that her beauty could not be shown to greater advantage. But certainly she did not move. She only opened her eyes, and said, "Ah, old White!"

But oh, to see how the man started, who was nearer to her than White! It was as if a ball or a sword-stroke had gone through him. He sprang from his chair, and then he checked himself and drew it close and sat down again. He glanced round upon us all as if he would have cleared not only the chamber but the world of us, had it been possible, and then he leant over her and said sternly, "There are others here besides White."

"Ah!" Either she was afraid of him or pretended to be; she clutched at my sleeve with her hand, she shrank back a little, but still did not change her attitude nor raise herself so as to see his face.

"I am here," he went on, his voice trembling with passion. "I whom you have hunted, whose life you have poisoned. Oh, woman! you dare not look at me nor speak to me, but you wrong me behind my back. You whisper tales of me wherever I go. Here I had a moment's peace and you

have ruined it. Tell these people the truth once in your life. Is it I that am in the wrong or you?"

A frightened look had stolen over her face, her eyebrows contracted as with fear. Her eyes became full of tears, and the corners of her beautiful mouth quivered. Heaven forgive me! I asked myself was it all feigning or had she something kinder and better in her which I had never seen till now? But those eyes, which were like great cups of light filled with dew, once more turned to him. She remained immovable, looking up to his face, when he repeated hoarsely, "You or I, which is in the wrong?"

She answered with a shiver which ran all over her, "I." Her voice was like a sigh. I did not know what his wrongs might be, but whatever they were, at that moment there could be no doubt about it. He, a hard, unsympathetic, inhuman soul, it must be he that was in the wrong, not she, though she confessed it so sweetly; and if this effect

was produced upon me, what should it be upon him?

Mr. Reinhardt shook like a leaf in the wind. He had not expected this. It was a surprise to him. He had expected to be blamed. It startled him so, that for the moment he was silent, gazing at her. But old White was not silent. "Oh! master, master, come away, come home," he pleaded, wringing his hands; and then he came and touched my shoulder and cried like a child. "Speak to him, send him away!" he cried. "It is for his own good. If she speaks to him like that, if she keeps her temper, it is all over; it will have all to be begun again."

Reinhardt made a long pause. He looked as if he were gathering up his strength to speak again, and when he did so, it was with the fictitious heat of a man whose heart is melting. "How dare you say 'I,' " he said, "when you do not mean it?—when all your life you have said otherwise? You have reproached me, stirred up my friends against me, kept your

own sins in the background and published mine. You have done this for years, and now is it a new art you are trying? Do not think you can deceive me," he cried, getting up in his agitation "it is impossible. I am not such a credulous fool."

She kept her eyes on the ceiling, not looking at him; the moisture in them seemed to swell, but did not overflow. "I may not change then?" she said, very low. "I may not see that I am wrong? I am not to be permitted to repent?"

He turned from her and began to pace up and down the room; he plucked at his waistcoat and cravat as though they choked him. More than once he returned to the sofa as if with something to say but went away again. When White approached, he was pushed away with impatience, and once with such force that he span round as he was driven back. This last repulse seemed to convince him. "Be a fool, then, if you will, sir," he said sharply, and withdrew altogether into

a corner, where he watched the scene. I do not think Reinhardt even saw this or anything else. He was walking up and down hastily like a man out of his mind, struggling, one could not but see, with a hundred demons, and tempting his fate.

He came back again however in his tumultuous uncertainty, and bent over her once more. "Talk of repentance—talk of change," he cried bitterly. "How often have you pretended as much? Do you hear me, woman?" (bending down so close that his breath must have touched her)—"how often have you done it? how often have you pretended? Oh, false, false as death!"

She put her hand upon his shoulder, almost on his neck. He broke away from her with a hoarse cry; he made another wild march round the room. Then he came back.

"Julia," he cried, "Julia, Julia, Julia! Mine!"

She lay still as a tiger that is going to spring. He fell on his knees beside her,

weeping, storming in his passion. Good Lord! was it my doing? was I responsible? White gave me a furious look, and rushed out of the room. The husband and wife were reconciled.

*

THE SCIENTIFIC GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER X.

THIS is about the end of the story so far as I am concerned. He spent the night there by her sofa, kissing her dress and her hands, and watching her in a transport of passion and perhaps delight. For the last I would not answer. It must have been at best a troubled joy ; and a man's infatuation for a beautiful face is not what I call love, though it is often a very tragic and terrible passion. He took her away in the morning, but not to his own house. They went straight from mine to London, that great receptacle of everybody's misery and happiness. I saw them both before they left, though only for a moment. She was still lying on the sofa as when I

left her, and the half disorder of her hair, the exhaustion in her face, seemed rather to enhance her beauty. Any one else would have looked jaded and worn out, but a faint flush of triumph and satisfaction had stolen over her (partly perhaps produced by her weakness) and woke the marble into life. She stretched out her hand to me carelessly as I went in. She said with a smile, "You see my feeling was right. I always trust my feelings. I knew you were the person to do it, and you have done it. I felt it whenever I saw your face."

"I hope it will be lasting, and that you may be happy," I said, faltering, not knowing what tone to take.

"Oh, yes, it is to be hoped so. He is going to take me to London," she answered carelessly. "I am quite sorry to leave your nice house, everything has been so comfortable. It is small and it is plain, but you know how to make yourself

comfortable. I suppose when one has lived so long one naturally does."

This was all her thanks to me. The husband took the matter in a different way. They had a fire lighted and coffee taken to them in the drawing-room (which was left in the saddest confusion after all the disturbance of the night); and it was when the carriage he had ordered was at the door, and she had gone to make herself ready, that he came to me. I was in the dining-room with my breakfast on the table, which I was too much worn out to take. His face was very strange; it was full of suppressed excitement, with a wild, strained look about the eyes, and a certain air of heat and haste, though his colour was like ivory as usual. "I have to thank you," he said to me, very stiffly, "and if I said anything amiss in my surprise last night, I hope you will forgive it. I can only thank you now; nothing else is possible. But I must add, I hope we shall never meet again.

“I assure you, if we do, it shall not be with my will,” said I, feeling very angry as I think I had a right to be.

He bowed, but made no reply; not because words failed him. I felt that he would have liked nothing better than to have fallen upon me and metaphorically torn me to pieces. He had been overcome by his own heart or passions, and had taken her back, but he hated me for having drawn him to do so. He saw the tragic folly of the step he was taking. There was a gloom in his excitement such as I cannot describe. He had no strength to resist her, but she was hateful to him even while he adored her. And doubly hateful, without any counterbalancing attraction, was I, who had as it were betrayed him to his fate.

“I trust your wife and you will be happy—now,” I said, trying to speak firmly. He interrupted me with a hoarse laugh.

“My wife!”

“Is she not your wife?” I said in alarm.

He laughed again, even more hoarsely, with a sharp tone in the sound. "What do you call a woman who is taken back after—everything? Who is taken back because—— What is she, do you suppose? What is he, the everlasting dupe and fool! Don't speak to me any more." He hurried away from me, and then turned round again at the door. "I spoke a little wildly perhaps," he said, with a smile, which was more disagreeable than his rage, "without due thought for Mrs. Reinhardt's reputation. Make yourself quite easy—she is my wife."

That was the last I saw of them. I was too much offended to go to the door to see them leave the house, but it is impossible to describe the relief with which I listened to the wheels ringing along the road as they went away. Was it really true?—was this nightmare removed from me, and my house my own again? I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. I fell down on my knees and made some sort

of confused thanksgiving. It seemed to me as if I had been in this horrible bondage half my life.

Mary came in about half-an-hour after to take away the breakfast things. I had swallowed a cup of tea, but I had not been able to eat. Mary was still disapproving, but quieter than at first; she shook her head over the untouched food. "We'll be having you ill next, ma'am," she said, with an evident feeling that cook and she would in that case have good reason to complain; and then, after a pause, she added severely, "I don't know if you knew ma'am, as the lady is gone off in your best shawl?"

"My shawl!" I had thought no more of it: but this sudden news took away my breath.

"She was always fond of it," said Mary grimly. "She liked the best of everything did that lady; and she couldn't make up her mind to take it off when she went away."

Though I was so confounded and confused, I made an effort to keep up appearances still. "She will send it back, of course, as soon as she gets—home," I said; "as soon as she gets—her own things."

"I am sure I hope so, ma'am," said Mary, carrying off her tray. Her tone was not one to inspire hope in the listener, and I confess that for the rest of the morning my shawl held a very large place in my thoughts. It was the most valuable piece of personal property I possessed. When I used to take it out and wrap it round me, it was always with a certain pride. It was the kind of wrap which dignifies any dress. "With that handsome shawl, it does not matter what else you wear," Mrs. Stoke was in the habit of saying to me; and though Mrs. Stoke was not a great authority in most matters, she knew what she was saying on this point. I said to myself, "Of course she will send it back," but I had a very chill sensation of doubt about my heart.

All the morning I sat still over the fire, with a longing to go and talk to some one. For more than a week now, I had not exchanged a word with my neighbours, and this was terrible to a person like me, living surrounded by so many whose lives had come to be a part of mine. But I had not the courage to take the initiative. I cannot tell how I longed for some one to come, for the ice to be broken. And it was only natural that people should be surprised and offended, and even have learned to distrust me. For who could they suppose I was hiding away like that—some mysterious sinner belonging to myself—some one I had a special interest in? And then she had been recognized by Everard Stoke!

At about twelve o'clock my quietness was disturbed by the sound of some one coming; my heart began to beat and my face to flush, but it was only old White with his fellow-servant, Mississarah, as he called her, pronouncing the two words as if they were one.

Their visit put me in possession of the whole miserable story. It was like a tale of enchantment all through. The man had been a mature man of forty or more, buried in science and learning, when he first saw the beautiful creature who since seemed to have been the curse of his life. She was an innkeeper's daughter, untaught and unrefined. He had tried to educate her, married her, done everything that a man mad with love could do to make her a lady—nay, to make her a decorous woman—but he had failed and over again failed. They did not tell me, and I did not wish to hear, what special sins she had done against him. I suppose she had done everything that a wicked wife could do. She had been put into honourable retirement with the hope of recovery again and again. Then she had been sent away in anger. But every time the unfortunate husband had fallen under her personal influence—the influence of her beauty—she had been taken back.

“She hates him,” poor White said, almost

crying, "but he can't resist her. He's mad, ma'am, mad, that's what it is. He could kill hisself for giving in, but he can't help hisself. We've had to watch him night and day as he shouldn't hear her nor see her, for when her money's done she always comes back to him. He'll kill her some day or kill hisself. Mississarah knows as I'm speaking true."

"As true as the Bible," said Mississarah; but she was softer than he towards the wife. "He was too wise and too good for her, ma'am," she said, "a fool and a wise man can't walk together—it's hard on the wise man, but may be it's a bit hard too on the fool. Folks don't make themselves. She mightn't have been so bad——"

"Oh, go along; go along, Mississarah, do," said White. "We'll have to go off from here where all was quiet and nice, and start again without knowing no more than Adam. But he'll kill her, some day, you'll see, or he'll kill hisself."

Mississarah was a north-country woman,

and had a little feeling that her master was a foreigner, and therefore necessarily more or less guilty ; but White was half a foreigner himself and totally devoted to his master. When they had poured forth their sorrows to me, they went away disconsolate, and their fears about leaving East Cottage were so soon justified that I never saw them more.

And then came my melancholy luncheon, which was set on the table for me, and which I loathed the sight of. To escape from it I went into the drawing-room, from which all traces of last night's confusion were gone. I was so miserable, and lonely, and weary that I think I dropped asleep over the fire. I had been up almost all night, and there seemed nothing so comfortable in all the world as forgetting one's very existence and being able to get to sleep.

I woke with the murmur of voices in my ears. Lady Denzil was sitting by me holding my hand. She gave me a kiss, and whispered to me in her soft voice,—“We know all

about it—we know all about it, my dear,” patting me softly with her kind hand. I’m afraid I broke down and cried like a child. I am growing old myself, to be sure, but Lady Denzil, thank heaven, might have been even my mother—and if you consider all the agitation, all the disturbance I had come through!

I think everybody on the green called that day, and each visitor was more kind than the other. “I shall always consider it a special providence, however, that none of us called or were introduced to her,” Mrs. General Perronet said solemnly. But she was the only one who made any allusion to the terrible guest I had been hiding in my house. They took me out to get the air—they made me walk to the Dell to see the autumn colour on the trees. They carried me off to dine at the Lodge, and brought me home with a body-guard. “You are not fit to be trusted to walk home by yourself,” Lottie Stoke said, giving me her arm. In short, the green received me back with acclamations, as if I had been

a returned Prodigal, and I found that I could laugh over the new and most unexpected *rôle*, which I thus found myself filling, as soon as the next day.

Some time after, I received my shawl in a rough parcel, sent by railway. It was torn in two or three places by the pins it had been fastened with, and had several small stains upon it. It was sent without a word, without any apologies, with Mrs. Reinhardt's compliments written outside the brown paper cover, in a coarse hand. And that was the only direct communication I ever had with my strange guest. Before Christmas however there was a paragraph in some of the papers that L. Reinhardt, Esq., had volunteered to accompany an expedition going to Africa in order to make some scientific observations. There was a great crowded, enthusiastic meeting of the Geographical Society, in which his wonderful devotion was dwelt on and the sacrifice he was making to the interests of science. And he was even mentioned in the

House of Commons, where some great personage took it upon him to say that in the arrangement of the expedition the greatest assistance had been received from Mr. Reinhardt, who, himself a man of wealth and leisure, had generously devoted his energies to it, and smoothed away a great many of the difficulties in the way—a good work for which science and his country would alike be grateful to him, said the orator. Oh, me! oh, me! I looked up in Lady Denzil's face as Sir Thomas read out these words to us. Sir Thomas took it quite calmly, and was rather pleased indeed that Mr. Reinhardt, by getting himself publicly thanked in the House of Commons, had justified the impulse which prompted himself, Sir Thomas Denzil, head as it were of society on the green, to call upon him. But my lady laid her soft old hand on mine, and her eyes filled with tears. "Do not let us blame him, my dear,—do not let us blame him," she said to me when we were alone. She had known what temptation was.

LADY ISABELLA.

P A R T I.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was one house in our neighbourhood which was perfect and above criticism. I do not mean to say that it was a great house ; but the very sight of it was enough to make you feel almost bitter if you were poor, and much pleased and approving if you were well-off. Naturally it was the very next house to Mrs. Merridew's, who had heaps of children and a small income, and could not have things so very nice as might have been wished. Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella lived within sight of her, with but two holly-hedges between ; the hedge on the side of the Merridew's house

was bristly and untidy, but on the other side it was trimmed and clipped till it looked like a barrier-wall of dark green Utrecht velvet; and inside that inclosure everything was in perfection; the lawn was mown every other day; there was never an obtrusive daisy on it, and no fallen leaf presumed to lie for half an hour. The flower-beds which surrounded it were more brilliant than any I ever saw—not mere vulgar geraniums and calceolarias, but a continual variety, and always such masses of colour. Inside everything was just as perfect. They had such good servants, always the best trained of their class; such soft carpets, upon which no step ever sounded harsh; and Mrs. Spencer's ferns were the wonder of the neighbourhood; and the flowers in the two drawing-rooms were always just at the point of perfection, with never a yellow leaf or a faded blossom. We poorer people sometimes tried to console ourselves by telling each other that

such luxury was monotonous. "Nothing ever grows and nothing ever fades," said Lottie Stoke, "but always one eternal beautyfulness; I should not like it if it were I. I should like to watch them budding, and pick off the first faded leaves." This Lottie said with confidence, though she was notoriously indifferent to such cares, and declared, on other occasions, that she could not be troubled with flowers, they required so much looking after; but poor little Janet Merridew used to shake her head and groan with an innocent envy that would bring the tears to her eyes; not that she wished to take anything from her neighbours, but she loved beautiful things so much, and they were so far out of her reach.

Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella lived together in this beautiful house; they were two friends so intimately allied, that I was in the habit of saying they were more like man and wife than anything else. It was

a wonder to us all at Dinglefield how they managed their money matters in respect to housekeeping. Many a little attempt I have seen to find this out, and heard many a speculation; whether the house was Mrs. Spencer's, whether Lady Isabella only paid for her board, which of them was at the expense of the carriage, or whether they kept a rigid account of all their expenditure and divided it at the end of the year, as some thought—nobody could make out. When they first came to Dinglefield it was universally prophesied that it would not last. "Depend upon it, these arrangements never answer," was the opinion of old Mr. Lloyd, who was Mrs. Damerel's father, and lived with them at the rectory. "They will quarrel in three months," the Admiral said, who was not very favourable to ladies. But when seven years had come and gone, Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella still lived together and had not quarrelled. By this time Lady Isabella, who was really quite

young when they came, must have been nearly five-and-thirty, and people had made up their minds she would not marry now, so that the likelihood was, as it had lasted so long, it would last all their lives. They did not, at the first glance, look like people likely to suit each other. Mrs. Spencer was a woman overflowing with activity ; she was thin, she could not have been anything else, so energetic was she, always in motion, setting everybody right. She was shortsighted, or said she was shortsighted, so far as the outer world was concerned, but in her own house, and in all that involved her own affairs, she had the eye of a lynx ; nothing escaped her. It was she who kept everything in such beautiful order, and made the lawns and the flowers the wonder of the neighbourhood. Lady Isabella's part was the passive one ; she enjoyed it. She did not worry her friend by pretending to take any trouble. She was full ten years younger than Mrs.

Spencer, inclining to be stout, pretty, but undeniably inactive. I am afraid she was a little indolent, or, perhaps, in such close and constant contact with her friend's more active nature, Lady Isabella had found it expedient to seem more indolent than she was. She left all the burdens of life on Mrs. Spencer's shoulders. Except the one habitual walk in the day, which it was said Mrs. Spencer compelled her to take, lest she should grow fat, we at Dinglefield only saw Lady Isabella in her favourite easy-chair in the drawing-room, or her favourite garden-bench on the lawn. Indolent—but not so perfectly good-tempered as indolent people usually are, and fond of saying sharp things without perhaps always considering the feelings of others. Indeed she seemed to live on such a pinnacle of ease and wealth and comfort, that she must have found it difficult to enter into the feelings of such as were harassed, or care-worn, or poor. She had a way of begging

everybody not to make a fuss when anything happened ; and I am afraid most of us thought that a selfish regard for her own comfort lay at the bottom of this love of tranquillity. I don't think now that we were quite right in our opinion of her. She had to go through a great deal of fuss whether she liked it or not ; and I remember now that when she uttered her favourite sentiment she used to give a glance, half-comic, half-pathetic, to where Mrs. Spencer was. But she bore with Mrs. Spencer's " ways " as a wife bears with her husband. Mrs. Spencer had all the worry and trouble, such as it was. Plenty of money is a great sweetener of such cares ; but still, to be sure, it was easy for Lady Isabella to sit and laugh and adjure everybody not to make a fuss, when she herself had no trouble about anything, never had even to scold a servant, or turn an unsatisfactory retainer away.

We were never very intimate, they and

I ; but it happened, one autumn evening, that I went in to call rather out of the regular order of calls which we exchanged punctiliously. When I say we were not intimate, I only mean that there was no personal and individual attraction between us. Of course we knew each other very well, and met twice or thrice every week, as people do at Dinglefield. I had been calling upon Mrs. Merridew, and I cannot tell what fascination one found—coming out of that full house, which was as tidy as she could make it, but not, alas ! as tidy as it might have been—in the next house, which was so wonderful a contrast, where the regions of mere tidiness were overpast, and good order had grown into beauty and grace. I suppose it was the contrast. I found myself going in at the other gate almost before I knew it ; and there I found Lady Isabella alone, seated in the twilight, for it was growing dark, in her favourite corner, not very far from the fire. She was not doing any-

thing ; and as I went in, I fancied, to my great surprise, that something like the ghost of a sigh came to greet me just half a moment in advance of Lady Isabella's laugh. She had a way of laughing, which was not disagreeable when one came to know her, though at first people were apt to think that she was laughing at them.

“ Mrs. Spen is out,” she said, “ and I am quite fatigued, for I have been standing at my window watching the Merridew babies in their garden. They look like nice little fat puppies among the grass ; but it must be damp for them at this time of the year.”

“ Poor little things ! there are so many of them that they get hardy ; they are not used to being looked after very much. Some people's children would be killed by it,” said I.

“ How lucky for the little Merridews that they are not those people's children !” said Lady Isabella ; “ and I think they must like it,

for it is a great bore being looked after too much." As she spoke she leant back in her chair with something that sounded like another sigh. "I was rather fond of babies once," she added, with a laugh which quickly followed the sigh. "Absurd, was it not? but don't say a word, or Mrs. Spen will turn me out."

"It would take more than that to part you two," said I.

"Well, I suppose it would. I think sometimes it would take a great deal. Mrs. Mulgrave, do you know I have been turning it over in my mind whether I could ask you to do something for me or not? and I think I have decided that I will—that is not to say that you are to do it, you know, unless you please."

"I think most likely I shall please—unless it is something very unlike you," said I.

"Well, it is unlike me," said Lady Isabella; and though I could not make out

her face in the least, I felt sure, by the sound of her voice, and a certain movement she made, and an odd little laugh that accompanied her words, that she was blushing violently in the dark. "At least, it is very unlike anything you know of me. You might not think it, perhaps," she went on, with again that little constrained laugh, "but do you know I was young once?"

"My dear, I think you are young still," said I.

"Oh dear, no; that is quite out of the question. When a woman is over thirty, she ought to give up all such ideas," said Lady Isabella, with an amount of explanatoriness which I did not understand; and she began to fold hems in her handkerchief in a nervous way. "When a woman is thirty, she may just as well be fifty at once for any difference it makes."

"I don't think even fifty is anything so very dreadful," said I. "One's ideas change as one gets older; but twenty years make

a wonderful difference, whatever you may think."

"Perhaps, for some things," she said hastily. "And you must know, Mrs. Mulgrave, in that fabulous time when I was young other marvels existed. They always do in the fabulous period in all histories; and there was once somebody who was—or at least he said he was—in love with me. There, the murder is out," she said, pushing her chair a little further back into the dark corner; and, to my amazement, her voice was full of agitation, as if she had been telling me the secret of her life.

"My dear Lady Isabella," I said, "do you really expect me to be surprised at that?"

"Well, no, perhaps not," she said, with another laugh. "Not at the simple fact. They say every woman has such a thing happen to her some time in her life. Do you think that is true?"

"The people in the newspapers say it can't be true," said I, "nowadays: though

I don't think I ever knew a woman who had not——”

“Mrs. Spen will be back directly,” cried Lady Isabella hastily, “and I don't want her to know. I need not tell you that it all came to nothing, for you can see that ; but, Mrs. Mulgrave, now comes the funny part of it. His regiment is coming to the barracks, and he will be within five miles of us. Is it not odd?”

“I don't think it is at all odd,” said I. “I dare say it is just in the natural order. If it will be painful to you to meet him, Lady Isabella——”

“That is the funniest of all,” she said. “It will not be in the least painful to me to meet him. On the contrary, I want to meet him. It is very droll, but I do. I should so like to see what he looks like now, and if his temper is improved, and a hundred things. Besides, his sister used to be a great friend of mine ; and when we broke it off I lost Augusta too. I want so much to know

about her. Indeed, that is my chief reason," she went on faltering, "for wishing to meet him." The words were scarcely spoken when she burst into a little peal of laughter. "What a stupid I am," she cried, "trying to take you in. No, Mrs. Mulgrave, let me be honest; it is not for Augusta I want to see him. I should so like just to make sure—you know—if I was a very great fool, or if he was worth thinking of after all. Now," with a little sigh, "when one is perfectly dispassionate—and cool——"

"To be sure," said I, glad that it was dark, and she could not see me smile; "and now that we have settled all that, tell me what I am to do."

"You are so very kind," she said; and then went off again in that agitated laugh. "I am betraying myself frightfully; but I am sure you will understand me, Mrs. Mulgrave, and not think anything absurd. You are sure to get acquainted with him, you know; and if you would ask him to

the cottage—and ask us to meet him—— Good heavens! what a fool you must think me,” she cried: “but I should like it, I confess.”

“But, my dear, I never give dinners,” I said; “and to ask a man, a strange man, to tea——”

“He would be sure to come—to you,” she said very quickly, as if her breath had failed her.

“But, my dear, you are just as likely as I am—more likely—to meet him at other houses. It would be impossible otherwise. Not that I should mind asking him—though it is so odd to ask a man to tea.”

“Hush!” she said, suddenly leaning forward and grasping my arm. “Mrs. Spen has told Lady Denzil—she meant it for kindness—so we shall not be asked to meet him. And I do wish it, just for once. Hush, here she is coming. I don’t want her to know.”

“Then, my dear, I will do it,” said I,

grasping her hand. It trembled and was hot, and she grasped mine again in an agitated, impetuous way. Could this be Lady Isabella, who was always so calm and self-possessed? I was rather afraid of her in general, for she had the name of being satirical; and this was entirely a new light on her character. But just then Mrs. Spencer came in, and scolded us for sitting in the dark, and rang for lights; and then no more could be said.

It was curious to look at the two when the lamp came. Mrs. Spencer seated herself on her side of the fire, like the husband coming in from his day's work. She was a clever woman, but she was matter-of-fact, and notwithstanding the long years they had lived together, was never quite sure what was the meaning of her friend's jibes and jests. It was this as much as anything that gave a sort of conjugal character to their relationship. Friends who were merely friends, and were so different, would,

one was inclined to suppose, have got rid of each other years ago. But these two clung together in spite of all their differences, as if there were some bond between them which they had to make the best of. Mrs. Spencer began talking the moment she came in.

“I met Mrs. Damerel on the green and she was asking for you, Isabella; in short, she was quite surprised to see me out alone. ‘I thought Lady Isabella always walked once a day at least,’ she said. ‘And so she pretends to do,’ said I. And I told her what I said to you before I went out about your health. Depend upon it your health will suffer. A young woman at your age getting into these chimney-corner ways! Mrs. Mulgrave, don’t you agree with me that it is very wrong?”

“Don’t scold me, please,” said Lady Isabella, out of her corner; “if you both fall upon me, I am rather nervous to-night, and I know I shall cry.”

At this Mrs. Spencer laughed ; just as a husband would have done, taking it for the merest nonsense ; yet somehow propitiated, for there was an inference of superior wisdom, importance, goodness on his—I mean her—part, such as mollifies the marital mind. No one could have been more utterly bewildered than she, had she known that what her friend said was literally true. Lady Isabella had drawn a little screen between her and the fire, which sheltered her also from the modest light of the lamp ; and I felt by the sound of her voice, that though, no doubt, she could restrain herself, it would have been a relief to her to have shed the tears which made her eyes hot and painful. She would have laughed, probably, while she was shedding them, but that makes no difference.

“ You don't do enough, and Lady Denzil does too much,” said Mrs. Spencer. “ She surprises *me*, and I think I am as active as most people. I can't tell why she does it,

I am sure. She is an old woman; it can't be any pleasure to her. There is a dinner-party there to-night, and another on Saturday; and on Monday the dance for those young Fieldings that are staying there—enough to kill a stronger woman. But these little, fragile beings get through so much. She keeps up through it all and never looks a pin the worse."

"Are you going there to-night?" said I. I had scarcely said it when I saw a little flutter behind the screen, and felt it was a foolish question. But it was too late.

"No," said Mrs. Spencer pointedly; and she looked straight at Lady Isabella's screen with a distinctness of intimation that this abstinence was on her account, which would have puzzled me much but for the previous explanation I had had. Words would have been much less emphatic. She nodded her head a great many times, and she gave me a look which promised further information. She was fond of her companion, and I am

sure would have sheltered her from pain at almost any cost to herself; but yet she enjoyed the mystery, and the story which lay below. "All the officers from the barracks will be there," she added, after a pause. "There is a Captain Fielding, an empty-headed—but they are all empty-headed. I don't care much about soldiers in an ordinary way, and I dislike guardsmen. So does Isabella."

And then there followed one of those embarrassing pauses which come against one's will when there is any secret under-current which everybody knows and nobody mentions. Lady Isabella sat perfectly silent, and I, who ought to have come to the rescue,—I, after running wildly in my mind over every topic of conversation possible,—at last rose to take my leave, not finding anything to say.

"Are you going, Mrs. Mulgrave?" said Lady Isabella. "I will go to the door with you. I must show you the new flowers in the hall."

“ Good gracious, something must be going to happen,” said Mrs. Spencer, “ when Isabella volunteers to show you flowers. Don’t catch cold in the draught ; but it is too dark : you can’t possibly see any colour in them now.”

“ Never mind,” said Lady Isabella in an undertone ; and she hurried out leading the way,—a thing I had never seen her do before. She made no pretence about the flowers when we got out to the hall. It was quite dark, and of course I could see nothing. She grasped my hand in a nervous, agitated way. She was trembling,—she, who was always so steady and calm. It was partly from cold, to be sure, but then the cold was caused by emotion. “ His name is Colonel Brentford,” she whispered in my ear ; and then ran up stairs suddenly, leaving me to open the door for myself. I have received a great many confidences in my life, but seldom any so strange as this. I did not know whether to laugh or to be

sorry, as I walked home thinking over it. Lady Isabella was the last person in the world to be involved in any romance ; and yet this was romantic enough. And it was so difficult to make out how I could perform my part in it. Ask a guardsman, a strange colonel, a *man*, to tea! I could not but reflect how foolish I was, always undertaking things that were so difficult to perform. But I was pledged to do it, and I could not go back.

LADY ISABELLA.

CHAPTER II.

I WAS to dine at Sir Thomas Denzil's that same evening, and so no doubt would Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella have done, but for that obstacle which the elder lady had set up and in which the younger seemed determined to foil her. I dressed to go out, with my heart beating a little quicker than usual. For myself, as may be supposed, the officers from the barracks were not very much to me; but the undertaking with which I suddenly found myself burdened was very serious, and made me nervous in spite of myself; and then the man's very name was strange to me. I thought over all my acquaintances, and

everybody I had ever known ; but I could not remember any one of the name of Brentford. There were the Brentwoods of Northam, and the Bentleys, and a great many names came up to my mind which sounded like it at the first glance ; but I could not recollect a single Brentford among all my acquaintance. “ I wonder who his mother was ? ” I said to myself ; for, to be sure, there might be a means of getting at him in that way ; but it was impossible to find out at so short a notice. I almost felt as if I were a designing woman when I went into Lady Denzil’s drawing-room—and so I was, though I did not want to marry any of those unconscious warriors either personally or by proxy. Little did Lady Denzil suspect, as I went up to her—trying to look as innocent as possible—and little did the men of war think, of my evil projects, as they looked blandly at me, and set me down as that harmless and uninteresting being—an old lady. The one who took me in to dinner

was an elderly, sober-looking, quiet gentleman. He was a Major Somebody, and I don't think he was so fine as the others. I drew breath when I had seated myself under his wing. It was a comfort to me to have escaped the young ones, who never forgive you, when they have to take you in to dinner, for not being young and pretty. This was a man who had no pretensions above me—a man, probably, with a wife of his own and a large family, whom one could speak to freely and ask questions of. But before I would go so far, I made what private inspection I could. It was quite evident to me where the gap was which Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella ought to have filled. It had been hastily filled up by Lottie and Lucy Stoke, who were very much more to the taste of the guardsmen, I don't doubt, than if they had been their own grandmothers, ladies of county influence and majesty. Lucy, whose blue eyes were dancing in her head with mingled fright and delight to

find herself in such a grand party, sat by a handsome dark man, to whom my eyes returned a great many times. He looked the kind of man whom a woman might be faithful to for years. Could it be him? He ^{he} was amused with Lucy's excitement and her fright; perhaps he was flattered by it as men so often are. After a little while, I could see he took great pains to make himself agreeable; and I felt quite angry and jealous, though I am sure I could not have told why.

"Perhaps you recognize him?" my companion said to me, as he caught me watching this pair across the table. "He is one of the Elliots. His father had a place once in this neighbourhood. I am sure you must recollect his face."

"No, indeed," said I, denying by instinct. "That gentleman opposite—is his name Elliot? I was looking at the young lady by him. She is a little friend of mine, and I am petrified to find her here. I did not think she was out."

“That is why she likes it so well, I suppose,” said the Major with a little sigh.

“I am afraid you don't enjoy it much,” said I. “Pray forgive me for being so very stupid. I should like to know which of these gentlemen is Colonel Brentford. I have heard his name—I should like to know which is he.”

“He is sitting beside Lady Denzil,” said my companion shortly; and he said no more. His brevity startled me. I think Colonel Brentford from that moment began to lose in my opinion. I grew more and more frightened by the thought of what I had undertaken to do. I began to think it was a great pity Lady Isabella, a sensible woman, should waste a thought upon this soldier—and all for no reason in the world but that my Major announced curtly, “He is sitting beside Lady Denzil,” without adding a word to say, “I like him,” or “He is a very nice fellow,” or anything agreeable. I concluded he must be a bear

or a brute, or something utterly frivolous and uninteresting. It never occurred to me that it might be my Major and not the unknown Colonel who was to blame. And I had pledged myself to ask such a man as this to tea!

We had gone back to the drawing-room before I got what I could call a good look at him; and then I was even more disappointed to find that he was as far from looking a brute or a bear as he was from looking a hero. There was nothing remarkable about him; he was neither handsome nor ugly; he was neither young nor old. He stood and talked a long time to Lady Denzil, and his voice was pleasant, but the talk was about nothing—it was neither stupid nor clever. He was a man of negatives it seemed. I was dreadfully disappointed for Lady Isabella's sake. I could not help figuring to myself what her feelings would be. No doubt he had been young when they had known each other,

and youth has often a deceiving glitter about it, which never comes to anything. Chance threw my Major in my way again at that advanced period of the evening. He said to me, "We have a long drive and the night is chilly, and I wish I could get my young fellows into motion. These proceedings don't always agree with the taste of a man at my time of life; and my wife is always fidgety when I am out late—it is her way."

"Mrs. Bellinger is not here to-night?" I said.

"No, we are quite new to the place, and Lady Denzil has not had time to call yet: my wife, I am sure, would be delighted if you would go and see her. She is rather delicate, and far from her friends. Colonel Brentford is the only one——" And here he stopped short with an abruptness that made me hate Colonel Brentford and repent my temerity more and more.

"I am so sorry you don't seem to have

a favourable opinion of him," I said; "not that I know him, but I have heard some friends of mine—— Oh, I am sure you did not mean to say a word against him——"

"Against him!" said the Major stammering; "why, he is my best friend! He is the kindest fellow I know! He goes and sits with my wife when nobody else thinks of her. I don't want to find fault with any one; but Brentford—he is the man I am most grateful to in all the world!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" I cried. Good heavens! what a very bad manner the man must have had to give one such a false idea. "I shall do myself the pleasure of calling on Mrs. Bellinger early next week," I said; after all, it did not seem so insane to ask a man who was in the habit of going to sit with an invalid lady. And then a kind of inspiration stole into my mind. Afternoon tea! that was the thing; not an evening party, with all its horrors—which every man hates.

I don't know what Lady Denzil could think of me that evening; but I stayed until everybody had gone, with a determination to hear something more about him. I think she was surprised; but then she is one of those women who understand you, even when they don't in the least know what you mean. That seems foolish, but it is quite true. She saw I had a motive, and she forgave me, though she was tired, and Sir Thomas looked surprised.

"The fly has never come back for me," I said. "I must ask you to let George walk across the green with me. I have got my big shawl, and I don't mind the cold."

"Wait a little now they have all gone, and let us have a talk," said Lady Denzil. What a blessing it is to have to do with a woman who understands!

"Our new friends are very much like all the others, I think," said I. "Captain Fielding seems nice. Is he brother or cousin to those pretty girls?"

“ Brother, or I should not have him here,” said Lady Denzil ; “ I have no confidence in cousins. Colonel Brentford looks sensible. I should not have thought him likely to do anything so foolish as that business you know. I suppose Mrs. Spencer must have told you.”

“ No,” I said, with a little thrill running through me ; for, of course, it was something about Lady Isabella that was meant—and I was actually an agent employed in the matter, and knew, and yet did not know.

“ Lady Isabella and he were once engaged to be married,” said Lady Denzil, speaking low. “ Don’t mention this, unless Mrs. Spencer tells you ; but she is sure to tell you. And they quarrelled about some silly trifle. Mrs. Spencer says he flew into a passion, and that Lady Isabella had to give him up on account of his temper. He does not look like it, does he ? Mrs. Spencer is most anxious that they should not meet.”

“ Do you think it is right to prevent

people meeting, if they wish it?" said I; "perhaps Lady Isabella might think differently."

"It is best never to interfere," said Lady Denzil; "that is my principle—unless I am sure I can be of real use. Are you going now? You must wrap up well, for the night is rather cold."

"So my Major thought," I said to myself, as I went across the green; and I could not but smile at the thought of the poor gentleman buttoning up his great-coat as he drove with all those wild young fellows on their drag. Very likely he felt they might upset him at any moment driving through the dark—and it was a very dark night. My sympathies were much attracted by this good man. He had to give in to them a great deal, and put up with their foolish ways. I could not help wondering whether he had ever had such a commission given to him as mine; and then I reflected that Lady Isabella was not even young to be humoured

and have her fancies given in to. The Colonel looked a sensible, commonplace sort of man, with whom nobody had any right to quarrel. And perhaps Mrs. Spencer was right in doing her utmost to keep them apart. Perhaps Mrs. Spencer was right; but then, on the other hand, Lady Isabella was old enough to know her own mind and decide for herself. Such were the various thoughts that passed through my mind as I took that little walk through the dark with George behind me. It was a perplexing business altogether. But that I should be mixed up in it! I could not but take myself to task, and ask myself what call had I to be thus mixed up with every sort of foolish business—a woman of my age?

I saw Lady Isabella two days after. She came running in quite early, before luncheon, to my extreme surprise, and gave me a wistful look of inquiry which went to my very heart. She could not say anything however, for the Fielding girls were with me,

talking of nothing but the dance which Lady Denzil was going to give for them. They assailed Lady Isabella directly, the moment she entered.

“Oh, why are not you coming on Monday? Oh, Lady Isabella, do change your mind and come. It will be such a pretty dance. And all the officers are coming, so that there will be no want of partners. Lady Denzil says she always asks more men than ladies. Oh, Lady Isabella, do come!”

“That is very wise of Lady Denzil,” said Lady Isabella; “but I wonder how the extra men like it. No; I don’t think I shall go. I shall see all the officers, perhaps, another time.” And with that she gave me another look which made me tremble, holding me to my word.

“Perhaps you don’t dance,” said Emma Fielding. “Oh, it is such a pity you won’t come.”

“My husband won’t let me,” said Lady Isabella; “and, by the by, she will be wait-

ing for me now. I had something to ask, but never mind, another time will do."

She asked the question all the same with her eyes. She looked at me almost sternly, inquiring, as plainly as words, "Have you done it? Is my commission fulfilled?" which I could only answer by a deprecating, humble look, begging her as it were to have patience with me. She shook her head slightly as she shook hands with me, and smiled, and then she sighed. That was the worst of all. I read a reproach in the sound of that sigh.

"What does she mean by her husband?" said Edith Fielding. "Is she married, and does she call her husband 'she'? Isn't she very queer? That sort of person always bewilders me."

I could not help saying, "I dare say she does," with a certain irritation. As if it were within the bounds of possibility that creatures like these should understand Lady Isabella. And yet, alas! if she were enter-

ing into the lists with them, how could she ever stand against them? She, five-and-thirty, and a little stout; they, eighteen and nineteen. Is there a man in the world that would not turn to the young ones, and leave the mature woman? That was the question I asked myself. I don't think I am cynical; I have not a bad opinion of my fellow-creatures in general; but still there are some matters which one knows beforehand. The first thing to be done however was to make acquaintance with Colonel Brentford as soon as possible. I had promised to go to the dance, to take Lottie and Lucy Stoke; but then he would be dancing; he would not want to stand in a corner and talk to an old woman like me. Lady Isabella, at five-and-thirty, had given up dancing; but this man, though he was nearly five years older, of course did not think of giving it up. Most likely he felt himself on the level of the Fieldings and Stokes and the other girls, not on that

of his old love. Men and women are so different. But, at all events, I would do nothing before Monday: and in the meantime, I had promised to go and call on Major Bellinger's invalid wife. There had been something about him that pleased me. Not that he was attractive; but he had the look of a man who was not always at his ease, who had cares and perplexities in his life, and perhaps could not always make both ends meet. I always recognize that look. I am not very rich now, and never will be; but I once was poor, quite poor, and I know the look of it, and it goes to my heart.

Accordingly, the first day I was at liberty I drove into Royalborough to see Mrs. Bellinger. They were in a little house—one of the houses which people take for the purpose of letting them to the officers. It was opposite to a tall church, a three-storied house, with two rooms on each floor all the way up. There was a little

oblong strip of garden in front and another oblong strip behind ; and everything about it gave evidence that it was let furnished. But the little garden was rather pretty, and there was a virginian creeper hanging in rich red wreaths upon the walls. The drawing-room was the front room on the ground-floor. When I was shown in, it seemed to me that I interrupted the prettiest domestic scene. A lady, who looked very fragile and weak, though not ill, lay on a sofa in the room. Of course, she was Mrs. Bellinger. She was about forty, perhaps,—not much older than Lady Isabella. She had a lovely invalid complexion, a soft, delicate flush which came and went with every movement ; her hair was beginning to get gray, and was partially covered by a cap. She looked very weak, very worn, very sweet and smiling, and cheerful. Near her, on a low chair, sat a gentleman with a book in his hand. He had been reading aloud, and had just stopped when I came

to the door ; and in front of him, at a little distance, seated on a stool, just by her mother's feet, sat a girl of seventeen or so, with her head bent over her work. This was Edith, the Major's favourite child, the only one at home. And the gentleman who had been reading aloud was Colonel Brentford, the man about whom my mind had been busy night and day.

I took the chair that was given me, and I began to talk, but all the freedom and ease were taken out of me. I felt as if I had received a blow. Poor Lady Isabella ! I had already perceived that to put herself in competition with the young girls would be a hopeless notion indeed ; but it was no longer the girls in general, some of whom were empty-headed enough, but Edith Bellingier in particular. Poor Lady Isabella ! If she saw him once like this, I said to myself, she would not wish to see him again !

“ My husband told me you were going

to be so good," said the invalid. "He told me how kind you had been, asking for me. I am really quite well for me, and I am sure I could do a great deal more if they would but let me. Hush, Edie! I am dreadfully petted and spoiled, Mrs. Mulgrave. They make a baby of me, and Colonel Brentford is so kind as to come and read——"

"It is very good of him, I am sure," I said mechanically; and then, without knowing what I was doing, I looked at Edith. She was quite unconscious of any meaning in my look. She smiled at me in return with all the sweet composure yet shyness of a child. Would he be equally unconscious? I raised my eyes and looked steadily at him. He bore my scrutiny very well indeed. I knew there was an angry flush on my face which I could not quite conceal, and an eager look of inquiry. It puzzled him, there was no doubt. A vague sort of wonder came into his eyes, and he smiled

too. What could the old woman mean? I am sure he was thinking. Edith was very pretty, but then a great many girls are pretty. What was particular about her was her sweet look, which moved me even though I was so hostile to her. One saw she was ready to run anywhere, to do anything, at the least little glance from her mother. She was mending stockings—the homeliest work—and she looked such a serviceable, useful creature—so different from those Fielding girls, who thought of nothing but the dance. To be sure, the stockings and the useful look were much more likely to please me than to attract a guardsman; but I did not think of that in my sudden jealousy of her. Poor, poor Lady Isabella!

And he did not go away, as he would have done had this been a chance visit. He kept his place, and joined in the conversation as if he belonged to the house. When I asked Mrs. Bellinger to come and

see me, he seconded me quite eagerly. He was sure she was able, he said; while Edith put her pretty head on one side, and looked very wise and very doubtful.

“Oh, Colonel Brentford, please don't be so rash—please don't!” said Edith. “It is very, very kind of Mrs. Mulgrave, but we must think it over first—we must indeed.”

“I will send my pony,” said I; “he is the steadiest little fellow, and it is such a pretty drive. The weather is so mild that I am sure it would do you good.”

“Now, Edith, please let me go,” said the invalid. “Do not be such a little hard-hearted inexorable—Colonel Brentford is the kindest of you all. He is ready to let me have a little indulgence, and so is the Major, Mrs. Mulgrave; but Edith is the most odious little tyrant——”

“Mamma dear, it is for your good,” said Edith with the deepest gravity; and the mother and the friend looked at each other and laughed. How pretty it was to see

her shaking her young head, looking so serious, so judicious, so full of care! "No wonder if he is fond of her," I said to myself. I felt my own heart melting; but, all the same, I steeled it against her, feeling that I was on the other side.

"And I am sure," I said with an effort—for it seemed almost like encouraging him—"I shall be very glad to see Colonel Brentford too; if you will take the trouble to come so far for a cup of tea?"

He said it would give him the greatest pleasure, with a cordiality that made me cross, and got up and took his leave, shaking hands with me in his friendliness. Why was he so friendly, I wonder? When he was gone, Mrs. Bellinger launched into his praises.

"You must not think it is only me he is good to," she said; "he is kind to everybody. People laugh at the guardsmen, and make fun of them; but if they only knew George Brentford! Because they

see him everywhere in society, they think he is just as frivolous as the rest. But if they knew what kind of places he goes to when nobody sees him—as we do, Edith?”

“Yes, mamma,” said Edith, as calm as any cabbage. The mother was quite moved by her gratitude and enthusiasm, but the daughter took it all very quietly. “He means to be very kind, but he is rash,” said the little wise woman; “he gives the boys knives and things, though he knows they always cut themselves. He thinks so much more of pleasing people than of what is right. If Mrs. Mulgrave would leave it open, mamma dear, and then we could see how you are.”

This was how it was finally decided; indeed, before I left, even after that first visit, I could see that things were generally decided as Edith thought best. They were to come on Saturday—the Saturday before the ball—if Mrs. Bellinger was well enough; and Colonel Brentford was

to come too. I asked myself all the way back what Lady Isabella would think of the arrangement. That was not how she expected to meet him. She had wanted to see her old love—a man whom (I could not but feel) she had never quite put out of her heart—perhaps only to prove herself, perhaps to try if any lingerings of the old tenderness remained in him. And now that it was arranged, and she was really to see him, it was in company of a young bright creature who, there could be little doubt, was all to him that Lady Isabella had ever been. What a shock and bitter dispelling of all dreams for her! but yet, perhaps, to do that at once and at a blow was kindest after all.

LADY ISABELLA.

CHAPTER III.

As I drove home, strangely enough, I met the ladies on their afternoon walk. Mrs. Spencer was in advance as usual, talking rapidly and with animation, while Lady Isabella lagged a step behind, pausing to look at the ripe brambles and the beautiful ruddy autumn leaves.

“Just look what a bit of colour,” she was saying when I came up; but Mrs. Spencer’s mind, it was evident, was full of other things.

“I wonder how you can care for such nonsense,” she said; “I never saw any one so unexcitable. After me fussing myself into a fever, to preserve you from this

annoyance! and I knew it would be too much for you——”

“Hush!” said Lady Isabella emphatically, and then Mrs. Spencer perceived the pony carriage for the first time, and restrained herself. She changed her tone in a moment, and came up to me with her alert step when I drew the pony up.

“What a nice afternoon for a drive,” she said; “have you been at Royalborough?—is there anything going on? I have dragged Isabella out for a walk, as usual much against her will.”

“I have been to make a call,” I said, “on a poor invalid, the wife of Major Bellinger.”

“Oh, yes! I know, I know,” said Mrs. Spencer; “he is to be the barrack-master. He rose from the ranks, I think, or something—very poor, and a large family. I know quite what sort of person she would be. The kind of woman that has been pretty, and has quite broken down with

children and trouble—I know. It was very good of you; quite like yourself.”

“If it was very good of me, I have met with a speedy reward,” said I, “for I have quite fallen in love with her—and her daughter. They are coming to me on Saturday—if Mrs. Bellinger is able—for afternoon tea.”

“I know exactly the kind of person,” said Mrs. Spencer, nodding her head. “Ah, my dear Mrs. Mulgrave, you are always so good, and so——”

“Easily taken in,” she was going to say, but I suppose I looked very grave, for she stopped.

“Is the daughter pretty, too?” said Lady Isabella: a flush had come upon her face, and she looked at me intently, waiting, I could see, for a sign. She understood that this had something to do with the commission she had given me. And I was so foolish as to think she had divined my thoughts, and had fixed upon

Edith, by instinct, as an obstacle in her way.

“Never mind the daughter,” I said hastily, “but do come on Saturday afternoon, and see if I am not justified in liking the mother. I dare say they are not very rich, but they are not unpleasantly poor, or, if they are, they don’t make a show of it; and a little society, I am sure, would do her all the good in the world.”

This time Lady Isabella looked so intently at me, that I ventured to give the smallest little nod just to show her that I meant her to come. She took it up in a moment. Her face brightened all over. She made me a little gesture of thanks and satisfaction. And she put on instantly her old laughing, lively, satirical air.

“Of course we shall come,” she said, “even if this lady were not sick and poor. These qualities are great temptations to us, you are aware; but even if she were just like other people we should come.”

“Well, Isabella!” said Mrs. Spencer, “you who are so unwilling to go anywhere!” but of course she could not help adding a civil acceptance of my invitation; and so that matter was settled more easily than I could have hoped.

I saw them the next day—once more by accident. We were both calling at the same house, and Lady Isabella seized the opportunity to speak to me. She drew me apart into a corner, on pretence of showing me something. “Look here,” she said, with a flush on her face, “tell me, do you think me a fool—or worse? That is about my own opinion of myself.”

“No,” I said, “indeed I don’t. I think you are doing what is quite right. This is not a matter which concerns other people, that you should be guided by them, but yourself.”

“Oh, it does not concern any one very much,” she said, with a forced laugh. “I am not so foolish as to think *that*. It is

a mere piece of curiosity—folly. The fact is, one does not grow wise as one grows old, though of course one ought. And—he is—really to be there on Saturday? Despise me, laugh at me, make fun of me!—I deserve it, I know.”

“He is really to come—I hope.” I said it faltering, with a sense of fright at my own temerity: and Lady Isabella gave me a doubtful, half-suspicious look as she left me. Now that it had come so near I grew alarmed, and doubted much whether I should have meddled. It is very troublesome having to do with other people’s affairs. It spoiled my rest that night, and my comfort all day. I almost prayed that Saturday might be wet, that Mrs. Bellinger might not be able to come. But, alas! Saturday morning was the brightest, loveliest autumn morning, all wrapped in a lovely golden haze, warm and soft as summer, yet subdued and chastened and sweet as summer in its heyday never is:

and the first post brought me a note from Edith, saying that her mamma felt so well, and was so anxious to come. Accordingly, I had to make up my mind to it. I sent the pony carriage off by twelve o'clock, that the pony might have a rest before he came back, and I got out my best china, and had my little lawn carefully swept clean of faded leaves, and my flower-beds trimmed a little. They were rather untidy with the mignonette, which had begun to grow bushy, but then it was very sweet; and the asters and red geraniums looked quite gay and bright. My monthly rose, too, was covered with flowers. I am very fond of monthly roses; they are so sweet and so pathetic in autumn, remonstrating always, and wondering why summer should be past; or at least that is the impression they convey to me. I know some women who are just like them, women who have a great deal to bear, and cannot help feeling surprised that so much should

be laid upon them; yet who keep on flowering and blossoming in spite of all, brightening the world and keeping the air sweet, not for any reason, but because they can't help it. My visitor who was coming was, I think, something of that kind.

The first of the party to arrive were Major Bellinger and Colonel Brentford; they had walked over, and the Major was very eloquent about my kindness to his wife. "Nothing could possibly do her so much good," he said. "I don't know how to thank you, Mrs. Mulgrave. Brentford says he made up his mind she must go the very first minute, whether she could or not—he said he was so sure you would do her good."

"I am very glad Colonel Brentford had such a favourable opinion of me," I said.

Then I stopped short, feeling very much embarrassed. If Lady Isabella had only come in *then*, before the ladies arrived—but, of course, she did not. She came

only after Mrs. Bellinger was established on the sofa, and Edith had taken off her hat. They looked quite a family party, I could not but feel. Colonel Brentford, probably, was very nearly as old as the Major himself, and quite as old as the Major's wife; but then he had the unmarried look which of itself seems a kind of guarantee of youth, and his face was quite free of that cloud of care which was more or less upon both their faces. He was standing outside the open window with Edith when Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella came in. He did not see them. He was getting some of the monthly roses for her, which were high up upon the verandah. It was so high that it was very seldom we were able to get the flowers; but he was a tall man, and he managed it. Lady Isabella perceived him at once, and I saw a little shiver run over her. She gave Mrs. Bellinger, poor soul, but a very stiff salutation, and sat down on a chair.

near the window. She did not notice the girl. She had not thought of Edith, and no sort of suspicion as yet had been roused in her. She sat down quietly, and waited until he should come in.

How strange it was!—all bright full sunshine, no shadow or mystery to favour the romance; the Bellingers and Mrs. Spencer talking in the most ordinary way; the Colonel outside, pulling down the branch of pale roses; and Edith smiling, shaking off some dewdrops that had fallen from them upon her pretty hair. All so ordinary, so calm, so peaceable—but Lady Isabella seated there, silent, waiting—and I looking on with a chill at my very heart. He was a long time before he came in—talking to Edith was pleasant out in that verandah, with all the brilliant sunshine about, and the russet trees so sweet in the afternoon haze.

“You shall have some,” he said; “but we must give some to your mother first.”

And then he came in with the branch in his hand. I don't know whether some sense of suppressed excitement in the air struck him as he paused in the window, but he did stand still there, and looked round him with an inquiring look. He had not left so many people in the room as were in it now, and he was surprised. He looked at me, and then I suppose my agitated glance directed him, in spite of myself, to Lady Isabella. He gave a perceptible start when he saw her, and smothered an exclamation. He recognized her instantly. His face flushed, and the branch of roses in his hand trembled. All this took place quite unobserved by anybody but me, and, perhaps, Edith, outside the window, who was coming in after him, and now stood on tiptoe, trying to see what was going on and wondering. Lady Isabella looked up at him with a face so uncertain in its expression that my terror was great. Was she angry? Was she

going to betray herself, and show the nervous irritability which possessed her? She was very pale—white to her lips; and he so flushed and startled. She looked up at him, and then her lips parted and she smiled.

“I think *I* should like one of the roses,” she said.

Colonel Brentford did not say a word. He made her a bow, and with a trembling hand (how it did tremble!—it made me shake with sympathy to see it) he detached a spray from the great branch, which was all pink with roses, and gave it to her; and then he went away into the furthest corner, throwing down his roses on a table as he passed, and stared out of the window. To him the meeting was quite unexpected, I suppose—something utterly startling and sudden. The talk went on all the same. Edith, surprised, came in, and stood with her back to the open window, looking after him in a state of bewilderment. He had

gone in smiling, to give her mother the flowers; and now he was standing with his back to us, the flowers cast down anywhere. As for Lady Isabella, she had buried her face in her roses, and sat quite silent, taking no notice of any one. Such was this meeting, which I had brought about. And all the time I had to talk to Major Bellinger, and look as if I were attending to what he said.

“Does Edith sing?” I asked in desperation. “I am so glad! Do sing us something, my dear—oh, anything—and the simpler the better. How nice it is of you not to want your music! My piano is not in very good order, I play so seldom now; but it will not matter much to your young fresh voice.”

I said this, not knowing what I was saying, and hurried her to the piano, thinking, if she sang ever so badly, it still would be a blessed relief amid all this agitation and excitement.

“I only sing to mamma,” said Edith.

“ I will try if you wish it ; but papa does not care for my singing—and Colonel Brentford hates it,” she added, raising her voice.

There was a little spite, a little pique, in what Edith said. She was confounded by his sudden withdrawal, and anxious to call him back and punish him. This however was not the effect her words produced. Colonel Brentford took no notice, and kept his back towards us ; but on another member of our little company the effect was startling enough.

“ Colonel Brentford ! ” said Mrs. Spencer with a little shriek ; and her nice comfortable commonplace talk with Mrs. Bellinger came to an end at once. She got up and came to me, and drew me into another corner. “ For heaven’s sake,” she said, “ tell me, what did the girl mean ? Colonel Brentford ! He is the one man in all the world whom we must not meet. That is not him surely *he* at the window ? Oh, good heavens ! what

is to be done? I wanted to tell you, but I never had an opportunity. Mrs. Mulgrave, he was once engaged to Isabella. They had a quarrel, and it nearly cost her her life. I think I would almost have given mine to preserve her from this trial. Has she seen him?—Oh, my poor dear! my poor dear!”

Let anybody imagine what was the scene presented in my drawing-room now. Colonel Brentford at the other end, with his back to us all, gazing out at the window : Major Bellinger at one side of the room, and his wife at the other, suddenly deserted by the people they had been respectively talking to, looking across at each other with raised eyebrows and questioning looks. Edith, confused and half-offended, stood before the closed piano, where I had led her ; and Mrs. Spencer holding me by the arm in the opposite corner to that occupied by Colonel Brentford, was discoursing close to my ear with excited looks and voluble utter-

ance. And these people were strangers to me, not like familiar friends, who could wait for an explanation. I could only whisper in Mrs. Spencer's ear, "For heaven's sake, do not let us make a scene now—let us keep everything as quiet as possible now!"

Just then Lady Isabella suddenly rose from her seat, and sat down beside Mrs. Bellinger, and began to talk to her. I could not quite hear how she began, but I made out by instinct, I suppose, what she was saying :

"I cannot ask Mrs. Mulgrave to introduce me, for I see she is occupied ; but I know who you are, and you must let me introduce myself. I am Lady Isabella Morton, and I live here with a great friend of mine. Colonel Brentford and I used to know each other long ago——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bellinger, drawing her breath quickly ; "I think I have heard——"

“He was startled to see me,” said Lady Isabella. “Of course, he did not expect—but we are always meeting people we don’t expect. Your daughter is going to sing. Hush! please hush! I want to hear it,” she cried, raising her hand with a little sign to the Major, who looked as though he might be going to talk. Every word she said was audible through the room, her voice was so clear and full.

Colonel Brentford turned round slowly. He turned almost as if he were a man upon a pedestal, which some pivot had the power to move. Either it was her voice which attracted him, or he had heard what she said, or perhaps he was recovering from the shock of the first meeting.

It was at this moment that Edith began to sing. I do not know what her feelings were, or if she cared anything about it; but certainly all the rest of the party, with the exception of her father and mother, were excited to such a strange degree, that I felt

as if some positive explosion must occur. How is it that fire and air, and all sorts of senseless things, cause explosions, and that human feeling does not? Edith's girlish, fresh voice, rising out of the midst of all this electrified one. It was a pretty voice singing one of the ordinary foolish songs, which are all alike—a voice without the least passion or even sentiment in it, sweet, fresh, guiltless of any feeling. Lady Isabella leaned back in her chair, and listened with a faint smile upon her face; Colonel Brentford stood undecided between her and the piano, sometimes making a half-movement towards the singer, but turning his eyes the other way; while Mrs. Spencer, on the other side of the room, sat with her hands clasped, and gazed at her friend. The two Bellingers listened as people listen to the singing of their child; a soft little complacent smile was on the mother's face. When Edith approached a false note, or when she was a little out in her time, Mrs. Bellinger

gave a quick glance round to see if anybody noticed it, and blushed, as it were, under her breath. The Major kept time softly with his finger; and we—listened with our hearts thumping in our ears, bewildered by the pleasant little song in its inconceivable calm, and yet glad of the moment's breathing time.

“Thank you, my dear,” said I, when the song was done; and we all said “Thanks” with more or less fervour, while the parents, innocent people, looked on well pleased.

And then I went to Edith at the piano, and asked all about her music, what masters she had had, and a thousand other trifles, not hearing what she answered me. But I did hear something else. I heard Colonel Brentford speak to Lady Isabella, and took in every word. There was nothing remarkable about it; but he spoke low, as if his words meant more than met the ear.

“I knew you were living here,” was all he said.

“Oh, I suppose so,” said Lady Isabella. She had been quite calm before, but I knew by her voice she was flurried now. And then there followed that little agitated laugh, which in the last few days I had learnt to know. “Most people know where everybody lives,” she added, with an attempt at indifference. “I too knew that your regiment was here.”

“But I did not expect to see you just then,” he went on. “And that rose— Pardon me if I was rude. I was taken altogether by surprise.”

“That I should ask you for a rose?” she said, holding it up. “It is but a poor little thing, as these late flowers always are. Not much scent, and less colour, but sweet, because it is over—almost a thing of the past.”

“I was taken altogether by surprise,” said Colonel Brentford.

He did not make any reply to her. He was not clever, as she was. He repeated his little phrase of confused no-meaning, and his

voice trembled. And while he was saying all this, Edith was telling me that she had had a few—only a very few—lessons from Herrmannstadt, but her mamma hoped that if they stayed at Royalborough, she might be able to have some from Dr. Delvey or Miss de la Pluie.

“If, my dear?” said I. “I thought it was quite settled that you were to stay!” And then her answer became unintelligible to me; for my ears were intent upon what was going on behind us, and instead of listening to Edith, I heard only Colonel Brentford’s feet shuffling uneasily upon the carpet, and Mrs. Spencer asking Lady Isabella if she did not think it was time to go.

“But you have not had any tea,” said I, rushing to the front: though, indeed, I was not at all sure that I wished them to stay.

“We never take any tea,” said Mrs. Spencer unblushingly; though she knew that I knew she was the greatest afternoon tea-drinker in all Dinglefield; “and we have

to call upon old Mrs. Lloyd, who is quite ill. Did you know she was ill? We must not neglect the sick and the old, you know, even for the pleasantest society. Isabella, my dear!"

Colonel Brentford went after us to the door. He looked at them wistfully, watching their movements, until he saw that Mrs. Spencer had a cloak over her arm. Then he came forward with a certain heavy alacrity.

"Let me carry it for you," he said.

"Oh, thanks! We are not going far; don't take the trouble. I would not for the world take you from your friends," cried Mrs. Spencer wildly.

"It is no trouble, if you will let me," he said.

He had taken the cloak out of her astonished hand, and Lady Isabella, in the meantime, with a smile on her face, had walked on in advance. Even I, though I felt so much agitated that I could have cried, could not but laugh to see Mrs. Spencer's

look of utter discomfiture as she turned from my door, attended by this man whom she so feared. I stood and watched them as they went away, with a mingled feeling of relief and anxiety and wonder. Thus it was over. Was it over? Could this be a beginning or an end?

When I went back to the Bellingers they were consulting together, and I fear were not quite well pleased. The Major and his daughter drew back as I entered, but I saw it on their faces.

“I hope you will pardon me,” I said, “for leaving you alone. My friends are gone, and Colonel Brentford has kindly walked with them to carry something. Now I know you must want some tea.”

“Indeed, mamma is a great deal too tired,” said Edith, who naturally was most nettled, “I am sure we ought to go home.”

“I think she is over-tired,” said the Major doubtfully.

He did not want to be dragged away so

suddenly ; but yet he was a little surprised. Mrs. Bellinger, for her part, did not say anything, but she looked pale, and my heart smote me. And then there appeared a line of anxiety, which I had not noticed before, between her eyes.

“ It is only that she wants some tea,” said I ; and the Stokes coming in at the moment, to my infinite satisfaction, made a diversion, and brought things back to the ordinary channel of talk. And then they challenged the Major and Edith to croquet, for which all the hoops and things were set out on the lawn. Mrs. Bellinger and I began to talk when they went away : and presently Colonel Brentford came back and sat silently by us for five minutes—then went out to the croquet-players. A little silence fell upon us, as the sound of the voices grew merrier outside. It may be thought a stupid game nowadays, but it is pretty to look at, when one is safe and out of it ; and we two ladies sat in the cool room and watched the players, no doubt with grave thoughts enough.

Colonel Brentford took Edith in hand at once. He showed her how to play, advised her, followed her, was always by her side. What did it mean? Was he glad that his old love had passed away like a dream, and left him free to indulge in this new one—to throw himself into this younger, brighter existence? Neither of us spoke, and I wondered whether we were both busy with the same thought.

At length Mrs. Bellinger broke the silence.

“I feel so anxious about our Colonel,” she said; “he is so good and so nice. And your friends came by chance, quite by chance, Mrs. Mulgrave? How strange it is? Do you know that there was once——But of course you know. Oh, I hope this meeting will be for good, and not for harm.”

“For harm!” I said, with words that did not quite express my thoughts. “They are both staid, sober people, not likely to go back to any youthful nonsense. How could it do harm?”

Mrs. Bellinger shook her head. There was a cloud upon her face.

“We shall see in time,” she said, in a melancholy, prophetic way, and sighed again.

To whom could it be that she apprehended harm? Not to Lady Isabella, whom she did not know. Was it to the child then, or to *him*?

LADY ISABELLA.

CHAPTER IV.

NEXT day I had a number of visitors. Mrs. Spencer had made it so well known in Dinglefield that nobody was to invite Lady Isabella to meet the new officers, that my unexampled temerity startled the whole neighbourhood. "Of course they have met, notwithstanding all our precautions—and fancy, at Mrs. Mulgrave's! She was almost the only person Mrs. Spencer had not told," my neighbours said; for the place is so small, that of course everybody knows what everybody else is doing on the green. The Stokes were the first to call, and they were full of it:

"Fancy not telling us that Lady Isabella had been here?" cried Lottie. "You must

have known there was something, or you would have told us. And what did you mean by it? Did you think they ought to have another chance; or did you think——? Oh, I do so wish you would tell me what you meant!”

“Another chance, indeed!” said Lucy. “As if Colonel Brentford—a handsome man, and just a nice age—would look twice at that old thing!”

“He is a good deal older than the old thing,” said I; “and it is a poor account of both men and women, Lucy, if everything is to give way to mere youth. You yourself will not be seventeen always. You should remember that.”

“Well, but then I shall be married,” said Lucy; “and I sha’n’t mind if nobody pays me any attention. I shall have my husband and my children of course; but an old maid——”

“Be quiet, Lucy,” said her sister angrily. “If you girls only knew how to hold your

tongues, then you might have a chance ; but please tell me, Mrs. Mulgrave—you won't say you did not mean anything, for of course you knew—— ? ”

“ I don't intend to say anything about it, my dear ; and here is Mrs. Spencer coming, if you would like to make any further inquiries,” I said. I was quite glad to see her, to get rid of their questionings. Mrs. Spencer was very much flurried and disturbed, out of breath both of mind and body.

“ Oh, my dear Mrs. Mulgrave, what an unfortunate business ! ” she said, the moment the girls were gone. “ I have nobody but myself to blame, for I never told you. I thought as you did not give many parties—and then I know you don't care much for those dancing sort of men : and how was I to suppose he would be thrown upon your hands like this ? It has upset me so,” she said turning to me, with her eyes full of tears ; “ I have not slept all night.”

Her distress was a great deal too genuine

to be smiled at. "I am so sorry," I said; "but, after all, I do not think it is serious. It did not seem to disturb her much."

"Ah, that is because she does not show it," said Mrs. Spencer. "She is so unselfish. You might stab her to the heart and she would never say a word, if there was any one near who could be made unhappy by it. She would not let *me* see, for she knows it would make me wretched. And I *am* quite wretched about her. If this were to bring up old feelings! And you know she nearly died of it—at the time."

The tears came dropping down on poor Mrs. Spencer's thin nose. It was too thin, almost sharp in outline, but such tears softened all its asperity away. I could not help thinking of those dreadful French proverbs, which are so remorseless and yet so true; about "*l'un qui aime, et l'autre qui se laisse aimer*;" about "*l'un qui baise et l'autre qui tend la joue*." Is it always so in this world? I could have beaten myself

for having interfered at all in the matter. Why should anybody ever interfere? Life is hard enough without any assistance to make it worse.

Lady Isabella herself came in late, when, fortunately, I was alone; and she was in a very different mood. She came in, and gave a curious, humorous glance round the room, and then sat down in the chair by the window, where she had sat the day before, and asked Colonel Brentford for that rose.

“Is it possible it has been and is over,” she said, in her mocking way; “that great, wonderful event, to which I looked forward so much? It happened just here: and yet the place is exactly the same. How funny it is when one remembers that it has happened, and yet feels one’s self exactly like what one was before——”

“You are not sorry, then?” I cried, not knowing what to say.

“Sorry? oh, no,” she said with momentary fervour: and then blushed scarlet. “On the

contrary, I am very glad. It proved to me—I got all I wanted. I am quite pleased with myself. I can't have been such a fool after all; for—he is not clever, you know—but he is a man a woman need not be ashamed to have been in love with: and that is saying a great deal.”

“And is it only a ‘have been?’” said I; for after all when one had taken so much trouble it was hard that nothing should come of it. I felt as if I had taken a great deal of trouble, and all in vain.

“Indeed, I should hope so!” cried Lady Isabella, getting up and drawing her shawl round her hastily. “You surely did not think that I meant anything more. I am in a great hurry, I have only a few minutes to spare; and thanks to you, good friend, I have had my whim, and I am satisfied. I don't feel at all ashamed of having been fond of him—once.”

And with these words she ran away, silencing all questions. Was this indeed

all? Was it a mere whim? To tell the truth, when I tried to put myself in her position, it seemed to me much wiser of Lady Isabella to let it end so. She was very well off and comfortable: she had come to an age when one likes to have one's own way, and does not care to adopt the habits of others; and what an immense *bouleversement* it would make if she should marry and break up that pleasant house, and throw herself upon the chances of married life, abandoning Mrs. Spencer, who was as good as married to her, and who, no doubt, calculated on her society all her life. I said to myself—if I were Lady Isabella! And then there was the great chance, the almost certainty that he would never attempt to carry it any farther. He was a young-looking man, and no doubt (though it is very odd to me how they can do it) he felt himself rather on the level of a girl of twenty than of a woman of thirty-five. He had been a good deal startled and touched by the meet-

ing, which was not wonderful : but he had returned to Edith's side all the same ; and, no doubt, that was where he would stay. Edith was very young, and her parents were poor, and the best thing for her would be to marry a man who was able to take care of her, and make her very comfortable, and to whom, in return, she would be entirely devoted. Edith could consent to be swallowed up in him altogether, and to have no life but that of her husband ; and except by means of a husband who was well off the poor child never was likely to do anything for herself or her family, but would have to live a life of hard struggling with poverty and premature acquaintance with care. This was of course the point of view from which the matter should be regarded. To Lady Isabella Colonel Brentford's means or position were unnecessary. She was very well off, very fully established in the world without him. And she could not be swallowed up in him, and renounce everything that

was her own to become his wife. She was an independent being, with a great many independent ways and habits. It was better for him, better for her, better for Edith that nothing should come of this meeting; and yet—how foolish one is about such matters: what vain fancies come into one's head!

Everything sank into its ordinary calm however from that day. I did not see Mrs. Spencer and Lady Isabella for a week after, and then they were exactly as they had always been. Lady Isabella made no remark to me of any kind on the subject, but Mrs. Spencer took me aside to give me her opinion. "I am so glad to tell you," she said, "that your little inadvertence has done no harm. Oh, I forgot: it was not an inadvertence on your part, but my own fault for not telling you. It has done no harm, I am so glad to say. Isabella seems to have quite settled down again. I don't believe she has given him another thought. Of course it was a shock just at the moment. But you must not blame yourself,

indeed you must not. Probably she would have met him somewhere sooner or later. I really feel quite glad that it is over; and it has done her no harm."

This was all I gained by my exertions; and I made a resolution that I would certainly never be persuaded to do anything of the kind again. For, indeed, it had complicated my relations with various people. What could I do, for instance, about the Bellingers? In the meantime I simply dropped them, after having rushed into such an appearance of intimacy. If anybody else had done it, I should have been indignant; but how could I help myself? I could not have Edith in my house and see him wooing her, after having taken such an interest in the other side. I could not insult Lady Isabella by letting that go on under her very eyes. And though I wondered sometimes what the respectable Major would think, and whether poor dear Mrs. Bellinger would be wounded, I had not the fortitude to continue the acquaintance.

I simply dropped them: it was the only thing I could do.

And then the winter came on all at once, which was a sort of excuse. There was a week or two of very bad weather and I caught cold, and was very glad of it, for, of course, nobody could expect me to drive to Royal-borough in my little open carriage with a bad cold, through the rain and wind. A very dreary interval of dead quiet to me, and miserable weather, followed this little burst of excitement. I felt sore about it altogether, as a matter in which I had somehow been to blame, and which was a complete failure—to say the least. One day when I had been out for half an hour's walk in the middle of the day, Colonel Brentford called: but the card which I found on my table was the only enlightenment this brought me, and my cold kept me away from all the society on the green for six weeks, during which time I had no information on the subject. Sometimes, as usual, I saw Lady Isabella, but there was

no change in her. She had quite settled down again, was the same as ever, and Mrs. Spencer had ceased to keep any watch upon her. And so it was all over, as a tale that is told.

The first time I was out after my influenza was at Lady Denzil's, where, to my surprise, I found Edith Bellinger. She scarcely looked at me, and it was with some difficulty I got our slender thread of acquaintance renewed. Her mother, she thanked me, was better; her father was quite well; they had been sorry to hear of my cold; yes, of course it was a long way to drive. Such was the fashion of Edith's talk; and I acknowledged to myself that it was perfectly just.

"Your mamma must think it very strange that I have never gone to see her again," I was beginning to say, feeling uncomfortable and guilty.

"I don't suppose she has thought about it," Edith said hastily; and then she stopped

short and blushed. "I beg your pardon, I did not mean to be rude."

"You are quite right," I said—"not in being rude, but in feeling as you do. I seem to have been very capricious and unfriendly: but I have been ill; and you do not look quite so well yourself as when I saw you last."

"Oh, I am well enough," said the girl; and then those quick youthful tears of self-compassion which lie so near the surface came rushing to her eyes. "It is nothing, I—I am not very strong; and Lady Denzil, who is always kind, has asked me here for change of air."

"Poor child," I said, "tell me what is the matter?" But I was not to learn at this moment at least. Colonel Brentford, whom I had not seen till now, came forward and bent over her.

"They are going to sing something, and they want you to take a part. I have come for you," he said.

He looked down upon her quite tenderly, and held out his hand to help her to rise. Yes, of course, that was how it must have ended. It was all settled, of that I could have no doubt. I looked at them with, I fear, a look that had some pain and some pity in it, as they left me ; and when I withdrew my eyes from them, my look met Lady Isabella's, who was seated at the other side of the room. She had her usual half-mocking, half-kindly smile on her lips, but it looked to me set and immovable, as if she had been painted so and could not change ; and she was pale—surely she was pale. It troubled me sadly, and all the more that I dared not say a word to any one, dared not even make any manifestation of sympathy to herself. She had chosen to renew her old acquaintance with him, had chosen to break down the barrier which sympathizing friends had raised round her, and to meet him with all freedom as if he were totally indifferent to her. This had been her own choice ; and now, to be sure, she had

to look on, and see all there might be to be seen.

But he was very civil to me when he chanced to be thrown near me. He said, in a much more friendly tone than poor Edith's, that Mrs. Bellinger had been sorry to hear of my cold; that he hoped I should soon be able to go and see her; and when I said that Edith did not look strong, he shook his head. "She is rather wilful, and does not know her own mind," he said, and I thought he sighed. Was it that she could not make up her mind to accept him? Was it—— But speculation was quite useless, and there was no information to be got out of his face.

A little after this I went to see Mrs. Bellinger, but was coldly received. Edith was not quite well, she said; she had been doing too much, and had gone away for a thorough change. Colonel Brentford? Oh, he had gone to visit his brother Sir Charles Brentford, in Devonshire. Edith was in Devonshire, too—at Torquay.

“They are a little afraid of her lungs,” Mrs. Bellinger said. “Oh, not I; I don’t think there is very much the matter; but still they are afraid—and of course it is better to prevent than to cure.”

It seemed to me a heartless way for a mother to speak, and I was discouraged by my reception. When I came away I made up my mind not to take any further trouble about the matter. Perhaps I had been mistaken in them at first, or perhaps—but then, to be sure, I had another motive, and that existed no longer. It was my fault more than theirs.

I heard no more of the Bellingers nor much more of Colonel Brentford for a long time after this. He, to be sure, went and came, as the other officers did, to one house and another, and I met him from time to time, and exchanged three words with him, but no more. And Lady Isabella made no reference whatever to that agitating moment when I, too, had a share in her

personal history. Even Mrs. Spencer seemed to have forgotten all about it. Their house was more exquisite than ever that winter. They had built a new conservatory, which opened from the ante-room, and was full of the most bright, beautiful flowers—forced, artificial things to be sure they were, blooming long before their season, but still very lovely to look at in those winter days. The large drawing-room and the ante-room, and the conservatory at the end of all, were as warm and fragrant and soft and delicious as if they had been fairy-land—the temperature so equable, everything so soft to tread on, to sit on, to look at. It was a little drawing-room paradise—an Eden, with Turkey carpets instead of turf, and the flowers all in pots instead of growing free. And here Lady Isabella would sit, with that touch of mockery in her laugh, with little gibes at most people and most things, not quite so friendly or gentle as they once were. Now and

then, I have thought, she cast a wistful glance at the door; now and then her spirits were fitful, her face paler than usual—but she had never been more lively or more bright.

It was past Christmas, and already a pale glimmer of spring was in the air, when this little episode showed signs of coming to its conclusion. I remember the day quite distinctly—a pale day in the beginning of February, when everything was quite destitute of colour. The sky was gray and so was the grass, and the skeletons of the trees stood bleak against the dulness. It was the kind of afternoon when one is glad to hear any news, good or bad—anything that will quicken the blood a little, and restore to the nervous system something like its usual tone.

This stimulus was supplied by the entrance to the house of our two neighbours Lucy Stoke—very important, and bursting with the dignity of a secret. She kept it in painfully

for the first two minutes, moved chiefly by her reverential admiration for the fine furniture, the beautiful room, the atmosphere of splendour about her. But I was there, unfortunately, of whom Lucy was not afraid. It was to me, accordingly, that the revelation burst forth.

“Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave,” she said, “you know her! Who do you think I met going down to Lady Denzil’s, in a white bonnet,—though it’s such a dismal day—and a blue dress—quite light blue—the dress she went away in, I should think?”

“A bride, I suppose,” I said; “but whom?—I don’t remember any recent bride.”

“Oh, yes, I *know* you know her! Young Mrs. Brentford—Edith Bellinger that was.”

“Edith Bellinger!” I cried, with a sudden pang. It was nothing to me. I had no reason to suppose it was anything to anybody, but yet——

“It must have been the dress she went away in,” said Lucy: “blue trimmed with bands

of satin and fringe, and a white bonnet with blue flowers. It was very becoming. But fancy, only three weeks married, and coming to see Lady Denzil alone !”

“And so she is Mrs. Brentford,” said Mrs. Spencer, in a tone of genuine satisfaction. She would have suffered herself to be cut in little pieces for Lady Isabella, she would have done anything for her—but she was glad, unfeignedly thankful and relieved, to feel that this danger was past.

And Lucy, well pleased, ran on for ten minutes or more. It felt like ten hours. When she went away at last, Mrs. Spencer went with her to the door, to hear further particulars. All this time Lady Isabella had never said a word. She was in the shade, and her face was not very distinctly visible. When they left the room, she rose all at once, pulling herself up by the arms of her chair. Such a change had come upon her face that I was frightened. Every vestige of colour had left her cheek ; her

lip was parched, and tightly drawn across her teeth. She laughed as she got up from the chair.

“We were all wishing for something to stir us up,” she said; “but I never hoped for anything so exciting as Mrs. Brentford’s blue dress.”

“Where are you going?” I said, in sudden terror.

“Up stairs—only up stairs. Where should I go?” she said, with that short hard laugh. “Tell Mrs. Spencer—something. I have gone to fetch—Mrs. Brentford’s blue dress.”

Oh, how that laugh pained me! I would rather, a thousand times rather, have heard her cry. She went away like a ghost, without any noise; and Mrs. Spencer, full of thanksgiving, came back.

“Where is Isabella? Oh, Mrs. Mulgrave, I can’t tell you what a relief this news is,” she said. “I have always been so dreadfully afraid. Of course, anything that was for her

happiness I would have put up with ; but this would not have been for her happiness. She is no longer young, you know—her habits are all formed—and, even though she was fond of him once, how could she have taken up a man's ways, and adapted herself? It would never have done—it would never have done ! I am so thankful he is married, and that danger past.”

For my part, I could not make any answer. Perhaps Mrs. Spencer was right—perhaps, in the long run, it would be better so ; but, in the meantime, I could not forget Lady Isabella's face. I went home, feeling I cannot tell how sad. It was all so perfectly natural and to be expected. The hardest things in this world are the things that are to be expected. Of course, I had felt sure when I saw them together that it was the little girl who would be the victor in any such struggle. And Lady Isabella had not attempted any struggle. She had stood aside and looked on ; though, perhaps, she

had hoped that the old love would have counted for something in the man's heart. But I said to myself that I had always known better. What was old love, with all its associations, in comparison with the little peachy cheek and childish ways of a girl of seventeen? I despised the man for it, of course; but I thought it natural all the same.

LADY ISABELLA.

CHAPTER V.

I WAS sitting next day by myself, with my mind full of these thoughts, when I was suddenly roused by a shadow which flitted across the light, and then by the sound of some one knocking at the window which opened into my garden. I looked up hurriedly, and saw Lady Isabella. She was very pale, yet looked breathless, as if she had been running. She made me a hasty, imperative gesture to open, and when I had done so, came in without suffering me to shut the window. "Mrs. Mulgrave," she said, panting between the words, "I have a very strange—request—to make. I want to speak with—some one—for ten minutes

—alone. May we—come—here? I have nothing to conceal—from you. It is him; *he*—he has something—to say to me—for the last time.”

“Lady Isabella——” I said.

“Don’t—say anything. It is strange—I know—but it must be; for the last time.”

She did not seem able to stand for another moment. She sank down into the nearest chair, making a great effort to command herself. “Dear Mrs. Mulgrave—please call him,” she cried faintly: “he is there. It will only be for ten minutes—there is something to explain.”

I went out into the garden, and called him. He looked as much agitated as she did, and I went round the house, and through the kitchen-door with a sense of bewilderment which I could not put into words. Edith Bellinger’s bridegroom! What could he have to explain? What right had he to seek her, to make any

private communication? I felt indignant with him, and impatient with her. Then I went into the dining-room and waited. My dining-room windows command the road, and along this I could see Mrs. Spencer walking in her quick, alert way. She was coming towards my house, in search, probably, of her companion. There was something absurd in the whole business, and yet the faces of the two I had just left were too tragical to allow any flippancy on the part of the spectator. Mrs. Spencer came direct to my door as I supposed, and I had to step out and stop the maid, who was about to usher her into the drawing-room where those two were. Mrs. Spencer was a little excited too.

“Have you seen Isabella?” she said. “She was only about half-a-dozen yards behind me, round the corner at the Lodge; and when I turned to look for her she was gone. She could not have dropped into the earth you know, and I know she would

never have gone to the Lodge. Is she here? It has given me quite a turn, as the maids say. She cannot have vanished altogether, like a fairy. She was too substantial for that."

"She will be here directly," said I; "she is speaking to some one in the other room."

"Speaking—to some one! You look very strange, Mrs. Mulgrave, and Isabella has been looking very strange. Who is she speaking to? I am her nearest friend and I ought to know."

"Yes," I said, "you ought to know, that is certain—but wait, only wait, ten minutes—that was the time she said."

And then we two sat and looked at each other, not knowing what to think. I knew scarcely more than she did, but the little that I knew made me only the more anxious. If his wife should hear of it—if Lady Isabella were to betray herself, compromise herself! And then what was the good of it all? No

explanation could annul a fact, and the less explanation the better between a married man and his former love. This feeling made me wretched as the time went on. Time seems so doubly long when one is waiting, and especially when one is waiting for the result of some private, secret, mysterious interview. The house was so quiet, the maids moving about the kitchen, the chirp of the sparrows outside, the drip—drip of a shower, which was just over, from the leaves. All these sounds made the silence deeper, especially as there was no sound from that mysterious room.

“The ten minutes are long past,” said Mrs. Spencer. “I don’t understand what all this mystery can mean. It is more like an hour, I think.”

“Oh, do you think so?” said I, though I fully agreed with her. “When one is waiting time looks so long. She will be here directly. I hear her now—that was her voice.”

And so it certainly was. But everything became silent again the next instant. It was a sharp exclamation, sudden and high ; and then we heard no more.

“ I cannot wait any longer,” said Mrs. Spencer. “ I don’t know what this can mean ; I must have an explanation. Mrs. Mulgrave, if you will not come with me, I will go myself to Isabella. I don’t understand what she can mean.”

“ I will go,” said I ; and we rose at the same moment and hurried to the door. But we had not time to open it when a sudden sound was audible, which arrested us both. The door of the other room was opened, voices came towards us — two voices, and then a laugh. Was it Lady Isabella’s laugh ? Mrs. Spencer drew near me and pinched my arm violently. “ Is it Isabella ? What, oh, what can it mean ? ” she said with a look of terror. And then the door was thrown suddenly open, driving us back as we stood in our consternation within.

It was Lady Isabella who stood before us, and yet it was not the Lady Isabella I had ever known. When Mrs. Spencer saw her she gave a suppressed groan and sat down suddenly on the nearest chair. This Lady Isabella was leaning on Colonel Brentford's arm. Her face was flushed and rosy; her eyes shining like stars, yet full of tears; dimples I had never seen before were in her cheeks and about her mouth. She was radiant, she was young, she was running over with joy and happiness. In her joy and triumph she did not notice, I suppose, the sudden despair of her friend. "I have come to tell you," she said hastily, "he never meant it. It is all over. Oh, do you understand? All this cloud that has lasted for ten years, that has come between us and the skies—it is all over, all over. He never meant it. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Spencer stood up tottering, looking like a ghost. "Isabella! I thought you

had forgotten him. I thought it was this that was all over. I thought you were content."

Lady Isabella gave her a look of that supreme happiness which is not considerate of other people's feelings. "I am content now," she said, clasping her hands upon Colonel Brentford's arm, "more than content."

Mrs. Spencer answered with a bitter cry. "Then I am nothing to her, nothing to her!" she said.

It was at this moment that I interfered. I could keep silence no longer. I put myself between the two who were so happy and the one who was so miserable. "Before another word is said I must have this explained to me," I said. "He is Edith Bellinger's husband. And this is my house——"

He interrupted me hurriedly: "I am no one's husband but hers," he said. "You have been mistaken. Edith Bellinger has

married my brother. There is no woman to me in the world but Isabella—never has been—never could be, though I lived a hundred years.”

“And it is you who have brought us together,” cried Lady Isabella, suddenly throwing her arms round me. “God bless you for it! I should never have known, it would never have been possible but for you.”

And he came to me and took both my hands. “God bless you for it, I say too! We might have been two forlorn creatures all our lives but for you.”

I was overwhelmed with their thanks, with the surprise, and the shock. If I had done anything to bring this about I had done it in ignorance; but they surrounded me so with their joy and their gratitude, and the excitement of the revolution which had happened in them, that it was some minutes before I could think of anything else. And there was so much to be ex-

plained. But when I recovered myself so far as to look round and think of the other who did not share in their joy, I found she was gone. She had disappeared while they were thanking me, while I was expressing my wonder and my good wishes. None of us had either heard or seen her departure, but she was gone.

“Was Mrs. Spencer to blame?” I asked with some anxiety when the tumult had subsided a little, and they had seated themselves like ordinary mortals and begun to accustom themselves to their delight. “Had she anything to do with the quarrel between you?”

“Nothing at all,” said Lady Isabella. “She never saw George till she saw him in your house.”

“When you asked me for that rose—” said he. “The rose you used to be so fond of; and I felt as if the skies had opened——”

“You turned your back upon me all

the same," she said with the laugh that had suddenly become so joyous. They had forgotten everything but themselves and the new story of their reconciliation: which I suppose the old story of their estrangement thus recalled and reconsidered made doubly sweet.

"But about Mrs. Spencer?" I said.

"Poor Mrs. Spen! She had got to be fond of me. She thought we were to spend all our lives together," said Lady Isabella with momentary gravity; and then the smile crept once more about the corners of her mouth, and the dimples which had been hidden all these years disclosed themselves, and her face warmed into sunshine as she turned to him. This was my fate whenever I tried to bring back the conversation to Mrs. Spencer, who, poor soul, had disappeared like a shadow before that sunshine. I was glad for their sakes to see them so happy; but still I could not but feel that it was hard to have given your life and love

for years and to be rewarded at the end by that "poor Mrs. Spen."

The news made a great commotion through all Dinglefield, and Mrs. Spencer did not make so much difficulty about it as I fancied she would. The marriage was from her house, and she took a great deal of trouble, and no mother could have been more careful and tender about a bride. But she made no fuss, poor soul—she had not the heart; and though I don't like fuss, I missed it in this case, and felt that it was a sign how deep the blow had gone. Even Lady Isabella, pre-occupied as she was, felt it. She had not realized it perhaps—few people do. We are all in the habit of laughing at the idea of friendships so close and exacting, especially when they exist between women. But to Mrs. Spencer it was as if life itself had gone from her. Her companion had gone from her, the creature she loved best. Next to a man's wife deserting him, or a woman's husband, I know nothing

more hard. Her pretty house, her flowers, her perfect comfort and grace of life palled upon her. She had kept them up chiefly, I think, for the young woman who, she had thought, poor soul, was wedded to her for life. Perhaps it was a foolish thought, perhaps it might be a little selfish to try to keep Colonel Brentford away. I suppose to be married is the happiest; but still I was very, very sorry, grieved more than I can say, for the woman who was forsaken; though she was only forsaken by another woman and not by a man.

However that, I fear, is a sentiment in which I should find few sympathizers. The Brentfords took a place in the neighbourhood, and I believe Lady Isabella was a very happy wife. As for poor little Edith Bellinger, she had married the Colonel's elder brother, Sir Charles, and was Lady Brentford, to her great astonishment and that of everybody about. It had been her doubt and reluctance, poor child, to marry a

man older than her father, which had made her ill. I think her mother missed her almost as much as Mrs. Spencer missed Lady Isabella. For every new tie that is made in this world some old ties must be broken. But what does that matter? Is it not the course of nature and the way of the world?

AN ELDERLY ROMANCE.

CHAPTER I.

THERE is a house in Dinglefield, standing withdrawn in a mass of shrubbery, and overshadowed by some fine trees, which has been called by the name of Brothers-and-Sisters for a longer time than any one in the village can recollect. It presents to the outside world who peep at it over the palings, between the openings which have been carefully cut to afford to its inmates pleasant glimpses of the lower part of the green, on which the cricket-matches are played, the aspect of a somewhat low white house, with no apparent entrance, and a great number of chimneys of different heights, chimneys which I suppose suggested to some wag the un-

equal stature of a family of children, and thus procured the house its popular name. In the map of the estate on which Dinglefield stands it is called Bonport House, and this is how the General's letters, I need not say, are addressed. But yet the common name sticks, all the more because of the character of the family which now inhabits that hospitable place. It is literally a house of brothers and sisters. General Stamford, the head of the family, is a hale and ruddy old warrior of sixty, who has seen a great deal of service, and who has been knocked about, battered, and beaten from the age of sixteen until now : sent to every unfavourable place where a soldier without money or influence has to go, and engaged in every fierce little war in which it has been the pleasure of England to indulge, without any consideration for the feelings of her fighting men. He has been at Bermuda ; he has been on the Gold Coast ; he has braved all the fevers and fought all the savages within our ken ; and

outliving all this, has settled down with his sisters and brother in our village, one of the most peaceable yet the most active of men. It is for this last reason that General George (as we have all got to call him, partly because there are other generals about, and to say General Stamford every time you mention a man in a neighbourhood like ours is fatiguing—and partly for kindness) has so many things on his hands. He is one of the directors of our railway; he is on several boards in town, where he goes almost every day punctual as clockwork, brushed to perfection, and driven to the station by Miss Stamford in the pony-carriage, which always takes him there, and always meets him when he comes back. Miss Stamford is the eldest sister of all. She is very like her brother, and there never was such a tender brotherly sisterly union as between these two old people. They have known each other so long, longer than any husband and wife. They have the recollections of the

nursery quite fresh in their minds, as if it were yesterday—when it was always Ursula who found George's books for him, and gave him good advice, and most of her pocket-money, and looked after his linen when he was at home, and his pets when he went away. Miss Stamford knows all the occurrences of her brother's chequered life better than he does himself, and recollects everything, and knows all his friends, even if she never saw them, and can recall to him the exact relationship between the young man who comes to him with an introduction, and old Burton who was killed by his side among the Maoris; or Percival who died of the yellow fever at Barbadoes. She is his remembrancer, his counsellor, half his heart, and a good part of his mind; and indeed there is nobody among us who ever thinks of the one without thinking of the other. What she was doing with herself all those years when George was fighting on the outskirts of civilization, or sweltering in the

tropics, none of us know, but some of us wonder now and then. Did nothing ever happen to Miss Stamford on her own account? Has all her life been only a reflection of her brother's? But this is what nobody can tell.

The next member of the family in due succession is Mrs. St. Clair, who is the second sister, and who has been so long a widow that she has forgotten that this is not the normal condition of women. I don't think, for my part, that she remembers much about her husband, though he did exist, I have every reason to believe. Her married life was a little episode, but the family is all her idea of ordinary existence. That little sip of matrimony however has made her different from the rest. I cannot quite tell how. There is a tone that is more mellow; she is a little more—stout, if I may use such a word: her outlines are a little fuller, both of mind and body. Miss Stamford takes care of the house and the General, but Mrs.

St. Clair takes care of the parish. She is the Rector's lay curate, and a most efficient one. It is she who watches over, not only the poor, but the district visitors, and even the curates, whose juvenile importance she makes very light of, keeping down all rampant sacerdotalism. When a young man comes into a parish full of very fine ideas of priestly state and dignity, and fortified besides by all the talk in the newspapers about adoring ladies and worked slippers, it is hard for him to find himself confronted by a lively middle-aged woman who has no particular respect for him, and knows all his kind, and all their little ways. Mrs. St. Clair was of the greatest use to us all in this particular. She kept us from innovations. Our excellent Rector has not a very strong will, and how far he might have been induced to go in respect to vestments, or candles, or even Gregorians, it would be hard to say, but for Mrs. St. Clair, who kept the young men down. Everybody who has

ever been at Dinglefield has met her about the roads, with her gray hair neatly braided, and her soft brown eyes smiling, yet seeing everything, and a basket in her hand. She always had the basket ; and the basket, if it had been examined, would have been found always to contain something which was to do somebody good.

Miss Sophy, the third sister, was much younger than the others, and she was one of those who are always young. Nothing had changed much with her since she was eighteen. She lived quite the same sort of life as she had done then, and wore the same kind of dresses ; and felt, I believe, very much the same. Life had never progressed into a second chapter with her, and she felt no need of a second chapter. She did little commissions for everybody, and carried little messages, and played croquet, and went out to tea, and performed her little pieces on the piano with undiminished and undiminishing satisfaction. She was as kind, as sweet, and

as innocent as any girl need be ; and, in short, she was a girl—but of forty-five. The reader may think this is a sneer ; but nobody ever thought of sneering at Miss Sophy ; that malign amusement found no encouragement in her simplicity. You smiled at her, perhaps, then blushed for yourself, abashed at your own heartlessness in finding anything absurd in a creature so guileless and true. She had no particular *rôle* of her own in the family, except to be kind to everybody, and to do what everybody wished, as far as a merely mortal sister could. If there was one thing that she thought especially her duty and privilege, it was to look after the faith and morals of the other brother, who occasionally formed part of the household. He was a barrister, an old bachelor like the rest, who had chambers in town and came when he pleased to Brothers-and-Sisters. He spent the Sundays there, and Miss Sophy took him to church. She would have made him say the Collect if she could ; and, indeed,

always questioned him about his opinions, and argued with him on the Sunday afternoons upon the points on which he was astray. And when I add that Mr. Charles was a clever lawyer and a man of the world, and astray upon a great many points, it will be seen that Sophy had her hands full. She argued herself into palpitations and headaches, but I fear her arguments were less potent than her intention. This energetic effort to keep Charles right in theology was, so far as any one knew, the only duty exclusively hers.

These delightful people were only a small part of the family to which they belonged. Behind them was a bodyguard of married brothers and sisters, a sort of milky way of family plenitude, from which arose an army of nephews and nieces who were always looming about, sure to come down upon us in force when anything was going on. There were always men to be had for a dance, and actors for theatricals on application to the

Stamfords. "Tell me how many you want, and give me two or three days' notice," Mrs. St. Clair would say, and then Sophy would write the letters, and after a while the air of Dinglefield would be thick with nephews. There was room for an untold number of them in the old, many-chimneyed house. When it was the time for garden parties, or when there was a bazaar for some charity, it was the turn of the nieces, who came like the swallows, with a skimming of wings, and a chirping and chattering of pleasant voices. It was astonishing how soon we got to know them all, discriminating Sophy Humphreys from Sophy Thistlethwaite, and both from Sophy Stamford number one, called Soff, or Henry's Sophy, to distinguish her from Sophy Stamford number two, who was called Fia, or William's Sophy. Sophy was the pet name of the race; the mother's name from whom they all sprang.

And it would be difficult to give any stranger an idea of the addition they were to

our limited society at Dinglefield. Go when you would the genial house was always open, a pleasant party always to be found on the lawn in summer, by the drawing-room fire in winter. They had their anxieties and sorrows like other people, no doubt ; but not so many as other people : for the time was over with them for personal pangs and trouble ; and when one nephew out of twenty goes a little wrong, or one niece (also out of twenty) makes a bad marriage, the pang is not so keen or so lasting as when it is a son or a daughter who has broken down. And this was the worst that could now befall the house. It was a house made for the comfort and succour of every aching heart or troubled mind within its range. There was nothing they would not do for their neighbours and friends ; how much more for their relations. General George lent his kindly ear, a little, just a little, hard of hearing (but no, not hard of anything, the word is unworthy to be used in his connection), to every request.

He would do his best to place your son, or invest your money ; or order early salmon or turbot for you when you were going to have a dinner-party. I should not have liked to ask Mr. Charles Stamford to order my fish, but I have no doubt he too would have done it, had he been asked ; and as for the sisters, they would, as the poor people said, put their hand to anything.

One day Sophy came into my cottage with an air of some excitement to tell me that George had sent a telegram, and was bringing down a large party of his fellow-directors to dinner. "Will you come, dear Mrs. Mulgrave ? Fancy ! how shall we ever entertain these twelve business gentlemen ?" said Sophy in a flutter. "If only some of the girls had been here. Not that the girls would have cared for these old creatures. But the worst is that Ursula herself is away. She went up to town this morning to see her great friend, Mrs. Bidulph. And though she will be back for

dinner, all the responsibility will be upon Frances and me. I must run away now this moment to James the gardener, to see how many strawberries he can give us. Don't you think it was tiresome of George to bring down so many upon us without warning? It is just like him: no, he is not tiresome—never! he is a darling! But sometimes he does a tiresome thing.”

And Sophy tripped away, light-footed, light-hearted, with no greater thought than the strawberries. She was still as slim as a girl, and there was about her all the eagerness and breathless mixture of fright and pleasure which are natural at eighteen. She *was* eighteen, spiritually speaking. I watched her tripping along in her light summer dress, and smiled; I could not help it. I saw her again three times that day, and, indeed, I saw Mrs. St. Clare too, who was equally full of business. “Twelve men!” Mrs. St. Clair cried. “Is it not a nuisance? I can't think how George could do it. They have a nice

bit of villainy in hand ; they are going to cut up all our pretty view, and take away the poor people's gardens ; and then they expect us to give them dinner !”

“ Did Sophy get the strawberries ? ” I asked.

“ Oh, yes ; more than they deserve. But you are coming, and you shall see. ” She went on, waving her hand, too busy to talk. A dinner of twelve gentlemen, when you have made no arrangements, and provided nothing but what was needed for the family, is a serious matter in a country place, especially when the real housekeeper is out of the way.

AN ELDERLY ROMANCE.

CHAPTER II.

ALL this time Miss Stamford knew nothing of what was going on. She had gone up to town early in the morning, and she had spent the day with her friend, who was ailing ; and in the afternoon she had missed the usual dinner train by which General George always travelled, coming by the next one, which was about half an hour later. She came down in the same carriage with a gentleman who, she afterwards admitted, attracted her attention at once. He was a tall man—well, not young, certainly—oldish, elderly, “about the same age as other people”—with a long face, like Don Quixote. She remarked him ; and he remarked her, apparently, showing her

several little politenesses : opening and shutting the window, &c. He was very like Don Quixote. This was the chief remark Miss Stamford made.

She was a little late for dinner, having been taken entirely by surprise by the great preparations she found on her return. She had left everything in the ordinary quiet, no company expected, and had ordered the usual dinner for the family before she went away ; and the sight of Williams the greengrocer, and Jones the verger, both in grand official costume, on duty in her own hall when she got back, astonished her.

“Company, ma’am, as the General has brought home from town, unexpected,” Williams said, as he opened the door. Their own homely butler, Simms, had been promoted to the rank of major-domo for the moment, and was a very great personage with two men under him. Miss Stamford changed her dress as quickly as possible, but dinner had begun before she got down stairs.

Mrs. St. Clair had taken the head of the table, and Ursula slid quietly into the vacant place which had been left for her. She nodded to me across the table as she sat down. She had not even put on her best cap, and her gown was anything but new. And it did not seem to me that Ursula Stamford was by any means looking her best. She was a little prim in appearance, though so liberal and generous in heart; and she looked sixty, while to my knowledge she was only fifty-seven. You will say that was not a difference which mattered much; but I assure you we think a great deal of a year or two up here among the snows of life. She sat down so quietly that the gentleman on one side did not at first notice that the place was taken by his side, and she occupied herself with the other, whom she happened to know. There was a great deal of talk going on at the table. Mrs. St. Clair had picked up a few ladies in haste to make the balance a little more even. Mrs. Stokes had

sent Lucy, who was going to be married, and Miss Woodroff had come from the Rectory, and Mrs. Sommerville, the young widow who was living with her brother, the curate. There were seven of us altogether to thirteen gentlemen, for, by way of making the table a little more crowded, Charles Stamford had thought proper to come, though it was not his day. And we all talked as if our lives were at stake. The younger ones were much amused to be on duty thus, to be called upon to take care of the old gentlemen, and the rest of us understood the obligation we were under to talk, and worked resolutely at the conversation. For my part, I did very well, I had quite a pleasant neighbour; and, indeed, I have found that a great many of the City gentlemen are very pleasant to talk to. He told me all about the new railway it was intended to make, and scarcely laughed at all when I declared myself an enemy to new railroads, in our neighbourhood, at least.

“Why should you cut up our pleasant,

smiling country?" I said. "We have all the railways we want, and more. I do not say anything against what is necessary; but why make gashes across the country when it is not wanted——"

"Gashes—I don't think they are gashes," said my neighbour. "When I saw the white steam flying along the valley just now, I thought it very picturesque. I allow I do not like it too near; but Dinglefield is as safe as if it were in Paradise. No railway will climb your peaceable heights. If there was question however of a railway into Paradise itself, there is the man who would do it," he said, looking across the table. "I am a mere innocent myself. I do what other people tell me: but there is the dangerous man. I hope, for your sake, that he will give his word against this, for he would survey the moon if he thought it likely to answer."

I peeped between the little thickets of flowers with which Sophy had covered the

table, and looked at the man thus pointed out to me. He was sitting by Ursula Stamford, but he was not talking to her—she, as I have said, was occupied by her other neighbour at her right hand. He was an old man, not far from seventy, according to appearance, with snow-white hair, but a beard still almost black, a combination which is always striking. His features were fine, his dark eyes deeply sunk under eyebrows still dark like his beard. There was a gentleman on the other side of him whom he did not seem to care to talk to, and he was sitting, scarcely speaking, his face in repose.

“Do you mean that handsome old man?” I said.

“Old,” said my companion, slightly startled; he was about the same age himself if I had thought of it. “Well, I suppose he *is* old,” he added, with a little laugh. “You should talk to him. I don’t know a more interesting man; and, as I tell you, he is the

man to whom, if there was a railway to be made to the moon, everybody would turn. If he took the Channel tunnel in hand he would carry it through."

"But that must be impossible," said I. "I hate the crossing; but I would not trust myself in a tunnel under the sea, not for—— But you are laughing—it is impossible——"

"Impossible!—not in the very least—ask *him*. I think myself he's too speculative. But there is one thing certain. If Oakley took it up, it would go through. He'd do it. He is a man who does not believe in difficulties. There might be a great catastrophe next day, but one way or other he'd drive it through."

I am a very quiet person myself, therefore it stands to reason that I should like a man who drives things through. Besides, he was a handsome old man. I looked at him again behind the flowers, while my companion went on talking, and I saw something which interested me. Miss Stamford came to a

pause in her conversation with the man at her right hand, and she seized the opportunity to turn to the man on her left. At the first sound of her voice his abstract countenance lighted up. He turned hastily round with a look of recognition. How could he know Ursula Stamford, I said to myself? His face lighted up with a gleam of intelligence and pleasure, and something which, not knowing any other word, I can only call sweetness. He turned quite round to her, and began to talk with an interest and warmth which roused my immediate sympathy. I seemed to be looking on at an interesting scene in the theatre, seen from so great a distance that it was only the dumb-show which made it intelligible. And my neighbour carried on his discourse all the time.

“He has sprung from nothing,” he said. “I don’t know if he ever had a father. He began in the humblest way. The first time I heard of him was about thirty years ago,

when he was struggling into business. He was not what you would call a young man then. (You ladies are hard upon age—you don't like it talked about when it concerns yourselves, but you stamp us down as old men without a bit of fellow-feeling——) ”

Here I interrupted my instructor. “ I thought it was a weakness of ours only to dislike to be called old. I thought men were superior to such a little vanity—as to so many others.”

“ You are satirical now. You think we are not superior to any vanity, and I shouldn't wonder if you were right. I was saying old Oakley was not a young man to start with. He was a sort of an engineer, self-taught, all self-taught, and he was trying to get into business as a contractor. Mrs. Mulgrave,” said my companion solemnly, “ have you any idea what that man is worth now ? I thought so, as you didn't seem impressed. He is worth more than a million, that is the fact—he is made of money ; losses

don't seem to touch him. I do not suppose," my friend added, with awe in his voice, "that he knows how much he has."

This information did not excite me as he expected, but I looked again between the geraniums at Mr. Oakley. I am afraid his handsome head interested me more than his fortune. "And there are so many people who have nothing at all!" I said; "but to look at him he might be a philosopher without a penny."

"That is just like you ladies—you would think more of him if he were a philosopher without a penny. What an extraordinary mistake!" cried my companion, "as if money were not a power, quite as interesting and a great deal more tangible than philosophy."

His countenance flushed and changed. He was an enthusiast for money. I have met many such among General George's City friends: not in the sordid way we think of, but really as a great power.

When Mrs. St. Clair gave the sign to go away, I was quite sorry to break off this conversation, which was so much more interesting than the ordinary kind of talk. It was a beautiful June evening, and, instead of going into the drawing-room, we all went out upon the lawn where Simms had laid down the great lionskin, of which they are all so proud, and some rugs which the General brought from India ; for it is unnecessary to say that we elder people were a little afraid of the dew on the grass. But nobody could have taken cold on such a night. The borders were all red and white with roses standing out against the deep green of the shrubberies behind, and the colours seemed to repeat themselves in the sky, which was all one flush of rose above the blue, deepening into crimson as it descended, and burning like fire between the trees on the horizon line. Dinglefield stands high, with the broad Thames valley lying at its feet, of which you could get glimpses through the cuttings on

the western side, if your eyes were not dazzled with all that blaze of gold. Miss Stamford was tired with her day in town, and established herself at once in her favourite basket-chair on the lawn. She sat there tranquil and happy while the rest walked about ; her presence, her smile, the rest that seemed to breathe about her, gave stability and meaning to the whole place. She was only an old maid according to the vulgar, but you could not look at her without feeling sure that where she was, there was a home. I don't know that it had ever occurred to me to think so much about Ursula Stamford before. There was something in the air which affected me, though I did not know how. We could see the lighted windows of the dining-room, and hear the sound of the voices and laughter, though at a distance ; and we all laughed too in sympathy, though we did not know what the jokes were. It was very pleasant and friendly, and rather droll. None of us

had any particular desire to be joined by the gentlemen. We had done our duty by them, talked our very best to them, and flattered ourselves that it had all gone off very well ; but though we were glad they were enjoying themselves, now that our part of the entertainment was over, we were not very sorry to think that they must all go away shortly by the last train. And no heart among us, I am safe to say, beat one pulsation the quicker when they came out upon the lawn, some of them slightly flushed with the laughter and the good cheer, to take their coffee, and their leave. It had grown almost dark by that time, and the white waistcoats (for they were in their morning dress, and most of them wore white waistcoats) made a great show in the half light. The greater part of them thanked us all for the delightful evening, not being quite clear which were, and which were not, the ladies of the house, but determined to fulfil all the duties of politeness. We walked with them

to the gate to see them go, and shook hands with them all, though we did not know their names. I recollect the whole scene as clearly as a picture, though I knew at the time no reason why I should remember it : the dining-room brightly lighted, the table with all its fruit and flowers, and the vacant chairs pushed away, standing in all manner of groups : the drawing-room much more dim, just showing a glimmer of newly-lighted candles : the table on the lawn with Miss Stamford's white cap and half visible figure close to it : and all the rest of us standing about telling each other how well it had gone off, and listening to the voices of the gentlemen getting fainter and fainter as they streamed off behind the shrubberies along the road to the station. If any one had told us what changes would come from that visit ! But how could any one have guessed the changes that were to come ?

It was not the next day, but the day after that I met General George in the afternoon

coming from the station. It was at least two hours before his usual time, and he was walking. The sight of him gave me a little shock. Something, I thought, must have happened. I ran over in my mind, as one naturally does, as I went up to him, the things that were most possible. There were nephews scattered about over all the world. Could it be that there was bad news of George Thistlethwaite in Ceylon, or Bertie Stamford at the Cape? or was it pleasanter intelligence from young Mrs. Thurston (*née* Ursula Humphreys) or Lucy Thistlethwaite, or one of the Lincolnshire girls? but that (I said to myself) would not be enough to bring the General home so much sooner than usual. When he came nearer however my mind became easier. He did not look unhappy, he looked puzzled, and now and then a gleam like laughter came over his face. When he saw me he came forward with an air of pleasure.

“You are the very person I wanted to

see—if you will let me, I will walk home with you ; but let us go the back way,” said General George to my intense surprise, “ for I don’t want to see my sisters till I have taken your advice.”

“ My advice ! before you see your sisters, before you tell *Ursula* ! ” I cried, and then the General laughed and frowned, and looked angry and amused all in one. “ That is just where my difficulty lies,” he said. A difficulty about *Ursula* ! it took away my breath.

“ You will not believe it,” he said, “ but it is quite true. Charles came to me this morning with the absurdest question. He came to ask me who it was that sat next Mr. Oakley at dinner at Bonport on Tuesday—eh ? what, did you notice anything ? ” he asked abruptly, for I had not been able to restrain a little exclamation. I have never boasted of my penetration, but from that moment I seemed to know exactly what he was going to say.

“I know who sat next Mr. Oakley at dinner,” I said.

“Ursula, wasn't it? we laid our heads together, and from all we could make out—he went to Charles first to find out who it was, and Charles, of course, made up his mind that it must have been one of the young ladies that had made such an impression. He proposed first Miss Woodroof and then the young widow: but no, no. Oakley said it was not a young lady. It was a lady whose hair was turning gray, who wore a cap, and used a double eye-glass. At last the conviction forced itself upon me. By Jove! it was Ursula—*Ursula* the man was thinking of! We both burst out laughing in his face—— But afterwards,” the General added gloomily with a flush of displeasure, “afterwards—I feel furious, Mrs. Mulgrave, though I may not show it; and that is why I have come first to you.”

“What did he want?” I said, though I

allow there was some hypocrisy in my question.

“What did he want?—you may well ask. He is a man of sixty-five, older than I am. He wants—to marry my sister,” said the General, with a half suppressed outcry of rage—“a man who has risen from the ranks—a stranger—a—a confounded—— I beg you ten thousand pardons, Mrs. Mulgrave; he wants to pay his addresses, if you please, to Ursula! God bless us all—did you ever hear such a thing? I feel much more like cursing than blessing, to tell the truth.”

“But, General, he is very rich—richer than any one ever was before.”

“Ah, you have got bitten too,” he said, with a tone almost of disgust. “That is what Charles says; but what is his money to me? What is it to any of us, Mrs. Mulgrave? *You* would not upset all the order of your life and change your habits, and give up your own ways for a million of money, would you? After all, when you

have enough to be comfortable, what does money matter? Even the most extravagant of women can't put more than a certain number of yards of stuff into her dress. When you have enough, what does it matter whether the overplus is counted by hundreds or by thousands?" said the General, with magnanimous but new-born indifference. If he cared so little about it, why should he go to the City every day, I could not help saying to myself: and, indeed, it came to my lips before I knew.

"If we all thought that," I said, "it would save a great deal of trouble. Perhaps you would not then have had these twelve gentlemen down to dinner and made all the mischief, General."

General George laughed. "Perhaps I shouldn't," he said, "but that is different. It is not for the money, but the occupation, Mrs. Mulgrave; and of course when one has money invested one wants to make something by it. However my opinion is

that it would be much better to say nothing about this folly to Ursula. "To be sure," he added with a look of half-defiant assurance which he belied by a suspicious glance of inquiry at me, "it might amuse her; but it could have no other effect. I don't see why I should take any notice to Ursula."

"But Mr. Oakley—will he be satisfied?"

"Old Oakley? Upon my word, I don't see why I should consider him or what will satisfy him," said the General, growing red; but he was uneasy. He paused, then turned to me again. "If you were in my position, what should you do?"

"I should tell her, and let her judge; after all, it is she who must decide."

"Decide — judge! you speak," cried General George, "as if it were possible — as if it might be within the bounds of — Bah! do you suppose that Ursula—*Ursula!* my sister—would, could hesitate one moment?"

"No." I said "no," half because I really

thought so, but half because he was so much excited, and it was necessary to calm him. "I do not suppose she would; but still, a woman should be told when a man—— It is the greatest compliment he can pay her, and it is always flattering even when it is impossible!"

"Flattering—a compliment! What can you be thinking of?" the General cried in high disdain; "that an old fellow like that should propose to appropriate and take possession of—a lady! I don't say my sister, which of course is the sting of it," he said with a laugh, calming down again, "but any lady——"

"Dear General, forgive me," I said; "you always talk, you gentlemen, of marriage as the end of every woman's ambition, and you are always ready to jibe at those who have not attained that great end. Then how, when this elevation is in her power, do you venture to think of keeping her in ignorance of it?"

He turned round upon me almost with violence. "Elevation!" he cried; then perceiving, I suppose, by something in my eyes what I meant, laughed more uneasily than ever. "Come," he said, "we may say silly things, I allow we all say silly things; but when you come to that—to speak of elevation for my sister from any offer, or that she should think it a compliment!—God bless us all!—there are a great many foolish things that one says, but you know better than to take it all for gospel. Of course when one speaks of women one does not think of—— By Jove, I am only getting deeper. Don't hit a man when he is down, but be serious, and give me your advice."

"One does not think of one's own sisters," said I, for I did not mean to spare him, "only of other people's sisters, or of those who have nobody to stand up for them; but I will not be ungenerous. General, I will give you my advice. Tell Ursula, and let her judge for herself."

“ Judge!—she can have but one opinion. But that is what Charlie says. I suppose the two of you must be right,” said the General grudgingly. He walked on by my side in silence, cutting down the weeds by the roadside ferociously with his stick; then repeated with a still more churlish assent, “ I suppose what you two people of the world say must be right.”

I smiled within myself to be called a woman of the world; but one must not take the words of an angry man to heart. When he came to the turn of the road which led to Brothers-and-Sisters he muttered something about getting it over, and took off his hat and left me without another word. Poor General George! Under all his pretences at anger he was in a great fright. Either he believed his own careless talk, and thought that a husband was too ‘ fine a thing for any woman to refuse, or else—— But I need not discuss the vague feeling of insecurity which had begun to creep over

him. For my part, I did not feel alarmed. I had more confidence in Ursula's faithfulness than he had. At the same time, the crisis was exciting, and I thought the time very long until the evening began to darken, and I felt myself at liberty—dinner being over—to run over the corner of the green which lay between us, as I often did in the evening, and see what Ursula said.

AN ELDERLY ROMANCE.

CHAPTER III.

THE family party was on the lawn as usual; Miss Stamford seated in her own chair with her knitting and her feet upon the lionskin; while Mrs. St. Clair beside her, with a basket full of bright scraps, had been dressing dolls for a bazaar. Sophy was cutting off the withered roses with a large pair of garden scissors; all their occupations were quite as usual. But there was an aspect about the family which was not usual. In the distance the General's step was audible pacing about; and there was an odour of his cigar in the air; all as peaceful, as homelike as it always was; but yet a something in the atmosphere

which had not been there yesterday. As I came up with my shawl over my head, the General tossed his cigar away and came nearer, and Sophia put down the basket with the dead roses, and Mrs. St. Clair got up to get me a chair. The only one that had not changed in the least was Ursula, who raised her head and her eyes and gave me a friendly nod as she always did. She went on with her knitting without any intermission. It is work which does not demand attention, nor so much light as doll-dressing. They were all very glad to see me—more glad even than on ordinary occasions: for it was clear that the situation was highly *tendu*, as the French say, and that a new-comer was a relief.

“What a beautiful evening!” we all said together, and then stopped abashed, as people do who have rushed into the same commonplace speech.

Then Ursula added, “Of course, that is the first thing we must say to each other.

I think there never was such a summer—so bright, so steady, one fine day after another. Here is a fortnight, or nearly so, that we have not had one drop of rain.”

“Quite wonderful,” said I. “The hay, I hear, is a sight to see. A day or two more, and we shall all begin to pray for rain. We are never content whatever we have.”

“A little variety is always pleasant,” Mrs. St. Clair said. Meanwhile, while we talked about the weather, the General hung about over our little group like a storm-cloud. He did not say anything, but he looked tempestuous; he, who was always so calm. Presently he turned away, and went off to say something to Simms, who appeared just then with a note or a message.

“I suppose,” said Mrs. St. Clair, turning to me, “*you* know all about it. George told us that he had met you, and told you —”

“Yes, he told me ;” but I did not know what to say ; they all wore a look of agitation, except Ursula, who was as calm as usual—more calm than usual, I should have said ; but, no doubt, that was only in comparison with the agitation of the rest.

“And I suppose you think like the rest, that I will jump at a husband the moment one is offered to me,” said Miss Stamford with a smile.

“We don’t think so, Ursula. We know it is not the first time. It is only George that is so frightened, poor fellow.”

“Why should he be so frightened ?” Miss Stamford cried. “No ; it is not the first time. I may take that little credit to myself. I might have my head turned, perhaps, if it had been the first time. But, after all, it is not so much to brag of. I suppose he wants somebody to take care of him when he gets old and feeble ; but he ought to have somebody younger than me.”

Sixty-five is not what you would call young; but it was odd how we all were of opinion that Mr. Oakley's time for being old and feeble was still a good way off, a thing to come. I acknowledged that I shared this weakness. We were all about the same age, and it did not occur to us that we were already old.

"He shows his sense," said I, taking the part of the absent to whom nobody did any justice, "as well as his good taste. Poor man, though he is so rich, I am very sorry for him. I wish Ursula had met him twenty years ago when there would have been no harm——"

"No harm! do you know that he is a nobody—a man self-made?" said Mrs. St. Clair; "not a match for Ursula Stamford if he had been ever so young!"

"But you did not think of that in Fia's case," said Sophy; "he was rich and you never said a word. You thought it quite reasonable. 'What do his grandfathers

matter to us?' you said. I am not sure myself whether it does or not; but you said so, you know; and George proposed the bride and bridegroom at the wedding, and everybody was pleased. Now this Mr. Oakley is a very nice man, whatever you say, for I had a good deal of talk with him myself; and if Ursula chose——"

"You should not interfere," said Mrs. St. Clair; "you are always sentimental. Of course, if there is so much as a thought of a marriage, Sophy is always in favour of it; but to think of Ursula at her time of life!"

"You all talk very much at your ease about Ursula," said Miss Stamford. "I suppose Ursula may have a word, a little share in it, for herself. The way my family consult over me"—she said, turning to me with a slight blush and laugh. "I think George might have held his tongue; that would have been the more satisfactory way."

“It was my fault,” I cried hurriedly: “he told me that he thought it would be best not to tell you. You must forgive me, Ursula, if I gave him bad advice; I thought you ought to know.”

Before I had half said this, I saw I had made a mistake; but one must finish one’s sentence, however foolish it may be. Ursula suspended her knitting for a moment and looked at me with calm amazement.

“Not tell *me!*” she said. “Why should he have kept it from *me?*”

The emphasis was very slight, but it meant a great deal. It never occurred to her that a thing which concerned her so closely should have been kept from herself; the question was why should we know; and I confess I felt very much ashamed of having any say in it, when I met the calm, astonished look of her eyes.

“It is getting a little chilly,” she said, rising up. “I think it is time to go indoors.”

We all followed her quite humbly, and the General came stalking after us, more like a thunder-cloud than ever. He had been talking to poor Simms in a voice which was not pleasant, and he appeared at the drawing-room window by which we all entered with the large lionskin in his arms.

“I can’t have this left out all night in those heavy dews,” he said. I do not think I ever saw those signs of suppressed irritation, which are too common in families, among the Stamfords before.

Next morning General George came in for a moment before I had breakfasted, to tell me for my satisfaction that all was right. His face was quite clear again. “I was a little cross last night. I fear you may have supposed that I for a moment doubted my sister. Not a moment, Mrs. Mulgrave. I have got to give him his answer, poor old fellow. I can’t help feeling a little sorry for him all the same.

What bad luck for the poor old beggar! Of all the women there to hit upon the one who was simply hopeless! Some men always have that sort of fate."

"He showed his taste," said I; "but I heard he was the luckiest man in the world, General; that he always succeeded in everything; that however wild the project was, he was the man to carry it through."

I said this partly in malice, I am bound to admit, and I was very successful. The General's face clouded over again: he set his teeth. "He shall not succeed this time;" and he said something more in his moustache, some stronger words which I was not intended to hear. It was all over then, this odd little episode. I stood and watched him from my door half relieved, half wondering. Was it all over? I did not feel so satisfied or so certain as General George.

A few days of perfect quiet ensued. When a week passed we all felt really satisfied. It

was over then? Mr. Oakley had accepted his refusal. To be sure one did not see what else he could have done, though I confess that I had not expected it for my part. However, on the Sunday morning the moment I looked across to the Stamfords' pew after getting settled in my own, it seemed to me that I could see indications of a new event. Both Mrs. St. Clair and Sophy were looking at me when I raised my head; they could not restrain themselves. They gave me anxious, significant glances with little hardly perceptible signs of the head and hand. When the service was over, and we were going out, Sophy was at my side in a moment. We were not actually out of church when I felt her arm slide into mine and a whisper in my ear. "She has got a letter!" Sophy said, all in a tremble of eagerness. Mrs. St. Clair came up on the other side as soon as we were clear of the stream of people. "It is getting really serious," she said; "he will not take a refusal. It is quite

absurd, and George is dreadfully angry. *He* is just as absurd on the other side."

"And what does Ursula say?"

"Oh, Ursula does not say anything. Of course we could not help knowing about the letter. It was very long and very much in earnest——"

"Oh, quite impassioned!" cried Sophy. She had not encountered anything so exciting for years. She was pale with interest and emotion, shaking her head in intense seriousness. "He says that he appeals to her sense of justice not to condemn him without a hearing. It is quite beautiful. I am sure he is a nice man."

"And then, you know, there is the other side of the question," said Mrs. St. Clair seriously. "I did not quite understand when we spoke of it last. Charlie says he is immensely rich—not just ordinarily comfortable like so many people, but a true millionaire. That changes the aspect of the matter a little, don't you think? Not that I am a mercenary

person, still less Ursula ; but when you come to think of it, wealth to that extent is something to be considered. Just fancy the good she might do," cried the sensible sister, "and the number of young people we have looking to us ! I do think it is not exactly right to ignore that side of the question."

"Charlie thinks it is quite wrong," said Sophy, shaking her head.

The General had not even stopped to say "Good morning" outside the church door as he usually did. It was his brother Charles who was with Ursula. The General walked straight home, without looking to the right hand or the left. I felt a great sympathy for him. It was he that would feel it most *if anything happened*; and he was the only one of the family who had that fantastic delicacy of sentiment which some of us feel for those we love, so that the merest touch of anything that could be called ridicule, seemed sacrilege and desecration to him.

I must not attempt to go in detail into

all that followed. Miss Stamford wrote a very beautiful letter (they all told me) to her antiquated lover, telling him how sorry she was to be the cause of any annoyance to him, and hoping that the vexation would be but temporary, as indeed she felt sure it must be—but that his proposals were quite out of the question. This, of course, was what every woman would have said in the circumstances. But neither did Mr. Oakley take this for an answer. There was another letter by return of post in which they said he implored her to believe that nothing about the matter was temporary—that it was a question of life and death to him; that now was his only chance of happiness. Happiness! for a man of sixty-five! For my part I could not help laughing, but it was no laughing matter for the household at Brothers-and-Sisters. A few days after this I met Mr. Oakley himself on his way to the house. He recognized me at once, but naturally he did not know who I was. He took me for one

of the family, and came up to me carrying his hat in his hand. He was a very handsome old man. His hair was snow-white, a mass of it rising up in waves from his forehead, with eyebrows still black and strongly marked, and the finest brilliant dark eyes. I said to myself mentally: "If it had been I, I should have given in at once." And his manners were beautiful—not the manners of society—the deferential respect of a man who knows women chiefly through books, and does not understand the free and easy modern way of treating us. He kept his hat in his hand as he stood and spoke. "I do not know," he said, "if I have the honour of speaking to a sister of Miss Stamford's, but I know I met you there."

"Not a sister, but a very affectionate friend," I said. His face lighted up instantly; he almost loved me for saying so. "Then if that is the case we ought to be friends too," he said. I was so much interested that I turned and walked with him, regardless of

prudence. What would the Stamfords say if they saw me thus identifying myself with the cause of their assailant? but the interest of this strange little romance carried me away.

“I must see her,” he said. “Don’t you think I have a right to see her? They need not surely grudge me one opportunity of pleading my own cause. No, indeed, I don’t blame them. If I had such a treasure—nay,” he went on with a smile, “*when* I have that treasure, I will guard it from every wind that blows. I don’t wonder at their precautions. But Stamford does not treat me with generosity; he does not trust to my honour: that is why I adopt his own tactics. I must try to effect an entrance while he is away.”

“I don’t think Ursula will have you, Mr. Oakley,” I said.

“Perhaps not; but that remains to be seen. She has never seen me—that is, she has never seen the real John Oakley, only a director of her brother’s company, two

different persons, Mrs. Mulgrave, if you will allow me to say so."

"But she saw you before she knew you were a director. She travelled with you. You were the gentleman like Don Quixote——"

How foolish I was! Of course I ought not to have said it. I felt that before the words were out of my mouth. Such encouragement as this was enough to counterbalance any number of severities. "Ah! I am like Don Quixote, am I?" he said; and once more, and more brightly than ever, his handsome old face blazed into the brightest expression. Poor Mr. Oakley! I threw myself heart and soul into his faction after this; for indeed, as I afterwards heard, he had not at all a pleasant "time," as the Americans say, that afternoon. When he sent in his name at Brothers-and-Sisters he was told that the ladies were out, and, though he waited, all that he managed to obtain was a hurried interview with Mrs. St. Clair,

who conveyed to him Ursula's entreaty that he would accept her answer as final, and not ask to see her. Sophy told me after (she must have hidden herself somewhere, for nobody but Frances was supposed to be present) that his behaviour was beautiful. He bowed to the ground, she said, and declared that no one could be so much interested as he was in observing Miss Stamford's slightest wish ; that he would not for the world intrude upon her, but wait her pleasure another time. Mrs. St. Clair's heart softened too, and she did not protest, as perhaps she ought to have done, against this "other time." He passed by my cottage as he went away, and I do not deny that I was in my little garden looking out. "I have had no luck," he said, shaking his head, but still with a smile, "no luck to-day ; but another time I shall succeed better."

I ran to the gate, I felt so much interested. "Do you really think, Mr. Oakley," I said, "that it is worth your while to persevere?"

“Worth my while?” he said; “certainly it is worth my while: for I am in no hurry. I can bide my time.”

Bide his time at sixty-five! I stood and looked at him as long as he was in sight. There is nothing like courage for securing the sympathy of the bystanders.

After this the excitement ran very high both in the house of the Stamfords and in the community in general. We all took sides: and while General George made himself more and more disagreeable, and we all watched and spied her every action, Ursula was subjected all the time to a ceaseless assault from the other side. Letters poured upon her; beautiful baskets of flowers arrived suddenly, secretly, so that no one knew how they came. After a while, when the autumn commenced, there came hampers of game and of fruit, all in the same anonymous, magnificent way. And then the clever old man found out a still more effectual way of siege. The Stamfords had always nephews

who wanted appointments or who required to be pushed. For instance, there was young Charley, of the Inner Temple, sadly in want of a brief : when lo ! all at once, briefs began to tumble down from heaven upon the young man. In a week he had more business than he knew what do with. And Willie Thistlethwaite had a living offered to him ; and Cecil, whom they were so anxious to place with an engineer, though the premium was so serious a matter, suddenly found a place open to him with no premium at all. I believe in my heart that it was Mr. Charles Stamford who helped the old lover to recommend himself in this effectual, quiet way ; for how should he have found out all the nephews without help ? But as one of these mysterious benefits after another happened to the distant members of the family, the feeling rose stronger and stronger among all their friends. We set down everything, from the flowers to the living, unhesitatingly to Mr. Oakley ; and at last public sentiment on

the green got to such a pitch that whereas people had laughed at the whole matter at first as little more than a joke, everybody now grew indignant, and protested that Ursula Stamford ought to be cut and sent to Coventry if she did not marry Don Quixote. I don't know who had betrayed this description which she had herself given of him. But everybody now called him Don Quixote, and the whole community took his cause to heart. While this feeling rose outside, a wave of the same sentiment, but still more powerful, got up within. Mr. Charles spoke out and declared (as, indeed, he had done from the first) that to neglect such an opportunity of strengthening the family influence would be a mere flying in the face of Providence ; and then something still more extraordinary happened. Frances herself—who looked upon all married ladies in the light of prospective widows, and regarded the one state only as a preparation for the other—Frances herself suddenly threw off her allegiance to the

General and went over boldly to the other side. Sophy had been Mr. Oakley's champion all along. They began to turn upon Ursula, to accuse her of behaving badly to her unwearied suitor—they accused her of playing fast and loose, of amusing herself with his devotion. They raised a family outcry against her, and brought down all the married sisters and the distant brothers upon her, with a storm of disapproving letters. "The man that has provided for my Cecil," one indignant lady wrote, "surely, *surely*, deserves better at *my* sister's hands;" and "I really think, my dear Ursula, that any petty objections of your own should yield before the evident advantage to the family," was what the eldest brother of all, the father of the young barrister, said. On the other side, with gloom on his face, and a sneer upon his lip (where it was so completely out of place), and a bitter jibe now and then about the falsity and weakness of women, General George stood all alone, and kept

a jealous watch upon her. His love for his favourite sister seemed to have turned to gall. He would have none of her usual services; he no longer consulted her about anything—no longer told her what he was going to do. It is to be supposed that by this cruel method the General intended to prove to his sister how much kinder and better a master he was than any other she could aspire to; but if this was the case, he took a very curious way of showing his superiority. And Ursula stood between these two parties, her home and her life becoming more and more unbearable every day.

At last she took a sudden resolution. Sophy ran over to tell me of it late one September evening. There were tears in Sophy's eyes, and she was full of awe. "Ursula has made up her mind," she said, almost below her breath. "It is all over, Mrs. Mulgrave. She has written him a *terrible* letter—it is quite beautiful, but it

is something terrible at the same time ; and she is going off *abroad* to-morrow. She says she cannot bear it any longer ; she says we are killing her. She says she must make an end of it, and that she will go away. Poor Mr. Oakley !” Sophy said, and cried. As for me, I also felt deeply impressed and a little awe-stricken, but I had a lingering faith in Don Quixote notwithstanding all.

AN ELDERLY ROMANCE.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE had been very little time left for preparations, and hardly any one, Sophy told me, was aware they were going away. Except myself, no one of the neighbours knew. All the arrangements were hastily made. Ursula wanted to be gone if possible before Mr. Oakley could take any further step. I went over early next morning to see if I could be of any use. Ursula was in her room, doing her packing. To see her in her old black silk with her simple little cap covering her gray hair, and to think she was being driven from her home by the importunities of a too-ardent lover, struck me as more ridiculous than it had

ever done before. She saw it herself, and laughed as she stood for a moment before the long glass, in which she had caught a glimpse of herself.

“ I am a pretty sort of figure for all this nonsense,” she said, permitting herself for the first time an honest laugh on the subject ; but then her face clouded once more. “ The truth is,” she said, “ it would all be mere nonsense, but for George. It is he that takes it so much to heart.”

“ Indeed,” said I. “ I think it is not at all nice of the General ; and I don’t think it would be nonsense in any case. There is some one else I acknowledge, Ursula, that I think of more than the General.”

She did not say anything more. Her face paled, then grew red again, and she went on with her packing. It is needless to say that I was of no manner of use. I got rid of a little of my own excitement by going, that was all. I went again in the evening to see the last of them. It was a lovely

September evening. There had been a wonderfully fine sunset, and the whole horizon was still flaming, the trees standing out almost black in their deep greenness, though touched with points of yellow, against the broad lines of crimson and wide openings of wistful green blueness in the sky. The days were already growing short. There is no time of the year at which one gets so much good of the sunset. As I went across the corner of the green the gables and irregular chimneys of the old house stood up among the heavy foliage against the lower band of colour where the green and blue died into yellow, the "daffodil sky" of the poet. They too looked black against that light, and there was a wistful look, I thought, about the whole place, protesting dumbly against its abandonment. Why should people go away from such a pleasant and peaceful place to wander over the world? There was a solitary blackbird singing clear and loud, filling the whole air

with his song. I wonder if that song is really much less beautiful than the nightingale's. I was thinking how blank and cold the house would be when they were all gone. The chimneys and gables already looked so cold, smokeless, fireless, appealing against the glare of the summer, which carried away the dwellers inside, and extinguished the cheerful fire of home. As I went in I saw the fly from the "Barley-mow" creeping along towards the house to carry the luggage to the station. The old white horse came along quite reluctantly, as if he did not like the errand. I suppose all that his slow pace meant was that he had gone through a long day's work, and was tired; but it is so natural to convey a little of one's own feelings to everything, even the chimneys of the old house. There was nobody down stairs when I went in. Simms told me in a dolorous tone that Miss Stamford was putting on her bonnet.

"And I don't like it, ma'am—I don't like

it—going away like this, just when the country's at its nicest. If it was the General for his bit of sport, his shooting, or that, I wouldn't mind," said Simms; "but what call have the ladies got away from home? They'll go a-catching fevers or something, see if they don't. It's tempting Providence."

"I hope not, Simms," said I; but Simms took no comfort from my hoping. He shook his head and he uttered a groan as he set a chair for me in the centre of the drawing-room. No more cosy corners, the man seemed to say—no more low seats and pleasant talk—an uncompromising chair in the middle of the room, and a business object. These were all of which the old drawing-room would be capable when the ladies were away. I set down Simms along with the house itself, protesting with all its chimneys, and the old white horse lumbering reluctantly along to fetch the luggage, and the blackbird remonstrating loudly among

the trees. They were all opposed to Ursula's departure, and so was I.

The door opened, and Sophy came in more despondent than all of these sundry personages and things put together. "They are rather late—the boxes are just being put on to the fly. Will you come out here and bid her good-bye?" said Sophy, who was limp with crying. I never could tell whether it was imagination or a real quickening of my senses, but at that moment, as I rose to follow Sophy, I heard as clearly as I ever heard it in my life the galloping of horses on the dry, dusty summer road. I heard it as distinctly as I hear now the soft dropping of the rain, a sound as different as possible from all the other sounds I had been hearing—horses galloping at their very best, a whip cracking, the sound of a frantic energy of haste. Then I went out into the hall, following Sophy. It must have been imagination, for with all these lawns and shrubberies round, one could not, you may

well believe, hear passing carriages like that. Ursula was standing at the foot of the stairs in her travelling dress. It was a large, long hall, more oblong than square, into which all the rooms opened ; the drawing-room was opposite the outer door, and the General's room (the library as it was called) was further back nearer the stairs. He was inside, but the door was open. Ursula stood outside talking to the cook, who was to be a kind of housekeeper while they were away. "Don't trouble Miss Sophy except when you are perplexed yourself. 'On ordinary occasions you will do quite nicely, I am sure ; you will do everything that is wanted," she was saying in her kind, cheerful voice, for Ursula did not show any appearance of regret, though all of us who were staying behind were melancholy. The men were hoisting up the trunks with which the hall was encumbered on the top of the fly, which was visible with its old white horse standing

tired and pensive at the open door. And Mrs. St. Clair appeared behind her sister, slowly coming down stairs with a cloak over her arm and a bag in her hand. There was nothing left but to say good-bye and wish them a good journey and a speedy return.

But all at once in a moment there was a change. The horses I had been dreaming of, or had heard in a dream, drew up with a whirlwind of sound at the gate. Then something darted across the unencumbered light beyond the fly and came between the old white horse and the door. I think he—for to use any neutral expressions about *him* from the first moment at which he showed himself would be impossible—I think he lifted his hand to the men who were putting up the trunks to arrest them; at all events they stopped and scratched their heads and opened their mouths, and stood staring at him, as did Sophy and I, altogether confounded, yet with sudden elation in our hearts. He stepped

past us all as lightly as any young paladin of twenty, taking off his hat. His white hair seemed all in a moment to light up everything, to quicken the place. Ursula was the last to see him. She was still talking quite calmly to the cook, though even Mrs. St. Clair on the stairs had seen the new incident, and had dropped her cloak in amazement. He went straight up to her, without a pause, without drawing breath. I am sure we all held ours in spellbound anxiety and attention. When Ursula saw him standing by her side she started as if she had been shot—she made a hasty step back and looked at him, catching her breath too with sudden alarm. But he had the air of perfect self-command.

“Miss Stamford,” he said, “will you grant me half an hour’s interview before you go?”

For the first time Ursula lost her self-possession; she fluttered and trembled like a girl, and could not speak for a moment. Then she stammered out, “I hope you will

excuse me. We shall be—late for the train.”

“Half an hour?” he said; “I only ask half an hour—only hear me, Miss Stamford, hear what I have got to say. I will not detain you more than half an hour.”

Ursula looked round her helplessly. Whether she saw us standing gazing at her I cannot tell, or if she was conscious that the General behind her had come out to the door, and was standing there petrified, staring like the rest of us. She looked round vaguely, as if asking aid from the world in general. And whether her impetuous old lover took her hand and drew it within his arm, or if she accepted his arm, I cannot say. But the next thing of which we were aware was that they passed us, the two together, arm in arm, into the drawing-room. He had noted the open door with his quick eye, and there he led her trembling past us. Next moment it closed upon the momentous interview, and the chief actors in this strange scene disap-

peared. We were left all gazing at each other—Sophy and I at one side of the hall, Mrs. St. Clair on the stairs, where she stood as if turned to stone, her cloak fallen from her arm ; and the General at the door of his room with a face like a thunder-cloud, black and terrible. We stared at each other speechless, the central object at which we had all been gazing withdrawn suddenly from us. There were some servants also of the party, Simms standing over Miss Stamford's box, the address of which he affected to be scanning, and the cabman scratching his head. We all looked at each other with ludicrous, blank faces. It was the General who was the first to speak. He took no notice of us. He stepped out from his door into the middle of the hall, and pointed imperiously to the box. "Take all that folly away," he said harshly, and with another long step strode out of the house and disappeared.

He did not come back till late that night, when all thoughts of the train had long

departed from everybody's mind. Before that time need I say it was all settled? I had always been doubtful myself about Ursula. She had been afraid of making a joke of herself by a late marriage. She had shrunk, perhaps, too, at her time of life, from all the novelty and the change; but even at fifty-seven a woman retains her imagination, and it had been captivated in spite of herself by the bit of strange romance thus oddly introduced into her life. Is any one ever old enough to be insensible to the pleasure of being singled out and pursued with something that looked like real passion? I do not suppose so; Ursula had been alarmed by the softening of her own feelings; she had been remorseful and conscience-stricken about her secret treachery to her brother. In short, I had felt all along that she must have had very little confidence in herself when she was driven to the expedient of running away.

They would not let me go, though I felt

myself out of place at such a moment, so that I had my share in the excitement as I had in the suspense. And after all that struggle and suspense it is inconceivable how easy and natural the settlement of the matter seemed, and what a relief it was that it should be decided.

As soon as the first commotion was over Mrs. St. Clair came to me, took my hands in hers, and led me out by the open window. "George!" she said to me with a little gasp. "What shall we do about George? How will *he* take it? And if he comes in upon us all without any preparation, what will happen? I don't know what to do."

"He must know what has happened," said I; "he saw there was only one thing that could happen. He must know what he has to expect."

Mrs. St. Clair clasped her hands together. What with the excitement and the pleasure and the pain the tears stood in her eyes. "Ursula was always his favourite sister,"

she said ; “ how will he take it ? and where is he ?—wandering about, making himself wretched this melancholy night.”

It was not in reality a melancholy night. It was dark, and the colour had gone out of the sky, which looked of a deep wintry blue between the black tree-tops which swayed in the wind. Mrs. St. Clair shivered a little, partly from the contrast with the bright room inside, partly from anxiety. “ Where can he be ?—where can he be wandering ? ” she said. We had both the same idea—that he must have gone into the great park or the forest and lost himself wandering about there in wild resentment and distress. “ And we must not stay out here or Mr. Oakley will think something is wrong, and Ursula will be unhappy,” she said with a sigh.

It was then I proposed that I should stay outside to break the news to the General when he appeared—a proposal which, after a while, Mrs. St. Clair was compelled to

accept, though she protested—for after all, my absence would not be remarked, and it was easy to say that I had gone home, as I meant to do. But I cannot say that the post was a pleasant one. I walked about for some time in front of the house, and then I came and sat down in the porch “for company.” There was nothing, as I have said, specially melancholy about the night, but the contrast of the scene within and this without struck the imagination. When a door opened the voices within came with a kind of triumph into the darkness where the disappointed and solitary brother was wandering: and so absorbed was I in thoughts of General George and his downfall that I almost missed the subject of them, who came suddenly round the corner of the house when I was not looking for him. It was he who perceived me, rather than I who was on the watch for him. “You here, Mrs. Mulgrave!” he said in amazement. I believe he thought,

as I started to my feet, that I had been asleep.

“General!” I cried in my confusion. “Stop here a moment, do not go in. I have something to say to you.”

He laughed—which was a sound so unexpected that it bewildered me. “My kind friend,” he said, “have you stayed here to break the news to me? But it is unnecessary—from the moment I saw Oakley arrive I knew how it must be. Ursula has been going—she has been going. I have seen it for three or four weeks past.”

“And, General! thank heaven you are not angry: you are taking it in a Christian way.”

He laughed again—a sort of angry laugh. “Am I taking it in a Christian way? I am glad you think so, Mrs. Mulgrave. When a thing cannot be cured it must be endured, you know. I am out of court—I have no ground to stand upon, and he is master of the field. I don’t mean to make

her unhappy whatever happens. Is he here still?"

"Yes," I said trembling. He offered me his arm precisely as Mr. Oakley had offered his to Ursula. "Then we'll go and join them," he said.

This was how it all ended. There was not a speck on his boots or the least trace of disorder. Instead of roaming the woods in despair, as we thought, he had been quietly drinking Lady Denzil's delightful tea and playing chess with Sir Thomas. They had seen nothing unusual about him, we heard afterwards, and never knew that he ought to have been starting for the Continent when he walked in that evening, warmly welcomed to tea—which shows what sentimental estimates we women form about the feelings of men.

The marriage took place very soon after. Mr. Oakley bought Hillhead, the finest place in the neighbourhood, very soon after; he was so rich that he bought a

house whenever he found one that pleased him, as I might buy an old blue china pot. The one was a much greater extravagance to me than the other was to him. And they lived very happy ever after, and nobody, so far as I know, has ever had occasion to regret this love at first sight at sixty-five—this elderly romance.

END OF VOL. II.

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BUNGAY.