

A HOUSE
DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF

BY
MRS OLIPHANT

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CHAPTER XVII.

“ YES, I hope you will come and see me often. Oh yes, I shall miss my sister ; but then I shall have all the more of papa. Good night. Good night, Captain Gaunt. No ; I don’t sketch ; that was Frances. I don’t know the country either. It was my sister who knew it. I am quite ignorant and useless. Good night.”

Waring, who was on the loggia, heard this in the clear tones of his only remaining companion. He heard her come in afterwards with a step more distinct than that of Frances, as her voice carried farther. He said to himself that everything was more distinct about this

girl, and he was glad that she was coming, glad of some relief from the depression which overcame him against his will. She came across one room after another, and out upon the loggia, throwing herself down listlessly in the usurped chair. It did not occur to him that she was unaware of his presence, and he was surprised that she said nothing. But after a minute or two, there could be no doubt why it was that Constance did not speak. There was no loud outburst of emotion, but a low suppressed sound, which it was impossible to mistake. She said, after a moment, to herself, "What a fool I am!" But even this reflection did not stem the tide. A sensation of utter solitude had seized upon her. She was abandoned, among strangers; and though she had so much experience of the world, it was not of this world that Constance had any knowledge. Had she been left alone among a new tribe of people unknown to her, she would not have been afraid! Court or camp would have had no alarms for her; but the solitude, broken only by the occasional appearance of these rustic companions; the

simple young soldier, who was going to bestow his heart upon her, an entirely undesired gift; the anxious mother, who was about to mount guard over her at a distance; the polite old beau in the background. Was it possible that the existence she knew had altogether receded from Constance, and left her with such companions alone? She was not thinking of her father, neither of himself nor of his possible presence, which was of little importance to her. After a while she sat upright and passed her handkerchief quickly over her face. "It is my own fault," she said, still to herself; "I might have known."

"You don't see, Constance, that I am here."

She started, and pulled herself up in a moment. "Oh, are you there, papa? No, I didn't see you. I didn't think of any one being here. Well, they are gone. Everybody came to see Frances off, as you divined. She bore up very well; but, of course, it was a little sad for her, leaving everything she knows."

"You were crying a minute ago, Constance."

"Was I? Oh, well, that was nothing.

Girls cry, and it doesn't mean much. You know women well enough to know that."

"Yes, I know women—enough to say the ordinary things about them," said Waring; "but perhaps I don't know you, which is of far more consequence just now."

"There is not much in me to know," said the girl in a light voice. "I am just like other girls. I am apt to cry when I see people crying. Frances sobbed—like a little foolish thing; for why should she cry? She is going to see the world. Did you ever feel, when you came here first, a sort of horror seize upon you, as if—as if—as if you were lost in a savage wilderness, and would never see a human face again?"

"No; I cannot say I ever felt that."

"No, to be sure," cried Constance. "What ridiculous nonsense I am talking! A savage wilderness! with all these houses about, and the hotels on the beach. I mean—didn't you feel as if you would like to run violently down a steep place into the sea?" Then she stopped, and laughed. "It was the swine that did that."

"It has never occurred to me to take that means of settling matters; and yet I understand you," he said gravely. "You have made a mistake. You thought you were philosopher enough to give up the world; and it turns out that you are not. But you need not cry, for it is not too late. You can change your mind."

"I—change my mind! Not for the world, papa! Do you think I would give them the triumph of supposing that I could not do without them, that I was obliged to go back? Not for the world."

"I understand the sentiment," he said. "Still, between these two conditions of mind, it is rather unfortunate for you, my dear. I do not see any middle course."

"Oh yes, there is a middle course. I can make myself very comfortable here; and that is what I mean to do. Papa, if you had not found it out, I should not have told you. I hope you are not offended?"

"Oh no, I am not offended," he said, with a short laugh. "It is perhaps a pity that everybody has been put to so much trouble for what gives you so little satisfaction. That is the

worst of it; these mistakes affect so many others besides one's self."

Constance evidently had a struggle with herself to accept this reproof; but she made no immediate reply. After a while: "Frances will be a little strange at first; but she will like it by-and-by; and it is only right she should have her share," she said softly. "I have been wondering," she went on, with a laugh that was somewhat forced, "whether mamma will respect her individuality at all; or if she will put her altogether into my place? I wonder if—that man I told you of, papa——"

"Well, what of him?" said Waring, rather sharply.

"I wonder if he will be turned over to Frances too? It would be droll. Mamma is not a person to give up any of her plans, if she can help it; and you have brought up Frances so very well, papa; she is so docile—and so obedient——"

"You think she will accept your old lover, or your old wardrobe, or anything that offers? I don't think she is so well brought up as that."

"I did not mean to insult my sister," cried Constance, springing to her feet. "She is so well brought up, that she accepted whatever you chose to say to her, forgetting that she was a woman, that she was a lady."

Waring's face grew scarlet in the darkness. "I hope," he said, "that I am incapable of forgetting on any provocation that my daughter is a lady."

"You mean me!" she cried, breathless. "Oh, I can——" But here she stopped. "Papa," she resumed, "what good will it do us to quarrel? I don't want to quarrel. Instead of setting yourself against me because I am poor Con, and not Frances, whom you love—— Oh, I think you might be good to me just at this moment; for I am very lonely, and I don't know what I am good for, and I think my heart will break."

She went to him quickly, and flung herself upon his shoulder, and cried. Waring was perhaps more embarrassed than touched by this appeal; but after all, she was his child, and he was sorry for her. He put his arm round her, and said a few soothing words.

"You may be good for a great deal, if you choose," he said; "and if you will believe me, my dear, you will find that by far the most amusing way. You have more capabilities than Frances; you are much better educated than she is—at least I suppose so, for she was not educated at all."

"How do you mean that it will be more amusing? I don't expect to be amused; all that is over," said Constance, in a dolorous tone.

He was so much like her, that he paused for a moment to consider whether he should be angry, but decided against it, and laughed instead. "You are not complimentary," he said. "What I mean is, that if you sit still and think over your deprivations, you will inevitably be miserable; whereas, if you exert yourself a little, and make the best of the situation, you will very likely extract something that is amusing out of it. I have seen it happen so often in my experience."

"Ah," said Constance, considering. And then she withdrew from him and went back to her chair. "I thought, perhaps, you meant

something more positive. There are perhaps possibilities: Frances would have thought it wrong to look out for amusement—that must have been because you trained her so."

"Not altogether. Frances does not require so much amusement as you do. It is so in everything. One individual wants more sleep, more food, more delight than others."

"Yes, yes," she cried; "that is like me. Some people are more alive than others; that is what you mean, papa."

"I am not sure that it is what I mean; but if you like to take it so, I have no objection. And in that view, I recommend you to live, Constance. You will find it a great deal more amusing than to mope; and it will be much pleasanter to me."

"Yes," she said, "I was considering. Perhaps what I mean will be not the same as what you mean. I will not do it in Frances' way; but still I will take your advice, papa. I am sure you are right in what you say."

"I am glad you think so, my dear. If you cannot have everything you want, take what you can get. It is the only true philosophy."

"Then I will be a true philosopher," she said, with a laugh. The laugh was more than a mere recovery of spirits. It broke out again after a little, as if with a sense of something irresistibly comic. "But I must not interfere too much with Mariuccia, it appears. She knows what you like better than I do. I am only to look wise when she submits her *menu*, as if I knew all about it. I am very good at looking as if I knew all about it. By the way, do you know there is no piano? I should like to have a piano, if I might."

"That will not be very difficult," he said.
"Can you play?"

At which she laughed once more, with all her easy confidence restored. "You shall hear, when you get me a piano. Thanks, papa; you have quite restored me to myself. I can't knit you socks, like Frances; and I am not so clever about the mayonnaises; but still I am not altogether devoid of intellect. And now, we completely understand each other. Good night."

"This is sudden," he said. "Good night, if you think it is time for that ceremony."

"It is time for me; I am a little tired; and I have got some alterations to make in my room, now that—now that—at present when I am quite settled and see my way."

He did not understand what she meant, and he did not inquire. It was of very little consequence. Indeed it was perhaps well that she should go and leave him to think of everything. It was not a month yet since the day when he had met that idiot Mannering on the road. To be sure, there was no proof that the idiot Mannering was the cause of all that had ensued. But at least it was he who had first disturbed the calm which Waring hoped was to have been eternal. He sat down to think, almost grateful to Constance for taking herself away. He thought a little of Frances hurrying along into the unknown, the first great journey she had ever taken—and such a journey, away from everything and everybody she knew. Poor little Fan! he thought a little about her; but he thought a great deal about himself. Would it ever be possible to return to that peace which had been so profound, which had ceased to appear

capable of disturbance? The circumstances were all very different now. Frances, who would think it her duty to write to him often, was henceforth to be her mother's companion, reflecting, no doubt, the sentiments of a mind, to escape from the companionship of which he had given up the world and (almost) his own species. And Constance, though she had elected to be his companion, would no doubt all the same write to her mother; and everything that he did and said, and all the circumstances of his life, would thus be laid open. He felt an impatience beyond words of that dutifulness of women, that propriety in which girls are trained, which makes them write letters. Why should they write letters? But it was impossible to prevent it. His wife would become a sort of distant witness of everything he did. She would know what he liked for dinner, the wine he preferred, how many baths he took. To describe how this thought annoyed him would be impossible. He had forgotten to warn Frances that her father was not to be discussed with my lady. But what was the use of saying anything, when letters would

come and go continually from the one house to the other? And he would be compelled to put up with it, though nothing could be more unpleasant. If these girls had been boys, this would not have happened. It was perhaps the first time Waring had felt himself within reach of such a wish, for boys were far more objectionable to his fine taste than girls, gave more trouble, and were less agreeable to have about one. In the present circumstances, however, he could not but feel they would have been less embarrassing. Constance might grow tired, indeed, of that unprofitable exercise of letter-writing. But Frances, he felt sure, would in all cases be dutiful, and would not grow tired. She would write to him perhaps (he shivered) every day; at least every week; and she would think it her duty to tell him everything that happened, and she would require that he should reply. But this, except once or twice, perhaps, to let her down easily, he was resolved that nothing should induce him to do.

Constance was neither tired nor sleepy when she went to her room. She had never betrayed the consciousness in any way, being high-bred

and courteous when it did not interfere with her comfort to be so; yet she had divined that Frances had given up her room to her. This would have touched the heart of many people, but to Constance it was almost an irritation. She could not think why her sister had done it, except with that intention of self-martyrdom with which so many good people exasperate their neighbours. She would have been quite as comfortable in the blue room, and she would have liked it better. Now that Frances was safely gone and her feelings could not be hurt any more, Constance had set her heart upon altering it to her own pleasure, making it bear no longer the impress of Frances' mind, but of her own. She took down a number of the pictures which Frances had thought so much of, and softly pulled the things about, and changed it more than any one could have supposed a room could be changed. Then she sat down to think. The depression which had seized upon her when she had felt that all was over, that the door was closed upon her, and no place of repentance any longer possible, did not return at

first. Her father's words, which she understood in a sense not intended by him, gave her a great deal of amusement as she thought them over. She did not conceal from herself the fact that there might ensue circumstances in which she should quote them to him to justify herself. "Frances does not require so much amusement as you do. One individual requires more sleep, more food, more delight than another." She laid this dangerous saying up in her mind with much glee, laughing to herself under her breath: "If you cannot get what you want, you must take what you can get." How astounded he would be if it should ever be necessary to put him in mind of these dogmas—which were so true! Her father's arguments, indeed, which were so well meant, did not suit the case of Constance. She had been in a better state of mind when she had felt herself to awake, as it were, on the edge of this desert, into which, in her impatience, she had flung herself, and saw that there was no escape for her, that she had been taken at her word, that she was to be permitted to work out her own will, and that no one would

forcibly interfere to restore all her delights, to smooth the way for her to return. She had expected this, if not consciously, yet with a strong unexpressed conviction. But when she had seen Markham's face disappear, and realised that he was gone, actually gone, and had left her to exist as she could in the wilderness to which she had flown, her young perverse soul had been swept as by a tempest.

After a while, when she had gone through that little interview with her father, when she had executed her little revolution, and had seated herself in the quiet of the early night to think again over the whole matter, the pang returned, as every pang does. It was not yet ten o'clock, the hour at which she might have been setting out to a succession of entertainments under her mother's wing; but she had nothing better to amuse her than to alter the arrangement of a few old chairs, to draw aside a faded curtain, and then to betake herself to bed, though it was too early to sleep. There were sounds of voices still audible without —people singing, gossiping, enjoying, on the stone benches on the Punto, just those same

delights of society which happy people on the verge of a new season were beginning to enjoy. But Constance did not feel much sympathy with the villagers, who were foreigners, whom she felt to be annoying and intrusive, making a noise under her windows, when, as it so happened, she had nothing to do but to go to sleep. When she looked out from the window and saw the pale sky spreading clear over the sea, she could think of nothing but Frances rushing along through the night, with Markham taking such care of her, hastening to London, to all that was worth living for. No doubt that little thing was still crying in her corner, in her folly and ignorance regretting her village. Oh, if they could but have changed places ! To think of sitting opposite to Markham, with the soft night air blowing in her face, devouring the way, seeing the little towns flash past, the morning dawn upon France, the long levels of the flat country sweep along, then Paris, London, at last ! She shut the *persiani* almost violently with a hand that trembled, and looked round the four walls which shut her in, with again an impulse almost of despair. She

felt like a wild creature newly caged, shut in there, to be kept within bolts and bars, to pace up and down, and beat against the walls of her prison, and never more to go free.

But this fit being more violent, did not go so deep as the unspeakable sense of loneliness which had overwhelmed her soul at first. She sprang up from it with the buoyancy of her age, and said to herself what her father had said : “If you cannot get what you want, you must take what you can get.” There was yet a little amusement to be had out of this arid place. She had her father’s sanction for making use of her opportunities ; anything was better than to mope ; and for her it was a necessity to live. She laughed a little under her breath once more, as she came back to this more reassuring thought, and so lay down in her sister’s bed with a satisfaction in the thought that it had not taken her any trouble to supplant Frances, and a mischievous smile about the corners of her mouth ; although, after all, the thought of the travellers came over her again as she closed her eyes, and she ended by crying herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPTAIN GAUNT called next day to bring, he said, a message from his mother. She sent Mr Waring a newspaper* which she thought he might like to see, an English weekly newspaper, which some of her correspondents had sent her, in which there was an article—— He did not give a very clear account of this, nor make it distinctly apparent why Waring should be specially interested; and as a matter of fact, the newspaper found its way to the waste-paper basket, and interested nobody. But, no doubt, Mrs Gaunt's intentions had been excellent. When the young soldier arrived, there was a carriage at the door, and Constance had her hat on. “We are going,” she said, “to San Remo, to see about a piano. Do you know San Remo? Oh, I forgot you are as much a stranger as I

am ; you don't know anything. What a good thing that there are two ignorant persons ! We will keep each other in countenance, and they will be compelled to make all kinds of expeditions to show us everything."

"That will be a wonderful chance for me," said the young man, "for nobody would take so much trouble for me alone."

"How can you tell that ? Miss Tasie, I should think, would be an excellent cicerone," said Constance. She said it with a light laugh of suggestion, meaning to imply, though, of course, she had *said* nothing, that Tasie would be too happy to put herself at Captain Gaunt's disposition ; a suggestion which he, too, received with a laugh—for this is one of the points upon which both boys and girls are always ungenerous.

"And failing Miss Tasie," said Constance, "suppose you come with papa and me ? They say it is a pretty drive. They say, of course, that everything here is lovely, and that the Riviera is paradise. Do you find it so ?"

"I can fancy circumstances in which I should find it so," said the young soldier.

"Ah, yes; every one can do that. I can fancy circumstances in which Bond Street would be paradise—oh, very easily! It is not far from paradise at any time."

"That is a heaven of which I know very little, Miss Waring."

"Ah, then, you must learn. The true Elysian fields are in London in May. If you don't know that, you can form no idea of happiness. An exile from all delights gives you the information, and you may be sure it is true."

"Why, then, Miss Waring, if you think so——"

"Am I here? Oh, that is easily explained. I have a sister."

"Yes, I know."

"Ah, I understand you have heard a great deal about my sister. I suffer here from being compared with her. I am not nearly so good, so wise, as Frances. But is that my fault, Captain Gaunt? You are impartial; you are a new-comer. If I could, I would, be as nice as Frances, don't you believe?"

The young man gave Constance a look, which, indeed, she expected, and said with

confusion, "I don't see—any need for improvement," and blushed as near crimson as was possible over the greenish brown of his Indian colour.

Constance for her part did not blush. She laughed, and made him an almost imperceptible curtsey. The ways of flirtation are not original, and all the parallels of the early encounters might be stereotyped, as everybody knows.

"You are very amiable," she said; "but then you don't know Frances, and your opinion, accordingly, is less valuable. I did not ask you, however, to believe me to be equal to my sister, but only to believe that I would be as nice if I could. However, all that is no explanation. We have a mother, you know, in England. We are, unfortunately, that sad thing, a household divided against itself."

Captain Gaunt was not prepared for such confidences. He grew still a little browner with embarrassment, and muttered something about being very sorry, not knowing what to say.

"Oh, there is not very much to be sorry

about. Papa enjoys himself in his way here, and mamma is very happy at home. The only thing is that we must each have our turn, you know—that is only fair. So Frances has gone to mamma, and here am I in Bordighera. We are each dreadfully out of our element. Her friends condemn me, to begin with, as if it were my fault that I am not like her; and my friends, perhaps—— But no; I don't think so. Frances is so good, so nice, so everything a girl ought to be."

At this she laughed softly again; and young Gaunt's consciousness that his mother's much vaunted Frances was the sort of girl to please old ladies rather than young men, a prim, little, smooth, correct maiden, with not the least "go" in her, took additional force and certainty. Whereas—— But he had no words in which to express his sense of the advantages on the other side.

"You must find it," he said, knowing nothing more original to say, "dreadfully dull living here."

"I have not found anything as yet; I have only just come. I am no more than a few days

older than you are. We can compare notes as time goes on. But perhaps you don't mean to stay very long in these abodes of the blest?"

"I don't know that I did intend it. But I shall stay now as long as ever I can," said the young man. Then—for he was shy—he added hastily, "It is a long time since I have seen my people, and they like to have me."

"Naturally. But you need not have spoiled what looked like a very pretty compliment by adding that. Perhaps you didn't mean it for a compliment? Oh, I don't mind at all. It is much more original, if you didn't mean it. Compliments are such common coin. But I don't pretend to despise them, as some girls do; and I don't like to see them spoiled," Constance said seriously.

The young man looked at her with consternation. After a while, his moustache expanded into a laugh, but it was a confused laugh, and he did not understand. Still less did he know how to reply. Constance had been used to sharper wits, who took her at half a word; and she was half angry to be thus obliged to explain.

"We are going to San Remo, as I told you," she said. "I am waiting for my father. We are going to look for a piano. Frances is not musical, so there is no piano in the house. You must come too, and give your advice. Oh, are you ready, papa? Captain Gaunt, who does not know San Remo, and who does know music, is coming with us to give us his advice."

The young soldier stammered forth that to go to San Remo was the thing he most desired in the world. "But I don't think my advice will be good for much," he said, conscientiously. "I do a little on the violin; but as for pretending to be a judge of a piano——"

"Come; we are all ready," said Constance, leading the way.

Waring had to let the young fellow precede him, to see him get into the carriage without any articulate murmur. As a matter of fact, a sort of stupor seized the father, altogether unaccustomed to be the victim of accidents. Frances might have lived by his side till she was fifty before she would have thought of inviting a stranger to be of their party—a stranger, a young man, which was a class of

being with which Waring had little patience, a young soldier, proverbially frivolous, and occupied with foolish matters. Young Gaunt respectfully left to his senior the place beside Constance ; but he placed himself opposite to her, and kept his eyes upon her with a devout attention, which Waring would have thought ridiculous had he not been irritated by it. The young fellow was a great deal too much absorbed to contribute much to the amusement of the party ; and it irritated Waring beyond measure to see his eyes gleam from under his eyebrows, opening wider with delight, half closing with laughter, the ends of his moustache going up to his ears. Waring, an impartial spectator, was not so much impressed by his daughter's wit. He thought he had heard a great deal of the same before, or even better, surely better, for he could recollect that he had in his day been charmed by a similar treatment, which must have been much lighter in touch, much less commonplace in subject, because—he was charmed. Thus we argue in our generations. In the meantime, young Gaunt, though he had not been without some experi-

ence, looked at Constance from under his brows, and listened as if to the utterances of the gods. If only they could have had it all to themselves ; if only the old father had been out of the way !

The sunshine, the sea, the beautiful colour, the unexpected vision round every corner of another and another picturesque cluster of towns and roofs ; all that charm and variety which give to Italy above every country on earth the admixture of human interest, the endless chain of association which adds a grace to natural beauty, made very little impression upon this young pair. She would have been amused and delighted by the exercise of her own power, and he would have been enthralled by her beauty, and what he considered her wit and high spirits, had their progress been along the dullest streets. It was only Waring's eyes, disgusted by the prospect before him of his daughter's little artifices, and young Gaunt's imbecile subjection, which turned with any special consciousness to the varying blues of the sea, to the endless developments of the landscape.

Flirtation is one of the last things in the world to brook a spectator. Its little absurdities, which are so delightful to the actors in the drama, and which at a distance the severest critic may smile at and forgive, excite the wrath of a too close looker-on, in a way quite disproportioned to their real offensiveness. The interchange of chatter which prevents, as that observer would say, all rational conversation, the attempts to charm, which are so transparent, the response of silly admiration, which is only another form of vanity—how profoundly sensible we all are of their folly! Had Constance taken as much pains to please her father, he would, in all probability, have yielded altogether to the spell; but he was angry, ashamed, furious, that she should address those wiles to the young stranger, and saw through him with a clear-sightedness which was exasperating. It was all the more exasperating that he could not tell what she meant by it. Was it possible that she had already formed an inclination towards this tawny young stranger? Had his bilious hues affected her imagination? Love

at first sight is a very respectable emotion, and commands in many cases both sympathy and admiration. But no man likes to see the working of this sentiment in a woman who belongs to him. Had Constance fallen in love? He grew angry at the very suggestion, though breathed only in the recesses of his own mind. A girl who had been brought up in the world, who had seen all kinds of people, was it possible that she should fall a victim in a moment to the attractions of a young nobody—a young fellow who knew nothing but India? That he should be subjected, was simple enough; but Constance! Waring's brow clouded more and more. He kept silent, taking no part in the talk, and the young fools did not so much as remark it, but went on with their own absurdity more and more.

The transformation of a series of little Italian municipalities, although in their nature more towns than villages, rendered less rustic by the traditions of an exposed coast, and many a crisis of self-defence, into little modern towns full of hotels and tourists, is neither a pleas-

ant nor a lovely process. San Remo in the old days, before Dr Antonio made it known to the world, lay among its olive-gardens on the edge of the sea, which grew bluer and bluer as it crept to the feet of the human master of the soil, a delight to behold, a little picture which memory cherished. Wide promenades flanked with big hotels, with conventional gardens full of green bushes, and a kiosk for the band, make a very different prospect now. But then, in the old days, there could have been no music-sellers with pianos to let or sell ; no famous English chemist with coloured bottles ; no big shops in which travellers could be tempted. Constance forgot Captain Gaunt when she found herself in this atmosphere of the world. She began to remember things she wanted. "Papa, if you don't despise it too much, you must let me do a little shopping," she said. She wanted a hat for the sun. She wanted some eau-de-Cologne. She wanted just to run into the jeweller's to see if the coral was good, to see if there were any peasant-ornaments which would be characteristic. At all this her father smiled some-

what grimly, taking it as a part of the campaign into which his daughter had chosen to enter for the overthrow of the young soldier. But Constance was perfectly sincere, and had forgotten her campaign in the new and warmer interest.

"So long as you do not ask me to attend you from shop to shop," he said.

"Oh no; Captain Gaunt will come," said Constance.

Captain Gaunt was not a victim who required many wiles. He was less amusing than she had hoped, in so far that he had given in, in an incredibly short space of time. He was now in a condition to be trampled on at her pleasure, and this was unexciting. A longer resistance would have been much more to Constance's mind. Captain Gaunt accompanied her to all the shops. He helped her with his advice about the piano, bending his head over her as she ran through a little air or two, and struck a few chords on one after the other of the music-seller's stock. They were not very admirable instruments, but one was found that would do.

"You can bring your violin," Constance said; "we must try to amuse ourselves a little." This was before her father left them, and he heard it with a groan.

Waring took a silent walk round the bay while the purchases went on. He thought of past experiences, of the attraction which a shop has for women. Frances, no doubt, after a little of her mother's training, would be the same. She would find out the charms of shopping. He had not even her return to look forward to, for she would not be the same Frances who had left him, when she came back. *When* she came back?—if she ever came back. The same Frances, never; perhaps not even a changed Frances. Her mother would quickly see what an advantage she had in getting the daughter whom her husband had brought up. She would not give her back; she would turn her into a second Constance. There had been a time when Waring had concluded that Constance was amusing and Frances dull; but it must be remembered that he was under provocation now. If she had been amusing, it had not

been for him. She had exerted herself to please a commonplace, undistinguished boy, with an air of being indifferent to everything else, which was beyond measure irritating to her father. And now she had got scent of shops, and would never be happy save when she was rushing from one place to another—to Mentone, to Nice perhaps, wherever her fancied wants might lead her. Waring discussed all this with himself as he rambled along, his nerves all set on edge, his taste revolted. Flirtations and shops—was he to be brought to this? he who had been free from domestic encumbrance, who had known nothing for so many years but a little ministerant, who never troubled him, who was ready when he wanted her, but never put forth herself as a restraint or an annoyance. He had advised Constance to take what good she could find in her life; but he had never imagined that this was the line she would take.

The drive home was scarcely more satisfactory. Young Gaunt had got a little courage by the episode of the shops. He ventured to tell her of the trifles he had brought with him

from India, and to ask if Miss Waring would care to see them ; and he described to her the progress he had made with his violin, and what his attainments were in music. Constance told him that the best thing he could do was to bring the said violin and all his music, so that they might see what they could do together. "If you are not too far advanced for me," she said with a laugh. "Come in the morning, when we shall not be interrupted."

Her father listened, but said nothing. His imagination immediately set before him the tuning and scraping, the clang of the piano, the shriek of the fiddle, and he himself only two rooms off, endeavouring in vain to collect his thoughts and do his work ! Mr Waring's work was not of the first importance, but still it was his work, and momentous to him. He bore, however, a countenance unmoved, if very grave, and even endured without a word the young man's entrance with them, the consultation about where the piano was to stand, and tea afterwards in the loggia. He did not himself want any tea ; he left the young people to enjoy this refreshment together while he

retired to his bookroom. But with only two rooms between, and with his senses quickened by displeasure, he heard their voices, the laughter, the continual flow of talk, even the little tinkle of the teacups—every sound. He had never been disturbed by Frances' tea; but then, except Tasie Durant, there had been nobody to share it, no son from the bungalow, no privileged messenger sent by his mother. Mrs Gaunt's children, of whom she talked continually, had always been a nuisance, except to the sympathetic soul of Frances. But who could have imagined the prominence which they had assumed now?

Young Gaunt did not go away until shortly before dinner; and Constance, after accompanying him to the anteroom, went along the corridor singing, to her own room, to change her dress. Though her room (Frances' room that was) was at the extremity of the suite, her father heard her light voice running on in a little operatic air all the time she made her toilet. Had it been described in a book, he thought to himself it would have had a pretty sound. The girl's voice, sweet and gay,

sounding through the house, the voice of happy youth brightening the dull life there, the voice of innocent content betraying its own satisfaction with existence—satisfaction in having a young fool to flirt with, and some trumpery shops to buy unnecessary appendages in ! At dinner, however, she made fun of young Gaunt, and the morose father was a little mollified. “It is rather dreadful for other people when there is an adoring mother in the background to think everything you do perfection,” Constance said. “I don’t think we shall make much of the violin.”

“These are subjects on which you can speak with more authority than I—both the violin and the mother,” said Waring.

“Oh,” she cried, “you don’t think mamma was one of the adoring kind, I hope ! There may be things in her which might be mended ; but she is not like that. She kept one in one’s proper place. And as for the violin, I suspect he plays it like an old fiddler in the streets.”

“ You have changed your mind about it very rapidly,” said Waring ; but on the whole he was pleased. “ You seemed much interested

both in the hero and the music, a little while ago."

"Yes; was I not?" said Constance with perfect candour. "And he took it all in, as if it were likely. These young men from India, they are very ingenuous. It seems wicked to take advantage of them, does it not?"

"More people are ingenuous than the young man from India. I intended to speak to you very seriously as soon as he was gone—to ask you——"

"What were my intentions?" cried Constance, with an outburst of the gayest laughter. "Oh, what a pity I began! How sorry I am to have missed that! Do you think his mother will ask me, papa? It is generally the man, isn't it, who is questioned? and he says his intentions are honourable. Mine, I frankly allow, are not honourable."

"No; very much the reverse, I should think. But it had better be clearly defined, for my satisfaction, Constance, which of you is true—the girl who cried over her loneliness last night, or she who made love to Captain Gaunt this morning——"

"No, papa; only was a little nice to him, because he is lonely too."

"These delicacies of expression are too fine for me. —Who made the poor young fellow believe that she liked his society immensely, was much interested, counted upon him and his violin as her greatest pleasures."

"You are going too far," she said. "I think the fiddle will be fun. When you play very badly and are a little conceited about it, you are always amusing. And as for Captain Gaunt —so long as he does not complain——"

"It is I who am complaining, Constance."

"Well, papa—but why? You told me last night to take what I had, since I could not have what I want."

"And you have acted upon my advice? With great promptitude, I must allow."

"Yes," she said with composure. "What is the use of losing time? It is not my fault if there is somebody here quite ready. It amuses him too. And what harm am I doing? A girl can't be asked—except for fun—those disagreeable questions."

"And therefore you think a girl can do—what would be dishonourable in a man."

"Oh, you are so much too serious," cried Constance. "Are you always as serious as this? You laughed when I told you about Fanny Gervoise. Is it only because it is me that you find fault? And don't you think it is a little too soon for parental interference? The Gaunts would be much surprised. They would think you were afraid for my peace of mind, papa—as her parents were afraid for Miss Tasie."

This moved the stern father to a smile. He had thought that Constance did not appreciate that joke; but the girl had more humour than he supposed. "I see," he said, "you will have your own way; but remember, Constance, I cannot allow it to go too far."

How could he prevent it going as far as she pleased? she said to herself with a little scorn, when she was alone. Parents may be medieval if they will; but the means have never yet been invented of preventing a woman, when she is so minded and has the power in her hands, from achieving her little triumph over a young man's heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

"WHERE is George? I scarcely ever see him," said the General, in querulous tones. "He is always after that girl of Waring's. Why don't you try to keep him at home?"

Mrs Gaunt did not say that she had done her best to keep him at home, but found her efforts unsuccessful. She said apologetically, "He has so very little to amuse him here; and the music, you know, is a great bond."

"He plays like a beginner; and she, like a—like a—as well as a professional. I don't understand what kind of bond that can be."

"So much the greater a compliment is it to George that she likes his playing," responded the mother promptly.

"She likes to make a fool of him, I think," the General said; "and you help her on. I

don't understand your tactics. Women generally like to keep their sons free from such entanglements; and after getting him safely out of India, where every man is bound to fall into mischief——”

“Oh, my dear,” said Mrs Gaunt, “if it ever should come to that—think, what an excellent connection. I wish it had been Frances; I do wish it had been Frances. I had always set my heart on that. But the connection would be the same.”

“You knew nothing about the connection when you set your heart on Frances. And I can't help thinking there is something odd about the connection. Why should that girl have come here, and why should the other one be spirited away like a transformation scene?”

“Well, my dear, it is in the peerage,” said Mrs Gaunt. “Great families, we all know, are often very queer in their arrangements. But there can be no doubt it is all right, for it is in the peerage. If it had been Frances, I should have been too happy. With such a connection, he could not fail to get on.”

"He had much better get on by his own merits," retorted the General with a grumble. "Frances! Frances was not to be compared with this girl. But I don't believe she means anything more than amusing herself," he added. "This is not the sort of girl to marry a poor soldier without a penny—not she. She will take her fun out of him, and then——"

The General kissed the end of his fingers and tossed them into the air. He was, perhaps, a little annoyed that his son had stepped in and monopolised the most amusing member of the society. And perhaps he did not think so badly of George's chances as he said.

"You may be sure," said Mrs Gaunt, indignantly, "she will do nothing of the kind. It is not every day that a girl gets a fine fellow like our George at her feet. He is just a little too much at her feet, which is always a mistake, I think. But still, General, you cannot but allow that Lord Markham's sister——"

"I have never seen much good come of great connections," said the General; but though his tone was that of a sceptic, his mind was softer than his speech. He, too, felt a certain elation

in the thought that the youngest, who was not the clever one of the family, and who had not been quite so steady as might have been desired, was thus in the way of putting himself above the reach of fate. For of course, to be brother-in-law to a viscount was a good thing. It might not be of the same use as in the days when patronage ruled supreme; but still it would be folly to suppose that it was not an advantage. It would admit George to circles with which otherwise he could have formed no acquaintance, and make him known to people who could push him in his profession. George was the one about whom they had been most anxious. All the others were doing well in their way, though it was not a way which threw them into contact with viscounts or fine society. George would be over all their heads in that respect, and he was the one that wanted it most,—he was the one who was most dependent on outside aid.

“I don’t quite understand,” said Mrs Gaunt, “what Constance’ position is. She ought to be the Honourable, don’t you think? The Honourable Constance sounds very pretty. It

would come in very nicely with Gaunt, which is an aristocratic-sounding name. People may say what they like about titles, but they are very nice, there is such individuality in them. Mrs George might be anybody ; it might be me, as your name is George too. But the Honourable would distinguish it at once. When she called here, there was only Miss Constance Waring written on her father's card ; but then you don't put Honourable on your card ; and as Lady Markham's daughter——”

“ Women don't count,” said the General, “ as I've often told you. She's Waring's daughter.”

“ Mr Waring may be a very clever man,” said Mrs Gaunt, indignantly ; “ but I should like to know how Constance can be the daughter of a viscountess in her own right without——”

“ Is she a viscountess in her own right ? ”

This question brought Mrs Gaunt to a sudden pause. She looked at him with a startled air. “ It is not through Mr Waring, that is clear,” she said.

“ But it is not in her own right—at least I don't think so ; it is through her first husband,

the father of that funny little creature" (meaning Lord Markham).

"General!" said Mrs Gaunt, shocked. Then she added, "I must make some excuse to look at the Peerage this afternoon. The Durants have always got their Peerage on the table. We shall have to send for one too, if—"

"If what? If your boy gets a wife who has titled connections, for that is all. A wife! and what is he to keep her on, in the name of heaven?"

"Mothers and brothers are tolerably close connections," said Mrs Gaunt with dignity. "He has got his pay, General; and you always intended, if he married to your satisfaction—Of course," she added, speaking very quickly, to forestall an outburst, "Lady Markham will not leave her daughter dependent upon a captain's pay. And even Mr Waring—Mr Waring must have a fortune of his own, or—or a person like that would never have married him; and he would not be able to live as he does, very comfortably, even luxuriously—"

"Oh, I suppose he has enough to live on.

But as for pinching himself in order to enable his girl to marry your boy, I don't believe a word of it," exclaimed the General. Fortunately, being carried away by this wave of criticism, he had forgotten his wife's allusion to his own intentions in George's favour; and this was a subject on which she had no desire to be premature.

"Well, General," she said, "perhaps we are going a little too fast. We don't know yet whether anything will come of it. George is rather a lady's man. It may be only a flirtation; it may end in nothing. We need not begin to count our chickens——"

"Why, it was you!" cried the astonished General. "I never should have remarked anything about it, or wasted a moment's thought on the subject!"

Mrs Gaunt was not a clever woman, skilled in the art of leaving conversational responsibilities on the shoulders of her interlocutor; but if a woman is not inspired on behalf of her youngest boy, when is she to be inspired? She gave her shoulders the slightest possible shrug and left him to his newspaper. They had a

newspaper from England every morning—the ‘Standard,’ whose reasonable Conservatism suited the old General. Except in military matters, such questions as the advance of Russia towards Afghanistan, or the defences of our own coasts, the General was not a bigot, and preferred his politics mild, with as little froth and foam as possible. His newspaper afforded him occupation for the entire morning, and he enjoyed it in very pleasant wise, seated under his veranda with a faint suspicion of lemon-blossom in the air which ruffled the young olive-trees all around, and the blue breadths of the sea stretching far away at his feet. The garden behind was fenced in with lemon and orange trees, the fruit in several stages, and just a little point of blossom here and there, not enough to load the air. Mrs Gaunt had preserved the wild flowers that were natural to the place, and accordingly had a scarlet field of anemones which wanted no cultivation, and innumerable clusters of the sweet white narcissus filling her little enclosure. These cost no trouble, and left Toni, the man-of-all-work, at leisure for the more profitable culture of the olives. From where the General

sat, there was nothing visible, however, but the terraces descending in steps towards the distant glimpse of the road, and the light-blue margin, edged with spray, of the sea—under a soft and cheering sun, that warmed to the heart, but did not scorch or blaze, and with a soft air playing about his old temples, breathing freshness and that lemon-bloom. Sometimes there would come a faint sound of voices from some group of workers among the olives. The little clump of palm-trees at the end of the garden—for nothing here is perfect without a palm or two—cast a fantastic shadow, that waved over the newspaper now and then. When a man is old and has done his work, what can he want more than this sweet retirement and stillness? But naturally, it was not all that was necessary to young Captain George.

Mrs Gaunt went over to the Durants in the afternoon, as she so often did, and found that family, as usual, on their loggia. It cost her a little trouble and diplomacy to get a private inspection of the Peerage, and even when she did so, it threw but little light upon her question. Geoffrey Viscount Markham, tenth

lord, was a name which she read with a little flutter of her heart, feeling that he was already almost a relation ; and she read over the names of Markham Priory and Dunmorra, his lodge in the Highlands, and the town address in Eaton Square, all with a sense that by-and-by she might herself be directing letters from one or other of these places. But the Peerage said nothing about the Dowager Lady Markham subsequent to the conclusion of the first marriage, except that she had married again, E. Waring, Esq. ; and thus Mrs Gaunt's studies came to no satisfactory end. She introduced the subject, however, in the course of tea. She had asked whether any one had heard from Frances, and had received a satisfactory reply.

“ Oh yes ; I have had two letters ; but she does not say very much. They had gone down to the Priory for Easter ; and she was to be presented at the first drawing-room. Fancy Frances in a Court train and feathers, at a drawing-room ! It does seem so very strange,” Tasie said. She said it with a slight sigh, for it was she, in old times, who had expounded Society to little Frances, and taught her what

in an emergency it would be right to do and say; and now little Frances had taken a stride in advance. "I asked her to write and tell us all about it, and what she wore."

"It would be white, of course."

"Oh yes, it would be white—a *débutante*. When *I* went to drawing-rooms," said Mrs Durant, who had once, in the character of chaplainess to an Embassy, made her courtesy to her Majesty, "young ladies' toilets were simpler than now. Frances will probably be in white satin, which, except for a wedding dress, is quite unsuitable, I think, for a girl."

"I wonder if we shall see it in the papers? Sometimes my sister-in-law sends me a 'Queen,' said Mrs Gaunt, "when she thinks there is something in it which will interest me; but she does not know anything about Frances. Dear little thing, I can't think of her in white satin. Her sister, now——"

"Constance would wear velvet, if she could—or cloth-of-gold," cried Tasie, with a little irritation. Her mother gave her a reproving glance.

"There is a tone in your voice, Tasie, which is not kind."

"Oh yes; I know, mamma. But Constance is rather a trial. I know one ought not to show it. She looks as if one was not good enough to tie her shoes. And after all, she is no better than Frances; she is not half so nice as Frances; but I mean there can be no difference of position between sisters—one is just as good as the other; and Frances was so fond of coming here."

"Do you think Constance gives herself airs? Oh no, dear Tasie," said Mrs Gaunt; "she is really not at all—when you come to know her. I am most fond of Frances myself. Frances has grown up among us, and we know all about her; that is what makes the difference. And Constance—is a little shy."

At this there was a cry from the family. "I don't think she is shy," said the old clergyman, whom Constance had insulted by walking out of church before the sermon.

"Shy!" exclaimed Mrs Durant, "about as shy as——" But no simile occurred to her which was bold enough to meet the case.

"It is better she should not be shy," said Tasie. "You remember how she drove those

* people from the hotel to church. They have come ever since. They are quite afraid of her. Oh, there are some good things in her, some *very* good things."

"We are the more hard to please, after knowing Frances," repeated Mrs Gaunt. "But when a girl has been like that, used to the best society—— By the way, Mr Durant, you who know everything, are sure to know—Is she the Honourable? For my part I can't quite make it out."

Mr Durant put on his spectacles to look at her, as if such a question passed the bounds of the permissible. He was very imposing when he looked at any one through those spectacles with an air of mingled astonishment and superiority. "Why should she be an Honourable?" he said.

Mrs Gaunt felt as if she would like to sink into the abysses of the earth—that is, through the floor of the loggia, whatever might be the dreadful depths underneath. "Oh, I don't know," she said meekly. "I—I only thought —her mother being a—a titled person, a—a viscountess in her own right——"

“But my *dear* lady,” said Mr Durant, with a satisfaction in his superior knowledge which was almost unspeakable, “Lady Markham is *not* a viscountess in her own right. Dear, no! She is not a viscountess at all. She is plain Mrs Waring, and nothing else, if right was right. Society only winks good-naturedly at her retaining the title, which she certainly, if there is any meaning in the peerage at all, forfeits by marrying a commoner.”

Mrs Durant and Tasie both looked with great admiration at their head and instructor as he thus spoke. “You may be sure Mr Durant says nothing that he is not quite sure of,” said the wife, crushing any possible scepticism on the part of the inquirer; and “Papa knows such a lot,” added Tasie, awed, yet smiling, on her side.

“Oh, is that all?” said Mrs Gaunt, greatly subdued. “But then, Lord Markham—calls her his sister, you know.”

“The nobility,” said Mr Durant, “are always very scrupulous about relationships; and she *is* his step-sister. He couldn’t qualify the relationship by calling her so. A common person

might do so, but not a man of high breeding, like Lord Markham—that is all."

"I suppose you must be right," said Mrs Gaunt. "The General said so too. But it does seem very strange to me that of the same woman's children, and she a lady of title, one should be a lord, and the other have no sort of distinction at all." They all smiled upon her blandly, every one ready with a new piece of information, and much sympathy for her ignorance, which Mrs Gaunt, seeing that it was she that was likely to be related to Lord Markham, and not any of the Durants, felt that she could not bear; so she jumped up hastily and declared that she must be going, that the General would be waiting for her. "I hope you will come over some evening, and I will ask the Warings, and Tasie must bring her music. I am sure you would like to hear George's violin. He is getting on so well, with Constance to play his accompaniments;" and before any one could reply to her, Mrs Gaunt had hurried away.

It is painful not to have time to get out your retort; and these excellent people turned instinctively upon each other to discharge the

unflown arrows. "It is so very easy, with a little trouble, to understand the titles, complimentary and otherwise, of our own nobility," said Mr Durant, shaking his head.

"And such a sign of want of breeding not to understand them," said his wife.

"The Honourable Constance would sound very pretty," cried Tasie; "it is such a pity."

"Especially, our friend thinks, if it was the Honourable Constance Gaunt."

"That she could never be, my dear," said the old clergyman mildly. "She might be the Honourable Mrs Gaunt; but Constance, no—not in any case."

"I should like to know why," Mrs Durant said.

Perhaps here the excellent chaplain's knowledge failed him; or he had become weary of the subject; for he rose and said, "I have really no more time for a matter which does not concern us," and trotted away.

The mother and daughter left alone together, naturally turned to a point more interesting than the claims of Constance to rank. "Do you really think, mamma," said Tasie—"do you

really, really think,—it is silly to be always discussing these sort of questions—but do you believe that Constance Waring actually—means anything?"

" You should say does George Gaunt mean anything? The girl never comes first in such a question," said Mrs Durant, with that ingrained contempt for girls which often appears in elderly women. Tasie was so (traditionally) young, besides having a heart of sixteen in her bosom, that her sympathies were all with the girl.

"I don't think in this case, mamma," she said. "Constance is so much more a person of the world than any of us. I don't mean to say she is worldly. Oh no! but having been in society, and so much *out*."

"I should like to know in what kind of society she has been," said Mrs Durant, who took gloomy views. "I don't want to say a word against Lady Markham; but society, Tasie, the kind of society to which your father and I have been accustomed, looks rather coldly upon a wife living apart from her husband. Oh, I don't mean to say Lady Markham was

to blame. Probably she is a most excellent person ; but the presumption is that at least, you know, there were—faults on both sides.”

“I am sure I can’t give an opinion,” cried Tasie, “for, of course, I don’t know anything about it. But George Gaunt has nothing but his pay ; and Constance couldn’t be in love with him, could she ? Oh no ! I don’t know anything about it ; but I can’t think a girl like Constance——”

“A girl in a false position,” said the chaplain’s wife, “is often glad to marry any one, just for a settled place in the world.”

“Oh, but not Constance, mamma ! I am sure she is just amusing herself.”

“Tasie ! you speak as if she were the man,” exclaimed Mrs Durant, in a tone of reproof.

CHAPTER XX.

THE subjects of these consultations were at the moment in the full course of a sonata, and oblivious of everything else in the world but themselves, their music, and their concerns generally. A fortnight had passed of continual intercourse, of much music, of that propinquity which is said to originate more matches than any higher influence. Nothing can be more curious than the pleasure which young persons, and even persons who are no longer young, find perennially in this condition of suppressed love-making, this preoccupation of all thoughts and plans in the series of continually recurring meetings, the confidences, the divinations, the endless talk which is never exhausted, and in which the most artificial beings in the world probably reveal more of themselves than they

themselves know—when the edge of emotion is always being touched, and very often, by one of the pair at least overpassed, in either a comic or a tragic way. It is not necessary that there should be any real charm in either party, and what is still more extraordinary, it is possible enough that one may be a person of genius, and the other not far removed from a fool ; that one may be simple as a rustic, and the other a man or woman of the world. No rule, in short, holds in those extraordinary yet most common and everyday conjunctions. There is an amount of amusement, excitement, variety, to be found in them which is in no other kind of diversion. This is the great reason, no doubt, why flirtation never fails. It is dangerous, which helps the effect. For those sinners who go into it voluntarily for the sake of amusement, it has all the attractions of romance and the drama combined. If they are intellectual, it is a study of human character; in all cases, it is an interest which quickens the colour and the current of life : who can tell why or how ? It is not the disastrous love-makings that end in misery and sin, of which we speak. It is those which are

practised in society every day, which sometimes end in a heart-break indeed, but often in nothing at all.

Constance was not unacquainted with the amusement, though she was so young; and it is to be feared that she resorted to it deliberately for the amusement of her otherwise dull life at the Palazzo, in the first shock of her loneliness, when she felt herself abandoned. It was, of course, the victim himself who had first put the suggestion and the means of carrying it out into her hands. And she did not take it up in pure wantonness, but actually gave a thought to him, and the effect it might produce upon him, even in the very act of entering upon her diversion. She said to herself that Captain Gaunt, too, was very dull; that he would want something more than the society of his father and mother; that it would be a kindness to the old people to make his life amusing to him, since in that case he would stay, and in the other, not. And as for himself, if the worst came to the worst, and he fell seriously in love—as, indeed, seemed rather likely, judging from the fervour of the begin-

ning—even that, Constance calculated, would do him no permanent harm. “Men have died,” she said to herself, “but not for love.” And then there is that famous phrase about a liberal education. What was it? To love her was a liberal education? Something of that sort. Then it could only be an advantage to him; for Constance was aware that she herself was cleverer, more cultivated, and generally far more “up to” everything than young Gaunt. If he had to pay for it by a disappointment, really everybody had to pay for their education in one way or another; and if he were disappointed, it would be his own fault; for he must know very well, everybody must know, that it was quite out of the question she should marry him in any circumstances—entirely out of the question; unless he was an absolute simpleton, or the most presumptuous young coxcomb in the world, he *must* see that; and if he were one or the other, the discovery would do him all the good in the world. Thus Constance made it out fully, and to her own satisfaction, that in any case the experience could do him nothing but good.

Things had gone very far during this fortnight—so far, that she sometimes had a doubt whether they had not gone far enough. For one thing, it had cost her a great deal in the way of music. She was a very accomplished musician for her age, and poor George Gaunt was one of the greatest bunglers that ever began to study the violin. It may be supposed what an amusement this intercourse was to Constance, when it is said that she bore with his violin like an angel, laughed and scolded and encouraged and pulled him along till he believed that he could play the waltzes of Chopin and many other things which were as far above him as the empyrean is above earth. When he paused, bewildered, imploring her to go on, assuring her that he could catch her up, Constance betrayed no horror, but only laughed till the tears came. She would turn round upon her music-stool sometimes and rally him with a free use of a superior kind of slang, which was unutterably solemn, and quite unknown to the young soldier, who laboured conscientiously with his fiddle in the evenings and mornings, till General Gaunt's life became a

burden to him—in a vain effort to elevate himself to a standard with which she might be satisfied. He went to practise in the morning; he went in the afternoon to ask if she thought of making any expedition? to suggest that his mother wished very much to take him to see this or that, and had sent him to ask would Miss Waring come? Constance was generally quite willing to come, and not at all afraid to walk to the bungalow with him, where, perhaps, old Luca's carriage would be standing to drive them along the dusty road to the opening of some valley, where Mrs Gaunt, not a good climber, she allowed, would sit and wait for them till they had explored the dell, or inspected the little town seated at its head. Captain Gaunt was more punctilious about his mother's presence as *chaperon* than Constance was, who felt quite at her ease roaming with him among the terraces of the olive woods. It was altogether so idyllic, so innocent, that there was no occasion for any conventional safeguards: and there was nobody to see them or remark upon the prolonged *tête-à-tête*. Constance came to know the young fellow far better than his

mother did, better than he himself did, in these walks and talks.

“Miss Waring, don’t laugh at a fellow. I know I deserve it.—Oh yes, do, if you like. I had rather you laughed than closed the piano. I had a good long grind at it this morning; but somehow these triplets are more than I can fathom. Let us have that movement again, will you? Oh, not if you are tired. As long as you’ll let me sit and talk. I love music with all my heart, but I love——”

“Chatter,” said Constance. “I know you do. It is not a dignified word to apply to a gentleman; but you know, Captain Gaunt, you do love to chatter.”

“Anything to please you,” said the young man. “That wasn’t how I intended to end my sentence. I love to—chatter, if you like, as long as you will listen—or play, or do anything; as long as——”

“You must allow,” said Constance, “that I listen admirably. I am thoroughly well up in all your subjects. I know the station as well as if I lived there.”

“Don’t say that,” he cried; “it makes a man

beside himself. Oh, if there was any chance that you might ever—! I think—I'm almost sure—you would like the society in India—it's so easy; everybody's so kind. A—a young couple, you know, as long as the lady is—delightful."

"But I am not a young couple," said Constance, with a smile. "You sometimes confuse your plurals in the funniest way. Is that Indian too? Now come, Captain Gaunt, let us get on. Begin at the andante. One, two—three! Now, let's get on."

And then a few bars would be played, and then she would turn sharp round upon the music-stool and take the violin out of his astonished hands.

"Oh, what a shriek! It goes through and through one's head. Don't you think an instrument has feelings? That was a cry of the poor ill-used fiddle, that could bear no more. Give it to me." She took the bow in her hands, and leaned the instrument tenderly against her shoulder. "It should be played like this," she said.

"Miss Waring, you can play the violin too?"

"A little," she said, leaning down her soft cheek against it, as if she loved it, and drawing a charmingly sympathetic harmony from the ill-used strings.

"I will never play again," cried the young man. "Yes, I will—to touch it where you have touched it. Oh, I think you can do everything, and make everything perfect you look at."

"No," said Constance, shaking her head as she ran the bow softly, so softly over the strings; "for you are not perfect at all, though I have looked at you a great deal. Look! this is the way to do it. I am not going to accompany you any more. I am going to give you lessons. Take it now, and let me see you play that passage. Louder, softer—louder. Come, that was better. I think I shall make something of you after all."

"You can make anything of me," said the poor young soldier, with his lips on the place her cheek had touched—"whatever you please."

"A first-rate violin-player, then," said Constance. "But I don't think my power goes so high as that. Poor General, what does he

say when you grind, as you call it, all the morning?"

"Oh, mother smooths him down—that is the use of a mother."

"Is it?" said Constance, with an air of impartial inquiry. "I didn't know. Come, Captain Gaunt, we are losing our time."

And then *tant bien que mal*, the sonata was got through.

"I am glad Beethoven is dead," said Constance, as she closed the piano. "He is safe from that at least: he can never hear us play. When you go home, Captain Gaunt, I advise you to take lodgings in some quite out-of-the-way place, about Russell Square, or Islington, or somewhere, and grind, as you call it, till you are had up as a nuisance; or else——"

"Or else—what, Miss Waring? Anything to please you."

"Or else—give it up altogether," Constance said.

His face grew very long; he was very fond of his violin. "If you think it is so hopeless as that—if you wish me to give it up altogether——"

"Oh, not I. It amuses me. I like to hear

you break down. It would be quite a pity if you were to give up, you take my scolding so delightfully. Don't give it up as long as you are here, Captain Gaunt. After that, it doesn't matter what happens—to me."

"No," he said, almost with a groan, "it doesn't matter what happens after that—to me. It's the Deluge, you know," said the poor young fellow. "I wish the world would come to an end first"—thus unconsciously echoing the poet. "But, Miss Waring," he added anxiously, coming a little closer, "I may come back? Though I must go to London, it is not necessary I should stay there. I may come back?"

"Oh, I hope so, Captain Gaunt. What would your mother do, if you did not come back? But I suppose she will be going away for the summer. Everybody leaves Bordighera in the summer, I hear."

"I had not thought of that," cried the young soldier. "And you will be going too?"

"I suppose so," said Constance. "Papa, I hope, is not so lost to every sense of duty as to let me spoil my complexion for ever by staying here."

"That would be impossible," he said, with eyes full of admiration.

"You intend that for a compliment, Captain Gaunt; but it is no compliment. It means either that I have no complexion to lose, or that I am one of those thick-skinned people who take no harm—neither of which is complimentary, nor true. I shall have to teach you how to pay compliments as well as how to play the violin."

"Ah, if you only would!" he cried. "Teach me how to make myself what you like—how to speak, how to look, how——"

"Oh, that is a great deal too much," she said. "I cannot undertake all your education. Do you know it is close upon noon? Unless you are going to stay to breakfast——"

"Oh, thanks, Miss Waring. They will expect me at home. But you will give me a message to take back to my mother. I may come to fetch you to drive with her to-day?"

"It must be dreadfully dull work for her sitting waiting while we explore."

"Oh, not at all. She is never dull when

she knows I am enjoying myself—that's the mother's way."

"Is it?" said Constance, with once more that air of acquiring information. "I am not acquainted with that kind of mother. But do you think, Captain Gaunt, it is right to enjoy yourself, as you call it, at your mother's cost?"

He gave her a look of great doubt and trouble. "Oh, Miss Waring, I don't think you should put it so. My mother finds her pleasure in that—indeed she does. Ask herself. Of course I would not impose upon her, not for the world; but she likes it, I assure you she likes it."

"It is very extraordinary that any one should like sitting in that carriage for hours with nothing to do. I will come with pleasure, Captain Gaunt. I will sit with your mother while you go and take your walk. That will be more cheerful for all parties," Constance said.

Young Gaunt's face grew half a mile long. He began to expostulate and explain; but Waring's step was heard stirring in the next room, approaching the door, and the young man

had no desire to see the master of the house with his watch in his hand, demanding to know why Domenico was so late. Captain Gaunt knew very well why Domenico was so late. He knew a way of conciliating the servants, though he had not yet succeeded with the young mistress. He said hurriedly, "I will come for you at three," and rushed away. Waring came in at one door as Gaunt disappeared at the other. The delay of the breakfast was a practical matter, of which, without any reproach of mediævalism, he had a right to complain.

"If you must have this young fellow every morning, he may at least go away in proper time," he said, with his watch in his hand, as young Gaunt had divined.

"Oh, papa, twelve is striking loud enough. You need not produce your watch at the same time."

"Then why have I to wait?" he said. There was something awful in his tone. But Domenico was equal to the occasion, worthy at once of the lover's and of the father's trust. At that moment, Captain Gaunt having been got away

while the great bell of Bordighera was still sounding, the faithful Domenico threw open, perhaps with a little more sound than was necessary, an ostentation of readiness, the dining-room door.

The meal was a somewhat silent one. Perhaps Constance was pondering the looks which she had not been able to ignore, the words which she had managed to quench like so many fiery arrows before they could set fire to anything, of her eager lover, and was pale and a little preoccupied in spite of herself, feeling that things were going further than she intended; and perhaps her father, feeling the situation too serious, and remonstrance inevitable, was silenced by the thought of what he had to say. It is so difficult in such circumstances for two people, with no relief from any third party, without even that wholesome regard for the servant in attendance, which keeps the peace during many a family crisis—for with Domenico, who knew no English, they were as safe as when they were alone—it is very difficult to find subjects for conversation, that will not lead direct to the very heart of the matter

which is being postponed. Constance could not talk of her music, for Gaunt was associated with it. She could not speak of her walk, for he was her invariable companion. She could ask no questions about the neighbourhood, for was it not to make her acquainted with the neighbourhood that all those expeditions were being made? The great bouquet of anemones which blazed in the centre of the table came from Mrs Gaunt's garden. She began to think that she was buying her amusement too dearly. As for Waring, his mind was not so full of these references, but he was occupied by the thought of what he had to say to this headstrong girl, and by a strong sense that he was an ill-used man, in having such responsibilities thrust upon him against his will. Frances would not have led him into such difficulties. To Frances, young Gaunt would have been no more interesting than his father; or so at least this man, whose experience had taught him so little, was ready to believe.

“I want to say something to you, Constance,” he began at length, after Domenico had left the room. “You must not stop my mouth by re-

marks about middle-age parents. I am a middle-age parent, so there is an end of it. Are you going to marry George Gaunt?"

"I—going to marry George Gaunt! Papa!"

"You had better, I think," said her father. "It will save us all a great deal of embarrassment. I should not have recommended it, had I been consulted at the beginning. But you like to be independent and have your own way; and the best thing you can do is to marry. I don't know how your mother will take it; but so far as I am concerned, I think it would save everybody a great deal of trouble. You will be able to turn him round your finger; that will suit you, though the want of money may be in your way."

"I think you must mean to insult me, papa," said Constance, who had grown crimson.

"That is all nonsense, my dear. I am suggesting what seems the best thing in the circumstances, to set us all at our ease."

"To get rid of me, you mean," she cried.

"I have not taken any steps to get rid of you. I did not invite you, in the first place, you will remember; you came of your own will.

But I was very willing to make the best of it. I let Frances go, who suited me—whom I had brought up—for your sake. All the rest has been your doing. Young Gaunt was never invited by me. I have had no hand in those rambles of yours. But since you find so much pleasure in his society——”

“Papa, you know I don’t find pleasure in his society ; you know——”

“Then why do you seek it ? ” said Waring, with that logic which is so cruel.

Constance, on the other side of the table, was as red as the anemones, and far more brilliant in the glow of passion. “I have not sought it,” she cried. “I have let him come—that is all. I have gone when Mrs Gaunt asked me. Must a girl marry every man that chooses to be silly ? Can I help it, if he is so vain ? It is only vanity,” she said, springing up from her chair, “that makes men think a girl is always ready to marry. What should I marry for ? If I had wanted to marry—— Papa, I don’t wish to be disagreeable, but it is *vulgar*, if you force me to say it—it is common to talk to me so.”

“I might retort,” said Waring.

"Oh yes, I know you might retort. It is common to amuse one's self. So is it common to breathe and move about, and like a little fun when you are young. I have no fun here. There is nobody to talk to, not a thing to do. How do you suppose I am to get on? How can I live without something to fill up my time?"

"Then you must take the consequences," he said.

In spite of herself, Constance felt a shiver of alarm. She began to speak, then stopped suddenly, looked at him with a look of mingled defiance and terror, and—what was so unlike her, so common, so weak, as she felt—began to cry, notwithstanding all she could do to restrain herself. To hide this unaccountable weakness, she hastened off and hid herself in her room, making as if she had gone off in resentment. Better that, than that he should see her crying like any silly girl. All this had got on her nerves, she explained to herself afterwards. The consequences! Constance held her breath as they became dimly apparent to her in an atmosphere of horror. George Gaunt no longer an

eager lover, whom it was amusing, even exciting to draw on, to see just on the eve of a self-committal, which it was the greatest fun in the world to stop, before it went too far—but the master of her destinies, her constant and inseparable companion, from whom she could never get free, by whom she must not even say that she was bored to death—gracious powers! and with so many other attendant horrors. To go to India with him, to fall into the life of the station, to march with the regiment. Constance's lively imagination pictured a baggage-waggon, with herself on the top, which made her laugh. But the reality was not laughable; it was horrible. The consequences! No; she would not take the consequences. She would sit with Mrs Gaunt in the carriage, and let him take his walk by himself. She would begin to show him the extent of his mistake from that very day. To take any stronger step, to refuse to go out with him at all, she thought, on consideration, not necessary. The gentler measures first, which perhaps he might be wise enough to accept.

But if he did not accept them, what was Constance to do? She had run away from an impending catastrophe, to take refuge with her father. But with whom could she take refuge, if he continued to hold his present strain of argument? And unless he would go away of himself, how was she to shake off this young soldier? She did not want to shake him off; he was all the amusement she had. What was she to do?

There glanced across her mind for a moment a sort of desperate gleam of reflection from her father's words: "You like to be independent; the best thing you can do is to marry." There was a kind of truth in it, a sort of distorted truth, such as was likely enough to come through the medium of a mind so wholly at variance with all established forms. Independent — there was something in that; and India was full of novelty, amusing, a sort of world she had no experience of. A tremor of excitement got into her nerves as she heard the bell ring, and knew that he had come for her. He! the only individual who was at all inter-

esting for the moment, whom she held in her hands, to do what she pleased with. She could turn him round her little finger, as her father said : and independence ! Was it a Mephistopheles that was tempting her, or a good angel leading her the right way ?

CHAPTER XXI.

FRANCES remembered little of the journey after it was over, though she was keenly conscious of everything at the time, if there can be any keen consciousness of a thing which is all vague, which conveys no clear idea. Through the darkness of the night, which came on before she had left the coast she knew, with all those familiar towns gleaming out as she passed—Mentone, Monaco on its headland, the sheltering bays which keep so warm and bright those cities of sickness, of idleness, and pleasure—the palms, the olives, the oranges, the aloe hedges, the roses and heliotropes—there was a confused and breathless sweep of distance, half in the dark, half in the light, the monotonous plains, the lines of poplars, the straight highroads of France. Paris, where they stayed for a night, was only like a bigger,

noisier, vast railway station, to Frances. She had no time, in the hurry of her journey, in the still greater hurry of her thoughts, to realise that here was the scene of that dread Revolution of which she had read with shuddering excitement—that she was driven past the spot where the guillotine was first set up, and through the streets where the tumbrels had rolled, carrying to that dread death the many tender victims, who were all she knew of that great convulsion of history. Markham, who was so good to her, put his head out of the carriage and pointed to a series of great windows flashing with light. “What a pity there’s no time!” he said. She asked “For what?” with the most complete want of comprehension. “For shopping, of course,” he said, with a laugh. For shopping! She seemed to be unacquainted with the meaning of the words. In the midst of this strange wave of the unknown which was carrying her away, carrying her to a world more unknown still, to suppose that she could pause and think of shopping! The inappropriateness of the suggestion bewildered Frances. Markham, indeed, alto-

gether bewildered her. He was very good to her, attending to her comfort, watchful over her needs in a way which she could not have imagined possible. Her father had never been unkind ; but it did not occur to him to take care of her. It was she who took care of him. If there was anything forgotten, it was she who got the blame ; and when he wanted a book, or his writing-desk, or a rug to put over his knees, he called to his little girl to hand it to him, without the faintest conception that there was anything incongruous in it. And there was nothing incongruous in it. If there is any one in the world whom it is natural to send on your errands, to get you what you want, surely your child is that person. Waring did not think on the subject, but simply did so by instinct, by nature ; and equally by instinct Frances obeyed, without a doubt that it was her simplest duty. If Markham had said, "Get me my book, Frances ; dear child, just open that bag—hand me so-and-so," she would have considered it the most natural thing in the world. What he did do surprised her much more. He tripped in and out of his seat at her smallest suggestion.

He pulled up and down the window at her pleasure, never appearing to think that it mattered whether *he* liked it or not. He took her out carefully on his arm, and made her dine, not asking what she would have, as her father might perhaps have done, but bringing her the best that was to be had, choosing what she should eat, serving her as if she had been the Queen! It contributed to the dizzying effect of the rapid journey that she should thus have been placed in a position so different from any that she had ever known.

And then there came the last stage, the strange leaden-grey stormy sea, which was so unlike those blue ripples that came up just so far—no farther, on the beach at Bordighera. She began to understand what is said in the Bible about the waves that mount up like mountains, when she saw the roll of the Channel. She had always a little wondered what that meant. To be sure, there were storms now and then along the Riviera, when the blue edge to the sea-mantle disappeared, and all became a deep purple, solemn enough for a king's pall, as it has been the pall of so

many a brave man ; but even that was never like the dangerous threatening lash of the waves along those rocks, and the way in which they raised their awful heads. And was that England, white with a faint line of green, so sodden and damp as it looked, rising out of the sea ? The heart of Frances sank : it was not like her anticipations. She had thought there would be something triumphant, grand, about the aspect of England—something proud, like a monarch of the sea ; and it was only a damp, greyish-white line, rising not very far out of those sullen waves. An east wind was blowing with that blighting greyness which here, in the uttermost parts of the earth, we are so well used to : and it was cold. A gleam of pale sun indeed shot out of the clouds from time to time ; but there was no real warmth in it, and the effect of everything was depressing. The green fields and hedgerows cheered her a little ; but it was all damp, and the sky was grey. And then came London, with a roar and noise as if they had fallen into a den of wild beasts, and throngs, multitudes of people at every little station

which the quick train flashed past, and on the platform, where at last she arrived dizzy and faint with fatigue and wonderment. But Markham always was more kind than words could say. He sympathised with her, seeing her forlorn looks at everything. He did not ask her how she liked it, what she thought of her native country. When they arrived at last, he found out miraculously, among the crowd of carriages, a quiet, little, dark-coloured brougham, and put her into it. "We'll trundle off home," he said, "you and I, Fan, and let John look after the things; you are so tired you can scarcely speak."

"Not so much tired," said Frances, and tried to smile, but could not say any more.

"I understand." He took her hand into his with the kindest caressing touch. "You mustn't be frightened, my dear. There's nothing to be frightened about. You'll like my mother. Perhaps it was silly of me to say that, and make you cry. Don't cry, Fan, or I shall cry too. I am the fooliest little beggar, you know, and always do what my companions do. Don't make a fool of your old brother, my dear.

There, look out and see what a beastly place old London is, Fan."

"Don't call me Fan," she cried, this slight irritation affording her an excuse for disburdening herself of some of the nervous excitement in her. "Call me Frances, Markham."

"Life's too short for a name in two syllables. I've got two syllables myself, that's true; but many fellows call me Mark, and you are welcome to, if you like. No; I shall call you Fan; you must make up your mind to it. Did you ever see such murky heavy air? It isn't air at all—it's smoke, and animalculæ, and everything that's dreadful. It's not like that blue stuff on the Riviera, is it?"

"Oh no!" cried Frances, with fervour. "But I suppose London is better for some things," she added with a doubtful voice.

"Better! It's better than any other place on the face of the earth; it's the only place to live in," said Markham. "Why, child, it is paradise,"—he paused a moment, and then added, "with pandemonium next door."

"Markham!" the girl cried.

"I was wrong to mention such a place in

your hearing. I know I was. Never mind, Fan; you shall see the one, and you shall know nothing about the other. Why, here we are in Eaton Square."

The door flashed open as soon as the carriage stopped, letting out a flood of light and warmth. Markham almost lifted the trembling girl out. She had got her veil entangled about her head, her arms in the cloak which she had half thrown off. She was not prepared for this abrupt arrival. She seemed to see nothing but the light, to know nothing until she found herself suddenly in some one's arms; then the light seemed to go out of her eyes. Sight had nothing to do with the sensation, the warmth, the softness, the faint rustle, the faint perfume, with which she was suddenly encircled; and for a few moments she knew nothing more.

"Dear, dear, Markham, I hope she is not delicate—I hope she is not given to fainting," she heard in a disturbed but pleasant voice, before she felt able to open her eyes.

"Not a bit," said Markham's familiar tones. "She's overdone, and awfully anxious about meeting you."

"My poor dear! Why should she be anxious about meeting me?" said the other voice, a voice round and soft, with a plaintive tone in it; and then there came the touch of a pair of lips, soft and caressing like the voice, upon the girl's cheek. She did not yet open her eyes, half because she could not, half because she would not, but whispered in a faint little tentative utterance, "Mother!" wondering vaguely whether the atmosphere round her, the kiss, the voice, was all the mother she was to know.

"My poor little baby, my little girl! open your eyes. Markham, I want to see the colour of her eyes."

"As if I could open her eyes for you!" cried Markham with a strange outburst of sound, which, if he had been a woman, might have meant crying, but must have been some sort of a laugh, since he was a man. He seemed to walk away, and then came back again. "Come, Fan, that's enough. Open your eyes, and look at us. I told you there was nothing to be frightened for."

And then Frances raised herself; for, to her

astonishment, she was lying down upon a sofa, and looked round her, bewildered. Beside her stood a little lady, about her own height, with smooth brown hair like hers, with her hands clasped, just as Frances was aware she had herself a custom of clasping her hands. It began to dawn upon her that Constance had said she was very like mamma. This newcomer was beautifully dressed in soft black satin, that did not rustle—that was far, far too harsh a word—but swept softly about her with the faintest pleasant sound; and round her breathed that atmosphere which Frances felt would mean mother to her for ever and ever,—an air that was infinitely soft, with a touch in it of some sweetness. Oh, not scent! She rejected the word with disdain—something, nothing, the atmosphere of a mother. In the curious ecstasy in which she was, made up of fatigue, wonder, and the excitement of this astounding plunge into the unknown, that was how she felt.

“Let me look at you, my child. I can’t think of her as a grown girl, Markham. Don’t you know she is my baby. She has never

grown up, like the rest of you, to me. Oh, did you never wish for me, little Frances? Did you never want your mother, my darling? Often, often, I have lain awake in the night and cried for you."

"Oh mamma!" cried Frances, forgetting her shyness, throwing herself into her mother's arms. The temptation to tell her that she had never known anything about her mother, to excuse herself at her father's expense, was strong. But she kept back the words that were at her lips. "I have always wanted this all my life," she cried, with a sudden impulse, and laid her head upon her mother's breast, feeling in all the commotion and melting of her heart a consciousness of the accessories, the rich softness of the satin, the delicate perfume, all the details of the new personality by which her own was surrounded on every side.

"Now I see," cried the new-found mother, "it was no use parting this child and me, Markham. It is all the same between us—isn't it, my darling?—as if we had always been together—all the same in a moment. Come up-stairs now, if you feel able, dear one.

Do you think, Markham, she is able to walk up-stairs?"

"Oh, quite able; oh, quite, quite well. It was only for a moment. I was—frightened, I think."

"But you will never be frightened any more," said Lady Markham, drawing the girl's arm through her own, leading her away. Frances was giddy still, and stumbled as she went, though she had pledged herself never to be frightened again. She went in a dream up the softly carpeted stairs. She knew what handsome rooms were, the lofty bare grandeur of an Italian palazzo; but all this carpeting and cushioning, the softness, the warmth, the clothed and comfortable look, bewildered her. She could scarcely find her way through the drawing-room, crowded with costly furniture, to the blazing fire, by the side of which stood the tea-table, like, and yet how unlike, that anxious copy of English ways which Frances had set up in the loggia. She was conscious, with a momentary gleam of complacency, that her cups and saucers were better, though! not belonging to an ordinary modern set, like

these; but, alas, in everything else how far short! Then she was taken up-stairs, through—as she thought—the sumptuous arrangements of her mother's room, to another smaller, which opened from it, and in which there was the same wealth of carpets, curtains, easy-chairs, and writing-tables, in addition to the necessary details of a sleeping-room. Frances looked round it admiringly. She knew nothing about the modern-artistic, though something, a very little, about old art. The painted ceilings and old gilding of the Palazzo—which she began secretly and obstinately to call *home* from this moment forth—were intelligible to her; but she was quite unacquainted with Mr Morris's papers and the art fabrics from Liberty's. She looked at them with admiration, but doubt. She thought the walls “killed” the pictures that were hung round, which were not like her own little gallery at home, which she had left with a little pang to her sister. “Is this Constance's room?” she asked timidly, called back to a recollection of Constance, and wondering whether the transfer was to be complete.

“No, my love; it is Frances' room,” said

Lady Markham. "It has always been ready for you. I expected you to come some time. I have always hoped that; but I never thought that Con would desert me." Her voice faltered a little, which instantly touched Frances' heart.

"I asked," she said, "not just out of curiosity, but because, when she came to us, I gave her my room. Our rooms are not like these; they have very few things in them. There are no carpets; it is warmer there, you know; but I thought she would find the blue room so bare, I gave her mine."

Lady Markham smiled upon her, and said, but with a faint, the very faintest indication of being less interested than Frances was, "You have not many visitors, I suppose?"

"Oh, none!" cried Frances. "I suppose we are—rather poor. We are not—like this."

"My darling, you don't know how to speak to me, your own mother! What do you mean, dear, by *we*? You must learn to mean something else by *we*. Your father, if he had chosen, might have had—all that you see, and more. And Constance—— But we will

say nothing more to-night on that subject. This is Con's room, see, on the other side of mine. It was always my fancy, my hope, some time to have my two girls, one on each side."

Frances followed her mother to the room on the other side with great interest. It was still more luxurious than the one appropriated to herself—more comfortable, as a room which has been occupied, which shows traces of its tenant's tastes and likings, must naturally be; and it was brighter, occupying the front of the house, while that of Frances' looked to the side. She glanced round at all the fittings and decorations, which, to her unaccustomed eyes, were so splendid. "Poor Constance!" she said under her breath.

"Why do you say poor Constance?" said Lady Markham, with something sharp and sudden in her tone. And then she, too, said regretfully, "Poor Con! You think it will be disappointing to her, this other life which she has chosen. Was it—dreary for you, my poor child?"

Then there rose up in the tranquil mind of

Frances a kind of tempest-blast of opposition and resentment. "It is the only life I know—it was—everything I liked best," she cried. The first part of the sentence was very firmly, almost aggressively said. In the second, she wavered, hesitated, changed the tense—it *was*. She did not quite know herself what the change meant.

Lady Markham looked at her with a penetrating gaze. "It was—everything you knew, my little Frances. I understand you, my dear. You will not be disloyal to the past. But to Constance, who does not know it, who knows something else—— Poor Con! I understand. But she will have to pay for her experience, like all the rest."

Frances had been profoundly agitated, but in the way of happiness. She did not feel happy now. She felt disposed to cry, not because of the relief of tears, but because she did not know how else to express the sense of contrariety, of disturbance that had got into her mind. Was it that already a wrong note had sounded between herself and this unknown mother, whom it had been a rapture to see

and touch? Or was it only that she was tired? Lady Markham saw the condition into which her nerves and temper were strained. She took her back tenderly into her room. "My dear," she said, "if you would rather not, don't change your dress. Do just as you please to-night. I would stay and help you, or I would send Josephine, my maid, to help you; but I think you will prefer to be left alone and quiet."

"Oh yes," cried Frances with fervour; then she added hastily, "If you do not think me disagreeable to say so."

"I am not prepared to think anything in you disagreeable, my dear," said her mother, kissing her—but with a sigh. This sigh Frances echoed in a burst of tears when the door closed and she found herself alone—alone, quite alone, more so than she had ever been in her life, she whispered to herself, in the shock of the unreasonable and altogether fantastic disappointment which had followed her ecstasy of pleasure. Most likely it meant nothing at all but the reaction from that too highly raised level of feeling.

"No; I am not disappointed," Lady Markham was saying down-stairs. She was standing before the genial blaze of the fire, looking into it with her head bent and a serious expression on her face. "Perhaps I was too much delighted for a moment; but she, poor child, now that she has looked at me a second time, she is a little, just a little disappointed in me. That's rather hard for a mother, you know; or I suppose you don't know."

"I never was a mother," said Markham. "I should think it's very natural. The little thing has been forming the most romantic ideas. If you had been an angel from heaven——"

"Which I am not," she said with a smile, still looking into the fire.

"Heaven be praised," said Markham. "In that case, you would not have suited me—which you do, mammy, you know, down to the ground."

She gave a half glance at him, a half smile, but did not disturb the chain of her reflections. "That's something, Markham," she said.

"Yes; it's something. On my side, it is

a great deal. Don't go too fast with little Fan. She has a deal in her. Have a little patience, and let her settle down her own way."

"I don't feel sure that she has not got her father's temper; I saw something like it in her eyes."

"That is nonsense, begging your pardon. She has got nothing of her father in her eyes. Her eyes are like yours, and so is everything about her. My dear mother, Con's like Warning, if you like. This one is of our side of the house."

"Do you really think so?" Lady Markham looked up now and laid her hand affectionately upon his shoulder, and laughed. "But, my dear boy, you are as like the Markhams as you can look. On my side of the house, there is nobody at all, unless, as you say——"

"Frances," said the little man. "I told you—the best of the lot. I took to her in a moment by that very token. Therefore, don't go too fast with her, mother. She has her own notions. She is as stanch as a little—Turk,"

said Markham, using the first word that offered. When he met his mother's eye, he retired a little, with the air of a man who does not mean to be questioned; which naturally stimulated curiosity in her mind.

"How have you found out that she is stanch, Markham?"

"Oh, in half-a-dozen ways," he answered, carelessly. "And she will stick to her father through thick and thin, so mind what you say."

Then Lady Markham began to bemoan herself a little gently, before the fire, in the most luxurious of easy-chairs.

"Was ever woman in such a position," she said, "to be making acquaintance, for the first time, at eighteen, with my own daughter—and to have to pick my words and to be careful what I say?"

"Well, mammy," said Markham, "it might have been worse. Let us make the best of it. He has always kept his word, which is something, and has never annoyed you. And it is quite a nice thing for Con to have him to go

to, to find out how dull it is, and know her own mind. And now we've got the other one too."

Lady Markham still rocked herself a little in her chair, and put her handkerchief to her eyes. "For all that, it is very hard, both on her and me," she said.

CHAPTER XXII.

LADY MARKHAM'S story was one which was very well known to Society—to which everything is known—though it had remained so long a secret, and was still a mystery to one of her children. Waring had been able to lose himself in distance, and keep his position concealed from every one; but it was clear that his wife could not do so, remaining as she did in the world which was fully acquainted with her, and which required an explanation of everything that happened. Perhaps it is more essential to a woman than to a man that her position should be fully explained, though it is one of the drawbacks of an established place and sphere, which is seldom spoken of, yet is very real, and one of the greatest embarrassments of

life. So long as existence is without complications, this matters little; but when these arise, those difficulties which so often distract the career of a family, the inevitable explanations that have to be made to the little interested ring of spectators, is often the worst part of domestic trouble. Waring, whose temperament was what is called sensitive—that is, impatient, self-willed, and unenduring—would not submit to such a necessity. But a woman cannot fly; she must stand in her place, if she has any regard for that place, and for the reputation which it is common to say is more delicate and easily injured than is that of a man—and make her excuse to the world. Perhaps, as, sooner or later, excuses and explanations must be afforded, it is the wiser plan to get over them publicly and at once; for even Waring, as has been seen, though he escaped, and had a dozen years of tranquillity, had at the last to submit himself to the questions of Mr Durant. All that was over for these dozen years with Lady Markham. Everybody knew exactly what her position was. Scandal had never breathed

upon her, either at the moment of the separation or afterwards. It had been a foolish, romantic love-marriage between a woman of Society and a man who was half rustic, half scholar. They had found after a time that they could not endure each other—as anybody with a head on his shoulders could have told them from the beginning, Society said. And then he had taken the really sensible though wild and romantic step of banishing himself and leaving her free. There were some who had supposed this a piece of *bizarre* generosity, peculiar to the man, and some who thought it only a natural return to the kind of life that suited him best.

Lady Markham had, of course, been censured for this, her second marriage; and equally, of course, was censured for the breach of it—for the separation, which, indeed, was none of her doing; for retaining her own place when her husband left her; and, in short, for every step she had taken in the matter from first to last. But that was twelve years ago, which is a long time in all circumstances, and which counts for about a century in Society: and nobody thought of blaming her any

longer, or of remarking at all upon the matter. The present lords and ladies of fashionable life had always known her as she was, and there was no further question about her history. When, in the previous season, Miss Waring had made her *début* in Society, and achieved the success which had been so remarkable, there was indeed a little languid question as to who was her father among those who remembered that Waring was not the name of the Markham family; but this was not interesting enough to cause any excitement. And Frances, still thrilling with the discovery of the other life, of which she had never suspected the existence, and ignorant even now of everything except the mere fact of it, suddenly found herself embraced and swallowed up in a perfectly understood and arranged routine in which there was no mystery at all.

"The first thing you must do is to make acquaintance with your relations," said Lady Markham next morning at breakfast. "Fortunately, we have this quiet time before Easter to get over all these preliminaries. Your aunt Clarendon will expect to see you at once."

Frances was greatly disturbed by this new discovery. She gave a covert glance at Markham, who, though it was not his habit to appear so early, had actually produced himself at breakfast to see how the little one was getting on. Markham looked back again, elevating his eyebrows, and not understanding at first what the question meant.

"And there are all the cousins," said the mother, with that plaintive tone in her voice. "My dear, I hope you are not in the way of forming friendships, for there are so many of them! I think the best thing will be to get over all these duty introductions at once. I must ask the Clarendons—don't you think, Markham?—to dinner, and perhaps the Peyton's,—quite a family party."

"Certainly, by all means," said Markham; "but first of all, don't you think she wants to be dressed?"

Lady Markham looked at Frances critically from her smooth little head to her neat little shoes. The girl was standing by the fire, with her head reclined against the mantelpiece of carved oak, which, as a "reproduction," was

very much thought of in Eaton Square. Frances felt that the blush with which she met her mother's look must be seen, though she turned her head away, through the criticised clothes.

"Her dress is very simple; but there is nothing in bad taste. Don't you think I might take her anywhere as she is? I did not notice her hat," said Lady Markham, with gravity; "but if that is right— Simplicity is quite the right thing at eighteen—"

"And in Lent," said Markham.

"It is quite true; in Lent, it is better than the right thing—it is the best thing. My dear, you must have had a very good maid. Foreign women have certainly better taste than the class we get our servants from. What a pity you did not bring her with you! One can always find room for a clever maid."

"I don't believe she had any maid; it is all out of her own little head," said Markham. "I told you not to let yourself be taken in. She has a deal in her, that little thing."

Lady Markham smiled, and gave Frances a kiss, enfolding her once more in that soft

atmosphere which had been such a revelation to her last night. "I am sure she is a dear little girl, and is going to be a great comfort to me. You will want to write your letters this morning, my love, which you must do before lunch. And after lunch, we will go and see your aunt. You know that is a matter of—what shall we call it, Markham?—conscience : with me."

"Pride," Markham said, coming and standing by them in front of the fire.

"Perhaps a little," she answered with a smile ; "but conscience too. I would not have her say that I had kept the child from her for a single day."

"That is how conscience speaks, Fan," said Markham. "You will know next time you hear it. And after the Clarendons?"

"Well—of course, there must be a hundred things the child wants. We must look at your evening dresses together, darling. Tell Josephine to lay them out and let me see them. We are going to have some people at the Priory for Easter ; and when we come back, there will be no time. Yes, I think on our way home

from Portland Place we must just look into—a shop or two."

"Now my mind is relieved," Markham said. "I thought you were going to change the course of nature, Fan."

"The child is quite bewildered by your nonsense, Markham," the mother said.

And this was quite true. Frances had never been on such terms with her father as would have entitled her to venture to laugh at him. She was confused with this new phase, as well as with her many other discoveries: and it appeared to her that Markham looked just as old as his mother. Lady Markham was fresh and fair, her complexion as clear as a girl's, and her hair still brown and glossy. If art in any way added to this perfection, Frances had no suspicion of such a possibility. And when she looked from her mother's round and soft contour to the wrinkles of Markham, and his no-colour and indefinite age, and heard him address her with that half-caressing, half-bantering equality, the girl's mind grew more and more hopelessly confused. She withdrew, as was expected of her, to write her letters,

though without knowing how to fulfil that duty. She could write (of course) to her father. It was of course, and so was what she told him. "We arrived about six o'clock. I was dreadfully confused with the noise and the crowds of people. Mamma was very kind. She bids me send you her love. The house is very fine, and full of furniture, and fires in all the rooms; but one wants that, for it is much colder here. We are going out after luncheon to call on my aunt Clarendon. I wish very much I knew who she was, or who my other relations are; but I suppose I shall find out in time." This was the scope of Frances' letter. And she did not feel warranted, somehow, in writing to Constance. She knew so little of Constance: and was she not in some respects a supplanter, taking Constance's place? When she had finished her short letter to her father, which was all fact, with very few reflections, Frances paused and looked round her, and felt no further inspiration. Should she write to Mariuccia? But that would require time—there was so much to be said to Mariuccia. Facts were not what *she* would want—at least,

the facts would have to be of a different kind ; and Frances felt that daylight and all the arrangements of the new life, the necessity to be ready for luncheon and to go out after, were not conditions under which she could begin to pour out her heart to her old nurse, the attendant of her childhood. She must put off till the evening, when she should be alone and undisturbed, with time and leisure to collect all her thoughts and first impressions. She put down her pen, which was not, indeed, an instrument she was much accustomed to wield, and began to think instead ; but all her thinking would not tell her who the relatives were to whom she was about to be presented ; and she reflected with horror that her ignorance must betray the secret which she had so carefully kept, and expose her father to further and further criticism.

There was only one way of avoiding this danger, and that was through Markham, who alone could help her, who was the only individual in whom she could feel a confidence that he would give her what information he could, and understand why she asked. If she

could but find Markham ! She went down-stairs, timidly flitting along the wide staircase through the great drawing-room, which was vacant, and found no trace of him. She lingered, peeping out from between the curtains of the windows upon the leafless gardens outside in the spring sunshine, the passing carriages which she could see through their bare boughs, the broad pavement close at hand with so few passengers, the clatter now and then of a hansom, which amused her even in the midst of her perplexity, or the drawing up of a brougham at some neighbouring door. After a minute's distraction thus, she returned again to make further investigations from the drawing-room door, and peep over the balusters to watch for her brother. At last she had the good luck to perceive him coming out of one of the rooms on the lower floor. She darted down as swift as a bird, and touched him on the sleeve. He had his hat in his hand, as if preparing to go out. "Oh," she said in a breathless whisper, "I want to speak to you ; I want to ask you something,"—holding up her hand with a warning hush.

“What is it?” returned Markham, chiefly with his eyebrows, with a comic affectation of silence and secrecy which tempted her to laugh in spite of herself. Then he nodded his head, took her hand in his, and led her up-stairs to the drawing-room again. “What is it you want to ask me? Is it a state secret? The palace is full of spies, and the walls of ears,” said Markham with mock solemnity, “and I may risk my head by following you. Fair conspirator, what do you want to ask?”

“Oh, Markham, don’t laugh at me—it is serious. Please, who is my aunt Clarendon?”

“You little Spartan!” he said; “you are a plucky little girl, Fan. You won’t betray the daddy, come what may. You are quite right, my dear; but he ought to have told you. I don’t approve of him, though I approve of you.”

“Papa has a right to do as he pleases,” said Frances steadily; “that is not what I asked you, please.”

He stood and smiled at her, patting her on the shoulder. “I wonder if you will stand by me like that, when you hear me get my due?

Who is your aunt Clarendon? She is your father's sister, Fan; I think the only one who is left."

"Papa's sister! I thought it must be—on the other side."

"My mother," said Markham, "has few relations—which is a misfortune that I bear with equanimity. Mrs Clarendon married a lawyer a great many years ago, Fan, when he was poor; and now he is very rich, and they will make him a judge one of these days."

"A judge," said Frances. "Then he must be very good and wise. And my aunt——"

"My dear, the wife's qualities are not as yet taken into account. She is very good, I don't doubt; but they don't mean to raise her to the Bench. You must remember when you go there, Fan, that they are *the other side*."

"What do you mean by 'the other side'?" inquired Frances anxiously, fixing her eyes upon the kind, queer, insignificant personage, who yet was so important in this house.

Markham gave forth that little chuckle of a laugh which was his special note of merriment. "You will soon find it out for yourself," he

replied ; “but the dear old mammy can hold her own. Is that all ? for I’m running off; I have an engagement.”

“Oh, not all—not half. I want you to tell me—I want to know—I—I don’t know where to begin,” said Frances, with her hand on the sleeve of his coat.

“Nor I,” he retorted with a laugh. “Let me go now; we’ll find an opportunity. Keep your eyes, or rather your ears, open ; but don’t take all you hear for gospel. Good-bye till to-night. I’m coming to dinner to-night.”

“Don’t you live here ?” said Frances, accompanying him to the door.

“Not such a fool, thank you,” replied Markham, stopping her gently, and closing the door of the room with care after him as he went away.

Frances was much discouraged by finding nothing but that closed door in front of her where she had been gazing into his ugly but expressive face. It made a sort of dead stop, an emphatic punctuation, marking the end. Why should he say he was not such a fool as to live at home with his mother ? Why should he be so *nice* and yet so odd ? Why had Con-

stance warned her not to put herself in Markham's hands? All this confused the mind of Frances whenever she began to think. And she did not know what to do with herself. She stole to the window and watched through the white curtains, and saw him go away in the hansom which stood waiting at the door. She felt a vacancy in the house after his departure, the loss of a support, an additional silence and sense of solitude; even something like a panic took possession of her soul. Her impulse was to rush up-stairs again and shut herself up in her room. She had never yet been alone with her mother except for a moment. She dreaded the (quite unnecessary, to her thinking) meal which was coming, at which she must sit down opposite to Lady Markham, with that solemn old gentleman, dressed like Mr Durant, and that gorgeous theatrical figure of a footman, serving the two ladies. Ah, how different from Domenico—poor Domenico, who had called her *carina* from her childhood, and who wept over her hand as he kissed it, when she was coming away. Oh, when should she see these faithful friends again?

"I want you to be quite at your ease with your aunt Clarendon," said Lady Markham at luncheon, when the servants had left the room. "She will naturally want to know all about your father and your way of living. We have not talked very much on that subject, my dear, because, for one thing, we have not had much time; and because—— But she will want to know all the little details. And, my darling, I want just to tell you, to warn you. Poor Caroline is not very fond of me. Perhaps it is natural. She may say things to you about your mother——"

"Oh no, mamma," said Frances, looking up in her mother's face.

"You don't know, my dear. Some people have a great deal of prejudice. Your aunt Caroline, as is quite natural, takes a different view. I wonder if I can make you understand what I mean without using words which I don't want to use?"

"Yes," said Frances; "you may trust me, mamma; I think I understand."

Lady Markham rose and came to where her child sat, and kissed her tenderly. "My dear,

I think you will be a great comfort to me," she said. "Constance was always hot-headed. She would not make friends, when I wished her to make friends. The Clarendons are very rich; they have no children, Frances. Naturally, I wish you to stand well with them. Besides, I would not allow her to suppose for a moment that I would keep you from her—that is what I call conscience, and Markham pride."

Frances did not know what to reply. She did not understand what the wealth of the Clarendons had to do with it; everything else she could understand. She was very willing, nay, eager to see her father's sister, yet very determined that no one should say a word to her to the detriment of her mother. So far as that went, in her own mind all was clear.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS CLARENDON lived in one of the great houses in Portland Place which fashion has abandoned. It was very silent, wrapped in that stillness and decorum which is one of the chief signs of an entirely well-regulated house, also of a place in which life is languid and youth does not exist. Frances followed her mother with a beating heart through the long wide hall and large staircase, over soft carpets, on which their feet made no sound. She thought they were stealing in like ghosts to some silent place in which mystery of one kind or other must attend them; but the room they were ushered into was only a very large, very still drawing-room, in painfully good order, inhabited by nothing but a fire, which made a little sound and flicker that preserved it from utter death. The blinds

were drawn half over the windows ; the long curtains hung down in dark folds. There were none of the quaintnesses, the modern æstheticisms, the crowds of small picturesque articles of furniture impeding progress, in which Lady Markham delighted. The furniture was all solid, durable — what upholsterers call very handsome — huge mirrors over the mantelpieces, a few large portraits in chalk on the walls, solemn ornaments on the table ; a large and brilliantly painted china flower-pot enclosing a large plant of the palm kind, dark-green and solemn, like everything else, holding the place of honour. It was very warm and comfortable, full of low easy-chairs and sofas, but at the same time very severe and forbidding, like a place into which the common occupations of life were never brought.

“ She never sits here,” said Lady Markham in a low tone. “ She has a morning-room that is cosy enough. She comes up here after dinner, when Mr Clarendon takes a nap before he looks over his briefs ; and he comes up at ten o’clock for ten minutes and takes a cup of tea. Then she goes to bed. That is about

all the intercourse they have, and all the time the drawing-room is occupied, except when people come to call. That is why it has such a depressing look."

"Is she not happy, then?" said Frances wistfully, which was a silly question, as she now saw as soon as she had uttered it.

"Happy! Oh, probably just as happy as other people. That is not a question that is ever asked in Society, my dear. Why shouldn't she be happy? She has everything she has ever wished for—plenty of money—for they are very rich—her husband quite distinguished in his sphere, and in the way of advancement. What could she want more? She is a lucky woman, as women go."

"Still she must be dull, with no one to speak to," said Frances, looking round her with a glance of dismay. What she thought was, that it would probably be her duty to come here to make a little society for her aunt, and her heart sank at the sight of this decent, nay, handsome gloom, with a sensation which Mariuccia's kitchen at home, which only looked on the court, or the dimly lighted rooms of the villagers, had

never given her. The silence was terrible, and struck a chill to her heart. Then all at once the door opened, and Mrs Clarendon came in, taking the young visitor entirely by surprise ; for the soft carpets and thick curtains so entirely shut out all sound, that she seemed to glide in like a ghost to the ghosts already there. Frances, unaccustomed to English comfort, was startled by the absence of sound, and missed the indication of the footstep on the polished floor, which had so often warned her to lay aside her innocent youthful visions at the sound of her father's approach. Mrs Clarendon coming in so softly seemed to arrest them in the midst of their talk about her, bringing a flush to Frances' face. She was a tall woman, fair and pale, with cold grey eyes, and an air which was like that of her rooms—the air of being unused, of being put against the wall like the handsome furniture. She came up stiffly to Lady Markham, who went to meet her with effusion, holding out both hands.

“I am so glad to see you, Caroline. I feared you might be out, as it was such a beautiful day.”

“Is it a beautiful day? It seemed to me cold, looking out. I am not very energetic, you know—not like you. Have I seen this young lady before?”

“You have not seen her for a long time—not since she was a child; nor I either, which is more wonderful. This is Frances. Caroline, I told you I expected—”

“My brother’s child!” Mrs Clarendon said, fixing her eyes upon the girl, who came forward with shy eagerness. She did not open her arms, as Frances expected. She inspected her carefully and coldly, and ended by saying, “But she is like you,” with a certain tone of reproach.

“That is not my fault,” said Lady Markham, almost sharply; and then she added: “For the matter of that, they are both your brother’s children—though, unfortunately, mine too.”

“You know my opinion on that matter,” said Mrs Clarendon; and then, and not till then, she gave Frances her hand, and stooping kissed her on the cheek. “Your father writes very seldom, and I have never heard a word from you. All the same, I have always taken an interest in

you. It must be very sad for you, after the life to which you have been accustomed, to be suddenly sent here without any will of your own."

"Oh no," said Frances. "I was very glad to come, to see mamma."

"That's the proper thing to say, of course," the other said with a cold smile. There was just enough of a family likeness to her father to arrest Frances in her indignation. She was not allowed time to make an answer, even had she possessed confidence enough to do so, for her aunt went on, without looking at her again : "I suppose you have heard from Constance ? It must be difficult for her too, to reconcile herself with the different kind of life. My brother's quiet ways are not likely to suit a young lady about town."

"Frances will be able to tell you all about it," said Lady Markham, who kept her temper with astonishing self-control. "She only arrived last night. I would not delay a moment in bringing her to you. Of course, you will like to hear. . Markham, who went to fetch his sister, is of opinion that on the whole the change will do Constance good."

"I don't at all doubt it will do her good. To associate with my brother would do any one good—who is worthy of it; but of course it will be a great change for her. And this child will be kept just long enough to be infected with worldly ways, and then sent back to him spoilt for his life. I suppose, Lady Markham, that is what you intend?"

"You are so determined to think badly of me," said Lady Markham, "that it is vain for me to say anything; or else I might remind you that Con's going off was a greater surprise to me than to any one. You know what were my views for her?"

"Yes. I rather wonder why you take the trouble to acquaint me with your plans," Mrs Clarendon said.

"It is foolish, perhaps; but I have a feeling that as Edward's only near relation——"

"Oh, I am sure I am much obliged to you for your consideration," the other cried quickly. "Constance was never influenced by me; though I don't wonder that her soul revolted at such a marriage as you had prepared for her."

"Why?" cried Lady Markham quickly, with an astonished glance. Then she added with a smile: "I am afraid you will see nothing but harm in any plan of mine. Unfortunately, Con did not like the gentleman whom I approved. I should not have put any force upon her. One can't nowadays, if one wished to. It is contrary, as she says herself, to the spirit of the times. But if you will allow me to say so, Caroline, Con is too like her father to bear anything, to put up with anything that——"

"Thank heaven!" cried Mrs Clarendon. "She is indeed a little like her dear father, notwithstanding a training so different. And this one, I suppose—this one you find like you?"

"I am happy to think she is a little, in externals at least," said Lady Markham, taking Frances' hand in her own. "But Edward has brought her up, Caroline; that should be a passport to your affections at least."

Upon this, Mrs Clarendon came down as from a pedestal, and addressed herself to the girl, over whose astonished head this strange dialogue had gone. "I am afraid, my dear, you will think me very hard and disagreeable," she

said. “I will not tell you why, though I think I could make out a case. How is your dear father? He writes seldom and seldom—sometimes not even at Christmas; and I am afraid you have little sense of family duties, which is a pity at your age.”

Frances did not know how to reply to this accusation, and she was confused and indignant, and little disposed to attempt to please. “Papa,” she said, “is very well. I have heard him say that he could not write letters—our life was so quiet: there was nothing to say.”

“Ah, my dear, that is all very well for strangers, or for those who care more about the outside than the heart. But he might have known that anything, everything would be interesting to me. It is just your quiet life that I like to hear about. Society has little attraction for me. I suppose you are half an Italian, are you? and know nothing about English life.”

“She looks nothing but English,” said Lady Markham in a sort of parenthesis.

“The only people I know are English,” said Frances. “Papa is not fond of society. We

see the Gaunts and the Durants, but nobody else. I have always tried to be like my own country-people, as well as I could."

"And with great success, my dear," said her mother with a smiling look.

Mrs Clarendon said nothing, but looked at her with silent criticism. Then she turned to Lady Markham. "Naturally," she said, "I should like to make acquaintance with my niece, and hear all the details about my dear brother; but that can't be done in a morning call. Will you leave her with me for the day? Or may I have her to-morrow, or the day after? Any time will suit me."

"She only arrived last night, Caroline. I suppose even you will allow that the mother should come first. Thursday, Frances shall spend with you, if that suits you?"

"Thursday, the third day," said Mrs Clarendon, ostentatiously counting on her fingers—"during which interval you will have full time— Oh yes, Thursday will suit me. The mother, of course, conventionally, has, as you say, the first right."

"Conventionally and naturally too," Lady

Markham replied ; and then there was a silence, and they sat looking at each other. Frances, who felt her innocent self to be something like the bone of contention over which these two ladies were wrangling, sat with downcast eyes confused and indignant, not knowing what to do or say. The mistress of the house did nothing to dissipate the embarrassment of the moment : she seemed to have no wish to set her visitors at their ease, and the pause, during which the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the occasional fall of ashes from the fire came in as a sort of chorus or symphony, loud and distinct, to fill up the interval, was half painful, half ludicrous. It seemed to the quick ears of the girl thus suddenly introduced into the arena of domestic conflict, that there was a certain irony in this inarticulate commentary upon those petty miseries of life.

At last, at the end of what seemed half an hour of silence, Lady Markham rose and spread her wings—or at least shook out her silken draperies, which comes to the same thing. “ As that is settled, we need not detain you any longer,” she said.

Mrs Clarendon rose too, slowly. "I cannot expect," she replied, "that you can give up your valuable time to me; but mine is not so much occupied. I will expect you, Frances, before one o'clock on Thursday. I lunch at one; and then if there is anything you want to see or do, I shall be glad to take you wherever you like. I suppose I may keep her to dinner? Mr Clarendon will like to make acquaintance with his niece."

"Oh, certainly; as long as you and she please," said Lady Markham with a smile. "I am not a medieval parent, as poor Con says."

"Yet it was on that ground that Constance abandoned you and ran away to her father," quoth the implacable antagonist.

Lady Markham, calm as she was, grew red to her hair. "I don't think Constance has abandoned me," she cried hastily; "and if she has, the fault is—— But there is no discussion possible between people so hopelessly of different opinions as you and I," she added, recovering her composure. "Mr Clarendon is well, I hope?"

"Very well. Good morning, since you will go," said the mistress of the house. She

dropped another cold kiss upon Frances' cheek. It seemed to the girl, indeed, who was angry and horrified, that it was her aunt's nose, which was a long one and very chilly, which touched her. She made no response to this nasal salutation. She felt, indeed, that to give a slap to that other cheek would be much more expressive of her sentiments than a kiss, and followed her mother down-stairs hot with resentment. Lady Markham, too, was moved. When she got into the brougham, she leant back in her corner and put her handkerchief lightly to the corner of each eye. Then she laughed, and laid her hand upon Frances' arm.

" You are not to think I am grieving," she said ; " it is only rage. Did you ever know such a——? But, my dear, we must recollect that it is natural—that she is on *the other side*."

" Is it natural to be so unkind, to be so cruel ?" cried Frances. " Then, mamma, I shall hate England, where I once thought everything was good."

" Everything is not good anywhere, my love ; and Society, I fear, above all, is far from being perfect,—not that your poor dear aunt Caroline

can be said to be in Society," Lady Markham added, recovering her spirits. "I don't think they see anybody but a few lawyers like themselves."

"But, mamma, why do you go to see her? Why do you endure it? You promised for me, or I should never go back, neither on Thursday nor any other time."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Frances, my dear! I hope you have not got those headstrong Waring ways. Because she hates me, that is no reason why she should hate you. Even Con saw as much as that. You are of her own blood, and her near relation: and I never heard that *he* took very much to any of the young people on his side. And they are very rich. A man like that, at the head of his profession, must be coining money. It would be wicked of me, for any little tempers of mine, to risk what might be a fortune for my children. And you know I have very little more than my jointure, and your father is not rich."

This exposition of motives was like another language to Frances. She gazed at her mother's soft face, so full of sweetness and kindness, with

a sense that Lady Markham was under the sway of motives and influences which had been left out in her own simple education. Was it supreme and self-denying generosity, or was it —something else? The girl was too inexperienced, too ignorant to tell. But the contrast between Lady Markham's wonderful temper and forbearance and the harsh and ungenerous tone of her aunt, moved her heart out of the region of reason. “If you put up with all that for us, I cannot see any reason why we should put up with it for you!” she cried indignantly. “She cannot have any right to speak to my mother so—and before me.”

“Ah, my darling, that is just the sweetness of it to her. If we were alone, I should not mind; she might say what she liked. It is because of you that she can make me feel—a little. But you must take no notice; you must leave me to fight my own battles.”

“Why?” Frances flung up her young head, till she looked about a foot taller than her mother. “I will never endure it, mamma; you may say what you like. What is her fortune to me?”

"My love!" she exclaimed; "why, you little savage, her fortune is everything to you! It may make all the difference." Then she laughed rather tremulously, and leaning over, bestowed a kiss upon her stranger-child's half-reluctant cheek. "It is very, very sweet of you to make a stand for your mother," she said, "and when you know so little of me. The horrid people in Society would say that was the reason; but I think you would defend your mother anyhow, my Frances, my child that I have always missed! But look here, dear: you must not do it. I am old enough to take care of myself. And your poor aunt Clarendon is not so bad as you think. She believes she has reason for it. She is very fond of your father, and she has not seen him for a dozen years; and there is no telling whether she may ever see him again; and she thinks it is my fault. So you must not take up arms on my behalf till you know better. And it would be so much to your advantage if she should take a fancy to you, my dear. Do you think I could ever reconcile myself, for any *amour-propre* of mine, to stand in my child's way?"

Once more, Frances was unable to make any

reply. All the lines of sentiment and sense to which she had been accustomed seemed to be getting blurred out. Where she had come from, a family stood together, shoulder by shoulder. They defended each other, and even revenged each other; and though the law might disapprove, public opinion stood by them. A child who looked on careless while its parents were assailed would have been to Mariuccia an odious monster. Her father's opinions on such a subject, Frances had never known: but as for fortune, he would have smiled that disdainful smile of his at the suggestion that she should pay court to any one because he was rich. Wealth meant having few wants, she had heard him say a thousand times. It might even have been supposed from his conversation that he scorned rich people for being rich, which of course was an exaggeration. But he could never, never have wished her to endeavour to please an unkind, disagreeable person because of her money. That was impossible. So that she made no reply, and scarcely even, in her confusion, responded to the caress with which her mother thanked her for the partisanship, which it appeared was so out of place.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRANCES had not succeeded in resolving this question in her mind when Thursday came. The two intervening days had been very quiet. She had gone with her mother to several shops, and had stood by almost passive and much astonished while a multitude of little luxuries which she had never been sufficiently enlightened even to wish for, were bought for her. She was so little accustomed to lavish expenditure, that it was almost with a sense of wrong-doing that she contemplated all these costly trifles, which were for the use not of some typical fine lady, but of herself, Frances, who had never thought it possible she could ever be classed under that title. To Lady Markham these delicacies were evidently necessaries of life. And then it was for the first time that

Frances learned what an evening dress meant—not only the garment itself, but the shoes, the stockings, the gloves, the ribbons, the fan, a hundred little accessories which she had never so much as thought of. When you have nothing but a set of coral or amber beads to wear with your white frock, it is astonishing how much that matter is simplified. Lady Markham opened her jewel-boxes to provide for the same endless roll of necessities. "This will go with the white dress, and this with the pink," she said, thus revealing to Frances another delicacy of accord unsuspected by her simplicity.

"But, mamma, you are giving me so many things!"

"Not your share yet," said Lady Markham. And she added: "But don't say anything of this to your aunt Clarendon. She will probably give you something out of her hoards, if she thinks you are not provided."

This speech checked the pleasure and gratitude of Frances. She stopped with a little gasp in her eager thanks. She wanted nothing from her aunt Clarendon, she said to herself

with indignation, nor from her mother either. If they would but let her keep her ignorance, her pleasure in any simple gift, and not represent her, even to herself, as a little schemer, trying how much she could get ! Frances cried rather than smiled over her turquoises and the set of old gold ornaments, which but for that little speech would have made her happy. The suggestion put gall into everything, and made the timid question in her mind as to Lady Markham's generous forbearance with her sister-in-law more difficult than ever. Why did she bear it ? She ought not to have borne it—not for a day.

On the Wednesday evening before the visit to Portland Place, to which she looked with so much alarm, two gentlemen came to dinner at the invitation of Markham. The idea of two gentlemen to dinner produced no exciting effect upon Frances so as to withdraw her mind from the trial that was coming. Gentlemen were the only portion of the creation with which she was more or less acquainted. Even in the old Palazzo, a guest of this description had been occasionally received, and had sat

discussing some point of antiquarian lore, or something about the old books at Colla, with her father without taking any notice, beyond what civility demanded, of the little girl who sat at the head of the table. She did not doubt it would be the same thing to-night ; and though Markham was always *nice*, never leaving her out, never letting the conversation drop altogether into that stream of personality or allusion which makes Society so intolerable to a stranger, she yet prepared for the evening with the feeling that dulness awaited her, and not pleasure. One of the guests, however, was of a kind which Frances did not expect. He was young, very young in appearance, rather small and delicate, but at the same time refined, with a look of gentle melancholy upon a countenance which was almost beautiful, with child-like limpid eyes, and features of extreme delicacy and purity. This was something quite unlike the elderly antiquarians who talked so glibly to her father about Roman remains or Etruscan art. He sat between Lady Markham and herself, and spoke in gentle tones, with a soft affectionate manner, to her mother, who

replied with the kindness and easy affectionateness which were habitual to her. To see the sweet looks which this young gentleman received, and to hear the tender questions about his health and his occupations which Lady Markham put to him, awoke in the mind of Frances another doubt of the same character as those others from which she had not been able to get free. Was this sympathetic tone, this air of tender interest, put on at will for the benefit of everybody with whom Lady Markham spoke? Frances hated herself for the instinctive question which rose in her, and for the suspicions which crept into her mind on every side and undermined all her pleasure. The other stranger opposite to her was old—to her youthful eyes—and called forth no interest at all. But the gentleness and melancholy, the low voice, the delicate features, something plaintive and appealing about the youth by her side, attracted her interest in spite of herself. He said little to her, but from time to time she caught him looking at her with a sort of questioning glance. When the ladies left the table, and Frances and her mother

were alone in the drawing-room, Lady Markham, who had said nothing for some minutes, suddenly turned and asked : “ What did you think of him, Frances ? ” as if it were the most natural question in the world.

“ Of whom ? ” said Frances in her astonishment.

“ Of Claude, my dear. Whom else ? Sir Thomas could be of no particular interest either to you or me.”

“ I did not know their names, mamma ; I scarcely heard them. Claude is the young gentleman who sat next to you ? ”

“ And to you also, Frances. But not only that. He is the man of whom, I suppose, Constance has told you—to avoid whom she left home, and ran away from me. Oh, the words come quite appropriate, though I could not bear them from the mouth of Caroline Clarendon. She abandoned me, and threw herself upon your father’s protection, because of—”

Frances had listened with a sort of consternation. When her mother paused for breath, she filled up the interval : “ That little, gentle, small, young man ! ”

Lady Markham looked for a moment as if she would be angry; then she took the better way, and laughed. "He is little and young," she said; "but neither so young nor even so small as you think. He is most wonderfully, portentously rich, my dear; and he is very nice and good and intelligent and generous. You must not take up a prejudice against him because he is not an athlete or a giant. There are plenty of athletes in Society, my love, but very, very few with a hundred thousand a-year."

"It is so strange to me to hear about money," said Frances. "I hope you will pardon me, mamma. I don't understand. I thought he was perhaps some one who was delicate, whose mother, perhaps, you knew, whom you wanted to be kind to."

"Quite true," said Lady Markham, patting her daughter's cheek with a soft finger; "and well judged: but something more besides. I thought, I allow, that it would be an excellent match for Constance; not only because he was rich, but *also* because he was rich. Do you see the difference?"

"I—suppose so," Frances said; but there was not any warmth in the admission. "I thought the right way," she added after a moment, with a blush that stole over her from head to foot, "was that people fell in love with each other."

"So it is," said her mother, smiling upon her. "But it often happens, you know, that they fall in love respectively with the wrong people."

"It is dreadful to me to talk to you, who know so much better," cried Frances. "All that *I* know is from stories. But I thought that even a wrong person, whom you chose yourself, was better than—"

"The right person chosen by your mother? These are awful doctrines, Frances. You are a little revolutionary. Who taught you such terrible things?" Lady Markham laughed as she spoke, and patted the girl's cheek more affectionately than ever, and looked at her with unclouded smiles, so that Frances took courage. "But," the mother went on, "there was no question of choice on my part. Constance has known Claude Ramsay all her life.

She liked him, so far as I knew. I supposed she had accepted him. It was not formally announced, I am happy to say; but I made sure of it, and so did everybody else—including himself, poor fellow—when, suddenly, without any warning, your sister disappeared. It was unkind to me, Frances,—oh, it was unkind to me!"

And suddenly, while she was speaking, two tears appeared all at once in Lady Markham's eyes.

Frances was deeply touched by this sight. She ventured upon a caress, which as yet, except in timid return, to those bestowed upon her, she had not been bold enough to do. "I do not think Constance can have meant to be unkind," she said.

"Few people mean to be unkind," said this social philosopher, who knew so much more than Frances. "Your aunt Clarendon does, and that makes her harmless, because one understands. Most of those who wound one, do it because it pleases themselves, without meaning anything—or caring anything—don't you see?—whether it hurts or not."

This was too profound a saying to be understood at the first moment, and Frances had no reply to make to it. She said only by way of apology, “But Markham approved ?”

“My love,” said her mother, “Markham is an excellent son to me. He rarely wounds me himself—which is perhaps because he rarely does anything particular himself—but he is not always a safe guide. It makes me very happy to see that you take to him, though you must have heard many things against him; but he is not a safe guide. Hush ! here are the men coming up-stairs. If Claude talks to you, be as gentle with him as you can—and sympathetic, if you can,” she said quickly, rising from her chair, and moving in her noiseless easy way to the other side. Frances felt as if there was a meaning even in this movement, which left herself alone with a vacant seat beside her; but she was confused as usual by all the novelty, and did not understand what the meaning was.

It was balked, however, if it had anything to do with Mr Ramsay, for it was the other gentleman—the old gentleman, as Frances

called him in her thoughts—who came up and took the vacant place. The old gentleman was a man about forty-five, with a few grey hairs among the brown, and a well-knit manly figure, which showed very well between the delicate youth on the one hand and Markham's insignificance on the other. He was Sir Thomas, whom Lady Markham had declared to be of no particular interest to any one; but he evidently had sense enough to see the charm of simplicity and youth. The attention of Frances was sadly distracted by the movements of Claude, who fidgeted about from one table to another, looking at the books and the nick-nacks upon them, and staring at the pictures on the walls, then finally came and stood by Markham's side in front of the fire. He did well to contrast himself with Markham. He was taller, and the beauty of his countenance showed still more strikingly in contrast with Markham's odd little wrinkled face. Frances was distracted by the look which he kept fixed upon herself, and which diverted her attention in spite of herself away from the talk of Sir Thomas, who was, however, very

nice, and, she felt sure, most interesting and instructive, as became his advanced age, if only she could attend to what he was saying. But what with the lively talk which her mother carried on with Markham, and to which she could not help listening all through the conversation of Sir Thomas, and the movements and glances of the melancholy young lover, she could not fix her mind upon the remarks that were addressed to her own ear. When Claude began to join languidly in the other talk, it was more difficult still. “You have got a new picture, Lady Markham,” she heard him say; and a sudden quickening of her attention and another wave of colour and heat passing over her, arrested even Sir Thomas in the much more interesting observation which presumably he was about to make. He paused, as if he, too, waited to hear Lady Markham’s reply.

“Shall we call it a picture? It is my little girl’s sketch from her window where she has been living—her present to her mother; and I think it is delightful, though in the circumstances I don’t pretend to be a judge.”

Where she has been living! Frances grew redder and hotter in the flush of indignation that went over her. But she could not stand up and proclaim that it was from her home, her dear loggia, the place she loved best in the world, that the sketch was made. Already the bonds of another life were upon her, and she dared not do that. And then there was a little chorus of praise, which silenced her still more effectually. It was the group of palms which she had been so simply proud of, which—as she had never forgotten—had made her father say that she had grown up. Lady Markham had placed it on a small easel on her table; but Frances could not help feeling that this was less for any pleasure it gave her mother, than in order to make a little exhibition of her own powers. It was, to be sure, in her own honour that this was done—and what so natural as that the mother should seek to do her daughter honour? but Frances was deeply sensitive, and painfully conscious of the strange tangled web of motives, which she had never in her life known anything about before. Had the little picture been

hung in her mother's bedroom, and seen by no eyes but her own, the girl would have found the most perfect pleasure in it; but here, exhibited as in a public gallery, examined by admiring eyes, calling forth all the incense of praise, it was with a mixture of shame and resentment that Frances found it out. It produced this result, however, that Sir Thomas rose, as in duty bound, to examine the performance of the daughter of the house; and presently young Ramsay, who had been watching his opportunity, took the place by her side.

"I have been waiting for this," he said, with his air of pathos. "I have so many things to ask you, if you will let me, Miss Waring."

"Surely," Frances said.

"Your sketch is very sweet—it is full of feeling—there is no colour like that of the Riviera. It is the Riviera, is it not?"

"Oh yes," cried Frances, eager to seize the opportunity of making it apparent that it was not only where she had been living, as her mother said. "It is from Bordighera, from our loggia, where I have lived all my life."

"You will find no colour and no vegetation like that near London," the young man said.

To this Frances replied politely that London was full of much more wonderful things, as she had always heard; but felt somewhat disappointed, supposing that his communications to her were to be more interesting than this.

"And the climate is so very different," he continued. "I am very often sent out of England for the winter, though this year they have let me stay. I have been at Nice two seasons. I suppose you know Nice? It is a very pretty place; but the wind is just as cold sometimes as at home. You have to keep in the sun; and if you always keep in the sun, it is warm even here."

"But there is not always sun here," said Frances.

"That is very true; that is a very clever remark. There is not always sun here. San Remo was beginning to be known when I was there; but I never heard of Bordighera as a place where people went to stay. Some Italian wrote a book about it, I have heard—to push

it, no doubt. Could you recommend it as a winter-place, Miss Waring? I suppose it is very dull, nothing going on?"

"Oh, nothing at all," cried Frances eagerly. "All the tourists complain that there is nothing to do."

"I thought so," he said; "a regular little Italian dead-alive place." Then he added after a moment's pause: "But of course there are inducements which might make one put up with that, if the air happened to suit one. Are there villas to be had, can you tell me? They say, as a matter of fact, that you get more advantage of the air when you are in a dull place."

"There are hotels," said Frances more and more disappointed, though the beginning of this speech had given her a little hope.

"Good hotels?" he said with interest. "Sometimes they are really better than a place of one's own, where the drainage is often bad, and the exposure not all that could be desired. And then you get any amusement that may be going. Perhaps you will tell me the names of one or two? for if

this east wind continues, my doctors may send me off even now."

Frances looked into his limpid eyes and expressive countenance with dismay. He must look, she felt sure, as if he were making the most touching confidences to her. His soft pathetic voice gave a *faux air* of something sentimental to those questions, which even she could not persuade herself meant nothing. Was it to show that he was bent upon following Constance wherever she might go? That must be the true meaning, she supposed. He must be endeavouring by this mock-anxiety to find out how much she knew of his real motives, and whether he might trust to her or not. But Frances resented a little the unnecessary precaution.

"I don't know anything about the hotels," she said. "I have never thought of the air. It is my home—that is all."

"You look so well, that I am the more convinced it would be a good place for me," said the young man. "You look in such thorough good health, if you will allow me to say so. Some ladies don't like to be told that; but I

think it the most delightful thing in existence. Tell me, had you any trouble with drainage, when you went to settle there? And is the water good? and how long does the season last? I am afraid I am teasing you with my questions; but all these details are so important—and one is so pleased to hear of a new place."

"We live up in the old town," said Frances with a sudden flash of malice. "I don't know what drainage is, and neither does any one else there. We have our fountain in the court—our own well. And I don't think there is any season. We go up among the mountains, when it gets too hot."

"Your well in the court!" said the sentimental Claude, with the look of a poet who has just been told that his dearest friend is killed by an accident—"with everything percolating into it! That is terrible indeed. But," he said, after a pause, an ethereal sense of consolation stealing over his fine features—"there are exceptions, they say, to every rule; and sometimes, with fine health such as you have, bad sanitary conditions do not

seem to tell—*when there has been no stirring-up.* I believe that is at the root of the whole question. People can go on, on the old system, so long as there is no stirring-up; but when once a beginning has been made, it must be complete, or it is fatal."

He said this with animation much greater than he had shown as yet; then dropping into his habitual pathos: "If I come in for tea to-morrow—Lady Markham allows me to do it, when I can, when the weather is fit for going out—will you be so very kind as to give me half an hour, Miss Waring, for a few particulars? I will take them down from your lips—it is so much the most satisfactory way; and perhaps you would add to your kindness by just thinking it over beforehand—if there is anything I ought to know."

"But I am going out to-morrow, Mr Ramsay."

"Then after to-morrow," he said; and rising with a bow full of tender deference, went up to Lady Markham to bid her good-night. "I have been having a most interesting conversation with Miss Waring. She has given me

so many *renseignements*,” he said. “She permits me to come after to-morrow for further particulars. Dear Lady Markham, good-night and *à revoir*.”

“What was Claude saying to you, Frances?” Lady Markham asked with a little anxiety, when everybody save Markham was gone, and they were alone.

“He asked me about Bordighera, mamma.”

“Poor dear boy! About Con, and what she had said of him? He has a faithful heart, though people think him a little too much taken up with himself.”

“He did not say anything about Constance. He asked about the climate and the drains—what are drains?—and if the water was good, and what hotel I could recommend.”

Lady Markham laughed and coloured slightly, and tapped Frances on the cheek. “You are a little satirical——! Dear Claude! he is very anxious about his health. But don’t you see,” she added, “that was all a covert way of finding out about Con? He wants to go after her; but he does not want to let everybody in the world see that he has gone after a girl who would not

have him. I have a great deal of sympathy with him, for my part."

Frances had no sympathy with him. She felt, on the other hand, more sympathy for Constance than had moved her yet. To escape from such a lover, Frances thought a girl might be justified in flying to the end of the world. But it never entered into her mind that any like danger to herself was to be thought of. She dismissed Claude Ramsay from her thoughts with half resentment, half amusement, wondering that Constance had not told her more; but feeling, as no such image had ever risen on her horizon before, that she would not have believed Constance. However, her sister had happily escaped, and to herself, Claude Ramsay was nothing. Far more important was it to think of the ordeal of to-morrow. She shivered a little even in her warm room as she anticipated it. England seemed to be colder, greyer, more devoid of brightness in Portland Place than in Eaton Square.

CHAPTER XXV.

FRANCES went to Portland Place next day. She went with great reluctance, feeling that to be thus plunged into the atmosphere of the other side was intolerable. Had she been able to feel that there was absolute right on either side, it would not have been so difficult for her. But she knew so little of the facts of the case, and her natural prepossessions were so curiously double and variable, that every encounter was painful. To be swept into the faction of the other side, when the first impassioned sentiment with which she had felt her mother's arms around her had begun to sink inevitably into that silent judgment of another individual's ways and utterances which is the hindrance of reason to every enthusiasm—was doubly hard. She was resolute indeed that not a word or

insinuation against her mother should be permitted in her presence. But she herself had a hundred little doubts and questions in her mind, traitors whose very existence no one must suspect but herself. Her natural revulsion from the thought of being forced into partisanship gave her a feeling of strong opposition and resistance against everything that might be said to her, when she stepped into the solemn house in Portland Place, where everything was so large, empty, and still, so different from her mother's warm and cheerful abode. The manner in which her aunt met her strengthened this feeling. On their previous meeting, in Lady Markham's presence, the greeting given her by Mrs Clarendon had chilled her through and through. She was ushered in now to the same still room, with its unused look, with all the chairs in their right places, and no litter of habitation about; but her aunt came to her with a different aspect from that which she had borne before. She came quickly, almost with a rush, and took the shrinking girl into her arms. "My dear little Frances, my dear child, my brother's

own little girl!" she cried, kissing her again and again. Her ascetic countenance was transfigured, her grey eyes warmed and shone.

Frances could not make any eager response to this warmth. She did her best to look the gratification which she knew she ought to have felt, and to return her aunt's caresses with due fervour; but in her heart there was a chill of which she felt ashamed, and a sense of insincerity which was very foreign to her nature. All through these strange experiences, Frances felt herself insincere. She had not known how to respond even to her mother, and a cold sense that she was among strangers had crept in even in the midst of the bewildering certainty that she was with her nearest relations and in her mother's house. In present circumstances, "How do you do, aunt Caroline?" was the only commonplace phrase she could find to say, in answer to the effusion of affection with which she was received.

"Now we can talk," said Mrs Clarendon, leading her with both hands in hers to a sofa near the fire. "While my lady was here it was impossible. You must have thought me

cold, when my heart was just running over to my dear brother's favourite child. But I could not open my heart before her,—I never could do it. And there is so much to ask you. For though I would not let her know I had never heard, you know very well, my dear, I can't deceive you. O Frances, why doesn't he write? Surely, surely, he must have known I would never betray him—to *her*, or any of her race."

"Aunt Caroline, please remember you are speaking of——"

"Oh, I can't stand on ceremony with you! I can't do it. Constance, that had been always with her, that was another thing. But you, my dear, dear child! And you must not stand on ceremony with me. I can understand you, if no one else can. And as for expecting you to love her and honour her and so forth, a woman whom you have never seen before, who has spoiled your dear father's life——"

Frances had put up her hand to stay this flood, but in vain. With eyes that flashed with excitement, the quiet still grey woman was strangely transformed. A vivacious and ani-

mated person, when moved by passion, is not so alarming as a reserved and silent one. There was a force of fury and hatred in her tone and looks which appalled the girl. She interrupted almost rudely, insisting upon being heard, as soon as Mrs Clarendon paused for breath.

"You must not speak to me so; you must not—you shall not! I will not hear it."

Frances was quiet too, and there was in her also the vehemence of a tranquil nature transported beyond all ordinary bounds.

Mrs Clarendon stopped and looked at her fixedly, then suddenly changed her tone. "Your father might have written to me," she said—"he might have written to *me*. He is my only brother, and I am all that remains of the family, now that Minnie, poor Minnie, who was so much mixed up with it all, is gone. It was natural enough that he should go away. I always understood him, if nobody else did; but he might have trusted his own family, who would never, never have betrayed him. And to think that I should owe my knowledge of him now to that ill-grown,

ill-conditioned—— O Frances, it was a bitter pill ! To owe my knowledge of my brother and of you and everything about you to Markham—I shall never be able to forget how bitter it was.”

“ You forget that Markham is my brother, aunt Caroline.”

“ He is nothing of the sort. He is your half-brother, if you care to keep up the connection at all. But some people don’t think much of it. It is the father’s side that counts. But don’t let us argue about that. Tell me how is your father ? Tell me all about him. I love you dearly, for his sake ; but above everything, I want to hear about him. I never had any other brother. How is he, Frances ? To think that I should never have seen or heard of him for twelve long years ! ”

“ My father is — very well,” said Frances, with a sort of strangulation both in heart and voice, not knowing what to say.

“ ‘ Very well ! ’ Oh, that is not much to satisfy me with, after so long ! Where is he —and how is he living—and have you been a very good child to him, Frances ? He

deserves a good child, for he was a good son. Oh, tell me a little about him. Did he tell you everything about us? Did he say how fond and how proud we were of him? and how happy we used to be at home all together? He must have told you. If you knew how I go back to those old days! We were such a happy united family. Life is always disappointing. It does not bring you what you think, and it is not everybody that has the comfort we have in looking back upon their youth. He must have told you of our happy life at home."

Frances had kept the secret of her father's silence from every one who had a right to blame him for it. But here she felt herself to be bound by no such precaution. His sister was on his side. It was in his defence and in passionate partisanship for him that she had assailed the mother to the child. Frances had even a momentary angry pleasure in telling the truth without mitigation or softening. "I don't know whether you will believe me," she said, "but my father told me nothing. He never said a word to me about his past life or any one

connected with him; neither you nor—any one.” Though she had the kindest heart in the world, and never had harmed a living creature, it gave Frances almost a little pang of pleasure to deliver this blow.

Mrs Clarendon received it, so to speak, full in the face, as she leaned forward, eagerly waiting for what Frances had to say. She looked at the girl aghast, the colour changing in her face, a sudden exclamation dying away in her throat. But after the first keen sensation, she drew herself together and regained her self-control. “Yes, yes,” she cried; “I understand. He could not enter into anything about us without telling you of—others. He was always full of good feeling—and so just! No doubt, he thought if you heard our side, you should hear the other. But when you were coming away—when he knew you must hear everything, what message did he give you for me?”

In sight of the anxiety which shone in her aunt’s eyes, and the eager bend towards her of the rigid straight figure not used to any yielding, Frances began to feel as if she were

the culprit. “Indeed,” she said, hesitating, “he never said anything. I came here in ignorance. I never knew I had a mother till Constance came—nor any relations. I heard of my aunt for the first time from—mamma; and then to conceal my ignorance, I asked Markham; I wanted no one to know.”

It was some minutes before Mrs Clarendon spoke. Her eyes slowly filled with tears, as she kept them fixed upon Frances. The blow went very deep; it struck at illusions which were perhaps more dear than anything in her actual existence. “You heard of me for the first time from—— Oh, that was cruel, that was cruel of Edward,” she cried, clasping her hands together—“of me for the first time—and you had to ask Markham! And I, that was his favourite sister, and that never forgot him, never for a day !”

Frances put her own soft young hands upon those which her aunt wrung convulsively together in the face of this sudden pang. “I think he had tried to forget his old life altogether,” she said; “or perhaps it was because he thought so much of it that he could not tell

me—I was so ignorant! He would have been obliged to tell me so much, if he had told me anything. Aunt Caroline, I don't think he meant to be unkind."

Mrs Clarendon shook her head; then she turned upon her comforter with a sort of indignation. "And you," she said, "did you never want to know? Did you never wonder how it was that he was there, vegetating in a little foreign place, a man of his gifts? Did you never ask whom you belonged to, what friends you had at home? I am afraid," she cried suddenly, rising to her feet, throwing off the girl's hand, which had still held hers, "that you are like your mother in your heart as well as your face—a self-contained, self-satisfying creature. You cannot have been such a child to him as he had a right to, or you would have known all—all there was to know."

She went to the fire as she spoke and took up the poker and struck the smouldering coals into a blaze with agitated vehemence, shivering nervously, with excitement rather than cold. "Of course that is how it is," she said. "You must have been thinking of your own little affairs,

and not of his. He must have thought he would have his child to confide in and rely upon—and then have found out that she was not of his nature at all, nor thinking of him ; and then he would shut his heart close—oh, I know him so well ! that is so like Edward—and say nothing, nothing ! That was always easier to him than saying a little. It was everything or nothing with him always. And when he found you took no interest, he would shut himself up. But there's Constance," she cried after a pause—"Constance is like our side. He will be able to pour out his heart, poor Edward, to her ; and she will understand him. There is some comfort in that, at least."

If Frances had felt a momentary pleasure in giving pain, it was now repaid to her doubly. She sat where her aunt had left her, following with a quiver of consciousness everything she said. Ah, yes ; she had been full of her own little affairs. She had thought of the mayonnaises, but not of any spiritual needs to which she could minister. She had not felt any wonder that a man of his gifts should live at Bordighera, or any vehemence of curiosity as

to the family she belonged to, or what his antecedents were. She had taken it all quite calmly, accepting as the course of nature the absence of relations and references to home. She had known nothing else, and she had not thought of anything else. Was it her fault all through? Had she been a disappointment to her father, not worthy of him or his confidence? The tears gathered slowly in her eyes. And when Mrs Clarendon suddenly introduced the name of Constance, Frances, too, sprang to her feet with a sense of the intolerable, which she could not master. To be told that she had failed, might be bearable; but that Constance—Constance!—should turn out to possess all that she wanted, to gain the confidence she had not been able to gain, that was more than flesh and blood could bear. She sprang up hastily, and began with trembling hands to button up to her throat the close-fitting outdoor jacket which she had undone. Mrs Clarendon stood, her face lit up with the ruddy blaze of the fire, shooting out sharp arrows of words, with her back turned to her young victim; while Frances behind her, in

as great agitation, prepared to bring the conference and controversy to a close.

"If that is what you think," she said, her voice tremulous with agitation and pain, pulling on her gloves with feverish haste, "perhaps it will be better for me to go away."

Mrs Clarendon turned round upon her with a start of astonishment. Through the semi-darkness of that London day, which was not much more than twilight through the white curtains, the elder woman looked round upon the girl, quivering with indignation and resentment, to whom she had supposed herself entitled to say what she pleased without fear of calling forth any response of indignation. When she saw the tremor in the little figure standing against the light, the agitated movement of the hands, she was suddenly brought back to herself. It flashed across her at once that the sudden withdrawal of Frances, whom she had welcomed so warmly as her brother's favourite child, would be a triumph for Lady Markham, already no doubt very triumphant in the unveiling of her husband's hiding-place and the recovery of the child, and in the fact that

Frances resembled herself, and not the father. To let that enemy understand that she, Waring's sister, could not secure the affection of Waring's child, was something which Mrs Clarendon could not face.

"Go—where?" she said. "You forget that you have come to spend the day with me. My lady will not expect you till the evening; and I do not suppose you can wish to expose your father's sister to her remarks."

"My mother," said Frances with an almost sob of emotion, "must be more to me than my father's sister. Oh, aunt Caroline," she cried, "you have been very, very hard upon me. I lived as a child lives at home till Constance came. I had never known anything else. Why should I have asked questions? I did not know I had a mother. I thought it was cruel, when I first heard; and now you say it was my fault."

"It must have been more or less your fault. A girl has no right to be so simple. You ought to have inquired; you ought to have given him no rest; you ought—"

"I will tell you," said Frances, "what I was

brought up to do: not to trouble papa; that was all I knew from the time I was a baby. I don't know who taught me—perhaps Mariuccia, perhaps, only—everything. I was not to trouble him, whatever I did. I was never to cry, nor even to laugh too loud, nor to make a noise, nor to ask questions. Mariuccia and Domenico and every one had only this thought—not to disturb papa. He was always very kind," she went on, softening, her eyes filling again. "Sometimes he would be displeased about the dinner, or if his papers were disturbed. I dusted them myself, and was very careful; but sometimes that put him out. But he was very kind. He always came to the loggia in the evening, except when he was busy. He used to tell me when my perspective was wrong, and laugh at me, but not to hurt. I think you are mistaken, aunt Caroline, about papa."

Mrs Clarendon had come a little nearer, and turned her face towards the girl, who stood thus pleading her own cause. Neither of them was quick enough in intelligence to see distinctly the difference of the two pictures which they set before each other—the sister displaying

her ideal of a delicate soul wounded and shrinking from the world, finding refuge in the tenderness of his child; the daughter making her simple representation of the father she knew, a man not at all dependent on her tenderness, concerned about the material circumstances of life, about his dinner, and that his papers should not be disturbed—kind, indeed, but in the easy, indifferent way of a father who is scarcely aware that his little girl is blooming into a woman. They were not clever enough to perceive this; and yet they felt the difference with a vague sense that both views, yet neither, were quite true, and that there might be more to say on either side. Frances got choked with tears as she went on, which perhaps was the thing above all others which melted her aunt's heart. Mrs Clarendon gave the girl credit for a passionate regret and longing for the father she loved; whereas Frances in reality was thinking, not so much of her father, as of the serene childish life which was over for ever, which never could come back again, with all its sacred ignorances, its simple unities, the absence of all complication or per-

plexity. Already she was so much older, and had acquired so much confusing painful knowledge—that knowledge of good and evil, and sense of another meaning lurking behind the simplest seeming fact and utterance, which, when once it has entered into the mind, is so hard to drive out again.

"Perhaps it was not your fault," said Mrs Clarendon at last. "Perhaps he had been so used to you as a child, that he did not remember you were grown up. We will say no more about it, Frances. We may be sure he had his reasons. And you say he was busy sometimes. Was he writing? What was he doing? You don't know what hopes we used to have, and the great things we thought he was going to do. He was so clever; at school and at college, there was nobody like him. We were so proud of him! He might have been Lord Chancellor. Charles even says so, and he is not partial, like me; he might have been anything, if he had but tried. But all the spirit was taken out of him when he married. Oh, many a man has been the same. Women have a great deal to answer for. I am not saying anything about

your mother. You are quite right when you say that is not a subject to be discussed with you. Come down-stairs; luncheon is ready; and after that we will go out. We must not quarrel, Frances. We are each other's nearest relations, when all is said."

"I don't want to quarrel, aunt Caroline. Oh no; I never quarrelled with any one. And then you remind me of papa."

"That is the nicest thing you have said. You can come to me, my dear, whenever you want to talk about him, to ease your heart. You can't do that with your mother; but you will never tire me. You may tell me about him from morning to night, and I shall never be tired. Mariuccia and Domenico are the servants, I suppose? and they adore him? He was always adored by the servants. He never gave any trouble, never spoke crossly. Oh, how thankful I am to be able to speak of him quite freely! I was his favourite sister. He was just the same in outward manner to us both,—he would not let Minnie see he had any preference; but he liked me the best, all the same."

It was very grateful to Frances that this monologue should go on: it spared her the necessity of answering many questions which would have been very difficult to her; for she was not prepared to say that the servants, though faithful, adored her father, or that he never gave any trouble. Her recollection of him was that he gave a great deal of trouble, and was "very particular." But Mrs Clarendon had a happy way of giving herself the information she wanted, and evidently preferred to tell Frances a thousand things, instead of being told by her. And in other ways she was very kind, insisting that Frances should eat at lunch, that she should be wrapped up well when they went out in the victoria, that she should say whether there was any shopping she wanted to do. "I know my lady will look after your finery," she said,—"that will be for her own credit, and help to get you off the sooner; but I hope you have plenty of nice underclothing and wraps. She is not so sure to think of these."

Frances, to save herself from this questioning, described the numberless unnecessaries which had been already bestowed upon her, not for-

getting the turquoises and other ornaments, which, she remembered with a quick sensation of shame, her mother had told her not to speak of, lest her aunt's liberalities should be checked. The result, however, was quite different. Mrs Clarendon grew red as she heard of all these acquisitions, and when they returned to Portland Place, led Frances to her own room, and opened to her admiring gaze the safe, securely fixed into the wall, where her jewels were kept. "There are not many that can be called family jewels," she said ; "but I've no daughter of my own, and I should not like it to be said that you had got nothing from your father's side."

Thus it was a conflict of liberality, not a withholding of presents because she was already supplied, which Frances had to fear. She was compelled to accept with burning cheeks, and eyes weighed down with shame and reluctance, ornaments which a few weeks ago would have seemed to her good enough for a queen. Oh, what a flutter of pleasure there had been in her heart when her father gave her the little necklace of Genoese filigree, which appeared to her the most beautiful thing in the world. She

slipped into her pocket the cluster of emeralds her aunt gave her, as if she had been a thief, and hid the pretty ring which was forced upon her finger, under her glove. "Oh, they are much too fine for me. They are too good for any girl to wear. I do not want them, indeed, aunt Caroline!"

"That may be," Mrs Clarendon replied; "but I want to give them to you. It shall never be said that all the good things came from her, and nothing but trumpery from me."

Frances took home her spoils with a sense of humiliation which weighed her to the ground. Before this, however, she had made the acquaintance of Mr Charles Clarendon, the great Q.C., who came into the cold drawing-room two minutes before dinner in irreproachable evening costume—a well-mannered, well-looking man of middle age, or a little more, who shook hands cordially with Frances, and told her he was very glad to see her. "But dinner is a little late, isn't it?" he said to his wife. The drawing-room looked less cold by lamplight; and Mrs Clarendon herself, in her soft velvet evening-gown with a good deal of lace—or perhaps it

was after the awakening and excitement of her quarrel with Frances—had less the air of being like the furniture, out of use. The dinner was very luxurious and dainty. Frances, as she sat between husband and wife, observing both very closely without being aware of it, decided within herself that in this particular her aunt Caroline again reminded her of papa. Mr Clarendon was very agreeable at dinner. He gave his wife several pieces of information indeed which Frances did not understand, but in general talked about the things that were going on, the great events of the time, the news, so much of it as was interesting, with all the ease of a man of the world. And he asked Frances a few civil and indeed kindly questions about herself. “You must take care of our east winds,” he said; “you will find them very sharp after the Riviera.”

“I am not delicate,” she said; “I don’t think they will hurt me.”

“No, you are not delicate,” he replied, with what Frances felt to be a look of approval; “one has only to look at you to see that. But fine elastic health like yours is a great possession,

and you must take care of it.” He added with a smile, a moment after : “ We never think that when we are young; and when we are old, thinking does little good.”

“ You have not much to complain of, Charles, in that respect,” said his wife, who was always rather solemn.

“ Oh, nothing at all,” was his reply. And shortly after, dinner by this time being over, he gave her a significant look, to which she responded by rising from the table.

“ It is time for us to go up-stairs, my dear,” she said to Frances.

And when the ladies reached the drawing-room, it had relapsed into its morning aspect, and looked as chilly and as unused as before.

“ Your uncle is one of the busiest men in London,” said Mrs Clarendon with a scarcely perceptible sigh. “ He talked of your health ; but if he had not the finest health in the world, he could not do it ; he never takes any rest.”

“ Is he going to work now ? ” Frances asked with a certain awe.

“ He will take a doze for half an hour ; then he will have his coffee. At ten he will come

up-stairs to bid me good-night; and then—I dare not say how long he will sit up after that. He can do with less sleep than any other man, I think." She spoke in a tone that was full of pride, yet with pathos in it too.

"In that way, you cannot see very much of him," Frances said.

"I am more pleased that my husband should be the first lawyer in England, than that he should sit in the drawing-room with me," she answered proudly. Then, with a faint sigh: "One has to pay for it," she added.

The girl looked round upon the dim room with a shiver, which she did her best to conceal. Was it worth the price, she wondered? the cold dim house, the silence in it which weighed down the soul, the half-hour's talk (no more) round the table, followed by a long lonely evening. She wondered if they had been in love with each other when they were young, and perhaps moved heaven and earth for a chance hour together, and all to come to this. And there was her own father and mother, who probably had loved each other too. As she drove along to Eaton Square, warmly

wrapped in the rich fur cloak which aunt Caroline had insisted on adding to her other gifts, these examples of married life gave her a curious thrill of thought, as involuntarily she turned them over in her mind. If the case of a man were so with his wife, it would be well not to marry, she said to herself, as the inquirers did so many years ago.

And then she blushed crimson, with a sensation of heat which made her throw her cloak aside, to think that she was going back to her mother, as if she had been sent out upon a raid, laden with spoils.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THERE were voices in the drawing-room as Frances ran up-stairs, which warned her that her own appearance in her morning dress would be undesirable there. She went on with a sense of relief to her own room, where she threw aside the heavy cloak, lined with fur, which her aunt had insisted on wrapping her in. It was too grave, too ample for Frances, just as the other presents she had received were too rich and valuable for her wearing. She took the emerald brooch out of her pocket in its little case, and thrust it away into her drawer, glad to be rid of it, wondering whether it would be her duty to show it, to exhibit her presents. She divined that Lady Markham would be pleased, that she would congratulate her upon having made herself agreeable to her aunt, and

perhaps repeat that horrible encouragement to her to make what progress she could in the affections of the Clarendons, because they were rich and had no heirs. If, instead of saying this, Lady Markham had but said that Mrs Clarendon was lonely, having no children, and little good of her husband's society, how different it might have been. How anxious then would Frances have been to visit and cheer her father's sister! The girl, though she was very simple, had a great deal of inalienable good sense; and she could not but wonder within herself how her mother could make so strange a mistake.

It was late before Lady Markham came upstairs. She came in shading her candle with her hand, gliding noiselessly to her child's bedside. "Are you not asleep, Frances? I thought you would be too tired to keep awake."

"Oh no. I have done nothing to tire me. I thought you would not want me down-stairs, as I was not dressed."

"I always want you," said Lady Markham, stooping to kiss her. "But I quite understand

why you did not come. There was nobody that could have interested you. Some old friends of mine, and a man or two whom Markham brought to dine ; but nothing young or pleasant. And did you have a tolerable day ? Was poor Caroline a little less grey and cold ? But Constance used to tell me she was only cold when I was there."

"I don't think she was cold. She was—very kind ; at least that is what she meant, I am sure," said Frances, anxious to do her aunt justice.

Lady Markham laughed softly, with a sort of suppressed satisfaction. She was anxious that Frances should please. She had herself, at a considerable sacrifice of pride, kept up friendly relations, or at least a show of friendly relations, with her husband's sister. But notwithstanding all this, the tone in which Frances spoke was balm to her. The cloak was an evidence that the girl had succeeded ; and yet she had not joined herself to the other side. This unexpected triumph gave a softness to Lady Markham's voice.

"We must remember," she said, "that poor

Caroline is very much alone. When one is much alone, one's very voice gets rusty, so to speak. It sounds hoarse in one's throat. You may think, perhaps, that I have not much experience of that. Still, I can understand; and it takes some time to get it toned into ordinary smoothness. It is either too expressive, or else it sounds cold. A great deal of allowance is to be made for a woman who spends so much of her life alone."

"Oh yes," cried Frances, with a burst of tender compunction, taking her mother's soft white dimpled hand in her own, and kissing it with a fervour which meant penitence as well as enthusiasm. "It is so good of you to remind me of that."

"Because she has not much good to say of me? My dear, there are a great many things that you don't know, that it would be hard to explain to you: we must forgive her for that."

And for a moment Lady Markham looked very grave, turning her face away towards the vacancy of the dark room with something that sounded like a sigh. Her daughter had never loved her so much as at this moment. She

laid her cheek upon her mother's hand, and felt the full sweetness of that contact enter into her heart.

"But I am disturbing your beauty-sleep, my love," she said; "and I want you to look your best to-morrow; there are several people coming to-morrow. Did she give you that great cloak, Frances? How like poor Caroline! I know the cloak quite well. It is far too *old* for you. But that is beautiful sable it is trimmed with; it will make you something. She is fond of giving presents." Lady Markham was very quick—full of the intelligence in which Mrs Clarendon failed. She felt the instinctive loosening of her child's hands from her own, and that the girl's cheek was lifted from that tender pillow. "But," she said, "we'll say no more of that to-night," and stooped and kissed her, and drew her covering about her with all the sweetness of that care which Frances had never received before. Nevertheless, the involuntary and horrible feeling that it was clever of her mother to stop when she did and say no more, struck chill to the girl's very soul.

Next day Mr Ramsay came in the afternoon, and immediately addressed himself to Frances. “I hope you have not forgotten your promise, Miss Waring, to give me all the *renseignements*. I should not like to lose such a good chance.”

“I don’t think I have any information to give you—if it is about Bordighera, you mean. I am fond of it; but then I have lived there all my life. Constance thought it dull.”

“Ah yes, to be sure—your sister went there. But her health was perfect. I have seen her go out in the wildest weather, in days that made me shiver. She said that to see the sun always shining bored her. She liked a great deal of excitement and variety—don’t you think?” he added after a moment, in a tentative way.

“The sun does not shine always,” said Frances, piqued for the reputation of her home, as if this were an accusation. “We have grey days sometimes, and sometimes storms, beautiful storms, when the sea is all in foam.”

He shivered a little at the idea. “I have never yet found the perfect place in which there is nothing of all that,” he said. “Wher-

ever I have been, there are cold days—even in Algiers, you know. No climate is perfect. I don't go in much for society when I am at a health-place. It disturbs one's thoughts and one's temper, and keeps you from fixing your mind upon your cure, which you should always do. But I suppose you know everybody there?"

"There is—scarcely any one there," she said, faltering, remembering at once that her father was not a person to whom to offer introductions.

"So much the better," he said more cheerfully. "It is a thing I have often heard doctors say, that society was quite undesirable. It disturbs one's mind. One can't be so exact about hours. In short, it places health in a secondary place, which is fatal. I am always extremely rigid on that point. Health—must go before all. Now, dear Miss Waring, to details, if you please." He took out a little note-book, bound in russia, and drew forth a jewelled pencil-case. "The hotels first, I beg; and then the other particulars can be filled in. We can put them under different heads:

(1) Shelter; (2) Exposure; (3) Size and convenience of apartments; (4) Nearness to church, beach, &c. I hope you don't think I am asking too much?"

"I am so glad to see that you have not given him up because of Con," said one of Lady Markham's visitors, talking very earnestly over the tea-table, with a little nod and gesture to indicate of whom she was speaking. "He must be very fond of you, to keep coming; or he must have some hope."

"I think he is rather fond of me, poor Claude!" Lady Markham replied without looking round. "I am one of the oldest friends he has."

"But Constance, you know, gave him a terrible snub. I should not have wondered if he had never entered the house again."

"He enters the house almost every day, and will continue to do so, I hope. Poor boy, he cannot afford to throw away his friends."

"Then that is almost the only luxury he can't afford."

Lady Markham smiled upon this remark. "Claude," she said, turning round, "don't you

want some tea? Come and get it while it is hot."

"I am getting some *renseignements* from Miss Waring. It is very good of her. She is telling me all about Bordighera, which, so far as I can see, will be a very nice place for the winter," said Ramsay, coming up to the tea-table with his little note-book in his hand.

"Thanks, dear Lady Markham. A little sugar, please. Sugar is extremely nourishing, and it is a great pity to leave it out in diet—except, you know, when you are inclining to fat. Banting is at the bottom of all this fashion of doing without sugar. It is not good for little thin fellows like me."

"I gave it up long before I ever heard of Banting," said the stout lady: for it need scarcely be said that there was a stout lady; no tea-party in England ever assembled without one. The individual in the present case was young, and rebellious against the fate which had overtaken her—not of the soft, smiling, and contented kind.

"It does us real good," said Claude, with his softly pathetic voice. "I have seen one or two

very sad instances where the fat did not go away, you know, but got limp and flaccid, and the last state of that man was worse than the first. Dear lady, I think you should be very cautious. To make experiments with one's health is really criminal. We are getting on very nicely with the *renseignements*. Miss Waring has remembered a great deal. She thought she could not tell me anything; but she has remembered a great deal."

"Bordighera? Is that where Constance is?" the ladies said to each other round the low tea-table where Lady Markham was so busy. She smiled upon them all, and answered "Yes," without any tinge of the embarrassment which perhaps they hoped to see.

"But of course as a resident she is not living among the people at the hotels. You know how the people who live in a place hold themselves apart; and the season is almost over. I don't think that either tourists or invalids passing that way are likely to see very much of Con."

In the meantime, Frances, as young Ramsay had said, had been honestly straining her

mind to “remember” what she could about the Marina and the circumstances there. She did not know anything about the east wind, and had no recollection of how it affected the place. She remembered that the sun shone in at the windows all day; which of course meant, as he informed her, a southern exposure; and that in all the hotel gardens, as well as elsewhere, there were palms growing, and hedges of lemons and orange trees; and that at the Angleterre—or was it the Victoria?—the housekeeper was English; along with other details of a similar kind. There were no balls; very few concerts or entertainments of any kind; no afternoon tea-parties. “How could there be?” said Frances, “when there were only ourselves, the Gaunts, and the Durants.”

“Only themselves, the Gaunts, and the Durants,” Ramsay wrote down in his little book. “How delightful that must be! Thank you so much, Miss Waring. Usually one has to pay for one’s experience; but thanks to you, I feel that I know all about it. It seems a place in which one could do one’s self every

justice. I shall speak to Dr Lull about it at once. I have no doubt he will think it the very place for me."

"You will find it dull," said Frances, looking at him curiously, wondering was it possible that he could be sincere, or whether this was his way of justifying to himself his intention of following Constance. But nothing could be more steadily matter-of-fact than the young man's aspect.

"Yes, no doubt I shall find it dull. I don't so very much object to that. At Cannes and those places there is a continual racket going on. One might almost as well be in London. One is seduced into going out in the evening, doing all sorts of things. I think your place is an ideal place—plenty of sunshine and no amusements. How can I thank you enough, Miss Waring, for your *renseignements*? I shall speak to Dr Lull without delay."

"But you must recollect that it will soon be getting very hot; and even the people who live there will be going away. Mr Durant sometimes takes the duty at Homburg or one of those places; and the Gaunts come home to England; and even we——"

Here Frances paused for a moment to watch him, and she thought that the pencil with which he was still writing down all these precious details, paused too. He looked up at her, as if waiting for further information. "Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"Even we—go up among the mountains where it is cooler," she said.

He looked a little thoughtful at this; but presently threw her back into perplexity by saying calmly: "That would not matter to me so much, since I am quite sincere in thinking that when one goes to a health-place, one should give one's self up to one's health. But unfortunately, or perhaps I should say fortunately, Miss Waring, England is just as good as anywhere else in the summer; and Dr Lull has not thought it necessary this year to send me away. But I feel quite set up with your *renseignements*," he added, putting back his book into his pocket, "and I certainly shall think of it for another year."

Frances had been so singled out for the purpose of giving the young invalid information, that she found herself a little apart from the

party when he went away. They were all ladies, and all intimates, and the unaccustomed girl was not prepared for the onslaught of this curious and eager, though so pretty and fashionable mob. "What are those *renseignements* you have been giving him? Is he going off after Con? Has he been questioning you about Con? We are all dying to know. And what do you think she will say to him if he goes out after her?" cried all, speaking together, those soft eager voices, to which Frances did not know how to reply.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FRANCES became accustomed to the presence of young Ramsay after this. He appeared almost every day, very often in the afternoon, eager for tea, and always disposed to inquire for further *renseignements*, though he was quite certain that he was not to leave England till autumn at the earliest. She began to regard him as a younger brother, or cousin at the least—a perfectly harmless individual, with whom she could talk when he wanted her with a gentle complacence, without any reference to her own pleasure. As a matter of fact, it did not give her any pleasure to talk to Claude. She was kind to him for his sake; but she had no desire for his presence on her own account. It surprised her that he ever could have been thought of as a possible mate for Constance.

Constance was so much cleverer, so much more advanced in every way than herself, that to suppose she could put up with what Frances found so little attractive, was a constant amazement to the girl. She could not but express this on one of the occasions, not so very frequent as she had expected, on which her mother and she were alone together.

"Is it really true," she said at the end of a long silence, "that there was a question of a — marriage between Constance and Mr Ramsay?"

"It is really quite true," said her mother with a smile. "And why not? Do you disapprove?"

"It is not that I disapprove—I have no right to disapprove; it is only that it seems so impossible."

"Why? I see nothing impossible in it. He is of suitable age; he is handsome. You cannot deny that he is handsome, however much you may dislike him, my dear."

"But I don't dislike him at all; I like him very much—in a kind of way."

"You have every appearance of doing so,"

said Lady Markham with meaning. " You talk to him more, I think, than to any one else."

" That is because—"

" Oh, I don't ask any reason, Frances. If you like his society that is reason enough—the best of reasons. And evidently he likes you. He would, no doubt, be more suitable to you than to Constance."

" Mamma! I don't know what you mean." Frances woke up suddenly from her musing state, and looked at her mother with wide open startled eyes.

" I don't mean anything. I only ask you to point out wherein his unsuitability lies. Young, handsome, *nice*, and very rich. What could a girl desire more? You think, perhaps, as you have been so simply brought up, that a heroine like Con should have had a Duke or an Earl at the least. But people think less of the importance of titles as they know Society better. Claude is of an excellent old family—better than many peers. She would have been a very fortunate young woman with such an establishment; but she has taken her own way. I hope you will never be so hot-headed as your sister,

Frances. You look much more practical and reasonable. You will not, I think, dart off at a tangent without warning or thought."

Frances looked her mother doubtfully in the face. Her feelings fluctuated strangely in respect to this central figure in the new world round her. To make acquaintance with your parents for the first time when you have reached the critical age, and are no longer able to accept everything with the matter-of-fact serenity of a child, is a curious experience.. Children, indeed, are tremendous critics, at the tribunal of whose judgment we all stand unawares, and have our just place allotted to us, with an equity which happily leads to no practical conclusions, but which no tribunal on earth can equal for clear sight and remorseless decision. Eighteen is not quite so abstract as eight; yet the absence of familiarity, and that love which is instinctive, and happily quite above all decisions of the judgment, makes, in such an extraordinary case as that of Frances, the sudden call upon the critical faculties, the consciousness that accompanies their exercise, and the underlying sense, never absent, that all this is unnatural and

wrong, into a complication full of distress and uncertainty. A vague question whether it were possible that such a conflict as that which had ended in Constance's flight, should ever arise between Lady Markham and herself, passed through the mind of Frances. If it should do so, the expedient which had been open to Constance would be to herself impossible. All pride and delicacy of feeling, all sense of natural justice, would prevent her from adopting that course. The question would have to be worked out between her mother and herself, should it ever occur. Was it possible that it could ever occur? She looked at Lady Markham, who had returned to her usual morning occupation of writing letters, with a questioning gaze. There had been a pause, and Lady Markham had waited for a moment for a reply. Then she had taken up her pen again, and with a smiling nod had returned to her correspondence.

Frances sat and pondered with her face turned towards the writing-table, at which her mother spent so much of her time. The number of letters that were written there every morning filled her with amazement.

Waring had written no letters, and received only one now and then, which Frances understood to be about business. She had looked very respectfully at first on the sheaves which were every day taken away, duly stamped, from that well-worn but much decorated writing-table. When it had been suggested to her that she too must have letters to write, she had dutifully compiled her little bulletin for her father, putting aside as quite a different matter the full chronicle of her proceedings, written at a great many *reprises*, to Mariuccia, which somehow did not seem at all to come under the same description. It had, however, begun to become apparent to Frances, unwillingly, as she made acquaintance with everything about her, that Lady Markham's correspondence was really by no means of the importance which appeared at the first glance. It seemed to consist generally in the conveyance of little bits of news, of little engagements, of the echoes of what people said and did; and it was replied to by endless shoals of little notes on every variety of tinted, gilt, and perfumed paper,

with every kind of monogram, crest, and device, and every new idea in shape and form which the genius of the fashionable stationer could work out. "I have just heard from Lady So-and-so the funniest story," Lady Markham would say to her son, repeating the anecdote—which on many occasions Frances, listening, did not see the point of. But then both mother and son were cleverer people than she was. "I must write and let Mary St Serle and Louisa Avenel know—it will amuse them so;" and there was at once an addition of two letters to the budget. Frances did not think—all under her breath, as it were, in involuntary unexpressed comment—that the tale was worth a pretty sheet of paper, a pretty envelope—both decorated with Lady Markham's cipher and coronet—and a penny stamp. But so it was; and this was one of the principal occupations evidently of a great lady's life. Lady Markham considered it very grave, and "a duty." She allowed nothing to interfere with her correspondence. "I have my letters to write," she said, as who should say, "I have my day's

work to do." By degrees Frances lost her respect for this day's work, and would watch the manufactory of one note after another with eyes that were unwillingly cynical, wondering within herself whether it would make any difference to the world if pen and ink were forbidden in that house. Markham, too, spoke of writing his letters as a valid reason for much consumption of time. But then, no doubt, Markham had land agents to write to, and lawyers, and other necessary people. In this, Frances did not do justice to her mother, who also had business letters to write, and did a great deal in stocks, and kept her eyes on the money market. The girl sat and watched her with a sort of fascination as her pen ran lightly over sheet after sheet. Sometimes Lady Markham was full of tenderness and generosity, and had the look of understanding everybody's feelings. She was never unkind. She never took a bad view of any one, or suggested evil or interested motives, as even Frances perceived, in her limited experience, so many people to do. But, on the other hand, there would

come into her face sometimes a look—which seemed to say that she might be inexorable, if once she had made up her mind: a look before which it seemed to Frances that flight like that of Constance would be the easiest way. Frances was not sufficiently instructed in human nature to know that anomalies of this kind are common enough; and that nobody is always and in all matters good, any more than anybody is in all things ill. It troubled her to perceive the junction of these different qualities in her mother; and still more it troubled her to think what, in case of coming to some point of conflict, she should do? How would she get out of it? Would it be only by succumbing wholly, or had she the courage in her to fight it out?

“Little un,” said Markham, coming up to her suddenly, “why do you look at the mother so? Are you measuring yourself against her, to see how things would stand if it came to a fight?”

“Markham!” Frances started with a great blush of guilt. “I did not know you were here. I—never heard you come in.”

"You were so lost in thought. I have been here these five minutes, waiting for an opportunity to put in a word. Don't you know I'm a thought-reader, like those fellows that find pins? Take my advice, Fan, and never let it come to a fight."

"I don't know how to fight," she said, crimsoning more and more; "and besides, I was not thinking—there is nothing to fight about."

"Fibs, these last," he said. "Come out and take a little walk with me,—you are looking pale; and I will tell you a thing or two. Mother, I am going to take her out for a walk; she wants air."

"Do, dear," said Lady Markham, turning half round with a smile. "After luncheon, she is going out with me; but in the meantime, you could not do better—get a little of the morning into her face, while I finish my letters." She turned again with a soft smile on her face to send off that piece of information to Louisa Avenel and Mary St Serle, closing an envelope as she spoke, writing the address with such a preoccupied yet amiable air—a woman who,

but for having so much to do, would have had no thought or ambition beyond her home. Markham waited till Frances appeared in the trim little walking-dress which the mother had paid her the high compliment of making no change in. They turned their faces as usual towards the Park, where already, though Easter was very near, there was a flutter of fine company in preparation for the more serious glories of the Row, after the season had fairly set in.

"Little Fan, you mustn't fight," were the first words that Markham said.

She felt her heart begin to beat loud. "Markham! there is nothing to fight about—oh, nothing. What put fighting in your head?"

"Never mind. It is my duty to instruct your youth; and I think I see troubles brewing. Don't be so kind to that little beggar Claude. He is a selfish little beggar, though he looks so smooth; and since Constance won't have him, he will soon begin to think he may as well have you."

"Markham!" Frances felt herself choking with horror and shame.

“ You have got my name quite pat, my dear ; but that is neither here nor there. Markham has nothing to do with it, except to put you on your guard. Don’t you know, you little innocent, what is the first duty of a mother ? Then I can tell you : to marry her daughters well ; brilliantly, if possible, but at all events *well*—or anyhow to marry them ; or else she is a failure, and all the birds of her set come round her and peck her to death.”

“ I often don’t understand your jokes,” said Frances, with a little dignity, “ and I suppose this is a joke.”

“ And you think it is a joke in doubtful taste ? So should I, if I meant it that way, but I don’t. Listen, Fan ; I am much of that opinion myself.”

“ That a mother—that a lady——? You are always saying horrible things.”

“ It is true, though—if it is best that a girl should marry—mind you, I only say if —then it *is* her mother’s duty. You can’t look out for yourself—at least I am very glad you are not of the kind that do, my little Fan.”

"Markham," said Frances, with a dignity which seemed to raise her small person a foot at least, "I have never heard such things talked about; and I don't wish to hear anything more, please. In books," she added, after a moment's interval, "it is the gentlemen—"

"Who look out? But that is all changed, my dear. Fellows fall in love—which is quite different—and generally fall in love with the wrong person; but you see I was not supposing that you were likely to do anything so wild as that."

"I hope not," cried Frances hurriedly. "However," she added, after another pause, colouring deeply, but yet looking at him with a certain courageous air, "if there was any question about being—married, which of course there is not—I never heard that there was any other way."

"Brava, Fan! Come, now, here is the little thing's own opinion, which is worth a great deal. It would not matter, then, who the man was, so long as *that* happened, eh? Let us know the premises on either side."

"You are a great deal older than I am, Markham," said Frances.

"Granted, my dear—a great deal. And what then? I should be wiser, you mean to say? But so I am, Fan."

"It was not *that* I meant. I mean, it is you who ought—to marry. You are a man. You are the eldest, the chief one of your family. I have always read in books——"

Markham put up his hand as a shield. He stopped to laugh, repeating over and over again that one note of mirth with which it was his wont to express his feelings. "Brava, Fan!" he repeated when he could speak. "You are a little Trojan. This is something like carrying the war into the enemy's country." He was so much tickled by the assault, that the water stood in his eyes. "What a good thing we are not in the Row, where I should have been delivered over to the talk of the town. Frances, my little dear, you are the funniest of little philosophers."

"Where is the fun?" said Frances gravely. "And I am not a philosopher, Markham; I am only—your sister."

At this the little man became serious all at once, and took her hand and drew it within his arm. They were walking up Constitution Hill, where there are not many spectators. "Yes, my dear," he said, "and as nice a little sister as a man could desire;" and walked on, holding her arm close to him with an expressive clasp which spoke more than words. The touch of nature and the little suggestive proffer of affection and kindred which was in the girl's words, touched his heart. He said nothing till they were about emerging upon the noise and clamour of the world at the great thoroughfare which they had to cross. Then "After all," he said, "yours is a very natural proposition, Fan. It is I who ought to marry. Many people would say it is my duty; and perhaps I might have been of that opinion once. But I've a great deal on my conscience, dear. You think I'm rather a good little man, don't you? fond of ladies' society, and of my mother and little sister, which is such a good feature, everybody says? Well, but that's a mistake, my dear. I don't know that I am at all a

fit person to be walking about London streets and into the Park with an innocent little creature, such as you are, under my arm."

"Markham!" she cried, with a tone which was half astonished, half indignant, and her arm thrilled within his—not, perhaps, with any intention of withdrawing itself; but that was what he thought.

"Wait," he said, "till I have got you safely across the Corner—there is always a crowd—and then, if you are frightened, and prefer another chaperon, we'll find one, you may be sure, before we have gone a dozen steps. Come now; there is a little lull. Be plucky, and keep your head, Fan."

"I want no other chaperon, Markham; I like you."

"Do you, my dear? Well, you can't think what a pleasure that is to me, Fan. You wouldn't, probably, if you knew me better. However, you must stick to that opinion as long as you can. Who, do you think, would marry me if I were to try? An ugly little fellow, not very well off, with several very bad tendencies, and—a mother."

“A mother, Markham!”

“Yes, my dear; to whom he is devoted—who must always be the first to him. That’s a beautiful sentiment, don’t you think? But wives have a way of not liking it. I could not force her to call herself the Dowager, could I, Fan? She is a pretty woman yet. She is really younger than I am. She would not like it.”

“I think you are only making fun of me, Markham. I don’t know what you mean. What could mamma have to do with it? If she so much wanted Constance to marry, surely she must want you still more, for you are so much older; and then——”

“There is no want of arguments,” he said with a laugh, shaking his head. “Conviction is what is wanted. There might have been times when I should have much relished your advice; but nobody would have had me, fortunately. No; I must not give up the mother, my dear. Don’t you know I was the cause of all the mischief—at least of a great part of the mischief—when your father went away? And now, I must make a mess of it again,

and put folly into Con's head. The mother is an angel, Fan, or she would not trust you with me."

It flashed across Frances' memory that Constance had warned her not to let herself fall into Markham's hands; but this only bewildered the girl in the softening of her heart to him, and in the general bewilderment into which she was thus thrown back. "I do not believe you can be bad," she said earnestly; "you must be doing yourself injustice."

By this time they were in the Row in all the brightness of the crowd, which, if less great than at a later period, was more friendly. Markham had begun to pull off his hat to every third lady he met, to put out his hand right and left, to distribute nods and greetings. "We'll resume the subject some time or other," he said with a smile aside to Frances, disengaging her arm from his. The girl felt as if she had suddenly lost her anchorage, and was thrown adrift upon this sea of strange faces; and thrown at the same time back into a moral chaos, full of new difficulties and wonders, out of which she could not see her way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DAY or two after, they all went to the Priory for Easter.

The Priory was in the Isle of Wight, and it was Markham's house. It was not a very great house, nor was it medieval and mysterious, as an unsophisticated imagination naturally expected. Its name came, it was said (or hoped), from an old ecclesiastical establishment once planted there; but the house itself was a sort of Strawberry-Hill Gothic, with a good deal of plaster and imitated ornament of the perpendicular kind,—that is to say, the worst of its kind, which is, unfortunately, that which most attracts the imitator. It stood on a slope above the beach, where the vegetation was soft and abundant, recalling more or less to the mind of Frances the aspect of the country with which

she was best acquainted—the great bosquets of glistening green laurel and laurestine simulating the daphnes and orange-trees, and the grey downs above recalling in some degree the scattered hill-tops above the level of the olives; though the great rollers of the Atlantic which thundered in upon the beach were not like that rippling blue which edged the Riviera in so many rims of delicate colour. The differences, however, struck Frances less than the resemblance, for which she had scarcely been prepared, and which gave her a great deal of surprised pleasure at the first glance. This put temporarily out of her mind all the new and troublesome thoughts which her conversation with Markham had called forth, and which had renewed her curiosity about her step-brother, whom she had begun to receive into the landscape around her with the calm of habit and without asking any questions. Was he really bad, or rather, not good?—which was as far as Frances could go. Had he really been the cause, or partly the cause, of the separation between her father and mother? She was bewildered by these little breaks in the curtain which

concealed the past from her so completely—that past which was so well known to the others around, which an invincible delicacy prevented her from speaking of or asking questions about. All went on so calmly around her, as if nothing out of the ordinary routine had ever been ; and yet she was aware not only that much had been, but that it remained so distinctly in the minds of those smiling people as to influence their conduct and form their motives still. Though it was Markham's house, it was his mother who was the uncontested sovereign, not less, probably more, than if the real owner had been her husband instead of her son. And even Frances, little as she was acquainted with the world, was aware that this was seldom the case. And why should not Markham at his age, which to her seemed at least ten years more than it was, be married, when it was already thought important that Constance should marry ? These were very bewildering questions, and the moment to resume the subject never seemed to come.

There was a party in the house, which included Claude Ramsay, and Sir Thomas,

the elder person in whom Lady Markham had thought there could be nothing particularly interesting. He was a very frequent member of the family party, all the same; and now that they were living under the same roof, Frances did not find him without interest. There was also a lady with two daughters, whose appearance was very interesting to the girl. They reminded her a little of Constance, and of the difficulty she had found in finding subjects on which to converse with her sister. The Miss Montagues knew a great many people, and talked of them continually; but Frances knew nobody. She listened with interest, but she could add nothing either to their speculations or recollections. She did not know anything about the contrivances which brought about the marriage between Cecil Gray and Emma White. She was utterly incompetent even to hazard an opinion as to what Lady Milbrook would do *now*; and she did not even understand about the hospitals which they visited and “took an interest” in. She tried very hard to get some little current with which she could make herself acquainted in the river of

their talk ; but nothing could be more difficult. Even when she brought out her sketch-book and opened ground upon that subject—about which the poor little girl modestly believed she knew by experience a very little—she was silenced in five minutes by their scientific acquaintance with washes, and glazing, and body colour, and the laws of composition. Frances did not know how to compose a picture. She said : “Oh no ; I do not make it up in my head at all ; I only do what I see.”

“ You mean you don’t formulate rules,” said Maud. “ Of course you don’t mean that you merely imitate, for that is tea-board style ; and your drawings are quite pretty. I like that little bit of the coast.”

“ How well one knows the Riviera,” said Ethel ; “ everybody who goes there has something to show. But I am rather surprised you don’t keep to one style. You seem to do a little of everything. Don’t you feel that flower-painting rather spoils your hand for the larger effects ? ”

“ It wants such a very different distribution of light and shade,” said the other sister. “ You

have to calculate your tones on such a different scale. If you were working at South Kensington or any other of the good schools——”

“I should not advise her to do that—should you, Maud?—there is such a long elementary course. But I suppose you did your freehand, and all that, in the schoolroom?”

Frances did not know how to reply. She put away her little sketch with a sense of extreme humiliation. “Oh, I am afraid I am not fit to talk about it at all,” she said. “I don’t even know what words to use. It has been all imitation, as you say.”

The two young ladies smiled upon her, and reassured her. “You must not be discouraged. I am sure you have talent. It only wants a little hard work to master the principles; and then you go on so much easier afterwards,” they said. It puzzled Frances much that they did not produce their own sketches, which she thought would have been as good as a lesson to her; and it was not till long after that it dawned upon her that in this particular Maud and Ethel were defective. They knew how to

do it, but could not do it; whereas she could do it without knowing how.

"How is it, I wonder," said one of them, changing the subject after a little polite pause, which suggested fatigue, "that Mrs Winterbourn is not here this year?"

They looked at her for this information, to the consternation of Frances, who did not know how to reply. "You know I have not been long—here," she said: she had intended to say at home, but the effort was beyond her—"and I don't even know who Mrs Winterbourn is."

"Oh!" they both cried; and then for a minute there was nothing more. "You may think it strange of us to speak of it," said Maud at length; "only, it always seemed so well understood; and we have always met her here."

"Oh, she goes everywhere," cried Ethel. "There never was a word breathed against—Please don't think *that*, from anything we have said."

"On the contrary, mamma always says it is so wise of Lady Markham," said Maud; "so

much better that he should always meet her here."

Frances retired into herself with a confusion which she did not know how to account for. She did not in the least know what they meant, and yet she felt the colour rise in her cheek. She blushed for she knew not what; so that Maud and Ethel said to each other, afterwards: "She is a little hypocrite. She knew just as well as either you or I."

Frances, however, did not know; and here was another subject about which she could not ask information. She carried away her sketch-book to her room with a curious feeling of ignorance and foolishness. She did not know anything at all—neither about her own surroundings, nor about the little art which she was so fond of, in which she had taken just a little pride, as well as so much pleasure. She put the sketches away with a few hasty tears, feeling troubled and provoked, and as if she could never look at them with any satisfaction, or attempt to touch a pencil again. She had never thought they were anything great; but to be made to feel so foolish in her own little

way was hard. Nor was this the only trial to which she was exposed. After dinner, retiring, which she did with a sense of irritation which her conscience condemned, from the neighbourhood of Ethel and Maud, she fell into the hands of Sir Thomas, who also had a way of keeping very clear of these young ladies. He came to where Frances was standing in a corner, almost out of sight. She had drawn aside one edge of the curtain, and was looking out upon the shrubbery and the lawn, which stood out against the clear background of the sea—with a great deal of wistfulness, and perhaps a secret tear or two in her eyes. Here she was startled by a sudden voice in her ear. “You are looking out on the moonlight,” Sir Thomas said. It took her a moment before she could swallow the sob in her throat.

“It is very bright; it is a little like—home.” This word escaped her in the confusion of her thoughts.

“You mean the Riviera. Did you like it so much? I should have thought—— But no doubt, whatever the country is which we call home, it seems desirable to us.”

"Oh, but you can't know how beautiful it is," cried Frances, roused from her fit of despondency. "Perhaps you have never been there?"

"Oh yes, often. Does your father like it as well as you do, Miss Waring? I should have supposed, for a man——"

"Yes," said Frances, "I know what you mean. They say there is nothing to do. But my father is not a man to want to do anything. He is fond of books; he reads all day long, and then comes out into the loggia with his cigarette—and talks to me."

"That sounds very pleasant," said Sir Thomas with a smile, taking no notice of the involuntary quaver that had got into the girl's voice. "But I wonder if perhaps he does not want a little variety, a little excitement? Excuse me for saying so. Men, you know, are not always so easily contented as the better half of creation; and then they are accustomed to larger duties, to more action, to public affairs."

"I don't think papa takes much interest in all that," said Frances with an air of authority.

"He has never cared for what was going on. The newspapers he sometimes will not open."

"That is a great change. He used to be a hot politician in the old days."

"Did you know my father?" she cried, turning upon him with a glow of sudden interest.

"I knew him very well—better than most people. I was one of those who felt the deepest regret——"

She stood gazing at him with her face lifted to him with so profound an interest and desire to know, that he stopped short, startled by the intensity of her look. "Miss Waring," he said, "it is a very delicate subject to talk to their child upon."

"Oh, I know it is. I don't like to ask—and yet it seems as if I ought to know." Frances was seized with one of those sudden impulses of confidence which sometimes make the young so indiscreet. If she had known Sir Thomas intimately, it would not have occurred to her; but as a stranger, he seemed safe. "No one has ever told me," she added in the heat of this sudden overflow, "neither

how it was or why it was—except Markham, who says it was his fault."

"There were faults on all sides, I think," said Sir Thomas. "There always are in such cases. No one person is able to carry out such a prodigious mistake. You must pardon me if I speak plainly. You are the only person whom I can ask about my old friend."

"Oh, I like you to speak plainly," cried Frances. "Talk to me about him; ask me anything you please." The tears came into her voice, and she put her hands together instinctively. She had been feeling very lonely and home-sick, and out of accord with all her surroundings. To return even in thought to the old life and its associations brought a flood of bitter sweetness to her heart.

"I can see at least," said Sir Thomas, "that he has secured a most loving champion in his child."

This arrested her enthusiasm in a moment. She was too sincere to accept such a solution of her own complicated feelings. Was she the loving champion which she was so suddenly assumed to be? She became vaguely aware

that the things which had rushed back upon her mind and filled her with longing were not the excellences of her father, but rather the old peace and ease and ignorance of her youthful life, which nothing could now restore. She could not respond to the confidence of her father's friend. He had kept her in ignorance ; he had deceived her ; he had not made any attempt to clear the perplexities of her difficult path, but left her to find out everything, more perhaps than she yet knew. Sir Thomas was a little surprised that she made him no reply ; but he set it down to emotion and agitation, which might well take from so young and innocent a girl the possibility of reply.

"I don't know whether I am justified in the hope I have been entertaining ever since you came," he said. "It is very hard that your father should be banished from his own country and all his duties by—what was, after all, never a very important cause. There has been no unpardonable wrong on either side. He is terribly sensitive, you know. And Lady Markham — she is a dear friend of mine ; I have a great affection for her——"

"If you please," said Frances quickly, "it is not possible for me to listen to any discussion of mamma."

"My dear Miss Waring," he cried, "this is better and better. You are then a partisan on both sides?"

Poor little Frances felt as if she were at least hemmed in on both sides, and without any way of escape. She looked up in his face with an appeal which he did not understand, for how was it possible to suppose that she did not know all about a matter which had affected her whole life?

"Don't you think," said Sir Thomas, drawing very close to her, stooping over her, "that if we two were to lay our heads together, we might bring things to a better understanding? Constance, to whom I have often spoken on the subject, knew only one side—and that not the difficult side. Markham was mixed up in it all, and could never be impartial. But you know both, and your father best. I am sure you are full of sense, as Waring's daughter ought to be. Don't you think——"

He had taken both Frances' hands in his

enthusiasm, and pressed so closely upon her that she had to retreat a step, almost with alarm. And he had his back to the light, shutting her out from all succour, as she thought. It was all the girl could do to keep from crying out that she knew nothing,—that she was more ignorant than any one; and when there suddenly came from behind Sir Thomas the sound of many voices, without agitation or special meaning, her heart gave a bound of relief, as if she had escaped. He gave her hands a vehement pressure and let them drop; and then Claude Ramsay's voice of gentle pathos came in. "Are you not afraid, Miss Waring, of the draught? There must be some door or window open. It is enough to blow one away."

"You look like a couple of conspirators," said Markham. "Fan, your little eyes are blinking like an owl's. Come back, my dear, into the light."

"No," said Claude; "the light here is perfect. I never can understand why people should want so much light only to talk by. Will you sit here, Miss Waring? Here is a

corner out of the draught. I want to say something more about Bordighera—one other little *renseignement*, and then I shall not require to trouble you any more."

Frances looked at Markham for help, but he did not interfere. He looked a little grave, she thought; but he took Sir Thomas by the arm, and presently led him away. She was too shy to refuse on her own account Claude's demand, and sat down reluctantly on the sofa, where he placed himself at her side.

"Your sister," he said, "never had much sympathy with me about draughts. She used to think it ridiculous to take so much care. But my doctrine always is, take care beforehand, and then you don't need to trouble yourself after. Don't you think I am right?"

She understood very well how Constance would receive his little speeches. In the agitation in which she was, gleams of perception coming through the chaos, sudden visions of Constance, who had been swept out of her mind by the progress of events, and of her father, whom her late companion had been talking about—as if it would be so easy to induce

him to change all his ways, and do what other people wished!—came back to her mind. They seemed to stand before her there, both appearing out of the mists, both so completely aware of what they wanted to do—so little likely to be persuaded into some one else's mode of thought.

"I think Constance and you were not at all likely to think the same," she said.

Ramsay looked at her with a glance which for him was hasty and almost excited. "No?" he said in an interrogative tone. "What makes you think so? Perhaps when one comes to consider, you are right. She was always so well and strong. You and I, perhaps, do you think, are more alike?"

"No," said Frances, very decidedly. "I am much stronger than Constance. She might have some patience with—with—what was fanciful; but I should have none."

"With what was fanciful? Then you think I am fanciful?" said Claude, raising himself up from his feeble attitude. He laughed a little, quite undisturbed in temper by this reproach. "I wish other people thought so;

I wish they would let me stay comfortably at home, and do what everybody does. But, Miss Waring, you are not so sympathetic as I thought."

"I am afraid I am not sympathetic," said Frances, feeling much ashamed of herself. "Oh, Mr Ramsay, forgive me; I did not mean to say anything so disagreeable."

"Never mind," said Claude. "When people don't know me, they often think so. I am sorry, because I thought perhaps you and I might agree better. But very likely it was a mistake. Are you feeling the draught again? It is astonishing how a draught will creep round, when you think you are quite out of the way of it. If you feel it, you must not run the risk of a cold, out of consideration for me."

CHAPTER XXIX.

“ SHE thinks I am fanciful,” he said.

He was sitting with Lady Markham in the room which was her special sanctuary. She did not call it her boudoir—she was not at all inclined to *bouder*; but it answered to that retirement in common parlance. Those who wanted to see her alone, to confide in her, as many people did, knocked at the door of this room. It opened with a large window upon the lawn, and looked down through a carefully kept opening upon the sea. Amid all the little luxuries appropriate to my lady’s chamber, you could see the biggest ships in the world pass across the gleaming foreground, shut in between two *massifs* of laurel, making a delightful confusion of the great and the small, which was specially pleasant to her. She sat, however,

with her back to this pleasant prospect, holding up a screen, to shade her delicate cheek from the bright little fire, which, though April was far advanced, was still thought necessary so near the sea. Claude had thrown himself into another chair in front of the fireplace. No warmth was ever too much for him. There was the usual pathos in his tone, but a faint consciousness of something amusing was in his face.

“Did she?” said Lady Markham with a laugh. “The little impertinent! But you know, my dear boy, that is what I have always said.”

“Yes—it is quite true. You healthy people, you are always of opinion that one can get over it if one makes the effort; and there is no way of proving the contrary but by dying, which is a strong step.”

“A very strong step—one, I hope, that you will not think of taking. They are both very sincere, my girls, though in a different way. They mean what they say; and yet they do not mean it, Claude. That is, it is quite true; but does not affect their regard for you, which,

I am sure, without implying any deeper feeling, is strong."

He shook his head a little. "Dear Lady Markham," he said, "you know if I am to marry, I want, above all things, to marry a daughter of yours."

"Dear boy!" she said, with a look full of tender meaning.

"You have always been so good to me, since ever I can remember. But what am I to do if they—object? Constance—has run away from me, people say: run away—to escape *me!*" His voice took so tragically complaining a tone, that Lady Markham bit her lip and held her screen higher to conceal her smile. Next moment, however, she turned upon him with a perfectly grave and troubled face.

"Dear Claude!" she cried, "what an injustice to poor Con. I thought I had explained all that to you. You have known all along the painful position I am in with their father, and you know how impulsive she is. And then, Markham—— Alas!" she continued with a sigh, "my position is very complicated, Claude. Markham is the best son that ever

was ; but you know I have to pay a great deal for it."

" Ah ! " said Claude ; " Nelly Winterbourn and all that," with a good many sage nods of his head.

" Not only Nelly Winterbourn—there is no harm in her, that I know—but he has a great influence with the girls. It was he who put it into Constance's head to go to her father. I am quite sure it was. He put it before her that it was her duty."

" O—oh ! " Claude made this very English comment with the doubtful tone which it expresses ; and added, " Her duty !" with a very unconvinced air.

" He did so, I know. And she was so fond of adventure and change. I agreed with him partly afterwards that it was the best thing that could happen to her. She is finding out by experience what banishment from Society, and from all that makes life pleasant, is. I have no doubt she will come back—in a very different frame of mind."

Claude did not respond, as perhaps Lady Markham expected him to do. He sat and

dangled his leg before the fire, not looking at her. After some time, he said in a reflective way, "Whoever I marry, she will have to resign herself to banishment, as you call it—that has been always understood. A warm climate in winter—and to be ready to start at any moment."

"That is always understood—till you get stronger," said Lady Markham in the gentlest tone. "But you know I have always expected that you would get stronger. Remember, you have been kept at home all this year—and you are better; at all events you have not suffered."

"Had I been sent away, Constance would have remained at home," he said. "I am not speaking out of irritation, but only to understand it fully. It is not as if I were finding fault with Constance; but you see for yourself she could not stand me all the year round. A fellow who has always to be thinking about the thermometer is trying."

"My dear boy," said Lady Markham, "everything is trying. The thermometer is much less offensive than most things that men care for. Girls are brought up in that fastidious way:

you all like them to be so, and to think they have refined tastes, and so forth ; and then you are surprised when you find they have a little difficulty—— Constance was only fanciful, that was all—impatient.”

“ Fanciful,” he repeated. “ That was what the little one said. I wish she were fanciful, and not so horribly well and strong.”

“ My dear Claude,” said Lady Markham quickly, “ you would not like that at all ! A delicate wife is the most dreadful thing—one that you would always have to be considering ; who could not perhaps go to the places that suited you ; who would not be able to go out with you when you wanted her. I don’t insist upon a daughter of mine : but not that, not that, for your own sake, my dear boy !”

“ I believe you are right,” he said, with a look of conviction. “ Then I suppose the only thing to be done is to wait for a little and see how things turn out. There is no hurry about it, you know.”

“ Oh, no hurry !” she said, with uneasy assent. “ That is, if you are not in a hurry,” she added after a pause.

"No, I don't think so. I am rather enjoying myself, I think. It always does one good," he said, getting up slowly, "to come and have it out with you."

Lady Markham said "Dear boy!" once more, and gave him her hand, which he kissed; and then his audience was over. He went away; and she turned round to her writing-table to the inevitable correspondence. There was a little cloud upon her forehead so long as she was alone; but when another knock came at the door, it cleared by magic as she said "Come in." This time it was Sir Thomas who appeared. He was a tall man, with grey hair, and had the air of being very carefully brushed and dressed. He came in, and seated himself where Claude had been, but pushed back the chair from the fire.

"Don't you think," he said, "that you keep your room a little too warm?"

"Claude complained that it was cold. It is difficult to please everybody."

"Oh, Claude. I have come to speak to you, dear Lady Markham, on a very different subject. I was talking to Frances last night."

"So I perceived. And what do you think of my little girl?"

"You know," he said, with some solemnity, "the hopes I have always entertained that some time or other our dear Waring might be brought among us once more."

"I have always told you," said Lady Markham, "that no difficulties should be raised by me."

"You were always everything that is good and kind," said Sir Thomas. "I was talking to his dear little daughter last night. She reminds me very much of Waring, Lady Markham."

"That is odd; for everybody tells me—and indeed I can see it myself—that she is like me."

"She is very like you; still, she reminds me of her father more than I can say. I do think we have in her the instrument—the very instrument that is wanted. If he is ever to be brought back again—"

"Which I doubt," she said, shaking her head.

"Don't let us doubt. With perseverance, everything is to be hoped; and here we have in our very hands what I have always looked for

—some one devoted to him and very fond of you."

"Is she very fond of me?" said Lady Markham. Her face softened—a little moisture crept into her eyes. "Ah, Sir Thomas, I wonder if that is true. She was very much moved by the idea of her mother—a relation she had never known. She expected I don't know what, but more, I am sure, than she has found in me. Oh, don't say anything. I am scarcely surprised; I am not at all displeased. To come with your heart full of an ideal, and to find an ordinary woman—a woman in Society!" The moisture enlarged in Lady Markham's eyes—not tears, but yet a liquid mist that gave them pathos. She shook her head, looking at him with a smile.

"We need not argue the question," said Sir Thomas, "for I know she is very fond of you. You should have heard her stop me when she thought I was going to criticise you. Of course, had she known me better she would have known how impossible that was."

Lady Markham did not say "Dear Sir Thomas!" as she had said "Dear boy!" but her

look was the same as that which she had turned upon Claude. She was in no doubt as to what his account of her would be.

"She can persuade him, if anybody can," he said. "I think I shall go and see him as soon as I can get away—if you do not object. To bring our dear Waring back, to see you two together again, who have always been the objects of my warmest admiration—"

"You are too kind. You have always had a higher opinion of me than I deserve," she said. "One can only be grateful. One cannot try to persuade you that you are mistaken. As for my—husband"—there was the slightest momentary pause before she said the name—"I fear you will never get him to think so well of me as you do. It is a great misfortune; but still it sometimes happens that other people think more of a woman than—her very own."

"You must not say that. Waring adored you."

She shook her head again. "He had a great admiration," she said, "for a woman to whom he gave my name. But he discovered that it was a mistake; and for me in my own person

he had no particular feeling. Think a little whether you are doing wisely. If you should succeed in bringing us two together again——”

“What then?”

She did not say any more: her face grew pale, as by a sudden touch or breath. When such a tie as marriage is severed, if by death or by any other separation, it is not a light thing to renew it again. The thought of that possibility—which yet was not a possibility—suddenly realised, sent the blood back to Lady Markham’s heart. It was not that she was unforgiving, or even that she had not a certain remainder of love for her husband. But to resume those habits of close companionship after so many years—to give up her own individuality, in part at least, and live a dual life—this thought startled her. She had said that she would put no difficulties in the way. But then she had not thought of all that was involved.

The next visitor who interrupted her retirement came in without the preliminary of knocking. It was Markham who thus made his appearance, presenting himself to the full

daylight in his light clothes and colourless aspect; not very well dressed, a complete contrast to the beautiful if sickly youth of her first visitor, and to the size and vigour of the other. Markham had neither beauty nor vigour. Even the usual keenness and humorous look had gone out of his face. He held a letter in his hand. He did not, like the others, put himself into the chair where Lady Markham, herself turned from the light, could mark every change of countenance in her interlocutor. He went up to the fire with the ease of the master of the house, and stood in front of it as an Englishman loves to do. But he was not quite at his ease on this occasion. He said nothing until he had assumed his place, and even stood for a whole minute or more silent before he found his voice. Lady Markham had turned her chair towards him at once, and sat with her head raised and expectant, watching him. For with Markham, never very reticent of his words, this prolonged pause seemed to mean that there was something important to say. But it did not appear when he spoke. He put the forefinger of one hand

on the letter he held in the other. "I have heard from the Winterbourns," he said. "They are coming to-morrow."

Lady Markham made the usual little exclamation "Oh!"—faintly breathed with the slightest catch, as if it might have meant more. Then, after a moment—"Very well, Markham: they can have their usual rooms," she said.

Again there was a little pause. Then—"He is not very well," said Markham.

"Oh, that is a pity," she replied with very little concern.

"That's not strong enough. I believe he is rather ill. They are leaving the Crosslands sooner than they intended because there's no doctor there."

"Then it is a good thing," said Lady Markham, "that there is such a good doctor here. We are so healthy a party, he is quite thrown away on us."

Markham did not find that his mother divined what he wanted to say with her usual promptitude. "I am afraid Winterbourn is in a bad way," he said at length, moving uneasily from one foot to the other, and avoiding her eye.

"Do you mean that there is anything serious—dangerous? Good heavens!" cried Lady Markham, now fully roused, "I hope she is not going to bring that man to die here."

"That's just what I have been thinking. It would be decidedly awkward."

"Oh, awkward is not the word," cried Lady Markham, with a sudden vision of all the inconveniences: her pretty house turned upside down—though it was not hers, but his—a stop put to everything—the flight of her guests in every direction—herself detained and separated from all her social duties. "You take it very coolly," she said. "You must write and say it is impossible in the circumstances."

"Can't," said Markham. "They must have started by this time. They are to travel slowly—to husband his strength."

"To husband——! Telegraph, then! Good heavens! Markham, don't you see what a dreadful nuisance—how impossible in every point of view."

"Come," he said, with a return of his more familiar tone. "There's no evidence that he means to die here. I daresay he won't, if he

can help it, poor beggar! The telegraph is as impossible as the post. We are in for it, mammy. Let's hope he'll pull through."

"And if he doesn't, Markham!"

"That will be—more awkward still," he said. Markham was not himself: he shuffled from one foot to another, and looked straight before him, never glancing aside with those keen looks of understanding which made his insignificant countenance interesting. His mother was, what mothers too seldom are, his most intimate friend; but he did not meet her eye. His hands were thrust into his pockets, his shoulders up to his ears. At last a faint and doubtful gleam broke over his face. He burst into a sudden chuckle—one of those hoarse brief notes of laughter which were peculiar to him. "By Jove! it would be poetic justice," he said.

Lady Markham showed no inclination to laughter. "Is there nothing we can do?" she cried.

"Think of something else," said Markham, with a sudden recovery. "I always find that the best thing to do—for the moment. What was Claude saying to you—and t'other man?"

"Claude! I don't know what he was saying. News like this is enough to drive everything else out of one's head. He is wavering between Con and Frances."

"Mother, I told you. Frances will have nothing to say to him."

"Frances—will obey the leading of events, I hope."

"Poor little Fan! I don't think she will, though. That child has a great deal in her. She shows her parentage."

"Sir Thomas says she reminds him much of her—father," Lady Markham said, with a faint smile.

"There is something of Waring too," said her son, nodding his head.

This seemed to jar upon the mother. She changed colour a little; and then added, her smile growing more constrained: "He thinks she may be a powerful instrument in—changing his mind—bringing him, after all these years, back"—here she paused a little, as if seeking for a phrase; then added, her smile growing less and less pleasant—"to his duty."

Then Markham for the first time looked at

her. He had been paying but partial attention up to this moment, his mind being engrossed with difficulties of his own; but he awoke at this suggestion, and looked at her with something of his usual keenness, but with a gravity not at all usual. And she met his eye with an awakening in hers which was still more remarkable. For a moment they thus contemplated each other, not like mother and son, nor like the dear and close friends they were, but like two antagonists suddenly perceiving, on either side, the coming conflict. For almost the first time there woke in Lady Markham's mind a consciousness that it was possible her son, who had been always her champion, her defender, her companion, might wish her out of his way. She looked at him with a rising colour, with all her nerves thrilling, and her whole soul on the alert for his next words. These were words which he would have preferred not to speak; but they seemed to be forced from his lips against his will, though even as he said them he explained to himself that they had been in his mind to say before he knew—before the dilemma that might occur had seemed possible.

"Yes?" he said. "I understand what he means. I—even I—had been thinking that something of the sort—might be a good thing."

She clasped her hands with a quick passionate movement. "Has it come to this—in a moment—without warning?" she cried.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE Winterbourns came next day: he to the best room in the house, a temperature carefully kept up to sixty-five degrees, and the daily attentions of the excellent doctor, who, Lady Markham declared, was thrown away upon her healthy household. Mr Winterbourn was a man of fifty, a confirmed invalid, who travelled with a whole paraphernalia of medicaments, and a servant who was a trained nurse, and very skilful in all the lower branches of the medical craft. Mrs Winterbourn, however, was not like this. She was young, pretty, lively, fond of what she called "fun," and by no means bound to her husband's sick-room. Everybody said she was very kind to him. She never refused to go to him when he wanted her. Of her own accord, as part of her usual routine, she would

go into his room three or even four times a-day to see if she could do anything. She sat with him always while Roberts the man-nurse had his dinner. What more could a woman do? She had indeed, it was understood, married him against her will; but that is an accident not to be avoided, and she had always been a model of propriety. They were asked everywhere, which, considering how little adapted he was for society, was nothing less than the highest proof of how much she was thought of; and the most irreproachable matrons did not hesitate to invite Lord Markham to meet the Winterbourns. It was a wonderful, quite an ideal friendship, everybody said. And it was such a comfort to both of them! For Markham, considering the devotion he had always shown to his mother, would probably find it very inconvenient to marry, which is the only thing which makes friendship between a man and a woman difficult. A woman does not like her devoted friend to marry: that is the worst of those delicate relationships, and it is the point upon which they generally come to shipwreck in the end. As a matter of course, any other

harm of a grosser kind was not so much as thought of by any one who knew them. There were people, however, who asked themselves and each other, as a fine problem, one of those cases of complication which it pleases the human intellect to resolve, what would happen if Winterbourn died?—a thing which he was continually threatening to do. It had been at one time quite a favourite subject of speculation in society. Some said that it would not suit Markham at all,—that he would get out of it somehow; some, that there would be no escape for him; some, that with such a fine jointure as Nelly would have, it would set the little man up, if he could give up his “ways.” Markham had not a very good reputation, though everybody knew that he was the best son in the world. He played, it was said, more and otherwise than a man of his position ought to play. He was often amusing, and always nice to women, so that society never in the least broke with him, and he had champions everywhere. But the mere fact that he required champions was a proof that all was not exactly as it ought to be. He was a man with a great many

"ways," which of course it is natural to suppose would be bad ways, though, except in the matter of play, no one knew very well what they were.

Winterbourn, however, had never been so bad as he was on this occasion, when he was almost lifted out of the carriage and carried to his room, his very host being allowed no speech of him till next morning, after he was supposed to have got over the fatigue of the journey. The doctor, when he was summoned, shook his head and looked very grave; and it may be imagined what talks went on among the guests when no one of the family was present to hear. These talks were sometimes carried on before Frances, who was scarcely realised as the daughter of the house. Even Claude Ramsay forgot his own pressing concerns in consideration of the urgent question of the moment, and Sir Thomas ceased to think of Waring. Frances gleaned from what she heard that they were all preparing for flight. "Of course, in case anything dreadful happens, dear Lady Markham," they said, "will no doubt go too."

"What a funny thing," said one of the Miss

Montagues, "if it should happen in this house."

"Funny, Laura! You mean dreadful," cried her mother. "Do choose your words a little better."

"Oh, you know what I mean, mamma!" cried the young lady.

"You must think it dreadful indeed," said Mrs Montague, addressing Frances, "that we should discuss such a sad thing in this way. Of course, we are all very sorry for poor Mr Winterbourn; and if he had been ill and dying in his own house—— But one's mind is occupied at present by the great inconvenience—oh, more than that—the horror and—and embarrassment to your dear mother."

"All that," said Sir Thomas with a certain solemnity. Perhaps it was the air of unusual gravity with which he uttered these two words which raised the smallest momentary titter,—no, not so much as a titter—a faintly audible smile, if such an expression may be used,—chiefly among the young ladies, who had perhaps a clearer realisation of the kind of embarrassment that was meant than was expected of

them. But Frances had no clue whatever to it. She replied warmly—

“My mother will not think of the inconvenience. It is surely those who are in such trouble themselves who are the only people to think about. Poor Mrs Winterbourn——”

“Who is it that is speaking of me in such a kind voice?” said the sick man’s wife.

She had just come into the room; and she was very well aware that she was being discussed by everybody about—herself and her circumstances, and all those contingencies which were, in spite of herself, beginning to stir her own mind, as they had already done the minds of all around. That is one thing which in any crisis people in society may be always sure of, that their circumstances are being fully talked over by their friends.

“I hope we have all kind voices when we speak of you, my dear Nelly. This one was Frances Waring, our new little friend here.”

“Ah, that explains,” said Mrs Winterbourn; and she went on, without saying more, to the conservatory, which opened from the drawing-room in which the party was seated. They

were silenced, though they had not been saying anything very bad of her. The sudden appearance of the person discussed always does make a certain impression. The gentlemen of the group dispersed, the ladies began to talk of something else. Frances, very shy, yet burdened with a great desire to say or do something towards the consolation of those who were, as she had said, in such trouble, went after Mrs Winterbourn. She had seated herself where the big palms and other exotic foliage were thickest, out of sight of the drawing-room, close to the open doorway that led to the lawn and the sea. Frances was a little surprised that the wife of a man who was thought to be dying should leave his bedside at all; but she reflected that to prevent breaking down, and thus being no longer of any use to the patient, it was the duty of every nurse to take a certain amount of rest and fresh air. She felt, however, more and more timid as she approached. Mrs Winterbourn had not the air of a nurse. She was dressed in her usual way, with her usual ornaments—not too much, but yet enough to make a tinkle, had she been at the side of a

sick person, and possibly to have disturbed him. Two or three bracelets on a pretty arm are very pretty things ; but they are not very suitable for a sick-nurse. She was sitting with a book in one hand, leaning her head upon the other, evidently not reading, evidently very serious. Frances was encouraged by the downcast face.

“I hope you will not think me very bold,” she said, the other starting and turning round at the sound of her voice. “I wanted to ask if I could help you in any way. I am very good for keeping awake, and I could get you what you wanted. Oh, I don’t mean that I am good enough to be trusted as nurse ; but if I might sit up with you—in the next room—to get you what you want.”

“What do you mean, child ?” the young woman said in a quick, startled, half-offended voice. She was not very much older than Frances, but her experiences had been very different. She thought offence was meant. Lady Markham had always been kind to her, which was, she felt, somewhat to Lady Markham’s own advantage, for Nelly knew that Markham would never marry so long as her influence

lasted, and this was for his mother's good. But now it was very possible that Lady Markham was trembling, and had put her little daughter forward to give a sly stroke. Her tone softened, however, as she looked up in Frances' face. It was perhaps only that the girl was a little simpleton, and meant what she said. "You think I sit up at night?" she said. "Oh no. I should be of no use. Mr Winterbourn has his own servant, who knows exactly what to do; and the doctor is to send a nurse to let Roberts get a little rest. It is very good of you. Nursing is quite the sort of thing people go in for now, isn't it? But, unfortunately, poor Mr Winterbourn can't bear amateurs, and I should do no good."

She gave Frances a bright smile as she said this, and turned again towards the scene outside, opening her book at the same time, which was like a dismissal. But at that moment, to the great surprise of Frances, Markham appeared without, strolling towards the open door. He came in when he saw his little sister, nodding to her with a look which stopped her as she was about to turn away.

"I am glad you are making friends with Frances," he said. "How is Winterbourn now?"

"I wish everybody would not ask me every two minutes how he is now," cried the young wife. "He doesn't change from one half-hour to another. Oh, impatient; yes, I am impatient. I am half out of my senses, what with one thing and another; and here is your sister—your sister—asking to help me to nurse him! That was all that was wanting, I think, to drive me quite mad!"

"I am sure little Fan never thought she would produce such a terrible result. Be reasonable, Nelly."

"Don't call me Nelly, sir; and don't tell me to be reasonable. Don't you know how they are all talking, these horrible people? Oh, why, why did I bring him here?"

"Whatever was the reason, it can't be undone now," said Markham. "Come, Nelly! This is nothing but nerves, you know. You can be yourself when you please."

"Do you know why he talks to me like that before you?" said Mrs Winterbourn, suddenly

turning upon Frances. "It is because he thinks things are coming to a crisis, and that I shall be compelled——" Here the hasty creature came to a pause and stared suddenly round her. "Oh, I don't know what I am saying, Geoff! They are all talking, talking in every corner about you and me."

"Run away, Fan," said her brother. "Mrs Winterbourn, you see, is not well. The best thing for her is to be left in quiet. Run away."

"It is you who ought to go away, Markham, and leave her to me."

"Oh!" said Markham, with a gleam of amusement, "you set up for that too, Fan! But I know better how to take care of Nelly than you do. Run away."

The consternation with which Frances obeyed this request it would be difficult to describe. She had not understood the talk in the drawing-room, and she did not understand this. But it gave her ideas a strange shock. A woman whose husband was dying, and who was away from him—who called Markham by his Christian name, and apparently preferred his ministrations

tions to her own! She would not go back as she came, to afford the ladies in the drawing-room a new subject for their comments, but went out instead by the open door, not thinking that the only path by which she could return indoors led past the window of her mother's room, which opened on the lawn round the angle of the house. Lady Markham was standing there looking out as Frances came in sight. She knocked upon the window to call her daughter's attention, and opening it hurriedly, called her in. "Have you seen Markham?" she said, almost before Frances could hear.

"I have left him, this moment."

"*You* have left him. Is he alone, then? Who is with him? Is Nelly Winterbourn there?"

Frances could not tell why it was that she disliked to answer. She made a little assenting movement of her head.

"It ought not to be," cried Lady Markham—"not at this moment—at any other time, if they like, but not now. Don't you see the difference? Before, nothing was possible. Now—when at any moment she may be a

free woman, and Markham—— Don't you see the difference? They should not, they should not, be together now!"

Frances stood before her mother, feeling that a claim was made upon her which she did not even understand, and feeling also a helplessness which was altogether foreign to her ordinary sensations. She did not understand, nor wish to understand—it was odious to her to think even what it could mean. And what could she do? Lady Markham was agitated and excited—not able to control herself.

"For I have just seen the doctor," she cried, "and he says that it is a question not even of days, but of hours. Good heavens, child! only think of it,—that such a thing should happen here; and that Markham—*Markham!*—should have to manage everything. Oh, it is indecent—there is no other word for it. Go and call him to me. We must get him to go away."

"Mamma," said Frances, "how can I go back? He told me to go and leave them."

"He is a fool," cried Lady Markham, stamping her foot. "He does not see how he is committing himself; he does not mind. Oh,

what does it matter what he said to you ! Run at once and bring him to me. Say I have something urgent to tell him. Say—oh, say anything ! If Constance had been here, she would have known.”

Frances was very sensible to the arrow thus flung at her in haste, without thought. She was so stung by it, that she turned hastily to do her mother’s commission at all costs. But before she had taken half-a-dozen steps, Markham himself appeared, coming leisurely, easily, with his usual composure, round the corner. “What’s wrong with you, little un ?” he asked. “ You are not vexed at what I said to you, Fan ? I couldn’t help it, my dear.”

“ It isn’t that, Markham. It is—mamma.”

And then Lady Markham, too much excited to wait, came out to join them. “ Do you know the state of affairs, Markham ? Does she know ? I want you to go off instantly, without losing a moment, to Southampton, to fetch Dr Howard. Quick ! There is just time to get the boat.”

“ Dr Howard ? What is wrong with the man here ?”

"He is afraid of the responsibility—at least I am, Markham. Think—in your house! Oh yes, my dear, go without delay."

Markham paused, and looked at her with his keen little eyes. "Mother, why don't you say at once you want to get me out of the way?"

"I do. I don't deny it, Markham. But this too. We ought to have another opinion. Do, for any favour, what I ask you, dear; oh, do it! Oh yes, I would rather you sent him here, and did not come back with him. But come back, if you must; only, go, go now."

"You think he will be—dead before I could get back? I will telegraph for Dr Howard, mother; but I will not go away."

"You can do no good, Markham—except to make people talk. Oh, for mercy's sake, whatever you may do afterwards, go now."

"I will go and telegraph—with pleasure," he said.

Lady Markham turned and took Frances' arm, as he left them. "I think I must give in now altogether," she cried. "All is going wrong with me. First Con, and then my boy. For now I see what will happen. And you

don't know, you can't think what Markham has been to me. Oh, he has been everything to me! And now—I know what will happen now."

"Mamma," said Frances, trembling. She wanted to say that little as she herself was, she was one who would never forsake her mother. But she was so conscious that Lady Markham's thoughts went over her head and took no note of her, that the words were stifled on her lips. "He said to me once that he could never—leave you," she said, faltering, though it was not what she meant to say.

"He said to you once——? Then he has been thinking of it; he has been discussing the question?" Lady Markham said with bitterness. She leant heavily upon Frances' arm, but not with any tender appreciation of the girl's wistful desire to comfort her. "That means," she said, "that I can never desert him. I must go now and get rid of all this excitement, and put on a composed face, and tell the people that they may go away if they like. It will be the right thing for them to go away.

But I can't stay here with death in the house, and take a motherly care of—of that girl, whom I never trusted—whom Markham—And she will marry him within the year. I know it."

Frances made a little outcry of horror, being greatly disturbed—"Oh no, no!" without any meaning, for she indeed knew nothing.

"No! How can you say No?—when you are quite in ignorance. I can't tell you what Markham would wish—to be let alone, most likely, if they would let him alone. But she will do it. She always was headstrong; and now she will be rich. Oh, what a thing it is altogether—like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. Who could have imagined, when we came down here so tranquilly, with nothing unusual— If I thought of any change at all, it was perhaps that Claude—whom, by the way, you must not be rude to, Frances—that Claude might perhaps— And now, here is everything unsettled, and my life turned upside down."

What did she hope that Claude would have

done? Frances' brain was all perplexed. She had plunged into a sudden sea of troubles, without knowing even what the wild elements were that lashed the placid waters into fury and made the sky dark all around.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE crisis, however, was averted—"mercifully," as Lady Markham said. Dr Howard from Southampton—whom she had thought of only by chance, on the spur of the moment, as a way of getting rid of Markham—produced some new lights; and in reality was so successful with the invalid, that he rallied, and it became possible to remove him by slow stages to his own house, to die there, which he did in due course, but some time after, and decorously, in the right way and place. Frances felt herself like a spectator at a play during all this strange interval, looking on at the third act of a tragedy, which somehow had got involved in a drawing-room comedy, with scenes alternating, and throwing a kind of wretched reflection of their poor humour upon

the tableaux of the darker drama. She thought that she never should forget the countenance of Nelly Winterbourn as she took her seat beside her husband in the invalid carriage in which he was conveyed away, and turned to wave a farewell to the little group which had assembled to watch the departure. Her face was quivering with a sort of despairing impatience, wretchedness, self-pity, the miserable anticipations of a living creature tied to one who was dead—nerves and temper and every part of her being wrought to a feverish excitement, made half delirious by the prospect, the possibility, of escape. A wretched sort of spasmodic smile was upon her lips as she waved her hand to the spectators—those spectators all on the watch to read her countenance, who, she knew, were as well aware of the position as herself. Frances was learning the lesson thus set practically before her with applications of her own. She knew now to a great extent what it all meant, and why Markham disappeared as soon as the carriage drove away; while her mother, with an aspect of intense relief, returned to her guests. “I

feel as if I could breathe again," Lady Markham said. "Not that I should have grudged anything I could do for poor dear Nelly; but there is something so terrible in a death in one's house."

"I quite enter into your feelings, dear—oh, quite!" said Mrs Montague; "most painful, and most embarrassing besides."

"Oh, as for that!" said Lady Markham. "It would have been indeed a great annoyance and vexation to break up our pleasant party, and put out all your plans. But one has to submit in such cases. However, I am most thankful it has not come to that. Poor Mr Winterbourn may last yet—for months, Dr Howard says."

"Dear me; do you think that is to be desired?" said the other, "for poor Nelly's sake."

"Poor Nelly!" said the young ladies. "Only fancy months! What a terrible fate!"

"And yet it was supposed to be a great match for her, a penniless girl!"

"It was a great match," said Lady Markham composedly. "And dear Nelly has always be-

haved so well. She is an example to many women that have much less to put up with than she has. Frances, will you see about the lawn-tennis? I am sure you want to shake off the impression, you poor girls, who have been *so* good."

"Oh, dear Lady Markham, you don't suppose we could have gone on laughing and making a noise while there was such anxiety in the house. But we shall like a game, now that there is no impropriety——"

"And we are all so glad," said the mother, "that there was no occasion for turning out; for our visits are so dovetailed, I don't know where we should have gone—and our house in the hands of the workmen. I, for one, am very thankful that poor Mr Winterbourn has a little longer to live."

Thus, after this singular episode, the ordinary life of the household was resumed; and though the name of poor Nelly recurred at intervals for a day or two, there were many things that were of more importance—a great garden-party, for instance, for which, fortunately, Lady Markham had not cancelled the invitations; a yachting

expedition, and various other pleasant things. The comments of the company were diverted to Claude, who, finding Frances more easily convinced than the others that draughts were to be carefully avoided, sought her out on most occasions, notwithstanding her plain-speaking about his fancifulness.

"Perhaps you were right," he said, "that I think too much about my health. I shouldn't wonder if you were quite right. But I have always been warned that I was very delicate; and perhaps that makes one rather a bore to one's friends."

"Oh, I hope you will forgive me, Mr Ramsay! I never meant——"

"There is poor Winterbourn, you see," said Claude, accepting the broken apology with a benevolent nod of his head and the mild pathos of a smile. "He was one of your rash people, never paying any attention to what was the matter with him. He was quite a well-preserved sort of man when he married Nelly St John; and now you see what a wreck! By Jove, though, I shouldn't like my wife, if I married, to treat me like Nelly. But I promise

you there should be no Markham in my case."

"I don't know what Markham has to do with it," said Frances with sudden spirit.

"Oh, you don't know! Well," he continued, looking at her, "perhaps you don't know; and so much the better. Never mind about Markham. I should expect my wife to be with me when I am ill; not to leave me to servants, to give me my—everything I had to take; and to cheer me up, you know. Do you think there is anything unreasonable in that?"

"Oh no, indeed. Of course, if—if—she was fond of you—which of course she would be, or you would not want to marry her."

"Yes," said Claude. "Go on, please; I like to hear you talk."

"I mean," said Frances, stumbling a little, feeling a significance in this encouragement which disturbed her, "that, *of course*—there would be no question of reasonableness. She would just do it by nature. One never asks if it is reasonable or not."

"Ah, you mean you wouldn't. But other girls are different. There is Con, for instance."

"Mr Ramsay, I don't think you ought to speak to me so about my sister. Constance, if she were in such a position, would do—what was right."

"For that matter, I suppose Nelly Winterbourn does what is right—at least, every one says she behaves so well. If that is what you mean by right, I shouldn't relish it at all in my wife."

Frances said nothing for a minute, and then she asked, "Are you going to be married, Mr Ramsay?" in a tone which was half indignant, half amused.

At this he started a little, and gave her an inquiring look. "That is a question that wants thinking of," he said. "Yes, I suppose I am, if I can find any one as nice as that. You are always giving me *renseignements*, Miss Waring. If I can find some one who will, as you say, never ask whether it is reasonable——"

"Then," said Frances, recovering something of the sprightliness which had distinguished her in old days, "you don't want to marry any one in particular, but just a wife?"

"What else could I marry?" he asked in a

peevish tone. Then, with a change of his voice,—“I don’t want to conceal anything from you; and there is no doubt you must have heard: I was engaged to your sister Con; but she ran away from me,” he added with pathos. “You must have heard that.”

“I do not wonder that you were very fond of her,” cried Frances. “I see no one so delightful as—she would be if she were here.”

She had meant to make a simple statement, and say, “No one so delightful as she;” but paused, remembering that the circumstances had not been to Constance’s advantage, and that here she would have been in her proper sphere.

As for Claude, he was somewhat embarrassed. He said, “Fond is perhaps not exactly the word. I thought she would have suited me—better than any one I knew.”

“If that was all,” said Frances, “you would not mind very much; and I do not wonder that she came away, for it would be rather dreadful to be married because a gentleman thought one suited him.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that would be so—in

every case," cried Claude, with sudden earnestness.

"In any case, I think you should never tell the girl's sister, Mr Ramsay; it is not a very nice thing to do."

"Miss Waring—Frances!—I was not thinking of you as any girl's sister; I was thinking of you—"

"I hope not at all; for it would be a great pity to waste any more thoughts on our family," said Frances. "I have sometimes been a little vexed that Constance came, for it changed all my life, and took me away from every one I knew. But I am glad you have told me this, for now I understand it quite." She did not rise from where she was seated and leave him, as he almost hoped she would, making a little quarrel of it, but sat still, with a composure which Claude felt was much less complimentary. "Now that I know all about it," she said, after a little interval, with a laugh, "I think what you want would be very unreasonable—and what no woman could do."

"You said the very reverse five minutes ago," he said sulkily.

"Yes—but I didn't know what the—what the wages were," she said with another laugh. "It is you who are giving me *renseignements* now."

Claude took his complaint next morning to Lady Markham's room. "She actually chaffed me—chaffed me, I assure you; though she looks as if butter would not melt in her mouth."

"That is a little vulgar, Claude. If you talk like that to a girl, what can you expect? Some, indeed, may be rather grateful to you, as showing how little you look for; but you know I have always told you what you ought to try to do is to inspire a *grande passion*."

"That is what I should like above all things to do," said the young man; "but—"

"But—it would cost too much trouble?"

"Perhaps; and I am not an impassioned sort of man. Lady Markham, was it really from me that Constance ran away?"

"I have told you before, Claude, that was not how it should be spoken of. She did not run away. She took into her head a romantic idea of making acquaintance with her father, in which Markham encouraged her. Or per-

haps it was Markham that put it into her head. It is possible—I can't tell you—that Markham had already something else in his own head, and that he had begun to think it would be a good thing to try if other changes could be made."

"What could Markham have in his head? and what changes—"

"Oh," she cried, "how can you ask me? I know how you have all been talking. You speculate, just as I do."

"I don't think so, Lady Markham," said Claude. "I am sure Markham would find all that sort of thing a great bore. Of course I know what you mean. But I don't think so. I have always told them my opinion. Whatever may happen, Markham will stick to you."

"Poor Markham!" she said, with a quick revulsion of feeling. "After all, it is a little hard, is it not, that he should have nothing brighter than that to look to in his life?"

"Than you?" said Claude. "If you ask my opinion, I don't think so. I think he's a lucky fellow. An old mother, I don't deny, might be

a bore. An old lady, half blind, never hearing what you say, sitting by the fire — like the mothers in books, or the Mrs Nickleby kind. But you are as young and handsome and bright as any of them—keeping everything right for him, asking nothing. Upon my word, I think he is very well off. I wish I were in his place."

Lady Markham was pleased. Affectionate flattery of this kind is always sweet to a woman. She laughed, and said he was a gay deceiver. "But, my dear boy, you will make me think a great deal more of myself than I have any right to think."

"You ought to think more of yourself. And so you really do not think that Con——? In many ways, dear Lady Markham, I feel that Con—understood me better than any one else —except you."

"I think you are right, Claude," she said, with a grave face.

"I am beginning to feel quite sure I am right. When she writes, does she never say anything about me?"

"Of course, she always—asks for you."

"Is that all? Asking does not mean much."

"What more could she say? Of course she knows that she has lost her place in your affection by her own rashness."

"Not lost, Lady Markham. It is not so easy to do that."

"It is true. Perhaps I should have said, fears that she has forfeited—your respect."

"After all, she has done nothing wrong," he said.

"Nothing wrong; but rash, headstrong, foolish. Oh yes, she has been all that. It is in the Waring blood!"

"I think you are a little hard upon her, Lady Markham. By the way, don't you think yourself, that with two daughters to marry, and—and all that: it would be a good thing if Mr Waring—for you must have got over all your little tiffs long ago—don't you think that it would be a good thing if he could be persuaded to—come back?"

She had watched him with eyes that gleamed from below her dropped eyelids. She said now, as she had done to Sir Thomas, "I should put no difficulties in the way, you may be sure."

"It would be more respectable," said Claude. "If getting old is good for anything, you know, it should make up quarrels; don't you think so? It would be a great deal better in every way. And then Markham——"

"Markham," she said, "you think, would then be free?"

"Well—then it wouldn't matter particularly about Markham, what he did," the young man said.

Lady Markham had borne a great many such assaults in her life as if she felt nothing: but as a matter of fact she did feel them deeply; and when a probable new combination was thus calmly set before her, her usual composure was put to a severe test. She smiled upon Claude, indeed, as long as he remained with her, and allowed him no glimpse of her real feelings; but when he was gone, felt for a moment her heart fail her. She had, even in the misfortunes which had crossed her life, secured always a great share of her own way. Many people do this even when they suffer most. Whether they get it cheerfully or painfully, they yet get it, which is always some-

thing. Waring, when, in his fastidious impatience and irritation, because he did not get his, he had flung forth into the unknown, and abandoned her and her life altogether, did still, though at the cost of pain and scandal, help his wife to this triumph, that she departed from none of her requirements, and remained mistress of the battlefield. She had her own way, though he would not yield to it. But as a woman grows older, and becomes less capable of that pertinacity which is the best means of securing her own way, and when the conflicting wills against hers are many instead of being only one, the state of the matter changes. Constance had turned against her, when she was on the eve of an arrangement which would have been so very much for Con's good. And Frances, though so submissive in some points, would not be so, she felt instinctively, on others. And Markham—that was the most fundamental shock of all—Markham might possibly in the future have prospects and hopes independent altogether of his mother's, in antagonism with all her arrangements. This, which she had not anticipated, went to her

heart. And when she thought of what had been suggested to her with so much composure—the alteration of her whole life, the substitution of her husband, from whom she had been so long parted, who did not think as she did nor live as she did for her son, who, with all his faults, which she knew so well, was yet in sympathy with her in all she thought and wished and knew—this suggestion made her sick and faint. It had come, though not with any force, even from Markham himself. It had come from Sir Thomas, who was one of the oldest of her friends; and now Claude set it before her in all the forcible simplicity of commonplace: it would be more respectable! She laughed almost violently when he left her, but it was a laugh which was not far from tears.

“Claude has been complaining of you,” she said to Frances, recovering herself with an instantaneous effort when her daughter came into the room; “but I don’t object, my dear. Unless you had found that you could like him yourself, which would have been the best thing, perhaps—you were quite right in what you

said. So far as Constance is concerned, it is all that I could wish."

"Mamma," said Frances, "you don't want Constance—you would not let her—accept *that?*"

"Accept what? My love, you must not be so emphatic. Accept a life full of luxury, splendour even, if she likes—and every care forestalled. My dear little girl, you don't know anything about the world."

Frances pondered for some time before she replied. "Mamma," she said again, "if such a case arose—you said that the best thing for me would have been to have liked—Mr Ramsay. There is no question of that. But if such a case arose—"

"Yes, my dear"—Lady Markham took her daughter's hand in her own, and looked at her with a smile of pleasure—"I hope it will some day. And what then?"

"Would you—think the same about me? Would you consider the life full of luxury, as you said—would you desire for me the same thing as for Constance?"

Lady Markham held the girl's hand clasped

in both of hers ; the soft caressing atmosphere about her enveloped Frances. "My dear," she said, "this is a very serious question. You are not asking me for curiosity alone ? "

"It is a very serious question," Frances said,

And the mother and daughter looked at each other closely, with more meaning, perhaps, than had as yet been in the eyes of either, notwithstanding all the excitement of interest in their first meeting. It was some time before another word was said. Frances saw in her mother a woman full of determination, very clear as to what she wanted, very unlikely to be turned from it by softer impulses, although outside she was so tender and soft ; and Lady Markham saw in Frances a girl who was entirely submissive, yet immovable, whose dove's eyes had a steady soft gaze, against which the kindred light of her own had no power. It was a mutual revelation. There was no conflict, nor appearance of conflict, between these two, so like each other—two gentle and soft-voiced women, both full of natural courtesy and disinclination to wound or offend ; both seeing everything around them very clearly from her

own, perhaps limited, point of view; and both feeling that between them nothing but the absolute truth would do.

"You trouble me, Frances," said Lady Markham at length. "When such a case arises, it will be time enough. In the abstract, I should of course feel for one as I feel for the other. Nay, stop a little. I should wish to provide for you, as for Constance, a life of assured comfort,—well, if you drive me to it — of wealth and all that wealth brings. Assuredly that is what I should wish." She gave Frances' hand a pressure which was almost painful, and then dropped it. "I hope you have no fancy for poverty theoretically, like your patron saint," she added lightly, trying to escape from the gravity of the question by a laugh.

"Mother," said Frances, in a voice which was tremulous and yet steady, "I want to tell you—I think neither of poverty nor of money. I am more used, perhaps, to the one than the other. I will do what you wish in everything—everything else; but——"

"Not in the one thing which would probably

be the only thing I asked of you," said Lady Markham, with a smile. She put her hands on Frances' shoulders and gave her a kiss upon her cheek. "My dear child, you probably think this is quite original," she said; "but I assure you it is what almost every daughter one time or other says to her parents: Anything *else*—anything, but—— Happily there is no question between you and me. Let us wait till the occasion arises. It is always time enough to fall out."

CHAPTER XXXII.

NOTHING happened of any importance before their return to Eaton Square. Markham, hopping about with a queer sidelong motion he had, his little eyes screwed up with humorous meaning, seemed to Frances to recover his spirits after the Winterbourn episode was over, which was the subject—though that, of course, she did not know—of half the voluminous correspondence of all the ladies and gentlemen in the house, whose letters were so important a part of their existence. Before a week was over, all Society was aware of the fact that Ralph Winterbourn had been nearly dying at Markham Priory; that Lady Markham was in “a state” which baffled description, and Markham himself so changed as to be scarcely recognisable; but that, fortunately, the crisis had been

tided over, and everything was still problematical. But the problem was so interesting, that one perfumed epistle after another carried it to curious wits all over the country, and a new light upon the subject was warmly welcomed in a hundred Easter meetings. What would Markham do? What would Nelly do? Would their friendship end in the vulgar way, in a marriage? Would they venture, in face of all prognostications, to keep it up as a friendship, when there was no longer any reason why it should not ripen into love? Or would they, frightened by all the inevitable comments which they would have to encounter, stop short altogether, and fly from each other?

Such a “case” is a delightful thing to speculate upon. At the Priory, it could only be discussed in secret conclave; and though no doubt the experienced persons chiefly concerned were quite conscious of the subject which occupied their friends’ thoughts, there was no further reference made to it between them, and everything went on as it had always done. The night before their return to town, Markham, in the solitude of the house, from which

all the guests had just departed, called Frances outside to bear him company while he smoked his cigarette. He was walking up and down on the lawn in the grey stillness of a cloudy warm evening, when there was no light to speak of anywhere, and yet a good deal to be seen through the wavering greyness of sky and sea. A few stars, very mild and indistinct, looked out at the edges of the clouds here and there ; the great water-line widened and cleared towards the horizon ; and in the far distance, where a deeper greyness showed the mainland, the gleam of a lighthouse surprised the dark by slow continual revolutions. There was no moon : something softer, more seductive than even the moon, was in this absence of light.

“ Well — now they’re gone, what do you think of them, Fan ? They’re very good specimens of the English country-house party — all kinds : the respectable family, the sturdy old fogy, the rich young man without health, and the muscular young man without money.” There had been, it is needless to say, various other members of the party, who, being quite unimportant to this history, need not be men-

tioned here. "What do you think of them, little un? You have your own way of seeing things."

"I—like them all well enough, Markham," without enthusiasm Frances replied.

"That is comprehensive at least. So do I, my dear. It would not have occurred to me to say it; but it is just the right thing to say. They pull you to pieces almost before your face; but they are not ill-natured. They tell all sorts of stories about each other——"

"No, Markham; I don't think that is just."

"——Without meaning any harm," he went on. "Fan, in countries where conversation is cultivated, perhaps people don't talk scandal—I only say perhaps—but here we are forced to take to it for want of anything else to say. What did your Giovannis and Giacomas talk of in your village out yonder?" Markham pointed towards the clear blue-grey line of the horizon, beyond which lay America, if anything; but he meant distance, and that was enough.

"They talked—about the olives, how they were looking, and if it was going to be a bad or an indifferent year."

“And then?”

“About the *forestieri*, if many were coming, and whether it would be a good season for the hotels; and about tying up the palms, to make them ready for Easter,” said Frances, resuming, with a smile about her lips. “And about how old Pietro’s son had got such a good appointment in the post-office, and had bought little Nina a pair of earrings as long as your finger; for he was to marry Nina, you know.”

“Oh, was he? Go on. I am very much interested. Didn’t they say Mr Whatever-his-name-is wanted to get out of it, and that there never would have been any engagement, had not Miss Nina’s mother——?”

“Oh Markham,” cried Frances in surprise, “how could you possibly know?”

“I was reasoning from analogy, Fan. Yes, I suppose they do it all the world over. And it is odd—isn’t it?—that, knowing what they are sure to say, we ask them to our houses, and put the keys of all our skeleton cupboards into their hands.”

“Do you think that is true, that dreadful idea about the skeleton? I am sure——”

"What are you sure of, my little dear?"

"I was going to say, oh Markham, that I was sure, *at home*, we had no skeleton; and then I remembered——"

"I understand," he said kindly. "It was not a skeleton to speak of, Fan. There is nothing particularly bad about it. If you had met it out walking, you would not have known it for a skeleton. Let us say a mystery, which is not such a mouth-filling word."

"Sir Thomas told me," said Frances, with some timidity; "but I am not sure that I understood. Markham! what was it really about?"

Her voice was low and diffident, and at first he only shook his head. "About nothing," he said; "about—me. Yes, more than anything else, about me. That is how—— No, it isn't," he added, correcting himself. "I always must have cared for my mother more than for any woman. She has always been my greatest friend, ever since I can remember anything. We seem to have been children together, and to have grown up together. I was everything to her for a dozen years, and then—your father

came between us. He hated me—and I tormented him."

"He could not hate you, Markham. Oh no, no!"

"My little Fan, how can a child like you understand? Neither did I understand, when I was doing all the mischief. Between twelve and eighteen I was an imp of mischief, a little demon. It was fun to me to bait that thin-skinned man, that jumped at everything. The explosion was fun to me too. I was a little beast. And then I got the mother to myself again. Don't kill me, my dear. I am scarcely sorry now. We have had very good times since, I with my parent, you with yours—till that day," he added, flinging away the end of his cigarette, "when mischief again prompted me to let Con know where he was, which started us all again."

"Did you always know where we were?" she asked. Strangely enough, this story did not give her any angry feeling towards Markham. It was so far off, and the previous relations of her long-separated father and mother were as a fairy tale to her, confusing and almost incred-

ible, which she did not take into account as matter of fact at all. Markham had delivered these confessions slowly, as they turned and re-turned up and down the lawn. There was not light enough for either to see the expression in the other's face, and the veil of the darkness added to the softening effect. The words came out in short sentences, interrupted by that little business of puffing at the cigarette, letting it go out, stopping to strike a fusee and relight it, which so often forms the byplay of an important conversation, and sometimes breaks the force of painful revelations. Frances followed everything with an absorbed but yet half-dreamy attention, as if the red glow of the light, the exclamation of impatience when the cigarette was found to have gone out, the very perfume of the fusee in the air, were part and parcel of it. And the question she asked was almost mechanical, a part of the business too, striking naturally from the last thing he had said as sparks flew from the perfumed light.

"Not where," he said. "But I might have known, had I made any attempt to know. The mother sent her letters through the lawyer, and

of course we could have found out. It was thrust upon me at last by one of those meddling fools that go everywhere. And then my old demon got possession of me, and I told Con." Here he gave a low chuckle, which seemed to escape him in spite of himself. "I am laughing," he said—"pay attention, Fan—at myself. Of course I have learned to be sorry for—some things—the imp has put me up to ; but I can't get the better of that little demon—or of this little beggar, if you like it better. It's queer phraseology, I suppose ; but I prefer the other form."

"And what," said Frances in the same dreamy way, drawn on, she was not conscious how, by something in the air, by some current of thought which she was not aware of—"what do you mean to do now ?"

He started from her side as if she had given him a blow. "Do now ?" he cried, with something in his voice that shook off the spell of the situation, and aroused the girl at once to the reality of things. She had no guidance of his looks, for, as has been said, she could not see them ; but there was a curious thrill in his

voice of present alarm and consciousness, as if her innocent question struck sharply against some fact of very different solidity and force from those far-off shadowy facts which he had been telling her. "Do now? What makes you think I am going to do anything at all?"

His voice fell away in a sort of quaver at the end of these words.

"I do not think it; I—I—don't think anything, Markham; I—don't—know anything."

"You ask very pat questions all the same, my little Fan. And you have got a pair of very good eyes of your own in that little head. And if you have got any light to throw upon the subject, my dear, produce it; for I'll be bothered if I know."

Just then, a window opened in the gloom. "Children," said Lady Markham's voice, "are you there? I think I see something like you, though it is so dark. Bring your little sister in, Markham. She must not catch cold on the eve of going back to town."

"Here is the little thing, mammy. Shall I hand her in to you by the window? It makes me feel very frisky to hear myself ad-

dressed as children," he cried, with his chuckle of easy laughter. "Here, Fan; run in, my little dear, and be put to bed."

But he did not go in with her. He kept outside in the quiet cool and freshness of the night, illuminating the dim atmosphere now and then with the momentary glow of another fusee. Frances from her room, to which she had shortly retired, heard the sound, and saw from her windows the sudden ruddy light a great many times before she went to sleep. Markham let his cigar go out oftener than she could reckon. He was too full of thought to remember his cigar.

They arrived in town when everybody was arriving, when even to Frances, in her inexperience, the rising tide was visible in the streets, and the air of a new world beginning, which always marks the commencement of the season. No doubt it is a new world to many virgin souls, though so stale and weary to most of those who tread its endless round. To Frances everything was new; and a sense of the many wonderful things that awaited her got into the girl's head like ethereal wine,

in spite of all the grave matters of which she was conscious, which lay under the surface, and were, if not skeletons in the closet, at least very serious drawbacks to anything bright that life could bring. Her knowledge of these drawbacks had been acquired so suddenly, and was so little dulled by habit, that it dwelt upon her mind much more than family mysteries usually dwell upon a mind of eighteen. But yet in the rush and exhilaration of new thoughts and anticipations, always so much more delicately bright than any reality, she forgot that all was not as natural, as pleasant, as happy as it seemed. If Lady Markham had any consuming cares, she kept them shut away under that smiling countenance, which was as bright and peaceful as the morning. If Markham, on his side, was perplexed and doubtful, he came out and in with the same little chuckle of fun, the same humorous twinkle in his eyes. When these signs of tranquillity are so apparent, the young and ignorant can easily make up their minds that all is well. And Frances was to be "presented"—a thought which made her heart beat. She was to be put into a

court-train and feathers,—she who as yet had never worn anything but the simple frock which she had so pleased herself to think was purely English in its unobtrusiveness and modesty. She was not quite sure that she liked the prospect; but it excited her all the same.

It was early in May, and the train and the court plumes were ready, when, going out one morning upon some small errand of her own, Frances met some one whom she recognised, walking slowly along the long line of Eaton Square. She started at the sight of him, though he did not see her. He was going along with a strange air of reluctance, yet anxiety, glancing up at the houses, no doubt looking for Lady Markham's house, so absorbed that he neither saw Frances nor was disturbed by the startled movement she made, which must have caught a less preoccupied eye. She smiled to herself, after the first start, to see how entirely bent he was upon finding the house, and how little attention he had to spare for anything else. He was even more worn and pale, or rather grey, than he had been

when he returned from India, she thought; and there was in him a slackness, a letting-go of himself, a weary look in his step and carriage, which proved, Frances thought, that the Riviera had done George Gaunt little good.

For it was certainly George Gaunt, still in his loose grey Indian clothes, looking like a man dropped from another hemisphere, investigating the numbers on the doors as if he but vaguely comprehended the meaning of them. But that there was in him that unmistakable air of soldier which no mufti can quite disguise, he might have been the Ancient Mariner in person, looking for the man whose fate it is to leave all the wedding-feasts of the world in order to hear that tale. What tale could young Gaunt have to tell? For a moment it flashed across the mind of Frances that he might be bringing bad news, that "something might have happened,"—that rapid conclusion to which the imagination is so ready to jump. An accident to her father or Constance? so bad, so terrible, that it could not be trusted to a letter, that he had been sent to break the news to them?

She had passed him by this time, being shy, in her surprise, of addressing the stranger all at once; but now she paused, and turned with a momentary intention of running after him and entreating him to tell her the worst. But then Frances recollected that this was impossible; that with the telegraph in active operation, no one would employ such a lingering way of conveying news; and went on again, with her heart beating quicker, with a heightened colour, and a restrained impatience and eagerness of which she was half ashamed. No, she would not turn back before she had done her little business. She did not want either the stranger himself or any one else to divine the flutter of pleasant emotion, the desire she had to see and speak with the son of her old friends. Yes, she said to herself, the son of her old friends—he who was the youngest, whom Mrs Gaunt used to talk of for hours, whose praises she was never weary of singing.

Frances smiled and blushed to herself as she hurried—perceptibly hurried—about her little affairs. Kind Mrs Gaunt had always had a secret longing to bring these two together.

Frances would not turn back; but she quickened her pace, almost running—as near running as was decorous in London—to the lace-shop, to give the instructions which she had been charged with. No doubt, she said to herself, she would find him there when she got back. She had forgotten, perhaps, the fact that George Gaunt had given very little of his regard to her when he met her, though she was his mother's favourite, and had no eyes but for Constance. This was not a thing to dwell in the mind of a girl who had no jealousy in her, and who never supposed herself to be half as worthy of anybody's attention as Constance was. But, anyhow, she forgot it altogether, forgot to ask herself what in this respect might have happened in the meantime; and with her heart beating full of innocent eagerness, pleasure, and excitement, full of the hope of hearing about everybody, of seeing again through his eyes the dear little well-known world, which seemed to lie so far behind her, hastened through her errands, and turned quickly home.

To her great surprise, as she came back,

turning round the corner into the long line of pavement, she saw young Gaunt once more approaching her. He looked even more listless and languid now, like a man who had tried to do some duty and failed, and was escaping, glad to be out of the way of it. This was a great deal to read in a man's face; but Frances was highly sympathetic, and divined it, knowing in herself many of those devices of shy people, which shy persons divine. Fortunately she saw him some way off, and had time to overcome her own shyness and take the initiative. She went up to him fresh as the May morning, blushing and smiling, and put out her hand. "Captain Gaunt?" she said. "I knew I could not be mistaken. Oh, have you just come from Bordighera? I am so glad to see any one from home!"

"Do you call it home, Miss Waring? Yes, I have just come. I—I—have a number of messages, and some parcels, and— But I thought you might perhaps be out of town, or busy, and that it would be best to send them."

"Is that why you are turning your back on my mother's house? or did you not know the number? I saw you before, looking—but I did not like to speak."

"I—thought you might be out of town," he repeated, taking no notice of her question; "and that perhaps the post——"

"Oh no," cried Frances, whose shyness was of the cordial kind. "Now you must come back and see mamma. She will want to hear all about Constance. Are they all well, Captain Gaunt? Of course you must have seen them constantly—and Constance. Mamma will want to hear everything."

"Miss Waring is very well," he said with a blank countenance, from which he had done his best to dismiss all expression.

"And papa? and dear Mrs Gaunt, and the colonel, and everybody? Oh, there is so much that letters can't tell. Come back now with me. My mother will be so glad to see you, and Markham; you know Markham already."

Young Gaunt made a feeble momentary resistance. He murmured something about an

engagement, about his time being very short; but as he did so, turned round languidly and went with her, obeying, as it seemed, the eager impulse of Frances rather than any will of his own.

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