THE
CURATE IN CHARGE.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

FIFTH EDITION.

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1876.

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

THE CURATE IN CHARGE.

CHAPTER I.

CICELY'S APPEAL.

CICELY ST. JOHN was not in the least beautiful. The chief charm she had, except her youthful freshness, was the air of life, activity, and animation which breathed about her. Dulness, idleness, weariness, langour were almost impossible to the girl—impossible, at least, except for the moment. To be doing something was a necessity of her nature, and she did that something so heartily, that there was nothing irritating in her ac-

tivity. Life (but for bills and debts, and the inaction of others) was a pleasure to her. Her perpetual motion was so easy and pleasant and harmonious, that it jarred upon nobody. When she came out, suddenly stepping from the dining-room window, all the sweetness of the morning seemed to concentrate in this one figure, so bright, so living, so full of simple power; and this, after the sombre agitation and distress in which she had been enveloped on the previous night, was the most extraordinary revelation to the stranger, who did not know Cicely. He could scarcely believe it was the same, any more than a man could believe a sunshiny, brilliant summer morning to be the same as the pallid, rainy troubled dawn which preceded the sun-rising. Cicely had been entirely cast down in the evening; every way of escape seemed to have closed upon her;

she was in despair. But the night had brought counsel, as it so often does; and to-day she had risen full of plans and resolutions and hopes, and was herself again, as much as if there were no debts in her way, as if her father's position was as sure and stable as they had all foolishly thought it. The moment she came into this little group in the garden its character changed. Two poor little startled babies gazing at a man who understood nothing about them, and gazed back at them with a wonder as great as their own, without any possible point on which they could come into contact: this is what the curious encounter had been. Mildmay, as thinking himself much the most advanced being, smiled at the children, and experienced a certain amusement in their bewildered, helpless looks; yet he was not a bit wiser in knowledge of them, in power

to help them, in understanding of their incomplete natures, than they were in respect to him. But when Cicely stepped out, the group grew human. Whatever was going to be done, whatever was necessary to be done, or said, she was the one capable of doing or saying. Her light, firm step rang on the gravel with a meaning in it; she comprehended both the previously helpless sides of the question, and made them into a whole. Her very appearance had brightness and relief in it. The children (as was natural and proper) were swathed in black woollen frocks, trimmed with crape, and looked under their black hats like two little black mushrooms, with their heads tilted back. Cicely, too, possessed decorous mourning for poor Mrs. St. John; but at home, in the morning, Mab and she considered it sufficient in the circumstances to wear black and white prints,

in which white predominated, with black ribbons; so that her very appearance agreed with the sunshine. May would have suited her perhaps better than August, but still she was like the morning, ready for whatever day might bring. Mildmay saluted her with a curious sensation of surprise and pleasure; for this was the one, he perceived at once, who had looked at him with so much hostility — and the change in her was very agreeable. Even the children were moved a little. Charley's mouth widened over his thumb with a feeble smile, and Harry took his gaze from Mildmay to fix it upon her, and murmured "Zat's Cicely," getting over her name with a run, and feeling that he had achieved a triumph. Little Annie, the nursemaid, however, who was jealous of the sisters, appeared at this moment, and led her charges away.

"Funny little souls!" Mildmay said, looking after them; then fearing he might have offended his hostess, and run the risk of driving her back into her former hostility, he said something hastily about the garden, which, of course, was the safest thing to do.

"Yes, it is a nice garden," said Cicely; "at least, you will be able to make it very nice. We have never taken enough trouble with it, or spent enough money upon it, which means the same thing. You are very fond of the country, Mr. Mildmay?"

"Am I?" he said. "I really did not know."

"Of country amusements, then—riding, and that sort of thing? We are quite near the race-ground, and this, I believe, is a very good hunting country."

"But these are not clerical amusements, are they?" he said, laughing;

"not the things one would choose a parish for?"

"No; certainly papa takes no interest in them: but then he is old; he does not care for amusement at all."

"And why should you think amusement is my great object? Do I look so utterly frivolous?" said Mildmay, piqued.

"Nay," said Cicely, "I don't know you well enough to tell how you look. I only thought perhaps you had some reason for choosing Brentburn out of all the world; perhaps love of the country, as I said; or love for—something. It could not be croquet—which is the chief thing in summer—for that you could have anywhere," she added, with a nervous little laugh.

"I hope, Miss St. John, there are other motives——"

"Oh yes, many others. You might

be going to be married, which people say is a very common reason; but indeed you must not think I am prying. It was only—curiosity. If you had not some object," said Cicely, looking at him with a wistful glance, "you would never leave Oxford, where there is society and books and everything any one can desire, to come here."

"You think that is everything any one could desire?" he said smiling, with a flattered sense of his superiority—having found all these desirable things too little to content him—over this inexperienced creature. "But, Miss St. John, you forget the only motive worth discussing. There is a great deal that is very pleasant in Oxford—society, as you say, and books, and art, and much besides; but I am of no use to any one there. All the other people are just as well educated, as well off, as good, or

better than I am. I live only to enjoy myself. Now, one wants more than that. Work, something to exercise one's highest faculties. I want to do something for my fellow-creatures; to be of a little use. There must be much to do, much to improve, much to amend in a parish like this——"

A rapid flush of colour came to Cicely's face. "To improve and amend!" she said quickly. "Ah! you speak at your ease, Mr. Mildmay—in a parish where papa has been working for twenty years!"

Mildmay gave her a startled, wondering look. To be thus interrupted while you are riding, full tilt, your favourite hobby, is very confusing. He scarcely took in the meaning of the words "working for twenty years."

"Twenty years — all my lifetime and more; and you think you can mend it all at once like an old shoe!" cried

Cicely, her cheeks flaming. Then she said, subduing herself, "I beg your pardon. What you say is quite right, I know."

But by this time her words began to take their proper meaning to his mind. "Has Mr. St. John been here so long?" he said. "I hope you don't think I undervalue his work. I am sure it must have been better than anything I with my inexperience can do; but yet——"

"Ah! you will learn; you are young; and we always think we can do better than the old people. I do myself often," said Cicely, under her breath.

"I did not mean anything so presumptuous," he said; "indeed, I did not know. I thought of myself, as one does so often without being aware—I hope you will not form a bad opinion of me, Miss St. John. I accepted the living for the sake of the work, not for

any smaller motive. Books and society are not life. It seemed to me that to instruct one's fellow-creatures so far as one can, to help them as far as one can, to bring a higher ideal into their existence——"

Cicely was bewildered by this manner a speech. She did not quite understand it. No one had ever spoken to her of of high ideal; a great deal had been said to her one time and another about doing her duty, but nothing of this. She was dazzled, and yet half contemptuous, as ignorance so often is. "A high ideal for the poor folk in the village, and Wilkins the grocer, and old Mrs. Joel with her pigs?" she cried mocking; yet while she said it, she blushed for herself.

Mildmay blushed too. He was young enough to be very sensitive to ridicule, and to know that high ideals should not

be rashly spoken of except to sympathetic souls. "Why not," he said, "for them as well as for others?" then stopped between disappointment and offence.

"Ah!" said Cicely, "you don't know the village people. If you spoke to them of high ideals, they would only open their mouths and stare. If it was something to make a little money by, poor souls! or to get new boots for their children, or even to fatten the pigs. Now you are disgusted, Mr. Mildmay; but you don't know how poor the people are, and how little time they have for anything but just what is indispensable for living." As she said this, Cicely's eyes grew wistful, and filled with moisture. The young man thought it was an angelical pity for the poverty and sufferings of others; but I fear the girl was at that moment thinking of what lay before herself.

"Miss St. John," he said, "when you feel for them so deeply, you must sympathize with me too. The harder life is, has it not the more need of some clear perception of all the higher meanings in it? If it is worth while to be a clergyman at all, this is the use, it seems to me, to which we should put ourselves; and for that reason——"

"You are coming to Brentburn!" cried Cicely. The tears disappeared from her eyes, dried by the flush of girlish impatience and indignation that followed. "As if they were all heathens; as if no one else had ever taught them—and spent his time and strength for them! Out of your Latin and Greek, and your philosophy, and your art, and all those fine things, you are coming to set a high deal before poor Sally Gillows, whose husband beats her, and the Hodges, with their hundreds of children, and the

hard farmers and the hard shopkeepers that grind the others to the ground. Well!" she said, coming rapidly down from this indignant height to a half disdainful calm, "I hope you will find it answer, Mr. Mildmay. Perhaps it will do better than papa's system. He has only told them to try and do their best, poor souls! to put up with their troubles as well as they could, and to hope that some time or other God would send them something better either in this world or another. I don't think papa's way has been very successful, after all," said Cicely, with a faint laugh; "perhaps yours may be the best."

"I think you do me injustice," said Mildmay, feeling the attack so unprovoked that he could afford to be magnanimous. "I have never thought of setting up my way in opposition to Mr. St. John's way. Pray do not think so.

Indeed, I did not know, and could not think——"

"Of papa at all!" cried Cicely, interrupting him as usual. "Why should you? No, no, it was not you who ought to have thought of him. You never heard his name before, I suppose. No one could expect it of you."

"And if I have entered into this question," he continued, "it was to show you that I had not at least mere petty personal motives."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Mildmay. I had no right to inquire into your motives at all."

Mildmay was not vain; but he was a young man, and this was a young woman by his side, and it was she who had begun a conversation much too personal for so slight an acquaintance. When he thought of it, it was scarcely possible to avoid a touch of amiable complacency in the

evident interest he had excited. "Nay," he said, with that smile of gratified vanity which is always irritating to a woman, "your interest in them can be nothing but flattering to me—though perhaps I may have a difficulty in understanding—"

"Why, I am so much interested! Mr. Mildmay!" cried Cicely, with her eyes flashing, "don't you think if any one came to you to take your place, to turn you out of your home, to banish you from everything you have ever known or cared for, and send you desolate into the world —don't you think you would be interested too? Don't you think you would wonder over him, and try to find out what he meant, and why this thing was going to be done, and why—oh, what am I saying?" cried Cicely, stopping short suddenly, and casting a terrified look at him. "I must be going out of my senses. It is not that, it is not that I mean!"

Poor Mildmay looked at her aghast. The flash of her eyes, the energy of her words, the sudden change to paleness and horror when she saw how far she had gone, made every syllable she uttered so real, that to pass it over as a mere ebullition of girlish temper or feeling was impossible; and there was something in this sudden torrent of reproach—which, bitter as it was, implied nothing like personal, intentional wrong on his part—which softened as well as appalled him. The very denunciation was an appeal. He stood thunderstruck, looking at her, but not with any resentment in his eyes. "Miss St. John," he said, almost tremulously, "I don't understand. This is all strange—all new to me."

"Forget it," she said hastily. "Forgive me, Mr. Mildmay, when I ask your pardon! I did not think what I was saying. Oh, don't think of it any more!"

"There is nothing to forgive," he said; "but you will tell me more? Indeed I am not angry—how could I be angry?—but most anxious to know."

"Cicely," said the curate's gentle voice from the window, "it is time for prayers, and we are all waiting for you. Come in, my dear." Mr. St. John stood looking out with a large prayer-book in his hand. His tall figure, with a slight wavering of constitutional feebleness and age in it, filled up one side of the window, and at his feet stood the two babies, side by side as usual, their hats taken off, and little white pinafores put on over their black frocks, looking out with round blue eyes. There was no agitation about that placid group. The little boys were almost too passive to wonder, and it had not occurred to Mr. St. John as possible that anything calculated to ruffle the countenance or the mind could have been talked of be-

tween his daughter and his guest. He went in when he had called them, and took his seat at his usual table. Betsy and Annie stood by the great sideboard waiting for the family devotions, which Betsy, at least, having much to do, was somewhat impatient of; and Mab was making the tea, in order that it might be "drawn" by the time that prayers were over. The aspect of everything was so absolutely peaceful, that when Mr. Mildmay stepped into the room he could not but look at Cicely with a question in his eyes. She, her face flushed and her mouth quivering, avoided his eye, and stole away to her place at the breakfast-table behind. Mildmay, I am afraid, got little benefit by Mr. St. John's prayer. He could not even hear it for thinking. Was this true? and if it was true, what must he do? A perfect tempest raged in the new rector's bosom, while the old

curate read so calmly, unmoved by anything but the mild every-day devotion which was habitual to him. Secular things did not interfere with sacred in the old man's gentle soul, though they might well have done so, Heaven knows, had human necessities anything to do with human character. And when they rose from their knees, and took their places round the breakfast-table, Mildmay's sensations became more uncomfortable still. The girl who had denounced him as about to drive her from her home, made tea for him, and asked him if he took cream and sugar. The old man whom he was about to supplant placed a chair for him, and bade him take his place with genial kindness. Mr. Mildmay had been in the habit for the greater part of his life of thinking rather well of himself; and it is inconceivable how unpleasant it is when a man accustomed to

this view of the subject, feels himself suddenly as small and pitiful as he did now. Mr. St. John had some letters, which he read slowly as he ate his egg, and Mabel also had one, which occupied her. Only Cicely and the stranger, the two who were not at ease with each other, were free to talk, and I don't know what either of them could have found to say.

The curate looked up from his letter with a faint sigh, and pushed away the second egg which he had taken upon his plate unconsciously. "Cicely," he said, "this is a startling letter, though perhaps I might have been prepared for something of the kind. Mr. Chester's relations, my dear, write to say that they wish to sell off the furniture." Mr. St. John gave a glance round, and for a moment his heart failed him. "It is sudden; but it is best, I suppose, that we should be prepared."

"It was to be expected," said Cicely, with a little gasp. She grew paler, but exerted all her power to keep all signs of emotion out of her face.

"Sell the furniture?" said Mab, with a laugh. "Poor old things! But who will they find to buy them?" Mab did not think at all of the inevitable departure which must take place before Mr. Chester's mahogany could be carried away.

"You will think it very weak," said poor Mr. St. John, "but I have been here so long that even the dispersion of the furniture will be something in the shape of a trial. It has seen so much. Of course, such a grievance is merely sentimental—but it affects one more than many greater things."

"I did not know that you had been here so long," said Mildmay.

"A long time—twenty years. That is

a great slice out of one's life," said Mr. St. John. (He here thought better of a too hasty determination, and took back his egg.) "Almost all that has happened to me has happened here. Here I brought your mother home, my dears. Cicely is very like what her mother was; and here you were born, and here——"

"Oh, papa, don't go on like that odious Jessica and her lover, 'On such a night!'" said Cicely, with a forced laugh.

"I did not mean to go on, my dear," said the curate, half aggrieved, half submissive; and he finished his egg with a sigh.

"But I wonder very much," said Mildmay, "if you will pardon me for saying so, why, when you have been here so long, you did not take some steps to secure the living. You must like the place, or you would not have stayed; and nobody would have been appointed over

your head; it is impossible, if the circumstances had been known."

"My dear sir," said the curate, with his kind smile, "you don't think I mean to imply any grudge against you? That would shut my mouth effectually. No, there are a great many reasons why I could not do anything. First, I did not know till a few days ago that the rector was dead; he should have sent me word. Then I have grown out of acquaintance with all my friends. I have not budged out of Brentburn, except now and then to town for a day, these twenty years; and, besides all this," he said, raising his head with simple grandeur, "I have never asked anything from anybody, and I hope I shall end my life so. A beggar for place or living I could never be."

Cicely, with her eyes fixed upon him with the most curious mixture of pride, wonder, humiliation, satisfaction, and

shame, raised her head too, sharing this little lyrical outburst of the humble old man's self-consequence.

But Mab burst lightly in from the midst of her letter. "Don't boast of that, papa, please," she said. "I wish you had asked something and got it. I am sure it would have been much better for Cicely and me."

"My dear!" said Mr. St. John, with a half smile, shaking his head. It was all the reply he made to this light interruption. Then he resumed the former subject. "Take the letter, Cicely, and read it, and tell me what you think. It is grievous to think of a sale here, disturbing old associations. We must consult afterwards what is best to do."

"Papa," said Cicely, in a low voice full of agitation, "the best thing of all would be to settle now, while Mr. Mildmay is here; to find out when he wishes

to come; and then there need be no more to put up with than is absolutely necessary. It is better to know exactly when we must go."

The curate turned his mild eyes to the young man's face. There was a look of pain and reluctance in them, but of submission; and then he smiled to save the stranger's feelings. "It is hard upon Mr. Mildmay," he said, "to be asked this, as if we were putting a pistol to his head; but you will understand that we wish you every good, though we may be grieved to leave our old home."

Mildmay had been making a pretence at eating, feeling as if every morsel choked him. Now he looked up flushed and nervous. "I am afraid I have inadvertently said more than I meant," he said. "I don't think I have made up my mind beyond the possibility of change. It is not settled, as you think."

"Dear me," said Mr. St. John, concerned, "I am very sorry; I hope it is not anything you have heard here that has turned you against Brentburn? It is not a model parish, but it is no worse than other places. Cicely has been telling you about my troubles with those cottages; but, indeed, there is no parish in England where you will not have troubles of some kind—unwholesome cottages or other things."

"I said nothing about the cottages," said Cicely, with downcast looks. "I hope Mr. Mildmay does not mind anything I said. I say many things without thinking. It is very foolish, but it would be more foolish to pay any attention. I am sure you have often said so, papa."

"I?" said the curate, looking at her disturbed countenance with some surprise. "No, I do not think you are one of the foolish talkers, my dear. It is

a long story about these cottages; and, perhaps, I let myself be more worried than I ought. I will tell you all about it on the way to the Heath, for I think you ought to call on the Ascotts, if you will permit me to advise. They are the chief people about here. If you are ready, perhaps we should start soon; and you will come back and have some of our early dinner before you go?"

"I am ashamed to give so much trouble, to—receive so much kindness," said Mildmay, confused. He rose when Mr. St. John did, but he kept his eyes fixed upon Cicely, who kept her seat, and would not look at him. The curate had various things to do before he was ready to start. He had his scattered memoranda to collect, and to get his note-book from his study, and yesterday's newspaper to carry to an old man in the village, and a book for a sick child, and

I don't know how many trifles besides. "Papa's things are always all over the house," Mab cried, running from one room to another in search of them. Cicely generally knew exactly where to find all these properties which Mr. St. John searched for habitually with unfounded yet unalterable confidence in the large pockets of his long clerical coat. But Cicely still kept her seat, and left her duties to her sister, her mind being full of other things.

"What is the matter with Cicely?" said Mab, running back with her hands full. "I have found them, but I don't know which of your pockets they belong to. This is the one for the note-book, and this is the one for the newspaper; but what does Cicely mean, sitting there like a log, and leaving everything to me?"

"Miss St. John," said Mildmay, in

this interval, "may I come back as your father says? May we finish the conversation we began this morning? or is the very sight of me disagreeable to you? There are so many things I want to know."

Cicely got up suddenly, half impatient, half sad. "We are always glad to see any one whom papa asks," she said; "you must call it luncheon, Mr. Mildmay, but to us it is dinner; that makes the difference between rector and curate," she added, with a laugh.

CHAPTER II.

THE PARSON'S ROUND.

How brilliant was that August morning when the two men went out! the sky so blue and warm and full of sunshine, bending with friendly tenderness toward the luxuriant earth which it embraced, lost everywhere in soft distances, limits that were of the eye and not of the infinite melting space—showing through the foliage, opening out sweet and full over the breezy purpled common. The red cottage roofs, with all their lichens, shone and basked in the light; the apples reddened moment by moment, the yellow corn

rustled and waved in every breath of air, conscious of the coming sickle. Everything was at its fullest blaze of colour; the trees more deeply green than usual, the sky of more profound and dazzling blue, the heather purple-royal, showing in its moorland flush against the russet-golden fields burning in the sun which gave them their last perfection of ripeness; and even the flowers in the gardens blazing their brightest to hide the fact from all men that the sweetness and hope of the year were almost lost in that harvest and climax which touches upon decay, as everything does which is perfect. The sun was too fierce for anything but red burning geraniums, and gaudy hollyhocks and rank dahlias. But the red old cottages at Brentburn were of themselves like growths of nature, with all their stains of moss, red and grey and yellow, relieved and thrown up by the waving

greyness of the willows, that marked every spot of special dampness, and by the wealthy green woods that rolled away into the distance, into the sky. Everything is musical in such a morning; the very cackle of the ducks in that brown pond—how cool it looks to the dusty wayfarer!—takes a tone from the golden air; the slow roll of the leisurely cart along the country road; the voices from the cottages calling in full Berkshire drawl to Jyain or Jeo outside. A harmonious world it seemed, with nothing in it to jar or wound; the very air caressing every mother's son it met, blowing about the rags as if it loved them, conveying never a chill to the most poorly clad. How different was that broad outdoor satisfaction and fulness to the complainings and troubles enclosed by every set of four walls in the parish! Mildmay, as was natural, knew nothing about these

nor suspected them; his spirits rose when he came out into the summer air—to walk along the cool side of the road in the shade, and watch the triumphant sunshine blazing over everything, leaving not an inch even of the common high road unglorified, brought a swell of pleasure to his heart he could not tell why.

"You must not come to a country parish with the idea that it is Arcadia," said Mr. St. John; "such ideas lead to a great deal of disappointment; but you must not let yourself be discouraged either. I don't think that Cicely knows all the outs and ins of the story about the cottages."

"Miss St. John said nothing about the cottages."

"Ah! I thought she had put you out of spirits; that would be foolish," said the curate kindly. "You see, Mr. Mild-

may, everybody here thinks a great deal of a little money; it is so, I believe, in every small place; they have little, very little, Heaven knows; and somehow, when one is very poor, that gets to look of more importance than anything else. I don't say so from personal experience, though I have always been poor enough. My way, I am afraid, is to think too little of the money, not too much—which is, perhaps, as great a mistake the other way; but it is much easier, you know, to condemn those faults we have no mind to," Mr. St. John added with a smile. The visit of an intelligent stranger had quite brightened the good man up, though it ought to have depressed him, according to all principles of good sense. The curate forgot how much he himself must suffer from the change that was coming. Mildmay pleased him; he was deferential to his own grey hairs and long

experience; he was willing to hear and apparently to take, his predecessor's opinion, and Mr. St. John liked the novelty, the new companion, the attentive listener. He walked on quite briskly, with the easy steps of a man to whom the way is so familiar that he does not need to pause to look where he is going. Now and then he would stop to point out a view, a glimpse of the distant forest, a slope opening down upon the lower level of the common, or even a pretty cottage; and one of them, a most picturesque refuge of misery, with tiny little casement windows bulging anyhow from the ruddy old wall, and a high roof of the most indescribable and beautiful mixture of tints, set him easily afloat again upon the subject of which his mind was full.

"Look at it!" he said; "it is a picture. If one could only clear them out and shut them up—or rather throw them

open, that the winds of heaven might enter, but not our fellow-creatures, Mr. Mildmay! As I was saying, they are all poor here. The people think you do them an injury when you speak of anything that has to be paid for. Because I have tried to get the cottages put into good repair, the arrangements made a little more decent, and the places fit to live in, more than two or three of the people have left the parish church. Yes, that is quite true—I thought Cicely must have told you—well-to-do people, who might have spared a few pounds well enough. It was a trial; but what of that? I have outlived it, and perhaps done a little good."

"The cottagers, at least, must have been grateful to you," said Mildmay; but the curate shook his head.

"The cottagers thought I was only trying to get them turned out," he said.

"They almost mobbed me once. I told them they should not take lodgers and lodgers till every room was crowded. They are as bad as the landlords; but, poor souls! it was easy to forgive them, for the shilling or two they gained was such an object to them. I thought it best to tell you; but there was really nothing in it, nothing to be annoyed about. It was soon over. You, a young man, need not be discouraged by any such episode as that."

"Mr. St. John, there is something which discourages me much more," said Mildmay. "When I came yesterday to see Brentburn, I did not know you at all. I had heard your name; that was all. I thought you were most likely a man of my own standing, or younger——"

"As a curate ought to be," said Mr. St. John, once more shaking his head. "Yes; I was saying to Cicely, it is

almost a stigma upon a man to be a curate at my age; but so it is, and I cannot help it. Perhaps if I had not settled down so completely when I was young, if I had been more energetic; I feel that now—but what good does it do? it is too late now to change my nature. The children are the worst," he said, with a sigh, "for they must come upon the girls." Then recovering himself with a faint smile, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Mildmay, for going off with my own thoughts. You said it discouraged you. Do you mean my example? You must take it as a lesson and a warning, not as an example. I am very sensible it is my own fault."

"I came to supplant you, to take your place, to turn you out of your home," said Mildmay, finding it a kind of relief to his feelings to employ Cicely's words, "and you received me like a friend, took

me into your house, made me sit at your table——"

The curate was startled by his vehemence. He laughed, then looked at him half alarmed. "What should I have done else?" he said. "I hope you are a friend. Supplant me! I have been here a great deal longer than I had any right to expect. Of course, we all knew a new rector would come. The girls, indeed, had vague notions about something that might he done—they did not know what, poor things! how should they? But of course from the first I was aware what must happen. No, no; you must not let *that* trouble you. I am glad, on the contrary, very glad, that the people are going to fall into hands like yours."

"Poor hands," said Mildmay. "Mr. St. John, you may think it strange that I should say this; but it is you who

ought to be the rector, not me. You ought to stay here; I feel it. If I come after all, I shall be doing a wrong to the people and to you, and even to the Church, where such things should not be."

Once more Mr. St. John slowly shook his head; a smile came over his face; he held out his hand. "It is pleasant to hear you say it; somehow it is pleasant to hear you say it. I felt sure Cicely had been saying something to you this morning. But no, no; they would never have given me the living, and I should never have asked for it. As for a wrong, nobody will feel it a wrong; not myself, nor the Church, and the people here last of all."

"They must look upon you as their father," said Mildmay warmly. "Nothing else is possible. To them it is the greatest wrong of all."

"You speak like a—boy," said the curate. "Yes, you speak like a kind, warm-hearted boy. The girls say the same kind of things. You are all young, and think of what ought to be, not of what is. The people! The Church does not give them any voice in the matter, and it is just as well. Mr. Mildmay, I've been a long time among them. I've tried to do what I could for them. Some of them like me well enough; but the people have never forgotten that I was only curate—not rector. They have remembered it all these twenty years, when sometimes I was half tempted to forget it myself."

"Oh, sir, do not think so badly of human nature!" said Mildmay, almost with a recoil from so hard a judgment.

"Do I think badly of human nature? I don't feel that I do; and why should this be thinking badly? Which is best

for them to have, a man who is well off, who is a real authority in the parish, whom the farmers and masters will stand in awe of, and who will be able to help them in trouble—or a poor man who has to struggle for himself, who has nothing to spare, and no great influence with any one? I shall feel it, perhaps, a little," said Mr. St. John, with a smile; "but it will be quite unreasonable to feel it. In a month you will be twice as popular in the parish as I am after twenty years."

"It is not possible!" said the young man.

"Ah, my dear Mr. Mildmay, a great many things are possible! The girls think like you. I suppose it is natural; but when you come to take everything into account—the only thing to have been desired was that I should have died before Mr. Chester; or, let us say that he should have outlived me, which sounds

more cheerful. Come," said the curate with an effort, "don't let us think of this. I hope you are a friend, Mr. Mildmay, as I said; but, as you say yourself, you are only a friend of yesterday, so why you should take my burden on your shoulders I don't know. I think we may venture to call on the Ascotts now. He is a little rough, or rather bluff, but a good man; and she is a little—fanciful," said the curate, searching for a pleasant word, "but a kind woman. If you take to them, and they to you——"

"On what pretence should I go to see them, unsettled as I am about my future?" said Mildmay, hesitating.

The curate looked at him with a smile. He rang the bell, then opened the door, which, like most innocent country doors, opened from the outside. Then he fixed his mild eyes upon the young man. He had some gentle insight in his way by

right of his years and experience of life, simple-minded as he was. "You go as the new rector—the best of introductions," he said, and led the way smiling. It was not difficult, perhaps, to see through the struggle in Mildmay's mind between his own wish and determination, and his sympathetic sense of the hardship involved to others. I think the curate was quite right in believing that it was the personal inclination which would gain the day, and not the generous impulse; as, indeed, Mr. St. John fully recognized it ought to be.

Mr. Ascott was in his library, reading the newspaper, but with such an array of papers about him, as made that indulgence look momentary and accidental. He was not the squire of the parish, but he had a considerable landed property in the neighbourhood, and liked to be considered as holding that position. He

received Mr. Mildmay, boldly introduced by the curate as the new rector, with the greatest cordiality. "I had not seen the appointment," he said, "but I am most happy to welcome you to the parish. I hope you like what you have seen of it? This is quite an agreeable surprise."

Mildmay found it very difficult to reply, for was not every word of congratulation addressed to him an injury to his companion, whose star must set as his rose? The curate, however, showed no such feeling. His *amour propre* was quite satisfied by being the first to know and to present to the parish its new rector. "Yes, I thought you would be pleased to hear at once," he said, with gentle complacency. "I would not let him pass your door."

"Poor Chester! This reminds me of him," said Mr. Ascott. "He came to Brentburn in my father's time, when I

was a young fellow at home fresh from the university. He was a very accomplished man. It was a pity he had such bad health. A parish gets out of order when it is without the proper authorities. Even a good deputy—and St. John, I am sure, has been the best of deputies—is never like the man himself."

"That is just what I have been saying," said Mr. St. John; but though he took it with great equanimity, it was less pleasant to him to hear this, than to say it himself. "I think I will leave you now," he added. "I have a great deal to do this morning. Mr. Ascott will tell you many things that will be really valuable, and at two o'clock or sooner we will expect you at the rectory."

"It is a pity to trouble you and your girls, St. John. He can have some luncheon here. Mrs. Ascott will be delighted to see him."

"I shall be at the rectory without fail," said Mildmay, with a sense of partial offence. He belonged to the rectory, not to this complacent secular person. A certain *esprit de corps* was within him. If the rest of the world neglected the poor curate, he at least would show that to him the old priest was the first person in the parish. "Or," he added, hesitating, "I will go with you now."

Mr. St. John did not wish this. He felt that he would be less at his ease with his poor people if conscious of this new man fresh from Oxford at his elbow. There might be, for anything he knew to the contrary, newfangled ways even of visiting the sick. To talk to them cheerily, kindly, as he had always done, might not fall in with the ideas of duty held by "high" schools of doctrine, of whatever kind. He went away plodding

along the high road in the sultry noon, with a smile still upon his face, which faded, however, when the stimulus of Mildmay's company, and the gratification of presenting the stranger to the great people of the parish, had subsided. These circumstances were less exhilarating when the curate was alone, and had to remember Wilkins and all the outstanding bills, and the fact that the furniture in the rectory was to be sold, and that Cicely that very night would ask him once more what he had made up his mind to do. What could he make up his mind to do? The very question, when he put it to himself merely, and when it was not backed up by an eager young face, and a pair of eyes blazing into him, was bewildering enough; it made the curate's head go round and round. Even when he came to Brentburn twenty years ago it was not his own doing. Friends had found the

appointment for him, and arranged all the preliminaries. Nothing had been left for him but to accept it, and he had accepted. And at that time he had Hester to fall back upon. But now to "look out for something," to apply for another curacy, to advertise and answer advertisements, describing himself and his capabilities—how was he to do it? He was quite ready to consent to anything, to let Cicely manage for him if she would; but to take the initiative himself! The very thought of this produced a nervous confusion in his mind which seemed to make an end of all his powers.

"You must come upstairs and see my wife," said Mr. Ascott. "She will be delighted to make your acquaintance. She has been a great deal in society, and I don't doubt you and she will find many people to talk about. As for me, I am but a country fellow, I don't go much into

the world. When your interests are all in the country, why, stick to the country is my maxim; but my wife is fond of fine people. You and she will find a hundred mutual acquaintances in half-an-hour, you will see."

"But I am not fond of fine people—nor have I so many acquaintances."

"Oh, you Oxford dons know everybody. They all pass through your hands. Come along, it will be quite a pleasure for my wife to see you. Adelaide, I am bringing you some one who will be a surprise to you as well as a pleasure. Mr. Mildmay, our new rector, my dear."

"Our new rector!" Mrs. Ascott said, with a subdued outcry of surprise. She was seated in a corner of a large light room with three or four large windows looking out upon a charming lawn and garden, beyond which appeared the tufted undulations of the common, and the

smooth green turf and white posts of the race-ground. With a house like this, looking out upon so interesting a spot, no one need be surprised that Mrs. Ascott's fine friends "kept her up," and that for at least one week in the year she was as popular and sought after as any queen. Though it was only one week in the year, it had a certain influence upon her manners. She lived all the year through in a state of reflected glory from this brief but ever-recurring climax of existence. The air of conferring a favour, the look of gracious politeness, yet preoccupation, which suited a woman overbalanced by the claims of many candidates for her hospitality, never departed from her. She gave that little cry of surprise just as she would have done had her husband brought a stranger to her to see if she could give him a bed for the race week. "I am delighted to make

Mr. Mildmay's acquaintance," she said; "but, my dear, I thought there was going to be an effort made for poor Mr. St. John?" This was in a lower tone, as she might have said, "But there is only one spare room, and that I have promised to Mr. St. John." Her husband laughed.

"I told you, my dear, that was nonsense. What do ladies know of such matters? They talked of some foolish petition or other to the Lord Chancellor, as if the Lord Chancellor had anything to do with it! You may be very thankful you had me behind you, my dear, to keep you from such a foolish mistake. No; Mr. Mildmay has it, and I am very glad. The dons have done themselves credit by their choice, and we are in great luck. I hope you will not be like your predecessor, Mr. Mildmay, and take a dislike to the parish. We must do our best, Adelaide, to prevent that."

"Indeed, I hope so," said the lady. "I am sure I am delighted. I think I have met some relations of yours, Mr. Mildmay—the Hamptons of Thornbury? Yes; I felt sure I had heard them mention you. You recollect, Henry, they lunched with us here the year before last, on the cup day? They came with Lady Teddington—charming people. And you know all the Teddingtons, of course? What a nice family they are! We see a great deal of Lord Charles, who is often in this neighbourhood. His dear mother is often rather anxious about him. I fear—I fear he is just a little disposed to be what you gentlemen call fast."

"We gentlemen don't mince our words," said her husband; "rowdy young scamp, that is what I call him; bad lot.

"You are very severe, Henry—very

severe—except when it is a favourite of your own. How glad I am we are getting some one we know to the rectory. When do you take possession, Mr. Mildmay? We shall be quite near neighbours, and will see a great deal of you, I hope."

"I do not feel quite sure, since I have been here, whether I will come to the rectory at all," said Mildmay. "Mr. St. John was so hasty in his announcement, that I feel myself a swindler coming here under false pretences. I have not made up my mind whether I will accept the living or not."

"Since you have been here? Then you don't like the place," said Mr. Ascott. "I must say I am surprised. I think you are hasty, as well as St. John. Poor Chester, to be sure, did not like it, but that was because he thought it did not agree with him. The greatest

nonsense! it is as healthy a place as any in England; it has a hundred advantages. Perhaps this sort of thing mayn't suit you as a clergyman," he said, waving his hand towards the distant race-course; "but it gives a great deal of life to the place."

"And so near town," said Mrs. Ascott; "and such nice people in the neighbourhood! Indeed, Mr. Mildmay, you must let us persuade you; you must really stay."

"Come, now," cried her husband, "let's talk it over. What's your objection? Depend upon it, Adelaide, it is those pets of yours, the St. Johns, who have been putting nonsense into his head."

"Poor things, what do they know!" said Mrs. Ascott, with a sigh. "But indeed, Mr. Mildmay, now that we have seen you, and have a chance of some one

we can like, with such nice connections, we cannot let you go."

This was all very flattering and pleasant. "You are extremely kind," said Mildmay. "I must put it to the credit of my relations, for I have no right to so much kindness. No, it is not any objection to the place. It is a still stronger objection. I heard Mrs. Ascott herself speak of some effort to be made for Mr. St. John——"

"I—what did I say?" cried the lady. "Mr. St. John? Yes, I was sorry, of course; very sorry."

"It was all nonsense," said the husband. "I told her so. She never meant it; only what could she say to the girls when they appealed to her? She is a soft-hearted goose—eh, Adelaide? One prefers women to be so. But as for old St. John, it is sheer nonsense. Poor old fellow! yes, I am sorry for him. But

whose fault is it? He knew Chester's life was not worth *that;* yet he has hung on, taking no trouble, doing nothing for himself. It is not your part or our part to bother our minds for a man who does nothing for himself."

"That is true enough," said Mildmay; "but his long services to the parish, his age, his devotion to his work—it does not seem right. I don't say for you or for me, but in the abstract——"

"Devotion?" said Mr. Ascott. "Oh yes; he has done his work well enough, I suppose. That's what is called devotion when a man dies or goes away. Yes, oh yes, we may allow him the credit of that, the poor old fogey, but—yes, oh yes, a good old fellow enough. When you have said that, there's no more to say. Perhaps in the abstract it was a shame that Chester should have the lion's share of the income, and St. John all the

work; but that's all over; and as for any hesitation of yours on his account——"

"It may be foolish," said the young man, "but I do hesitate—I cannot help feeling that there is a great wrong involved—to Mr. St. John, of course, in the first place—but without even thinking of any individual, it is a sort of thing that must injure the Church; and I don't like to be the instrument of injuring the Church."

"Tut—tut—tut!" said Mr. Ascott; "your conscience is too tender by far."

"Mr. Mildmay," said the lady sweetly, "you must not expect me to follow such deep reasoning. I leave that to superior minds; but you ought to think what a great thing it is for a parish to have some one to look up to—some one the poor people can feel to be really their superior."

"Not a poor beggar of a curate," cried

her husband. "There, Adelaide! you have hit the right nail on the head. That's the true way to look at the subject. Poor old St. John! I don't say he's been well treated by destiny. He has had a deal of hard work, and he has stuck to it; but, bless you! how is a man like that to be distinguished from a Dissenting preacher, for instance? Of course, he's a clergyman, in orders and all that, as good as the Archbishop of Canterbury; but he has no position—no means—nothing to make him the centre of the parish, as the clergyman ought to be. Why, the poorest labourer in the parish looks down upon the curate. 'Parson's just as poor as we is,' they say. I've heard them. He has got to run up bills in the little shops, and all that, just as they have. He has no money to relieve them with when they're out of work. The farmers look down upon him.

They think nothing of a man that's poor; and as for the gentry——"

"Stop, Henry," said Mrs. Ascott; "the gentry have always been very kind to the St. Johns. We were always sorry for the girls. Poor things! their mother was really quite a lady, though I never heard that she had anything. We were all grieved about this last sad affair, when he married the governess; and I should always have made a point of being kind to the girls. That is a very different thing, however, Mr. Mildmay," she added, with a sweet smile, "from having a clergyman whom one can really look up to, and who will be a friend and neighbour as well as a clergyman. You will stay to luncheon? I think I hear the bell."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT THE GIRLS COULD DO.

Mildmay left the house of the Ascotts hurriedly at this intimation. He thought them pleasant people enough—for who does not think those people pleasant who flatter and praise him?—but he would not allow himself to be persuaded out of his determination to return to the rectory. I must add however that his mind was in a more confused state than ever as he skirted the common by the way the curate had taken him on the previous night. There were two sides to every question; that could not be gainsaid.

To leave Brentburn after passing twenty years here in arduous discharge of all the rector's duties, but with the rank and remuneration only of the curate, was an injury too hard to contemplate to Mr. St. John; but then it was not Mildmay's fault that he should interfere at his own cost to set it right. It was not even the fault of the parish. It was nobody's fault but his own, foolish as he was, neglecting all chances of "bettering himself." If a man would do nothing for himself, how could it be the duty of others, of people no way connected with him, scarcely knowing him, to do it for him? This argument was unanswerable; nothing could be more reasonable, more certain; and yet—Mildmay felt that he himself was young, that the rectory of Brentburn was not much to him one way or the other. He had wanted it as the means of living a more real life than that

which was possible to him in his college rooms; but he had no stronger reason, no special choice of the place, no conviction that he could do absolute good here; and why should he then take so lightly what it would cost him nothing to reject, but which was everything to the curate? Then, on the other hand, there was the parish to consider. What if—extraordinary as that seemed—it did not want Mr. St. John? What if really his very poverty, his very gentleness, made him unsuitable for it? The argument seemed a miserable one, so far as the money went; but it might be true. The Ascotts, for instance, were the curate's friends; but this was their opinion. Altogether Mr. Mildmay was very much perplexed on the subject. He wished he had not come to see for himself, just as an artist has sometimes been sorry for having consulted that very troublesome

reality, Nature, who will not lend herself to any theory. If he had come without any previous inspection of the place, without any knowledge of the circumstances, how much better it would have been! Whereas now he was weighed down by the consideration of things with which he had really nothing to do. As he went along, full of these thoughts, he met the old woman whom he had first spoken to by the duck-pond on the day before, and who had invited him to sit down in her cottage. To his surprise—for he did not at first recollect who she was—she made him a curtsy, and stopped short to speak to him. As it was in the full blaze of the midday sunshine, Mildmay would very gladly have escaped—not to say that he was anxious to get back to the rectory, and to finish, as he persuaded himself was quite necessary, his conversation with Cicely.

Old Mrs. Joel, however, stood her ground. She had an old-fashioned large straw bonnet on her head, which protected her from the sun; and besides, was more tolerant of the sunshine, and more used to exposure than he was.

"Sir," she said, "I hear as you're the new gentleman as is coming to our parish. I am a poor woman, sir, the widow o' Job Joel, as was about Brentburn church, man and boy, for more than forty year. He began in the choir, he did, and played the fiddle in the old times; and then, when that was done away with, my husband he was promoted to be clerk, and died in it. They could not ezackly make me clerk, seeing as I'm nothing but a woman; but Dick Williams, as is the sexton, ain't married, and I've got the cleaning of the church, and the pew-opening, if you please, sir; and I hope, sir, as you won't think it's nothing but

justice to an old servant, to let me stay?"

"What do you think of Mr. St. John going away?" asked Mildmay abruptly.

The old woman stared, half alarmed, and made him another curtsy, to occupy the time till she could think how to answer. "Mr. St. John, sir? He's a dear good gentleman, sir; as innocent as a baby. When he's gone, sir, they will find the miss of him," she said, examining his face keenly to see how he meant her to answer, which is one of the highest arts of the poor.

"If he goes away, after being here so long, why shouldn't you be sent away, too?" said Mildmay. He felt how absurd was this questioning, as of an oracle, which came from the confused state of his own mind, not from any expectation of an answer; and then he could not but smile to himself at the idea of thus

offering up a victim to the curate's *manes*.

Mrs. Joel was much startled. "Lord bless us!" she said, making a step backwards. Then commanding herself, "It weren't Mr. St. John, sir, as gave me my place; but the rector hisself. Mr. St. John is as good as gold, but he ain't not to say my master. Besides, there's a many as can do the parson's work, but there ain't many, not in this parish, as could do mine. Mr. St. John would be a loss—but me, sir——"

Here she made another curtsy, and Mildmay laughed in spite of himself. "You—would be a greater loss?" he said. "Well, perhaps so; but if there are any good reasons why he should leave, there must be the same for you."

"I don't see it, sir," said Mrs. Joel promptly. "The parson's old, and he's a bit past his work; but I defy any one

in the parish to say as the church ain't as neat as a new pin. Mr. St. John's getting a bit feeble in the legs; he can't go long walks now like once he could. Me! I may be old, but as for my mop and my duster, I ain't behind nobody. Lord bless you! it's a very different thing with Mr. St. John from what it is with me. He's got those girls of his to think upon, and those little children. What's he got to do with little children at his age? But I've nobody but myself to go troubling *my* brains about. I thinks o' my work, and nought else. You won't get another woman in the parish as will do it as cheap and as comfortable as me."

"But don't you think," said Mildmay —whose conduct I cannot excuse, and whose only apology is that his mind was entirely occupied with one subject —"don't you think it is very hard

upon Mr. St. John at his age, to go away?"

Mrs. Joel found herself in a dilemma. She had no desire to speak ill of the curate, but if she spoke too well of him, might not that annoy the new rector, and endanger her own cause? She eyed him very keenly, never taking her eyes off his face, to be guided by its changes. "Between gentlefolks and poor folks," she said at last, philosophically, "there's a great gulf fixed, as is said in the Bible. They can't judge for us, nor us for them. He's a deal abler to speak up for hisself, and settle for hisself, than the likes o' me; and I reckon as he could stay on if he'd a mind to; but me, sir, it's your pleasure as I've got to look to," said the old woman, with another curtsy. This oracle, it was clear, had no response or guidance to give.

"Well," he said, carelessly, "I will

speak to Miss St. John—for I don't know about the parish; and if she approves——"

A gleam of intelligence came into the keen old eyes which regarded him so closely; the old face lighted up with a twinkle of mingled pleasure, and malice, and kindness. "If that's so, the Lord be praised!" she cried; "and I hope, sir, it's Miss Cicely; for if ever there was a good wife, it's her dear mother as is dead and gone; and Miss Cicely's her very breathing image. Good morning to you, and God bless you, sir, and I hope as I haven't made too bold."

What does the old woman mean? Mildmay said to himself bewildered. He repeated the question over and over again as he pursued his way to the rectory. What was it to him that Cicely St. John was like her mother? The curate, too, had insisted upon this fact as if it was of some importance. What interest do

they suppose me to take in the late Mrs. St. John? he said, with great surprise and confusion to himself.

Meanwhile, the girls in the rectory had been fully occupied. When their father went out, they held a council of war together, at which indeed Mab did not do much more than question and assent, for her mind was not inventive or full of resource as Cicely's was. It was she, however, who opened the consultation. "What were you saying to Mr. Mildmay in the garden?" said Mab. "You told him something. He did not look the same to-day as he did last night."

"I told him nothing," said Cicely. "I was so foolish as to let him see that we felt it very much. No, I must not say foolish. How could we help but feel it? It is injustice, if it was the Queen herself who did it. But perhaps papa is right

—if he does not come, some one else would come. And he has a heart. I do not hate him so much as I did last night."

"Hate him! I do not hate him at all. He knows how to draw, and said some things that were sense—really sense—and so few people do that," said Mab, thinking of her sketch. "I must have those mites again when the light is about the same as last time, and finish it. Cicely, what are you thinking of now?"

"So many things," said the girl, with a sigh. "Oh, what a change, what a change, since we came! How foolish we have been, thinking we were to stay here always! Now, in six weeks or so, we must go—I don't know where; and we must pay our debts—I don't know how; and we must live without anything to live on. Mab, help me! Papa won't do anything; we must settle it all, you and I."

"You need not say you and I, Cicely. I never was clever at plans. It must be all yourself. What a good thing you are like mamma! Don't you think we might go to Aunt Jane?"

"Aunt Jane kept us at school for three years," said Cicely. "She has not very much herself. How can I ask her for more? If it were not so dreadful to lose you, I should say, Go, Mab—she would be glad to have *you*—and work at your drawing, and learn all you can, while I stay with papa here."

Cicely's eyes filled with tears, and her steady voice faltered. Mab threw her arms round her sister's neck. "I will never leave you. I will never go away from you. What is drawing or anything if we must be parted?—we never were parted all our lives."

"That is very true," said Cicely, drying her eyes. "But we can't do as we

like now. I suppose people never can do what they like in this world. We used to think it was only till we grew up. Mab, listen—now is the time when we must settle what to do. Papa is no good. I don't mean to blame him; but he has been spoiled; he has always had things done for him. I saw that last night. To ask him only makes him unhappy; I have been thinking and thinking, and I see what to do."

Mab raised her head from her sister's shoulder, and looked at Cicely with great tender believing eyes. The two forlorn young creatures had nobody to help them; but the one trusted in the other, which was a safeguard for the weaker soul; and she who had nobody to trust in except God, felt that inspiration of the burden which was laid upon her, which sometimes is the strongest of all supports to the strong. Her voice still faltered

a little, and her eyes glistened, but she put what was worse first, as a brave soul naturally does.

"Mab, you must go—it is the best—you are always happy with your work, and Aunt Jane will be very kind to you; and the sooner you can make money, don't you see? It would not do to go back to school, even if Miss Blandy would have us, for all we could do there was to keep ourselves. Mab, you are so clever, you will soon now be able to help; and you know, even if papa gets something, there will always be the little boys."

"Yes, I know," said Mab, subdued. "O Cicely, don't be vexed! I should like it—I know I should like it—but for leaving you."

Cicely's bosom heaved with a suppressed sob. "You must not mind me. I shall have so much to do, I shall have no time to think; and so long as one can

keep one's self from thinking!—There now, that is settled. I wanted to say it, and I dared not. After that—Mab, don't ask me my plans! I am going round this very day," cried Cicely, springing to her feet, "to all those people we owe money to." This sudden movement was half the impulse of her vivacious nature, which could not continue in one tone, whatever happened, and, half an artifice to conceal the emotion which was too deep for her sister to share. Cicely felt the idea of the separation much more than Mab did, though it was Mab who was crying over it; and the elder sister dared not dwell upon the thought. "I must go round to them all," said Cicely, taking the opportunity to get rid of her tears, "and ask them to have a little patience. There will be another half-year's income before we leave, and they shall have all, all I can give them. I

hope they will be reasonable. Mab, I ought to go now."

"Oh, what will you say to them? Oh, how have you the courage to do it? O Cicely! when it is not your fault. It is papa who ought to do it!" cried Mab.

"It does not matter so much who ought to do it," said Cicely, with composure. "Some one *must* do it, and I don't know who will but me. Then I think there ought to be an advertisement written for the *Guardian*."

"Cicely, you said you were to stay with papa!"

"It is not for me; it is for papa himself. Poor papa! Oh, what a shame, what a shame, at his age! And a young man, *that* young man, with nothing to recommend him, coming in to everything, and turning us out! I can't talk about it," cried Cicely. "The best thing for us is to go and do something. I

can make up the advertisement on the way."

And in the heat of this, she put on her hat and went out, leaving Mab half stupefied by the suddenness of all those settlements. Mab had not the courage to offer to go to Wilkins and the rest with her sister. She cried over all that Cicely had to do; but she knew very well that she had not the strength to do it. She went and arranged her easel, and set to work very diligently. That was always something; and to make money, would not that be best of all, as well as the pleasantest? Mab did not care for tiring herself, nor did she think of her own enjoyment. That she should be the brother working for both, and Cicely the sister keeping her house, had always been the girl's ideal, which was far from a selfish one. But she could not do what Cicely was doing. She could not steer

the poor little ship of the family fortunes or misfortunes through this dangerous passage. Though she was, she hoped, to take the man's part of breadwinner, for the moment she shrank into that woman's part which women too often are not permitted to hold. To keep quiet at home, wondering and working in obscurity—wondering how the brave adventurer was faring who had to fight for bare life outside in the world.

I dare not follow Cicely through her morning's work; it would take up so much time; and it would not be pleasant for us any more than it was for her. "Don't you make yourself unhappy, Miss," said the butcher, "I know as you mean well by every one. A few pounds ain't much to me, the Lord be praised! and I'll wait, and welcome, for I know as you mean well." Cicely, poor child! being only nineteen, cried when these kind

words were said to her, and was taken into the hot and greasy parlour, where the butcher's wife was sitting, and petted and comforted. "Bless you, things will turn out a deal better than you think," Mrs. Butcher said; "they always does. Wait till we see the handsome young gentleman as is coming through the woods for you, Miss Cicely dear: and a good wife he'll have, like your dear mother," this kind woman added, smiling, yet wiping her eyes. But Wilkins the grocer was much more difficult to manage, and to him Cicely set her fair young face like a flint, biting her lips to keep them steady, and keeping all vestige of tears from her eyes. "Whatever you do," she said with those firm pale lips, "we cannot pay you now; but you shall be paid if you will have patience;" and at last, notwithstanding the insults which wrung Cicely's heart, this savage, too, was over-

come. She went home all throbbing and aching from this last conflict, her heart full of bitterness and those sharp stings of poverty which are so hard to bear. It was not her fault; no extravagance of hers had swelled those bills; and how many people threw away every day much more than would have saved all that torture of heart and mind to this helpless and guiltless girl! Mildmay himself had paid for a Palissy dish, hideous with crawling reptiles, a great deal more than would have satisfied Wilkins and relieved poor Cicely's delicate shoulders of this humiliating burden; but what of that? The young man whom she saw in the distance approaching the rectory from the other side could at that moment have paid every one of those terrible debts that were crushing Cicely, and never felt it; but I repeat, what of that? Under no pretence could he have done it; nothing

in the world would have induced the proud, delicate girl to betray the pangs which cut her soul. Thus the poor and the rich walk together shoulder by shoulder every day as if they were equal, and one has to go on in hopeless labour like Sisyphus, heaving up the burden which the other could toss into space with the lifting of a finger. So it is, and so it must be, I suppose, till time and civilization come to an end.

Meanwhile these two came nearer, approaching each other from different points. And what Mildmay saw was not the brave but burdened creature we know of, dear reader, bleeding and aching from battles more bitter than Inkerman, with a whole little world of helpless beings hanging upon her, but only a fresh, bright-eyed girl, in a black and white frock, with a black hat shading her face from the sunshine, moving lightly in the

animation of her youth across the white high road—a creature full of delicate strength, and variety, and brightness; like her mother! Mildmay could not help thinking that Mrs. St. John must have been a pretty woman, and there came a little pang of sympathy into his heart when he thought of the grave in the twilight where the curate had led him, from which the light in the girls' windows was always visible, and to which his patient feet had worn that path across the grass. To be sure, across the pathos of this picture there would come the jar of that serio-comic reference to the other Mrs. St. John, who, poor soul! lay neglected down the other turning. This made the new rector laugh within himself. But he suppressed all signs of the laugh when he came up to Cicely, who, though she gave him a smile of greeting, did not seem in a laughing mood. She was the first to speak.

"Have you left papa behind you, Mr. Mildmay? He has always a great many places to go to, and parish work is not pleasant on such a hot day."

Was there an insinuation in this that he had abandoned the unpleasant work, finding it uncongenial to him? Poor Cicely was sore and wounded, and the temptation to give a passing sting in her turn was great.

"Mr. St. John did not permit me to try its pleasantness or unpleasantness," said Mildmay. "He took me over the parish indeed, and showed me the church and the school, and some other things; and then he left me at Mr. Ascott's. I come from the Heath now."

"Ah, from the Heath?" said Cicely, changing colour a little, and looking at him with inquiring eyes. What had they done or said, she wondered, to him? for she could not forget the projected

petition to the Lord Chancellor, which had raised a fallacious hope in their hearts when she saw Mrs. Ascott last.

"They have a pretty house, and they seem kind people," said Mildmay, not knowing what to say.

"Yes, they have a pretty house." Cicely looked at him even more eagerly, with many questions on her lips. Had they said nothing to him? Had they received him at once as the new rector without a word? Kind! what did he mean when he said they were kind? Had they, too, without an effort, without a remonstrance, gone over to the enemy?

"Mr. St. John somewhat rashly introduced me as the new rector," said Mildmay, "which was very premature; and they knew some relations of mine. Miss St. John, the Ascotts are much less interesting to me than our conversation of

this morning. Since then my mind has been in a very confused state. I can no longer feel that anything is settled about the living."

"Didn't they say anything?" said Cicely, scarcely listening to him; "didn't they make any objection?" This was a shock of a new kind which she was not prepared for. "I beg your pardon," she cried; "they had no right to make any objection; but didn't they say anything at least—about papa?"

What was Mildmay to answer? He hesitated scarcely a moment, but her quick eye saw it.

"A great deal," he said eagerly; "they said, as every one must, that Mr. St. John's long devotion——"

"Don't try to deceive me," said Cicely, with a smile of desperation. "I see you do not mean it. They did not say anything sincere. They were delighted to

receive a new rector, a new neighbour, young and happy and well off——"

"Miss St. John——"

"Yes, I know; it is quite natural, quite right. I have nothing to say against it. Papa has only been here for twenty years, knowing all their troubles, doing things for them which he never would have done for himself; but—'Le roi est mort; vive le roi!'" cried the impetuous girl in a flash of passion; in the strength of which she suddenly calmed down, and, smiling, turned to him again. "Is it not a pretty house? and Mrs. Ascott is very pretty too—has been, people say, but I think it is hard to say, has been. She is not young, but she has the beauty of her age."

"I take very little interest in Mrs. Ascott," said Mildmay, "seeing I never saw her till to-day; but I take a great deal of interest in what you were saying this morning."

"You never saw any of us till yesterday, Mr. Mildmay."

"I suppose that is quite true. I cannot help it—it is different. Miss St. John, I don't know what you would think of the life I have been living, but yours has had a great effect upon me. What am I to do? you have unsettled me, you have confused my mind and all my intentions. Now tell me what to do."

"I," said Cicely aghast. "Oh, if I could only see a little in advance, if I could tell what to do myself!"

"You cannot slide out of it like this," he said; "nay, pardon me, I don't mean to be unkind; but what am I to do?"

Cicely looked at him with a rapid revulsion of feeling from indignation to friendliness. "Oh," she cried, "can't you fancy how a poor girl, so helpless as I am, is driven often to say a great deal more than she means? What can we do,

we girls?—say out some of the things that choke us, that make our hearts bitter within us, and then be sorry for it afterwards? that is all we are good for. We cannot go and do things like you men, and we feel all the sharper, all the keener, because we cannot *do*. Mr. Mildmay, all that I said was quite true; but what does that matter? a thing may be wrong and false to every principle, and yet it cannot be helped. You ought not to have the living; papa ought to have it; but what then? No one will give it to papa, and if you don't take it some one else will; therefore, take it, though it is wicked and a cruel wrong. It is not your fault, it is —I don't know whose fault. One feels as if it were God's fault sometimes," cried Cicely; "but that must be wrong; the world is all wrong and unjust, and hard—hard; only sometimes there is somebody who is very kind, very good, who makes

you feel that it is not God's fault, and you forgive even the world."

She put up her hand to wipe the tears from those young shining eyes, which indignation and wretchedness and tears only made the brighter. Cicely was thinking of the butcher—you will say no very elevated thought. But Mildmay, wondering, and touched to the heart, asked himself, with a suppressed throb of emotion, could she mean him ?

"I am going back to Oxford," he said hastily. "I shall not go to town. The first thing I do will be to see everybody concerned, and to tell them what you say. Yes, Miss St. John, you are right; it is wicked and wrong that I or any one should have it while your father is here. I will tell the Master so, I will tell them all so. It shall not be my fault if Mr. St. John does not have his rights."

They were close to the rectory gate,

and as fire communicates to fire, the passionate impulse and fervour of Cicely's countenance had transferred themselves to Mr. Mildmay, whose eyes were shining, and his cheeks flushed with purpose like her own. Cicely was not used to this rapid transmission of energy. She gazed at him half frightened. Usually her interlocutor did all that was possible to calm her down—wondered at her, blamed her a little, chilled her vehemence with surprised or disapproving looks. This new companion who caught fire at her was new to the girl. She was half alarmed at what she had done.

"Will you do so, really?" she said, the tears starting to her eyes. "O Mr. Mildmay, perhaps I am wrong! Papa would not advise you so. He would say he never asked for anything in his life, and that he would not be a beggar for a living now. And think—perhaps I

should not have said half so much if I could have done anything. I am too ignorant and too inexperienced for any one to be guided by me."

"Yes, you are ignorant," cried the young man. "You don't know the sophistries with which we blind ourselves and each other. You dare to think what is right and what is wrong—and, for once in my life, so shall I."

The moisture that had been gathering dropped all at once in two great unexpected tears out of Cicely's eyes. Her face lighted like the sky when the sun rises, a rosy suffusion as of dawn came over her. Her emotion was so increased by surprise that even now she did not know what to think. In the least likely quarter all at once, in her moment of need, she had found sympathy and succour; and I think perhaps that even the most strong and self-sustaining do not

know how much they have wanted sympathy and comprehension until it comes. It made Cicely weak, not strong. She felt that she could have sat down on the roadside and cried. She had an idiotic impulse to tell him everything, and especially about the butcher—how kind he had been. These impulses passed through her mind mechanically, or, as one ought to say nowadays, automatically; but Cicely, who had no notion of being an automaton, crushed them in the bud. And what she really would have said in the tumult of her feelings, beyond what the look in her eyes said, behind the tears, I cannot tell, if it had not been that the curate came forth leisurely at that moment from the rectory, making it necessary that tears and every other evidence of emotion should be cleared away.

"Cicely, it is just time for dinner," he

said. "You should not walk, my dear, in the heat of the day; and Mr. Mildmay, too, must be tired, and want something to refresh him. It is a long time since breakfast," said the gentle curate, opening the door that his guest might prece him. Mr. St. John was not a great eater, but he had a mild, regular appetite, and did not like any disrespect to the dinner hour.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW TO EXERCISE CHURCH PATRONAGE.

Mildmay made his way back to Oxford without any delay. He knew that the Master of the college, who was a man with a family, had not yet set out on the inevitable autumn tour. But I must add that, though no man could have been more anxious to obtain preferment in his own person than he was to transfer his preferment to another, yet various doubts of the practicability of what he was going to attempt interfered, as he got further and further from Brentburn, with the enthusiasm which had sprung up so

warmly in Cicely's presence. It would be very difficult, he felt, to convey to the Master the same clear perception of the rights of the case as had got into his own head by what he had seen and heard at the rectory; and if all he made by his hesitation was to throw the living into the hands of Ruffhead! For Brentburn was no longer an indifferent place—the same as any other in the estimation of the young don; quite the reverse; it was very interesting to him now. Notwithstanding the bran-new church, he felt that no other parish under the sun was half so attractive. The churchyard, with those two narrow threads of paths; the windows, with the lights in them, which glimmered within sight of the grave; the old-fashioned, sunny garden; the red cottages, with not one wall which was not awry, and projecting at every conceivable angle; the common, with its flush of

heather—all these had come out of the unknown, and made themselves plain and apparent to him. He felt Brentburn to be in a manner his own; a thing which he would be willing to give to Mr. St. John, or rather to lend him for his life-time; but he did not feel the least inclination to let it fall into the hands of any other man. Neither did he feel inclined to do as Mr. Chester, the late rector, had done—to expatriate himself, and leave the work of his parish to the curate in charge. Besides, he could not do this, for he was in perfect health; and he could neither tell the necessary lie himself, nor, he thought, get any doctor to tell it for him. As he got nearer and nearer to the moment which must decide all these uncertainties, he got more and more confused and troubled in his mind. The Master was the college, as it happened at that moment; he was by far the most

influential and the most powerful person in it; and what he said was the thing that would be done. Mildmay accordingly took his way with very mingled feelings, across the quadrangle to the beautiful and picturesque old house in which this potentate dwelt. Had he any right to attempt to make such a bargain as was in his mind? It was enough that the living had been offered to him. What had he to say but yes or no?

The Master's house was in a state of confusion when Mildmay entered it. The old hall was full of trunks, the oaken staircase encumbered with servants and young people running up and down in all the bustle of a move. Eight children of all ages, and half as many servants, was the Master—brave man!—about to carry off to Switzerland. The packing was terrible, and not less terrible the feelings of the heads of the expedition, who were

at that moment concluding their last calculation of expenses, and making up little bundles of circular notes. "Here is Mr. Mildmay," said the Master's wife, "and, thank Heaven! this reckoning up is over;" and she escaped with a relieved countenance, giving the new comer a smile of gratitude. The head of the college was slightly flustrated, if such a vulgar word can be used of such a sublime person. I hope no one will suspect me of Romanizing tendencies, but perhaps a pale ecclesiastic, worn with thought, and untroubled by children, would have been more like the typical head of a college than this comely yet careworn papa. The idea, however, flashed through Mildmay's mind, who had the greatest reverence for the Master, that these very cares, this evident partaking of human nature's most ordinary burdens, would make the great don feel for the poor

curate. Does not a touch of nature make the whole world kin?

"Well, Mildmay," said the Master, "come to say good-bye? You are just in time. We are off to-night by the Antwerp boat, which we have decided is the best way with our enormous party." Here the good man sighed. "Where are you going? You young fellows don't know you're born, as people say—coming and going, whenever the fancy seizes you, as light as a bird. Ah! wait till you have eight children, my dear fellow, to drag about the world."

"That could not be for some time, at least," said Mildmay, with a laugh; "but I am not so disinterested in my visit as to have come merely to say good-bye. I wanted to speak to you about Brentburn."

"Ah—oh," said the Master; "to be sure, your living. You have been to see it? Well! and how do you think it will

feel to be an orderly rector, setting a good example, instead of enjoying yourself, and collecting crockery here?"

That was a cruel speech, and Mildmay grew red at the unworthy title crockery; but the Master's savage sentiments on this subject were known. What is a man with eight children to be expected to know about rare china?

"I believe there are much better collections than mine in some country rectories," he said; "but, never mind; I want to speak to you of something more interesting than crockery. I do not think I can take Brentburn."

The Master framed his lips into that shape which in a profane and secular person would have produced a whistle of surprise. "So!" he said, "you don't like it? But I thought you were set upon it. All the better for poor Ruffhead, who will now be able to marry after all."

"That is just what I wanted to speak to you about," said Mildmay, embarrassed. "I don't want it to fall to Ruffhead. Listen, before you say anything! I don't want to play the part of the dog in the manger. Ruffhead is young, and so am I; but, my dear Master, listen to me. The curate in charge, Mr. St. John, is not young; he has been twenty years at Brentburn, a laborious excellent clergyman. Think how it would look in any other profession, if either Ruffhead or I should thus step over his head."

"The curate in charge!" said the Master, bewildered. "What are you talking about? What has he to do with it? I know nothing about your curate in charge."

"Of course you don't; and therefore there seemed to be some hope in coming to tell you. He is a member of our own college; that of itself is something. He

used to know you, he says, long ago, when he was an undergraduate. He has been Chester's curate at Brentburn, occupying the place of the incumbent, and doing everything for twenty years; and now that Chester is dead, there is nothing for him but to be turned out at a moment's notice, and to seek his bread, at over sixty, somewhere else—and he has children too."

This last sentence was added at a venture to touch the Master's sympathies; but I don't think that dignitary perceived the application; for what is there in common between the master of a college and a poor curate? He shook his head with, however, that sympathetic gravity and deference towards misfortune which no man who respects himself ever refuses to show.

"St. John, St. John?" he said. "Yes, I think I recollect the name: very tall—

stoops—a peaceable sort of being? Yes. So he's Chester's curate? Who would have thought it? I suppose he started in life as well as Chester did, or any of us. What has possessed him to stay so long there?"

"Well—he is, as you say, a peaceable, mild man; not one to push himself——"

"*Push* himself!" cried the Master; "not much of that, I should think. But even if you don't push yourself, you needn't stay for twenty years a curate. What does he mean by it? I am afraid there must be something wrong."

"And I am quite sure there is nothing wrong," cried Mildmay, warmly, "unless devotion to thankless work, and forgetfulness of self is wrong; for that is all his worst enemy can lay to his charge."

"You are very warm about it," said the Master, with some surprise; "which

does you credit, Mildmay. But, my dear fellow, what do you expect me—what do you expect the college to do? We can't provide for our poor members who let themselves drop out of sight and knowledge. Perhaps if you don't take the living, and Ruffhead does, you might speak to him to keep your friend on as curate. But I have nothing to do with that kind of arrangement. And I'm sure you will excuse me when I tell you we start to-night."

"Master," said Mildmay solemnly, "when you hear of a young colonel of thirty promoted over the head of an old captain of twice his age, what do you say?"

"Say, sir!" cried the Master, whose sentiments on this, as on most other subjects, were well known; "say! why I say it's a disgrace to the country. I say it's the abominable system of purchase

which keeps our best soldiers languishing. Pray, what do you mean by that smile? You know I have no patience to discuss such a question; and I cannot see what it has to do with what we were talking of," he added abruptly, breaking off with a look of defiance, for he suddenly saw the mistake he had made in Mildmay's face.

"Hasn't it?" said the other. "If you will think a moment—Ruffhead and I are both as innocent of parochial knowledge as—as little Ned there." (Ned at this moment had come to the window which opened upon the garden, and, knocking with impatient knuckles, had summoned his father out.) "Mr. St. John has some thirty years' experience, and is thoroughly known and loved by the people. What can anybody think—what can any one say—if one of us miserable subalterns is put over that veteran's head? Where

but in the Church could such a thing be done—without at least such a clamour as would set half England by the ears?"

"Softly, softly," cried the Master. "(Get away, you little imp. I'll come presently.) You mustn't abuse the Church, Mildmay. Our arrangements may be imperfect, as indeed all arrangements are which are left in human hands. But, depend upon it, the system is the best that could be devised; and there is no real analogy between the two professions. A soldier is helpless who can only buy his promotion, and has no money to buy it with. But a clergyman has a hundred ways of making his qualifications known, and as a matter of fact I think preferment is very justly distributed. I have known dozens of men, with no money and very little influence, whose talents and virtues alone—but you must know that as well as I do. In this case there must be

something behind—something wrong—extreme indolence, or incapacity, or something——"

"There is nothing but extreme modesty, and a timid retiring disposition."

"Yes, yes, yes," cried the Master; "these are the pretty names for it. Indolence which does nothing for itself, and hangs a dead weight upon friends. Now, tell me seriously and soberly, why do you come to me with this story? What, in such a case, do you suppose I can do?"

"If you were a private patron," said Mildmay, "I should say boldly, I have come to ask you to give this living to the best man—the man who has a right to it; not a new man going to try experiments like myself, but one who knows what he is doing, who has done all that has been done there for twenty years. I would say you were bound to exercise your private judgment on behalf of the parish in pre-

ference to all promises or supposed rights; and that you should offer the living of Brentburn to Mr. St. John without an hour's delay."

"That is all very well," said the Master scratching his head, as if he had been a rustic clodhopper, instead of a learned and accomplished scholar, "and very well put, and perhaps true. I say, *perhaps* true, for of course this is only one side of the question. But I am not a private patron. I am only a sort of trustee of the patronage, exercising it in conjunction with various other people. Come, Mildmay, you know as well as I do, poor old St. John, though his may be a hard case, has no claim whatever upon the college; and if you don't accept it, there's Ruffhead and two or three others who have a right to their chance. You may be sure Ruffhead won't give up his chance of marriage and domestic bliss for any poor curate.

Of course the case, as you state it, is hard. What does the parish say?"

"The parish! I was not there long enough to find out the opinion of the parish."

"Ah, you hesitate. Look here, Mildmay; if I were a betting man, I'd give you odds, or whatever you call it, that the parish would prefer you."

"It is impossible; or, if they did, it would only be a double wrong." But Mildmay's voice was not so confident as when he had been pleading Mr. St. John's cause, and his eyes fell before the Master's penetrating eyes.

"A wrong if you like, but it's human nature," said the Master, with some triumph. "I will speak to the Dean about it, if I see him this afternoon, and I'll speak to Singleton. If they think anything of your arguments, I shan't oppose. But I warn you I don't think it

the least likely. His age, if there were nothing else, is against him, rather than in his favour. We don't want parishes hampered with an old man past work."

"He is just as old being curate as if he were rector."

"Yes, yes. But to give him the living now, at his age, would be to weight the parish with him till he was a hundred, and destroy the chance for young men like yourself. *You* don't mind, but I can tell you Ruffhead does. No, no. Singleton will never hear of it; and what can I do? I am going away."

"Singleton will do whatever you tell him," said Mildmay; "and you could write even though you are going away."

"Hush, hush," said the Master, with a half laugh, "that is all a popular delusion. Singleton is the most independent-minded man I know—and the others are as obstinate as pigs. Talk of

turning them as one likes! Poor old St. John, though! we might hear of another place to suit him, perhaps. He has something of his own, I suppose—some private income? How many children has he? of course, being only a curate, he must have heaps of children. (Coming, you rascal! coming, Ned.)"

"He has two daughters grown up," said Mildmay, "and two small children; and so far as I can judge is—— What is there to laugh at?" he added, with a look of the greatest surprise.

"So, so; he has *daughters?*" said the Master, with a burst of genial laughter. "That is it? Don't blush, my dear fellow; as good men as you have been in the same predicament. Go and marry her, which will be much more sensible; and I hope Miss St. John is everything that is pretty and charming for your sake."

Perhaps Mildmay blushed, but he was not aware of it. He felt himself grow pale in a white heat of passion. "This is a very poor joke," he said. "Excuse me, Master, if I must say so. I speak to you of an injury to the Church, and a serious wrong to one of her priests, and you answer me with a jest most inappropriate to the occasion. I saw Miss—I mean Mr. St. John and his family for the first time two days ago. Personal feeling of any kind has not been my inducement to make this appeal to your sense of justice. But I have made a mistake, it seems. Good morning! I will not detain you more."

"Why, Mildmay! a man may have his joke. Don't take it in this tragical way. And don't be so withering in your irony about my sense of justice," said the Master, with a laugh, half apologetic, half angry. But he did not ask the

young man to sit down again. "Justice goes both ways," he added; "and I have justice to the college, and justice to its more distinguished members, and even to the parish, for whose good we are called upon to act—to consider; as well as justice to Mr. St. John, which really is not our affair. But, my dear fellow, all this is very admirable in you—and don't think I fail to see that, though you say I made a poor joke. Yes, I am in a hurry, there is no denying it; but I'll see Singleton, and leave the matter in his hands. Meet you in the Oberland, eh? My wife talks of St. Moritz, but we never can drag the children all that way. Goodbye."

Mildmay marched out of the old house with all his pulses tingling. It seemed to him that poor Cicely, in the midst of all the anxieties that lurked in her young eyes, had been insulted. Was it that

sort of folly he was thinking of, or she, poor girl, who had said nothing to him but reproaches? But yet, I will allow, that absolutely innocent as he felt of any such levity, the accusation excited him more, perhaps, than was needful. He could not forget or forgive it, as one forgives a sorry jest at one's own expense, the reason being, he said to himself, that it was an insult to her, and that this insult had come upon a young innocent creature through him, which was doubly hard. He was still tingling with this blow, when he met his second in succession, so to speak, Mr. Ruffhead, who was serving a curacy near Oxford, and who had a slight unspoken, unacknowledged grudge at his brother Fellow who had been preferred before himself. Mildmay, in his excitement, laid hold upon this probable heir of his, in case he should give up Brentburn, and poured the whole

story into his ears, asking with some heat and passion for his advice. I don't see how I can take the living over Mr. St. John's head; it seems to me the most terrible injustice," he cried.

Mr. Ruffhead shook his head.

"You must not ask my advice," said that sensible person. "If you don't take it, and it's offered to me, I shall of course. I don't know Mr. St. John, and if one neglected one's own interests for every hard case one heard of, where would one be? I can't afford to play with my chances. I daresay you think I am very hard-hearted; but that is what I should do."

This plain declaration of sentiment subdued Mildmay, and brought him back to matters of fact. "I suppose you are right; but I have not made up my mind to decline the living," he said coldly, and did not ask Ruffhead to dinner as he had

at first intended. No man, they say, likes his heir, and this kind of inheritance was doubly disagreeable to think of. Certainly, if the only alternative was Ruffhead and his honeymooning (which somehow it disgusted Mildmay to think of, as of something almost insulting to himself), it would be better, much better, that he himself should take Brentburn. He would not give it up only to see it passed on to this commonplace fellow, to enable him, forsooth, to marry some still more commonplace woman. Good heavens! was that the way to traffic with a cure of souls? He went back to his beautiful rooms in a most disturbed state of mind, and drew up impatiently the blinds which were not intended to be drawn up. The hot August light came in scorching and broad over all his delights, and made him loathe them; he tripped upon, and kicked away to the end

of the room, a rug for which you or I, dear reader, would have given one of our ears; and jerked his Italian tapestry to one side, and I think, if good sense had not restrained him, would have liked to take up his very best bit of china and smash it into a hundred pieces. But after a while he smiled at himself, and reduced the blaze of daylight to a proper artistic tone, and tried to eat some luncheon. Yesterday at the same hour he had shared the curate's dinner, with Cicely at the head of the table, looking at him with sweet eyes, in which there was still the dewy look of past tears. She had the house and all its cares upon her delicate shoulders, that girl; and her innocent name had been made the subject of a jest—through him!

CHAPTER V.

THE ARTIST AND THE HOUSEKEEPER.

I do not suppose that Cicely St. John had really any hope in her new acquaintance, or believed, when she looked at the matter reasonably, that his self-renunciation, if he had the strength of mind to carry it out, would really secure for her father the living of Brentburn. But yet a certain amount of faith is natural at her years, and she was vaguely strengthened and exhilarated by that suppressed expectation of something pleasant that might possibly happen, which is so great an element in human happiness; and, with this comfort her in

soul, went about her work, preparing for the worst, which, to be sure, notwithstanding her hope, was, she felt, inevitable. Mab, when the stranger's enthusiastic adoption of her sister's suggestion was told to her, accepted it for her part with delight, as a thing settled. A true artist has always more or less a practical mind. However strong his imagination may be, he does not confine himself to fancies, or even words, but makes something tangible and visible out of it, and this faculty more or less shapes the fashion of his thinking. Mab, who possessed in addition that delightful mixture of matter-of-factness which is peculiar to womankind, seized upon the hope and made it into reality. She went to her work as gaily as if all the clouds had been in reality dispersed from her path. This time it was little Annie, the nursemaid—Cicely having interfered to protect

the babies from perpetual posing—who supplied her with the necessary "life." Annie did not much like it. She would have been satisfied, indeed, and even proud, had "her picture" been taken in her best frock, with all her Sunday ribbons; but to be thrust into a torn old dingy garment, with bare feet, filled the little handmaiden with disgust and rage great enough for a full-grown woman. "Folks will think as I hain't got no decent clothes," she said; and Mab's injudicious consolation, to the effect that "folks would never see the picture," did not at all mend the matter. Cicely, however, drew up her slight person, and "looked Miss St. John," according to Mab's description; and Annie was cowed. There were at least twenty different representations in Mab's sketch-books of moments in which Cicely had looked Miss St. John; and it was Mab's conviction in

life as well as in art that no opponent could stand before such a demonstration. Barefooted, in her ragged frock, Annie did not look an amiable young person, which, I am ashamed to say, delighted the artist. "She will do for the naughty little girl in the fairy tale, the one with toads and frogs dropping from her lips," cried Mab, in high glee. "And if it comes well I shall send it to Mr. Mildmay, to show we feel how kind he is."

"Wait till he has been kind," said Cicely, shaking her head. "I always liked the naughty little girl best, not that complacent smiling creature who knew she had been good, and whom everybody praised. Oh, what a pity that the world is not like a fairy tale! where the good are always rewarded, and even the naughty, when they are sorry. If we were to help any number of old women, what would it matter now?"

"But I suppose," said Mab, somewhat wistfully, for she distrusted her sister's words, which she did not understand, and was afraid people might think Cicely Broad Church, "I suppose whatever may happen in the meantime, it all comes right in the end?"

"Papa is not so very far from the end, and it has not come right for him."

"O Cicely, how can you talk so! Papa is not so old. He will live years and years yet!" cried Mab, her eyes filling.

"I hope so. Oh, I hope so! I did not think of merely living. But he cannot get anything very great now, can he, to make up for so long waiting? So long —longer," said Cicely, with a little awe, thinking of that enormous lapse of time, "than we have been alive!"

"If he gets the living, he will not want anything more," said Mab, blithely

working away with her charcoal. "How delightful it will be! More than double what we have now? Fancy! After all, you will be able to furnish as you said."

"But not in amber satin," said Cicely, beguiled into a smile.

"In soft, soft Venetian stuff, half green, half blue, half no colour at all. Ah! she has moved! Cicely, Cicely, go and talk to her, for heaven's sake, or my picture will be spoilt!"

"If you please, miss, I can't stop here no longer. It's time as I was looking after the children. How is Betsy to remember in the middle of her cooking the right time to give 'em their cod-liver oil?"

"I'll go and look after the children," said Cicely. "What you have got to do, Annie, is to stop here."

Upon which Annie burst into floods of tears, and fell altogether out of pose.

"There ain't no justice in it!" she said. "I'm put up here to look like a gispy or a beggar; and mother will never get over it, after all her slaving and toiling to get me decent clothes!"

Thus it will be perceived that life studies in the domestic circle are very difficult to manage. After a little interval of mingled coaxing and scolding, something like the lapsed attitude was recovered, and Annie brought back into obedience. "If you will be good, I'll draw a picture of you in your Sunday frock to give to your mother," said Mab —a promise which had too good an effect upon her model, driving away the clouds from her countenance; and Cicely went away to administer the cod-liver oil. It was not a very delightful office, and I think that now and then, at this crisis, it seemed to Cicely that Mab had the best of it, with her work, which was a delight

to her, and which occupied both her mind and her fingers; care seemed to fly the moment she got that charcoal in her hand. There was no grudge in this sense of disadvantage. Nature had done it, against which there is no appeal. I don't think, however, that care would have weighed heavily on Mab, even if she had not been an artist. She would have hung upon Cicely all the same if her occupation had been but needlework, and looked for everything from her hands.

But it was not until Annie was released, and could throw off the ragged frock in which she had been made picturesque, and return to her charge, that Cicely could begin the more important business that waited for her. She took this quite quietly, not thinking it necessary to be on the look-out for a grievance, and took her work into the nursery, where the two babies were playing in a solemn sort of

way. They had their playthings laid out upon the floor, and had some mild little squabbles over them. "Zat's Harry's!" she heard again and again, mingled with faint sounds of resistance. The children were very mysterious to Cicely. She was half afraid of them as mystic incomprehensible creatures, to whom everybody in heaven and earth did injustice. After a while she put down her work and watched them play. They had a large box of bricks before them, playthings which Cicely herself well remembered, and the play seemed to consist in one little brother diving into the long box in search of one individual brick, which, when he produced it, the other snatched at, saying, "Zat's Harry's." Charley, who wanted both his hands to swim with on the edge of the box, did not have his thumb in his mouth this time; but he was silenced by the unvarying claim.

They did not laugh, nor did they cry, as other children do; but sat over the box of bricks, in a dumb conflict, of which it was impossible to tell whether it was strife or play.

"Are they all Harry's?" asked Cicely, suddenly moved to interfere. The sound of the voice startled the little creatures on the floor. They turned right round, and contemplated her from the carpet with round and wondering eyes.

"Zat's Harry's," said the small boy over again with the iteration common to children. Charley was not prepared with any reply. He put his thumb into his mouth in default of any more extended explanation. Cicely repeated her question—I fear raising her voice, for patience was not Cicely's forte; whereupon Harry's eyes, who was the boldest, got bigger and bigger, and redder and redder, with fright, and Charley began

to whimper. This irritated the sister much. "You little silly things!" she said, "I am not scolding you. What are you crying for? Come here, Harry, and tell me why you take all the bricks? They are Charley's too."

Children are the angels of life; but they are sometimes little demons for all that. To see these two pale little creatures sitting half dead with fright, gazing at her sunny young countenance as if she were an ogre, exasperated Cicely. She jumped up, half laughing, half furious, and at that movement the babies set up a unanimous howl of terror. This fairly daunted her, courageous as she was. She went back to her seat again, having half a mind to cry too. "I am not going to touch you," said Cicely piteously. "Why are you frightened at me? If you will come here I will tell you a story." She was too

young to have the maternal instinct so warmly developed as to make her all at once, without rhyme or reason, "fond of" her little half-brothers; but she was anxious to do her duty, and deeply wounded that they did not "take to her." Children, she said to herself with an internal whisper of self-pity, had always taken to her before; and she was not aware of that instinctive resistance, half defiance, half fright, which seems to repel the child-dependant from those whose duty it is to take care of it—most unreasonable, often most cruel, but yet apparently most universal of sentiments. Is it that the very idea of a benefactor, even before the mind is capable of comprehending what it is, sets nature on edge? This was rather a hard lesson for the girl, especially as, while they were still howling, little Annie burst in indignant, and threw herself down beside the

children, who clung to her, sobbing, one on each side. "You have made 'em cry, miss," cried Annie, "and missus's orders was as they was never to be allowed to cry. It is very dangerous for boys; it busts their little insides. Did she frighten 'em, then? the naughty lady. Never mind, never mind, my precious! Annie's here."

To see this child spread out upon the floor with these chicks under her wings would have been amusing to a cool spectator. But Cicely did not take it in that light. She waited till the children were pacified, and had returned to their play, and then she took the little nurse-maid by the arm, and led her to the door. "You are not to enter this room again or come near the children," she said, in a still voice which made Annie tremble. "If you make a noise I will beat you. Go downstairs to your sister, and I will

see you afterwards. Not a word! I have nothing more to say to you here."

Cicely went back again to her seat trembling with the excitement of the moment, and then said to herself, what a fool she was! but, oh! what a much greater fool Miss Brown had been to leave this legacy of trouble to two girls who had never done any harm to her. "Though, I suppose," Cicely added to herself with a sense of justice, "she was not thinking about us." And indeed it was not likely that poor Mrs. St. John had brought these babies into the world solely to bother her husband's daughters. Poor Cicely, who had a thousand other things to do, and who already felt that it was impolitic, though necessary, to dismiss Annie, pondered long, gazing at those pale-faced and terrible infants, how she was to win them over, which looked as hard as any of her other painful pieces

of business. At last some kind fairy put it into her head to sing: at which the two turned round once more upon their bases solemnly, and stared at her, intermitting their play till the song was finished. Then an incident occurred almost unparalleled in the nursery chronicles of Brentburn. Charley took his thumb out of his mouth, and looking up at her with his pale eyes, said of his own accord, "Adain."

"Come here then, and sit on my lap," said Cicely, holding out her hand. There was a momentary struggle between terror and gathering confidence, and then pushing himself up by the big box of bricks Charley approached gradually, keeping a wary eye upon her movements. Once on her lap, however, the little adventurer felt himself comfortable. She was soft and pleasant, and had a bigger shoulder to support him and a longer arm to enfold

him than Annie. He leant back against her, feeling the charm of that softness and sweetness, though he did not know how. "Adain," said Charley; and put his thumb in his mouth with all the feelings of a connoisseur in a state of perfect bodily ease prepared to enjoy the *morceau* specially given at his desire.

Thus Cicely conquered the babies once for all. Harry, too much astounded by thus seeing his lead taken from him to make any remonstrance, followed his brother in dumb surprise, and stood against her, leaning on her knee. They made the prettiest group; for, as Mab said, even when they are ugly, how pretty children are! and they "compose" so beautifully with a pretty young woman, making even a commonplace mother into a Madonna and Lady of Blessing. Cicely sang them a song, so very low down in the scale at once both of music and of

poetry that I dare not shock the refined reader by naming it, especially after that well-worn comparison; and this time both Harry and Charley joined in the encore, the latter too happy to think of withdrawing that cherished thumb from his mouth, murmuring thickly, "Adain."

"But, oh, what a waste of time—what a waste of time it will be!" cried poor Cicely, when she took refuge in the garden, putting the delicate children to play upon a great rug, stretched on the grass. "To be sure there will be one mouth less to feed, which is always something. You must help me a little while I write my letters, Mab."

"Who are you going to write to?" said Mab, with colloquial incorrectness which would have shocked out of their senses the Miss Blandys, and all the excellent persons concerned in bringing her up. "Oh yes, I will try to help; but won't

you forgive Annie, just for this little time, and let her stay?"

"I can't be defied in my own house," said Cicely, erecting her head with an air which frightened Mab herself; "and I must take to it sooner or later. Wherever we go, it is I that must look after them. Well! it will be a trouble at first; but I shall like it when I get fond of them. Mab, we ought to be fond of them now."

Mab looked at the children, and then laughed. "I don't hate them," she said; "they are such funny little things, as if they had been born about a hundred years before their time. I believe, really, they are not children at all, but old, old men, that know a great deal more than we do. I am sure that Charley could say something very wonderful if he liked. He has a great deal in him, if he would but take his thumb out of his mouth."

"Charley is my boy," said Cicely, brightening up; "he is the one I like best."

"I like him best, too. He is the funniest. Are you going to write there?"

"I must keep my eye upon them," said Cicely, with great solemnity. She was pleased with her victory, and felt it to be of the most prodigious importance that she should not lose the "influence" she had gained; for she was silly, as became her age, as well as wise. She had brought out her little desk—a very commonplace little article, indeed, of rosewood, with brass bindings—and seated herself under the old mulberry-tree, with the wind ruffling her papers, and catching in the short curling locks about her forehead. (N.B.—Don't suppose, dear reader, that she had cut them short; those stray curls were carefully

smoothed away under the longer braids when she brushed her hair; but the breeze caught them in a way which vexed Cicely as being untidy). It was as pretty a garden scene as you could see; the old mulberry bending down its heavy branches, the babies on the rug at the girl's feet; but yet, when you look over Cicely's shoulder, a shadow falls upon the pretty scene. She had two letters to write, and something still less agreeable than her letters—an advertisement for the *Guardian*. This was very difficult, and brought many a sigh from her young breast.

"'An elderly clergyman who has filled the office of curate for a very long time in one parish, finding it now necessary to make a change, desires to find a similar——'"

"Do you think that will do?" said Mab. "It is as if poor papa were a

butler, or something—'filled the office of curate for a long time in one parish' —it does not sound nice."

"We must not be bound by what sounds nice," said Cicely. "It is not nice, in fact—is it? How hard it is to put even such a little thing as this as one ought! Will this do better?—'A clergyman, who has long occupied the position of curate in charge, in a small parish, wishes to hear of a similar——' What, Mab? I cannot say situation, can I? that is like a butler again. Oh, dear, dear; it is so very much like a butler altogether. Tell me a word."

"Position," said Mab.

"But I have just said position. 'A clergyman who has long held the—an *appointment* as curate in charge'—there, that is better—'wishes to hear of a similar position in a small parish.' I think that will do."

"Isn't there a Latin word? *Locum* something or other; would not that be more dignified?" said Mab.

"*Locum tenens.* I prefer English," said Cicely; "and now I suppose we must say something about his opinions. Poor dear papa! I am sure I do not know whether he is High, or Low, or Broad."

"Not Broad," said Mab, pointedly; for she was very orthodox. "Say sound; I have often seen that, and it does not commit you to anything,—sound, but not extreme, like Miss Blandy's clergyman."

"'Of sound, but not extreme principles,'" wrote Cicely. "That sounds a little strange, for you might say that a man who could not tell a lie, but yet did not mind a fib, was sound, but not extreme. 'Church principles'—is that better? But I don't like that either.

Stop, I have it—'He is a sound, but not extreme Churchman'—that is the very thing—'and has much experience' (Ah, poor papa!) 'in managing a parish. Apply'—but that is another question. Where ought they to apply? We cannot give, I suppose, the full name and address here?"

"I wonder if any one will apply? But, Cicely, suppose all comes right, as I am sure it will, you may be deceiving some one, making them think—Here is the very person I want; and then how disappointed they will be!"

"Oh, if there is only *their* disappointment to think of! Mab, you must not think there is any reliance to be put on Mr. Mildmay. He meant it; yes, tears came into his eyes," cried Cicely, with a look of gratitude and pleasure in her own. "But when he goes back among those Oxford men, those dons, do you

think they will pay any attention to him? They will laugh at him; they will say he is a Quixote; they will turn it all into fun, or think it his folly."

"Why should Oxford dons be so much worse than other men?" said Mab, surprised. "Papa is an Oxford man—he is not hard-hearted. Dons, I suppose, are just like other people?"

"No," said Cicely, who was arguing against herself, struggling against the tide of fictitious hope, which sometimes threatened to carry her away. "They live by themselves among their books; they have nobody belonging to them; their hearts dry up, and they don't care for common troubles. Oh, I know it: they are often more heathens than Christians. I have no faith in those sort of people. He will have a struggle with them, and then he will find it to be of no use. I am as sure as if it had hap-

pened already," cried Cicely, her bright eyes sparkling indignant behind her tears.

"At least we need not think them so bad till we know," said Mab, more charitably.

Cicely had excited herself by this impassioned statement, in which indeed the Oxford men were innocent sufferers enough, seeing that she knew nothing about them. "I must not let myself believe it; I dare not let myself believe it," she said in her heart; "but, oh! if by chance things did happen *so!*" What abundant compensation, what lavish apology, did this impetuous young woman feel herself ready to offer to those maligned dons!

The advertisement was at last fairly written out, with the exception of the address to be given. "Papa may surely tell me where they are to apply," Cicely said, though with doubts in her mind as to whether he was good even for this;

and then she wrote her letters, one of which was in Mr. St. John's name to the lawyer who had written to him about the furniture, asking that the sale might not take place until the curate's half-year, which ended in the end of September, should be out. Mr. St. John would not do this himself. "Why should I ask any favour of those people who do not know me?" he said; but he had at length consented that Cicely might write "if she liked;" and in any case the lawyer's letter had to be answered. Cicely made this appeal as business-like as possible. "I wonder how a man would write who did not mind much—to whom this was only a little convenience," she said to her sister. "I don't want to go and ask as if one was asking a favour of a friend—as if we cared."

"But we do care; and it would be favour——"

"Never mind. I wish we knew what a man would say that was quite independent and did not care. 'If it is the same to you, it would be more convenient for me not to have the furniture disturbed till the 22nd of September'—that is the kind of thing. We girls always make too much of a favour of everything," said Cicely, writing; and she produced an admirable imitation of a business letter, to which she appended her own signature, "Cecil St. John," which was also her father's, with great boldness. The curate's handwriting was almost more womanlike than hers, for Cicely's generation are not taught to write Italian hands, and I do not think the lawyer suspected the sex of the production. When she had finished this, she wrote upon another sheet of paper, "My dear Aunt, I am——" and then she stopped sharply. "It is cool now, let us take

them out for a walk on the common," she said, shutting up her desk. "I can finish this to-night."

It was not, however, the walk on the common Cicely wanted, but to hide from her sister that the letter to Aunt Jane was much less easy than even those other dolorous pieces of business. Poor Cicely looked upon the life before her with a shudder. To live alone in some new place, where nobody knew her, as nurse-maid to these babies, and attendant upon her father, without her sweet companion, the little sister, who, though so near in age, had always been the protected one, the reliant dependent nature, believing in Cicely, and giving her infinite support by that belief! How could she do it? Yet she herself, who felt it most, must insist upon it; must be the one to arrange and settle it all, as so often happens. It would not be half so painful to Mab as to

Cicely; yet Mab would be passive in it, and Cicely active; and she could not write under Mab's smiling eyes betraying the sacrifice it cost her. Mab laughed at her sister's impetuosity, and concluded that it was exactly like Cicely to tire of her work all in a moment, and dash into something else. And, accordingly, the children's out-door apparel was got from the nursery, and the girls put on their hats, and strayed out by the garden door upon the common, with its heathery knolls and furze bushes. Harry and Charley had never in all their small lives had such a walk as this. The girls mounted them upon their shoulders, and ran races with them, Charley against Harry, till first one twin, and then the other, was beguiled into shrill little gusts of laughter: after which they were silent —themselves frightened by the unusual sound. But when the races ended,

Charley, certainly the hero of the day, opened his mouth and spoke, and said "Adain!" and this time when they laughed the babies were not frightened. Then they were set down and rolled upon the soft grass, and throned in mossy seats among the purple fragrant heather. What an evening it was! The sky all ablaze with the sunset, with clouds of rosy flame hanging like canopies over the faint delicious openings of that celestial green which belongs to a summer evening. The curate, coming from a distant round into the parish, which had occupied him all the day, found them on the grass under the big beech-tree, watching the glow of colour in the west. He had never seen his girls "taking to" his babies before so kindly, and the old man was glad.

"But it is quite late enough to have them out; they have been used to such early hours," he said.

"And Harry wants his tea," piped that small hero, with a half whimper.

Then the girls jumped up, and looked at each other, and Cicely grew crimson. Here was a beginning to make, an advantage terrible to think of, to be given to the dethroned Annie, who no doubt was enjoying it keenly. Cicely had already forgotten the children's tea!

CHAPTER VI.

REALITY.

CICELY wrote her letter to her aunt that evening, dropping some tears over it when Mab was not by to see; and almost as soon as it was possible she had a very kind answer, granting her request, and more. Aunt Jane declared that she would receive Mab with great delight, and do everything that could be done to further her art-studies, which, as the British Museum was near, and "a very good artist" lived next door to Miss Maydew, seemed likely to be something worth while. "She shall be to me like

my own child; though I have never concealed from either of you that you, Cicely, are my pet," wrote Miss Maydew; and she added a still more liberal invitation. "If you want to spend a few days anywhere between leaving Brentburn and going to the new place, wherever that may be, you must come here—babies and all. I can manage to find beds for you near; and it will be a nice little holiday for us all," said the kind woman. She even added a postscript, to the effect that, if there was a little money wanting at the time of the removal, Cicely was "not to hesitate" to apply to her: and what could woman do more? Sympathy and hospitality, and a little money, "i wanted." Alas! perhaps it is because the money is so sure to be wanted that so few people venture on such an offer; but Miss Maydew knew she was safe with Hester's child, who was so like her mother.

Cicely's other letter was successful, too. The lawyer who represented the Chester family was quite willing to postpone the sale until Mr. St. John's time was up. After all, the world is not so very bad as it is called. Nobody was cruel to the St. Johns. The tradespeople agreed to wait for their money. The Chesters would not for the world disturb the departing curate until he was ready to go; and Mrs. Ascott, and all the other great people in the parish, called and made much of the girls. The church was more full than usual every Sunday, for a vague expectation of a farewell (or, as old Mrs. Joel called it, a funeral) sermon was in the people's minds. A great many of them, now it came to the point, were very sorry that Mr. St. John was going. They would have signed freely anything that had been set before them to make the curate stay. But, neverthe-

less, they were all interested about his farewell sermon, and what he would say for himself, and what account he would give of various matters which stuck fast in their rustic recollections. Thus the weeks stole away quite placidly, and the harvest was got in, and August wore out under a great blazing moon with the utmost cheerfulness. One or two answers came to the advertisement in the *Guardian;* but they were not of an encouraging kind. Cicely felt that it was better to repeat it and wait; and her father was always pleased to wait under all circumstances; and the long bright days went away one by one in a kind of noiseless procession, which Cicely felt herself watch with a dreary dismay and restlessness. Nothing had happened yet to avert the calamity that was impending. Everything, on the contrary, seemed preparing for it—leading up to it—though still Mr.

St. John went "into the parish," and still all went on as usual at the rectory. The curate showed no symptom of feeling these last days different from any other; but the girls kept looking forward, and hoping for something, with a hope which gradually fell sick, and grew speechless —and nothing came.

One day when Mrs. Ascott called, Cicely had got into that state of exhaustion and strained anxiety when the mind grows desperate. She had been occupied with the children all day, not able to get free of them—Annie having finally departed, and Betsy, being too much displeased at the loss of her sister and subordinate to make any offer of help. The babies had grown more active and more loquacious under the changed *régime*, and this, though it was her own doing, increased poor Cicely's cares. Mab was upstairs preparing for her de-

parture, which was to be a few days before the general breaking up. Altogether when Mrs. Ascott came in, fresh and cool out of her carriage, Cicely was not in the best mood to receive her. She gave the children her work-basket to play with to keep them quiet, and cleared her own brow as best she could, as she stood up and welcomed the great lady. How fresh her toilette was, how unwrinkled her face! a woman altogether at ease, and ready to smile upon everything. She shook hands with Cicely, and took her seat with smiling prettiness. "I have come really on business," she said; "to see if we could be of any use to you, Cicely—in packing or any of your preparations; and to ask if the time is quite fixed? I suppose your papa must have heard from Mr. Mildmay, and that all is settled now?"

"All—settled?" said Cicely, faintly.

The words, so softly and prettily said, went into the girl's heart like a knife; and yet of course it was no more than she expected—no more.

"The appointment, as you would see, is in the paper to-day. I am so sorry your papa is going, my dear; but as he must go, and we cannot help it, at least we have reason to be thankful that we are getting such a good man as Mr. Mildmay. It will be some little compensation to the parish for losing Mr. St. John."

"Is it—in the papers?" said Cicely, feeling suddenly hoarse and unable to speak.

"You feel it, my poor dear child!—of course you must feel it—and so do we all. There will not be a dry eye in the whole church when Mr. St. John preaches his farewell sermon. To think that he should have been here so long—though

it is a little consolation, Mr. Ascott says, that we are getting a thorough gentleman, and so well connected—an admirable man."

"Consolation!" cried Cicely, raising her head. "What consolation is wanted? Papa is pretty well worn out; he has done almost as much work as a man can do. People cannot keep old things when they are worn out—the new are better; but why should any one pretend to make a moan over it? I do not see what consolation the parish can want. If you cry at the farewell sermon, Mrs. Ascott, I shall laugh. Why should not your eyes be dry—as dry as the fields—as dry as people's hearts?"

"Cicely, Cicely!" cried Mrs. Ascott, shocked; "my dear, I am very sorry for it, but a misfortune like this should be borne in a better spirit. I am sure your poor dear papa would say so; and it is nobody's fault."

"It is everybody's fault," cried Cicely, forgetting herself, getting up in her passion, and walking about the room; "the parish, and the Church, and all the world! Oh, you may smile! It does not touch you; you are well off; you cannot be put out of your home; you cannot have everything taken from you, and see everybody smiling pity upon you, and no one putting out a hand to help. Pity! we don't want pity," cried Cicely; "we want justice. How dare you all stand by and see it done? The Church, the Church! that everybody preaches about as if it was God, and yet that lets an old servant be so treated —an old servant that has worked so hard, never sparing himself! If this is the Church's doing, the Church is harder than the farmers—worse, worse than worldly people. Do you think God will be pleased because he is well connected?

or is it God's fault?" Here her voice broke with a sob and shudder, and suddenly dropping from her height of passion, Cicely said faintly, "Papa!"

"What is it?" said the curate, coming in. "Surely I heard something very strange. Mrs. Ascott, I beg your pardon; my ears must have deceived me. I thought Cicely must be repeating, to amuse herself, some speech, perhaps out of *Paradise Lost*. I have heard of some great man who was caught doing that, and frightened everybody who heard him," said Mr. St. John, shaking hands with the visitor with his friendly smile.

He sat down, weary and dusty from "the parish," and there was a painful pause. Cicely stole away to the corner where her little brothers were playing, her pulse bounding, her heart throbbing, her cheeks aflame, her whole being, soul

and body, full of the strong pain and violent stimulus of the shock she had received. She had never expected anything else, she said to herself; she had steadily prepared for the going away, the ruin that awaited them; but, nevertheless, her heart had never believed in it, since that conversation with Mildmay at the rectory gate. Day by day she had awoke with a certainty in her mind, never put into words, that the good news would come, that all would be well. But the shock did not crush her, as it does some people; it woke her up into freshened force and life; her heart seemed to thrill and throb, not so much with pain as with activity, and energy and power.

"Cicely is very much excited," said Mrs. Ascott in a low tone. "I fear she is very excitable; and she ought to be more careful in her position—a clergy-

man's daughter—what she says. I think you ought to speak to her, Mr. St. John. She flew at me (not that I mind that) and said such things—because I mentioned that Mr. Mildmay's appointment was in the paper this morning; and that since we must lose you—which nobody can be more sorry for than we are—it was well at least that we were getting so good a man."

"Ah!" said the curate. The announcement took him by surprise, and gave him a shock too, though of a different kind. He caught his breath after it, and panted for a moment. "Is it in the papers? I have not seen it. I have no time in the morning; and, besides, I never see the *Times*."

"We hope you will settle to dine with us one day before you go," said Mrs. Ascott. "How we shall miss you, Mr. St. John! I don't like to think of

it—and if we can be of any use in your preparations—— I hear there is to be a sale, too?"

"Not till we move. They will not put us to any inconvenience; indeed," said the curate, with a sigh and a smile, "everybody is very kind."

"I am sure everybody wishes to be kind," said Mrs. Ascott, with emphasis. "I must not take up your time any longer, for you look very tired after your rounds. But Mr. St. John, mark my words, you must hold a tight hand over Cicely. She uses expressions which a clergyman's daughter ought not to use."

"What were you saying to her, my dear?" said Mr. St. John, coming in again after he had taken the lady to her carriage; "your voice was raised, and you still look excited. What did you say?"

"It was nothing, papa. I lost my

temper—who could help it? I will never do it again. To think of *that* man calmly accepting the living and turning you out of it, after all he said."

"What good would it have done had he refused?" said Mr. St. John. "My dear, how could he help it?"

"Help it?" cried Cicely. "Can nobody help anything in this world? Must we stand by and see all manner of wrong done and take the advantage, and then think we are innocent and cannot help it. That is what I scorn. Let him do wrong if he will, and bear the blame—that is honest at least. But to say he cannot help it; how could he ever dare to give such a miserable excuse?"

"My dear," said the curate, "I am too tired to argue. I don't blame Mildmay; he has done just what was natural, and I am glad he is coming here; while in the meantime talking will do no good,

but I think my tea would do me good," he added with a smile.

Always tea, Cicely could not help thinking as she went away dutifully to prepare it—or dinner, or some trifle; never any serious thought of what was coming, of what had already come. She was young and impatient and unjust, as it is so natural to be at her years. The curate put his hand over his eyes when he was left alone. He was not disappointed or surprised. He had known exactly all along how it would be; but when it thus came upon him with such obvious and unmistakable reality, he felt it sharply. Twenty years! All that part of his life in which anything to speak of had happened to him, and—what was almost as hard to bear—all the familiar things which had framed in his life—the scene, the place, the people, the surroundings he was used to. He

had not even his favourite consolation, forlorn pride in never having asked anything, to sustain him, for that was no longer the case. He was asking something—a poor curacy, a priest's place for a piece of bread. The pang was momentary, but it was sharp. He got up, and stretched his long languid figure, and said to himself, "Ah, well! what is the good of thinking? It is soon enough to make oneself wretched when the moment comes," and then he went peacefully into the dining-room to tea. This was not how the younger people took it, but then perhaps they had more capacity for feeling left.

Next morning Cicely got a letter of a very unusual description, which affected her in no small degree. It was from Mildmay, and, perhaps, it will be best to give it in full here :—

"DEAR MISS ST. JOHN,

"I have delayed writing to you until I could make sure that you must have seen or heard of the announcement in the papers which will tell the results of my last three weeks' work. Do not think that our last conversation has been obliterated from my mind. Very far from that. I have seen the Master and all who are concerned, and have done my best to show them the step which bare justice required at their hands, but ineffectually. I made a point at the same time of ascertaining what were the views of the gentleman to whom Brentburn would be offered in case I refused it, and found him quite decided on the subject. What could I do then? Should I have declined and put myself entirely out of the way of being of any use at all?

"As a matter of simple justice, I refer the question to you. What am I to do

now? My thoughts on the subject have been many, I need not say, since I saw you. May I ask your father to continue at Brentburn as my curate? I am quite inexperienced; his assistance would be of infinite advantage to me; and, in point of fact, as is natural at our respective ages, I should be his curate, not he mine. May I do this? or what else can I do? The position in which I find myself is a painful one. It would have been much easier, I assure you, to have shuffled the whole matter off upon Ruffhead, and to have withdrawn. But I felt a responsibility upon me since I met you; and I ask you now urgently, feeling that I have almost a right to your advice, what am I to do?

"Yours very truly,

"ROGER MILDMAY."

This letter excited Cicely greatly. By

chance it arrived before the others had come into the breakfast-room, and she was able to read it without any looker-on. She put it hurriedly into her pocket before her father and sister appeared. She did not know what answer to make, neither did she feel comfortable about making any answer, and she said nothing about it all day; though—oh, how the letter burned her pocket and her mind! She had scarcely ever known what it was to have a secret before, and not to tell Mab seemed almost wrong. She felt that there was something clandestine about her, going up and down the house with that letter in her possession which nobody knew of. And to answer it—to answer it without any one knowing? This she could not do. She bore the burden of her secret all the day, and surprised Mab very much by her silence about Mr. Mildmay, whom the younger

sister abused roundly. "Perhaps it was not his fault," Cicely faltered. What had come over her? What change had happened? Mab was lost in amaze.

The difficulty, however, was solved in a very unexpected way. Next morning —no later—Mr. St. John himself had a letter from Oxford; a letter which made him change colour, and bend his meek brows, and then smile—but not like himself. "Cicely, this must be your doing," he said. "I never made any complaints to Mr. Mildmay, nor said anything to call for his pity. He asks me to be his curate," the old man added, after a pause, with a strange smile. No one had suspected that Mr. St. John was proud, until it became apparent all at once how proud he was.

"His curate—O papa! you will stay here, and never go away at all," cried Mab out of the fulness of her heart.

Cicely knew better. She grew pale, and to stop that outcry of inconvenient delight, grasped tightly her sister's hand.

"Stay here!" said Mr. St. John, smiling again. "No, Mab, I am not fallen so low as that, I hope. There is no need of a curate at Brentburn. If I could do without one, at double his age, what should he want with a curate? It is pity, pity! Oh yes, my dear, I know very creditable to him; but I did not expect—I never expected to be exposed. Cicely, have you that letter about the curacy in Liverpool? I should like to look at it again."

"But, papa, we agreed that it would not do; a bad town district full of dreadful people——"

"The more dreadful people are, the more they want to be looked after," he said. "Write and inquire about it, my dear; I am not particular. Work! that

is all I want, not idleness and charity. You all know I am old—but you don t know how much strength I have in me, nor how I like work!" he cried, with a quiver in his voice.

The shock had something of the same effect upon him now that it had previously had on Cicely. The latent pride in him rose up in arms. She had to write by that post about the Liverpool curacy; and before the week was out he had accepted this strange, uncongenial post. He was to be one of three curates in a large parish, including some of the most wretched quarters in the town; the work very hard; the people very degraded.

"Papa, you will never be able to bear it," cried Cicely, with tears in her eyes.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he cried, with feverish energy; "write at once and say I accept. It will do me all the good in the world."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BREAKING UP.

The day after Mr. St. John made this abrupt decision—almost the only decision he had made for himself, without stimulation from others, all his life—he went out into the parish as usual, but came home very tired, and went to bed early, which the girls thought natural enough. During the day Cicely had told Mab of her letter from Mildmay, and had written an answer to it, thanking him for his consideration, and informing him of the step her father had taken. "We shall never forget how kind you have been,"

she wrote, gratefully; "both Mab and I feel it to the bottom of our hearts. Is that too much?" she said, reading it over. "I don't want to say too much."

"But we must not say too little; and if a man who is willing to sacrifice the half of his income is not to be thanked for it, I don't know who is," cried Mab, always practical.

"It is not so much the income," Cicely said, slightly wounded by this matter-of-fact suggestion; "it is the feeling."

"But the offer proves the feeling," said her sister; and indeed she was right.

Mr. St. John came home, as has been said, before his usual hour, and went very early to bed. Next morning he rang his bell—the most unusual sound—and sent word by Betsy that he thought he would not get up. When Cicely went to him—as she did at once in a fright, for the bell and the message together produced a

great panic in a house quite unaccustomed (at least, so far as the girls' experience went) to illness—she found him in a partial doze, his large pale hand, looking very nerveless and feeble, lying outside the coverlet.

"No, no!" he said, when she roused him; "not very bad; not bad at all; only tired—and lazy. I have often thought of late that I should like to lie still some morning; and to-day I have done it. That's all, that's all, my dear." He would not hear of the doctor being sent for; and wanted nothing, he declared—nothing but a day's rest. Cicely had to go downstairs, feigning content with this; but she was far from satisfied. They talked it over all the morning, but there was little enough to be made of it. There was no harm in a day's laziness, and nothing but good in a day's rest; but yet—the girls did not know what to

think. Had he been looking ill lately? they asked each other. But, no! he had not been looking ill—a little fatigued, perhaps; tired by the hot weather, as he often was; but just as usual, doing as much as he always did; spending the whole long day "in the parish;" ready to go out morning or night when he was called to any one who was sick. "And what so natural as that he should be tired?" Mab said; "a day's rest will do him good." Cicely, though she was generally the leader, accepted this decision humbly, saying nothing for her own part, but feeling a sense of dismay steal into her mind, she could not tell why; for though it was quite natural that he should do this, he had never done it before; and an innovation on habits so long established and firmly fixed was very alarming and bewildering. But Mab had the coolest judgment of the two, she

said to herself—and no doubt Mab was right.

And next day it appeared indeed that Mab had been right. Mr. St. John came down to breakfast as usual, saying cheerfully that he was quite well, and went out "into the parish" as usual. The day's rest had done him "all the good in the world;" it had "set him up;" nor did he say anything more again about feeling tired. How quickly the days past during that last fortnight! They seemed to tumble on each other, one following on another's heels, holding so little of all the work they ought to see completed. It was settled that the curate was to leave on the 25th of September, in order that the sale should be over and everything cleared away before the quarter-day. Mildmay wrote again a pleading note to Cicely, a guarded but anxious one to her father, pointing out with

abject civility that it would be the greatest possible advantage to himself if Mr. St. John would consent to stay. Mr. St. John only smiled and shook his head, and handed the letter over to Cicely, who was not so confidential in return. "Write to him for me, my dear, for I have not time. Say how obliged I am, but that it is impossible." "Is that all, papa?" said Cicely, faltering. "All? What could be said more? And that everything will be ready by quarter-day —everything ready." As he said this he gave a strange bewildered look round him at the solid mahogany furniture which stood steadfast against the walls, looking as if it never could be changed or taken away. This look was still in his eyes when he went out to the parish, and when he came back—a sort of dreamy wonder and confusion. Cicely thought he had the same look next morning, and

the next and next, as if he had somehow got astray from his moorings in life, and could not make out what was going to happen to him, or why it was going to happen. Mab said, "Nonsense, you are getting fanciful. Papa looks exactly as he has always looked;" and indeed everything went on just the same as usual, showing no other difference except this look, if there was a difference at all. He went about just as usual, preached his two little sermons on the Sunday, went to the schools, kept up all the occupations he had been used to for twenty years; but nevertheless continued to have that dazed look in his eyes, sometimes only bewildered, sometimes startled, like the look of an animal who dumbly foresees something approaching which it knows to be malign, but can neither avert nor understand. This, at least, was what Cicely saw in her father's eyes; no one

else dreamt of looking at his eyes particularly, or cared what they meant. Perhaps his usually tranquil manners were disturbed a little, but how natural that was! In the evening when they were sitting together he would grow quite talkative, telling the girls little stories of his first coming here, and of their mother's trials in the new parish, and would even laugh softly over them, saying, "Poor Hester! You grow more and more like her, Cicely, my dear!" and then he would drop into long silence, never taking a book or the newspaper which came in the evening, but sitting quite still looking round him. The girls did not know, however, that his parish rounds got shorter; that in several of the cottages he had been compelled to wait and rest, and that here and there he had seemed to forget everything around him, falling into a half faint or harmless

trance, from which he would rouse up, and smile upon them, and go on. This, however, they were not told till long after, when it seemed to them, that, if they had but known;—but if they had, I don't know what they could have done.

On the 22nd Mab went to London to Aunt Jane. It was not to be a parting, for it was arranged that Mr. St. John and the rest of the family were to go there also on the 25th, and rest for the night, and afterwards start on their journey to Liverpool; but still the girls were sad enough as they walked to the station together, Mab's boxes having been sent on before by Farmer Dent's cart. Their eyes were dim with tears as they went through the faded heather on the common. "You will have plenty to fret about," said Mab, "with all you have got to do; and, oh, Cicely, I beg of you, don't be silly and fret about papa! He feels it, of course—

but he is quite well, as well as you or me." "I hope so, dear," said Cicely, meekly, with a tremor in her voice; and when they got to the station they looked through all the carriages till they saw in one a middle-aged homely woman, whose box, labelled for "London," was being put in, under the seat. Then Cicely established Mab in the opposite corner. It was the best that could be done for her, for no one could be spared to go with her, even could they have afforded the expense. Cicely walked home alone, feeling as if the world had suddenly grown dark and lonely round her. Mab had set out upon life, and she for her part was returning to hers—to the tradespeople, who were all to be paid so much, out of the fifty pounds which the curate had to receive, and to the babies, who had no one to look after them but herself, and to her father with that bewildered look in

his eyes. Next morning the auctioneer was coming to begin his inventory, and arrange the business of the sale, though the actual auction did not commence until twelve o'clock on Thursday, the day they were to leave.

On Tuesday morning, however, before he went out to the parish, Mr. St. John suddenly stumbled upon the auctioneer, who had gone quietly into the study as soon as its temporary master left, and was kneeling before the large old-fashioned writing-table, which Mr. St. John had used for so long, examining it, and tapping it with his knuckles to see where the drawers were. He had his back to the door, and did not see the surprised spectator, who stood and looked at him for a whole minute in silence. The curate went back to the hall where Cicely stood waiting for him with his hat in her hand. "Who is that?—who is that man?" he

said, with his eyes more cloudy and wild than they had ever been, and a sort of palsied trembling all over him.

"No harm, papa," said Cicely, trying to be cheerful; "only the auctioneer."

"Yes, yes, I remember," he said, taking his hat from her. "It was stupid of me not to remember."

"But, papa, you are trembling. You are not well. Come back and rest a little," she cried.

"No, no; it is nothing. Go back where? I suppose he is going through all the rooms?" said Mr. St. John. "No, no; it gave me a little shock, foolishly, but the air will blow it all away," he said, with a smile, recovering himself.

What terrors were in Cicely's mind all that day! but fortunately for her she had not much time to indulge them. She had to do all her packing, to take care of

the children, to separate the few things her father possessed from Mr. Chester's furniture, to see after everything and everybody, providing something even (though she had so little) for the auctioneer and his men. And it was a relief to her when her father came back a little earlier than usual, and looking no worse. She said to herself that Mab was right; that he felt it, of course—which was to be expected—but otherwise was as well as usual. He had a little colour in his cheeks, and ate very well, and afterwards fell asleep in his chair. How natural it was that he should fall asleep! It was the very best thing for him. Notwithstanding, in her anxiety, Cicely went out into the garden to look at him through the open window, and make sure that all was right. How white his venerable head looked lying against the dark corner of the chair, his face like

ivory but for the little pink in his cheeks, but he looked well, although he was wearied out, evidently; and no wonder! It was the most natural thing in the world.

Next day he was stronger and more cheerful in the morning. He went out, and made a round of all the poor people, saying good-bye to them; and half the people in Brentburn came crying to the doors of the cottages, and said "Good-bye, sir!" and "God bless you, sir!" curtsying and wiping their eyes with their aprons. All the last sixpences he had went that day to the old women and the children, to buy a little tea or some sweets in the little shop. He was very heavy about the eyes when he came home, and took his tea eagerly. Then he went out for an evening stroll, as he had been used to do before all these troubles came. He did not ask Cicely to go with

him, but no doubt he knew how busy she was. When, however, she had put the children to bed, and packed everything but the last box, which was left till to-morrow morning, Cicely perceived that daylight was over, and that it was getting late. Her father was not in any of the rooms. Frightened, she ran out, and gazed about her looking for him; then, seeing no one up or down; in a sudden passion of terror, hurried up the bank to the white churchyard stile. There she found him at once, standing close by the cross on her mother's grave. He had one arm round it, and with his other hand was picking away the yellow mosses that had crept over the stone; but he stopped when she called him, and picked up his hat which lay at his feet, and came with her quite submissively.

"It is late, papa," said Cicely, with quivering lips.

"Yes, yes, my dear; yes, you are quite right," he said, and walked towards the rectory—but like a blind man, as if he did not see where he was going. Two or three times she had to guide him to keep him from stumbling over the humble graves, for which usually he had so much reverence. He went into the house in the same way, going straight before him, as if he did not know where the doors were; and, instead of going into the dining-room, where supper was laid as usual, he took up a candle which stood on the hall-table, and went to his study. Cicely followed him, alarmed; but he did nothing more than seat himself at his writing-table.

"Are you not coming to supper, papa?" she said.

"Did any one speak?" he asked, looking up eagerly as if he did not see.

"O papa, dear, come to supper!" she

cried. Then his vacant face seemed to brighten.

"Yes, my love, yes. I am coming; I am coming——"

Cicely did not know what to say or to think. Was it to her he was speaking? She went away, her heart beating loud, to see that all was ready, hoping he would follow. But as he did not come in about ten minutes after, she went back. The room was dark, one corner of it only lighted by the candle, which threw all its light on his pale face and white hair. He was turning over some papers, apparently absorbed. He did not seem to observe her entrance. She went up to him softly, and put her hand upon his shoulder. "Come, please, papa, I am waiting," she said.

He turned to her, a great light shining over his face. "Ah! yes, my darling, you are waiting. How long you have

been waiting! But I'm ready—ready.—I knew you would come, Hester, I knew you would come when I wanted you most——"

"Papa!" cried Cicely, in a voice shrill with terror.

He started, the light went out of his face, his eyes grew cloudy and bewildered. "What were you saying, Cicely? I am getting—a little hard of hearing. I don't think I heard what you said."

"Come in to supper, papa."

"Yes, yes; but you need not trouble; there is nothing the matter," he said, recovering himself. And he went with her and ate something dutifully, not without appetite. Then he returned to his study. When Cicely went to him there to say good-night he was smiling to himself. "I am coming; I am coming," he said. "No need to tell me twice; I know when I am in good hands."

"Good night, papa—you are going to bed?—we must be early to-morrow," said Cicely.

"Yes, early—early," he said, still smiling. "Directly, Hester—before you have reached the gate——"

"Papa! don't you know me?" cried Cicely, trembling from head to foot.

Again he turned to her with his old face all lighted up and shining. "Know you! my darling!" he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CURATE LEAVES BRENTBURN.

Cicely went to her room that night in a very nervous and disturbed condition. It was her last night, too, in the house in which she had been born; but she had no leisure to think of that, or to indulge in any natural sentiments on the subject. She was very much alarmed about her father, whose looks were so strange, but did not know what to do. That he should take her for her mother was perhaps not wonderful at such a moment of agitation; but it frightened her more than words can say. What

could she do? It was night, and there was no one in the house with her but Betsy, who had for hours been buried in deepest slumbers; and even had she been able to send for the doctor, what advance would that have made?—for he was not ill, only strange, and it was so natural that he should be strange;—and the good steady-going country doctor, acquainted with honest practical fevers and rheumatism, what help could he bring to a mind diseased? Cicely had changed her room in her new office of nurse, and now occupied a small inner chamber communicating with that of the two children. She was sitting there pondering and thinking when she heard her father come upstairs. Then he appeared suddenly bending over the children's little cots. He had a candle in his hand, and stooping feebly, kissed the little boys. He was talking to himself

all the time; but she could not make out what he said, except, as he stood looking at the children, "Poor things, poor things! God bless you." Cicely did not show herself, anxiously as she watched, and he went out again and on to his own room. He was going to bed quietly, and after all it might turn out to be nothing; perhaps he had been dozing when he called her Hester, and was scarcely awake. After this she intended to go to bed herself; for she was sadly worn out with her long day's work and many cares, and fell dead asleep, as youth unaccustomed to watching ever will do in the face of all trouble. The house was perfectly still so long as she was awake; not a sound disturbed the quiet except the breathing of Harry and Charley, and the tap of the jessamine branches against her windows. There was one last blossom at the end of a branch, late and long

after its neighbours, which shed some of its peculiar sweetness through the open window. The relief was so great to hear her father come upstairs, and to know that he was safe in his room, that her previous fright seemed folly. She said her prayers, poor child! in her loneliness, giving tearful thanks for this blessing, and fell asleep without time to think of any bothers or sorrow of her own. Thus sometimes, perhaps, those who have other people to carry on their shoulders avoid occasionally the sharp sting of personal feeling—at least, of all the sentiments which are of a secondary kind.

The morning was less warm and bright than usual, with a true autumnal haze over the trees. This soothed Cicely when she looked out. She was very early, for there were still various last things to do. She had finished her own

individual concerns, and locked her box ready for removal, before it was time to call the children, who slept later and more quietly than usual by another happy dispensation of providence. Cicely heard the auctioneer arrive, and the sound of chatter and laughter with which Betsy received the men, with whom already she had made acquaintance. Why not? Shall everybody be sad because we are in trouble? Cicely asked herself; and she leant out of the window which overlooked the garden, and took a deep draught of the dewy freshness of the morning before she proceeded to wake the children and begin the day's work. Her eyes, poor child! were as dewy as the morning; but she did not give herself time to cry, or waste her strength by such an indulgence. A knock at her door disturbed her, and she shut the window hastily, and shaking off those stray drops from

her eyelashes, went to see what Betsy wanted so early. Betsy stood outside, looking pale and excited. "The men says, please, miss, will you come downstairs?" said Betsy, making an effort at a curtsy, which was so very unusual that Cicely was half amused.

"What do they want? I have to dress the children, Betsy. Could not you do instead?"

"If you please, miss, I'll dress the children. Do go—go, please Miss Cicely! I'm too frightened. O miss, your poor papa!"

"Papa?" Cicely gave the girl one frightened beseeching look, and then flew downstairs, her feet scarcely touching the steps. Why was he up so early? Why was he vexing himself with those men, and their preparations, making himself miserable about nothing, when there were so many real troubles to bear? The men

were standing in a little knot by the study door, which was half open. "What do you want with me? What is it?"

They were confused; one of them put forward another to speak to her, and there was a little rustling, and shuffling, and changing of position, which permitted her to see, as she thought, Mr. St. John sitting, facing the door, in his usual chair. "Ah! it is papa who has come down, I see—thank you for not wishing to disturb him. I will tell him," said Cicely, passing through the midst of them with swift light youthful steps.

"Don't let her go! Stop her, for God's sake!" cried one of the men, in subdued confused tones. She heard them, for she remembered them afterwards; but at that moment the words conveyed no meaning to her. She went in as any child would go up to any father. The chair was pushed away from

the writing-table, facing towards the door, as if he had been expecting some one. What surprised Cicely more than the aspect of his countenance, in which at the first glance she saw no particular difference, was that he had upon his knees, folded neatly, a woman's cloak and hat—her mother's cloak and hat—which had remained in his room by his particular desire ever since Hester died.

"Papa, what are you doing with these?" she said.

There was no reply. "Papa, are you asleep?" cried Cicely. She was getting very much frightened, her heart beating against her breast. For the moment some impulse of terror drove her back upon the men at the door. "He has gone to sleep," she said, hurriedly; "he was tired, very much tired last night."

"We have sent for the doctor, miss," said one of the men.

"Papa, papa!" said Cicely. She had gone back to him paying no attention to them; and then she gave a low cry, and threw herself on her knees by his side, gazing up into his face, trembling. "What is the matter?" said the girl, speaking low; "what is it, papa? Where were you going with that hat and cloak? Speak to me; don't sit there and doze. We are to go away—to go away—don't you remember, to-day?"

Some one else came in just then, though she did not hear. It was the doctor, who came and took her by the arm to raise her. "Run away, my dear; run upstairs till I see what is to be done," he said. "Somebody take her away."

Cicely rose up quickly. "I cannot awake him," she said. "Doctor, I am so glad you have come, though he would not let me send yesterday. I think he must be in a faint."

"Go away, go away, my dear."

It neither occurred to the poor girl to obey him nor to think what he meant. She stood by breathless while he looked at the motionless figure in the chair, and took into his own the grey cold hand which hung helpless by Mr. St. John's side. Cicely did not look at her father, but at the doctor, to know what it was; and round the door the group of men gazed too awestricken, with Betsy, whom curiosity and the attraction of terror had brought downstairs, and one or two labourers from the village passing to their morning's work, who had come in, drawn by the strange fascination of *what had happened*, and staring too.

"Hours ago," said the doctor to himself, shaking his head; "he is quite cold; who saw him last?"

"O doctor, do something!" cried Cicely, clasping her hands; "don't lose

time; don't let him be like this; do something—oh, do something, doctor! Don't you know that we are going to-day?"

He turned round upon her very gently, and the group at the door moved with a rustling movement of sympathy. Betsy fell a crying loudly, and some of the men put their hands to their eyes. The doctor took Cicely by the arm, and turned her away with gentle force.

"My dear, you must come with me. I want to speak to you in the next room."

"But papa?" she cried.

"My poor child," said the compassionate doctor, "we can do nothing for him now."

Cicely stood quite still for a moment, then the hot blood flushed into her face, followed by sudden paleness. She drew herself out of the kind doctor's hold, and went back and knelt down again by her

father's side. Do nothing more for him—while still he sat there, just as he always did, in his own chair?

"Papa, what is it?" she said, trembling, while they all stood round. Suddenly the roughest of all the men, one of the labourers, broke forth into loud sobs.

"Don't you, miss—don't, for the love of God!" cried the man.

She could not hear it. All this came fresh to her word for word a little later, but just then she heard nothing. She took the hand the doctor had taken, and put her warm cheek and her young lips to it.

"He is cold because he has been sleeping in his chair," she cried, appealing to them. "Nothing else—what could it be else? and we are going away to-day!"

The doctor grasped at her arm, almost hurting her. "Come," he said, "Cicely,

this is not like you. We must carry him to bed. Come with me to another room. I want to ask you how he was last night."

This argument subdued her, and she went meekly out of the room, trying to think that her father was to be carried to his bed, and that all might still be well. Trying to think so; though a chill had fallen upon her, and she knew, in spite of herself.

The men shut the door reverently as the doctor took her away, leaving him there whom no one dared to touch, while they stood outside talking in whispers. Mr. St. John, still and cold, kept possession of the place. He had gone last night, when Cicely saw him, to fetch those relics of his Hester, which he had kept for so many years in his room; but, in his feeble state, had been so long searching before he could find them, that

sleep had overtaken Cicely, and she had not heard him stumbling downstairs again with his candle. Heaven knows what fancy it was that had sent him to seek his wife's cloak and hat; his mind had got confused altogether with trouble and weakness, and the shock of uprootal; and then he had sat down again with a smile, with her familiar garments ready for her, to wait through the night till Hester came. What hour or moment it was no one could tell; but Hester, or some other angel, had come for him according to his expectation, and left nothing but the case and husk of him sitting, as he had sat waiting for her, with her cloak upon his knees.

"I am going to telegraph for her sister," said the doctor, coming out with red eyes after all was done that could be done, both for the living and the dead. "Of course you will send and stop the

people from coming; there can be no sale to-day."

"Of course," said the auctioneer. "The young lady wouldn't believe it, my man tells me. I must get them off at once, or they'll get drinking. They're all upset like a parcel of women—what with finding him, and what with seeing the young lady. Poor thing! and, so far as I can learn, very badly left?"

"Left!" cried the doctor; there was derision in the very word. "They are not *left* at all; they have not a penny in the world. Poor St. John, we must not say a word now against him, and there is not much to say. He got on with everybody. He did his duty by rich and poor. There was never a better clergyman, always ready when you called him, early or late; more ready for nothing," the doctor added remorsefully, "than I am for my best paying patients. We might

have done more to smooth his way for him, perhaps, but he never could take care of money or do anything to help himself; and now they'll have to pay for it, these two poor girls."

Thus the curate's record was made. The news went through the parish like the wind, in all its details; dozens of people were stopped in the village going to the sale, and a little comforted for their disappointment by the exciting story. Some of the people thought it was poor Miss Brown, the *other* Mrs. St. John, whom he was looking for. Some felt it a strange heathenish sort of thing of him, a clergyman, that he should be thinking at that last moment of anything but the golden city with the gates of pearl; and thought there was a dreadful materialism in the cloak and hat. But most people felt a thrill of real emotion, and the moment he was dead, mourned Mr. St. John truly,

declaring that Brentburn would never see the like of him again. Mrs. Ascott cried so that she got a very bad headache, and was obliged to go and lie down. But she sent her maid to ask if they could do anything, and even postponed a dinner-party which was to have been that evening, which was a very gratifying token of respect. Mrs. Joel, who was perhaps at the other extremity of the social scale, cried too, but had no headache, and went off at once to the rectory to make herself useful, pulling all the blinds down, which Betsy had neglected, and telling all the callers that poor Miss Cicely was as well as could be expected, though "it have given her a dreadful shock." The trunks stood all ready packed and corded, with Mr. St. John's name upon them. But he had no need of them, though he had kept his word and left Brentburn on the appointed day. After a while people

began to think that perhaps it was the best thing that could have happened—best for him certainly—he could never have borne the rooting up, they said—he could never have borne Liverpool, so noisy and quarrelsome. "Why, it would have killed him in a fortnight, such a place," said Mr. Ascott, who had not, however, lent a hand in any way to help him in his struggle against fate.

Mab, it is needless to say, came down at once with Aunt Jane, utterly crushed and helpless with sorrow. Poor Cicely, who was only beginning to realize what it was, and to make sure that her father absolutely was dead, and beyond the reach of all bringing back, had to rouse herself, and take her sister into her arms and console her. Mab sobbed quietly when she was in her sister's arms, feeling a sense of strong protection in them.

"I have still you, Cicely," she said, clinging to her.

"But Cicely has no one," said Aunt Jane, kissing the pale girl with that compassionate insight which age sometimes brings even to those who do not possess it by nature. "But it is best for you to have them all to look after, if you could but see it, my poor child!"

"I do see it," said Cicely—and then she had to disentangle herself from Mab's clinging, and to go out of the room where they had shut themselves up, to see somebody about the "arrangements," though indeed everybody was very kind and spared her as much as they could.

After the first shock was over it may well be supposed what consultations there were within the darkened rooms. The funeral did not take place till the following Tuesday, as English custom demands, and the days were very slow and terrible

to the two girls, hedged round by all the prejudices of decorum, who could do nothing but dwell with their grief in the gloomy house which crushed their young spirits with its veiled windows and changeless dimness. That, and far more, they were ready to do for their father and the love they bore him; but to feel life arrested and stopped short by that shadow of death is hard upon the young. Miss Maydew, whose grief naturally was of a much lighter description than that of the girls, and with whom decorum was stronger than grief, kept them upstairs in their rooms, and treated them as invalids, which was the right thing to do in the circumstances. Only at dusk would she let them go even into the garden, to get the breath of air which nature demanded. She knew all the proper ceremonials which ought to be observed when there was "a death in the house," and was not

quite sure even now how far it was right to let them discuss what they were going to do. To make up for this, she carried to them the scraps of parish gossip which she gleaned from Mrs. Joel and from Betsy in the kitchen. There had, it appeared, been a double tragedy in the parish. A few days after the death of the curate, the village schoolmistress, a young widow with several babies, had "dropped down" and died of heart disease in the midst of the frightened children. "It is a terrible warning to the parish," said Miss Maydew, "two such events in one week. But your dear papa, everybody knows, was ready to go, and I hope Mrs. Jones was so too. They tell me she was a good woman."

"And what is to become of the children?" said Cicely, thinking of her own burden.

"Oh, my dear, the children will be

provided for; they always are somehow. There are so many institutions for orphans, and people are very good if you know how to get at them. No doubt somebody will take them up. I don't doubt Mr. Ascott has votes for the British Orphans' or St. Ann's Society, or some of these. Speaking of that, my dears, I have been thinking that we ought to try for something of the same kind ourselves. Cicely, hear first what I have got to say before you speak. It is no disgrace. How are Mab and you to maintain these two little boys? Of course you shall have all that I can give you, but I have so little; and if girls can maintain themselves, it is all they are likely to do. There is a society, I am sure, for the orphans of clergymen——"

"Aunt Jane! Papa's sons shall never be charity boys—never! if I should work my fingers to the bone, as people say."

"Your fingers to the bone—what good would that do? Listen to me, girls. Both of you can make a fair enough living for yourselves. You will easily get a good governess's place, Cicely; for, though you are not very accomplished, you are so thorough—and Mab, perhaps, if she succeeds, may do still better. But consider what that is: fifty pounds a year at the outside; and at first you could not look for that; and you are always expected to dress well and look nice, and Mab would have all sorts of expenses for her materials and models and so forth. The cheapest good school for boys I ever heard of was forty pounds without clothes, and at present they are too young for school. It is a woman's work to look after two little things like that. What can you do with them? If you stay and take care of them, you will all three starve. It would

be far better to get them into some asylum where they would be well looked after; and then," said Aunt Jane, insinuatingly, "if you got on very well, or if anything fortunate happened, you could take them back, don't you see, whenever you liked."

Mab, moved by this, turned her eyes to Cicely for her cue; for there was a great deal of reason in what Aunt Jane said.

"Don't say anything more about it, please," said Cicely. "We must not say too much, for I may break down, or any one may break down; but they shall not go upon charity if I can help it. Oh, charity is very good, I know; we may be glad of it, all of us, if we get sick or can't find anything to do; but I must try first—I must try!"

"O Cicely, this is pride, the same sort of pride that prevented your poor papa from asking for anything——"

"Hush, Aunt Jane! Whatever he did was right; but I am not like papa. I don't mind asking so long as it is for work. I have an idea now. Poor Mrs. Jones! I am very very sorry for her, leaving her children desolate. But some one will have to come in her place. Why should it not be me? There is a little house quite comfortable and pleasant where I could have the children; and I think the parish would not refuse me, if it was only for papa's sake."

"Cicely! my dear child, of what are you thinking?" said Miss Maydew, in dismay. "A parish schoolmistress! you are dreaming. All this has been too much for you. My dear, my dear, you must never think of such a thing again!"

"O Cicely, it is not a place for a lady, surely," cried Mab.

"Look here," said Cicely, the colour mounting to her face. "I'd take in

washing if it was necessary, and if I knew how. A lady! there's nothing about ladies that I know of in the Bible. Whatever a woman can do I'm ready to try, and I don't care, not the worth of a pin, whether it's a place for a lady or not. O Aunt Jane, I beg your pardon. I know how good you are—but charity! I can't bear the thought of charity. I must try my own way."

"Cicely, listen to me," cried Aunt Jane, with tears. "I held back, for the children are not my flesh and blood as you are. Perhaps it was mean of me to hold back. O Cicely, I wanted to save what I had for you; but, my dear, if it comes to that, better, far better, that you should bring them to London. I don't say I'm fond of children," said Miss Maydew; "it's so long since I had anything to do with them. I don't say but what they'd worry me sometimes;

but bring them, Cicely, and we'll do what we can to get on, and when you find a situation, I'll—I'll—try——"

Her voice sank into quavering hesitation, a sob interrupted her. She was ready to do almost all they wanted of her, but this was hard; still, sooner than sacrifice her niece's gentility, the standing of the family — Cicely had good sense enough to perceive that enough had been said. She kissed her aunt heartily with tender thanks, but she did not accept her offer or say anything further about her own plans. For the moment nothing could be done, whatever the decision might be.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RECTOR'S BEGINNING.

Mr. Mildmay came to Brentburn the Saturday after the curate's death. The Ascotts invited him to their house, and he went there feeling more like a culprit than an innocent man has any right to do. He fairly broke down in the pulpit next day, in the little address he made to the people. "God knows," he said to them, "that I would give everything I have in the world to bring back to you the familiar voice which you have heard here so long, and which had the teachings of a long experience to give you,

teachings more precious than anything a new beginner can say. When I think that but for my appointment this tragedy might not have happened, my heart sinks within me; and yet I am blameless, though all who loved him have a right to blame me." His voice quivered, his eyes filled with tears, and all the Brentburn folks, who were not struck dumb with wonder, wept. But many of them were struck dumb with wonder, and Mr. Ascott, who was his host, and felt responsible for him, did more than wonder. He interfered energetically when the service was over. "Mildmay," he said, solemnly, "mark my words, this will never do. You are no more to blame for poor St. John's death than I am or any one, and nobody has a right to blame you. Good heavens, if you had never heard of the poor fellow, don't you think it would have

happened all the same? You did a great deal more than any one else would have done—is that why you think it is your fault?"

Mildmay did not make any reply to this remonstrance. Perhaps after he had said it, he felt, as so many impulsive men are apt to do, a hot nervous shame for having said it, and betraying his feelings; but he would not discuss the question with the Ascotts, who had no self-reproach in the matter, no idea that any one could have helped it. They discussed the question now, the first shock being over, and a comfortable Sunday put between them and the event, with great calm.

"He was just the sort of man that would not even have his life insured," said Mr. Ascott. "What those poor girls are to do, I do not know. Go out for governesses, I suppose, poor things! the common expedient; but then there are

those babies. There ought to be an Act of Parliament against second families. I never had any patience with that marriage; and Miss Brown, I suppose, had no friends that could take them up?"

"None that I know of," his wife replied. "It is a dreadful burden for those girls. It will hamper them in their situations, if they get situations, and keep them from marrying——"

"They are pretty girls," said Mr. Ascott. "I don't see why they shouldn't marry."

"That is all very well, Henry," she replied; "but what man, in his senses, would marry a girl with a couple of children dependent on her?"

"A ready-made family," he said, with a laugh.

This was on the Sunday evening after dinner. It was dusk, and they could not see their guest's face, who took no part

in the conversation. To hear such a discussion as this, touching the spoiling of a girl's marriage, is quite a commonplace matter, which the greater part of the world would think it foolishly fastidious to object to, and probably Mr. Mildmay had heard such talk upon other occasions quite unmoved; but it is astonishing the difference it makes when you know the girl thus discussed, and have, let us say, "a respect" for her. He felt the blood come hot to his face; he dared not say anything, lest he should say too much. Was it mere poverty that exposed those forlorn young creatures, whose case surely was sad enough to put all laughter out of court, to such comment? Mrs. Ascott thought it quite possible that Mr. Mildmay, fresh from Oxford, might consider female society frivolous, and was reserving himself for loftier conversation with her husband, and that this was the

reason of his silence, so she went away smiling, rustling her silken skirts to the drawing-room, in the humility which becomes the weaker vessel, not feeling herself equal to that loftier strain, to make the gentlemen's tea.

Her husband, however, came upstairs after her, by himself. Mildmay had gone out for a stroll, he said, and seemed to prefer being alone; he was afraid, after all, he was a morose sort of fellow, with very little "go" in him. As for the new rector, he was very glad to get out into the stillness of the dewy common after the hot room and the fumes of Mr. Ascott's excellent port, which he disliked, being altogether a man of the new school. He skirted the common under the soft light of some stars, and the incipient radiance of the moon, which had not yet risen, but showed that she was rising. He went even as far as the back

of the rectory, and that little path which the curate's feet had worn, which he followed reverently to the grey cross upon Hester's grave. Here a flood of peaceful and friendly thoughts came over the young man, bringing the tears to his eyes. He had only known Mr. St. John for about twenty-four hours, yet how much this short acquaintance had affected him! He seemed to be thinking of a dear old friend when he remembered the few moments he had stood here, six weeks before, listening to the curate's simple talk. "The lights in the girls' windows;"—there they were, the only lights in the dark house, a glimmer through the half-closed shutters. Then he thought of the old man, bewildered with death and death's weakness, sitting with his wife's cloak and hat ready, waiting for her to come who had been waiting all these years under the sod for him to come. "I shall go to her,

but she will not come to me," said the new rector to himself, letting a tear fall upon the cross, where the curate's hand had rested so tenderly. His heart was full of that swelling sensation of sympathetic sorrow which is both sweet and painful. And *she* was, they all said, so like her mother. Would any one, he wondered, think of *her* sometimes as Mr. St. John had done of his Hester? Or would nobody, in his senses, marry a girl burdened with two babies dependent on her? When those words came back to his mind, his cheeks reddened, his pace quickened in a sudden flush of anger. And it was a woman who had said it—a woman whose heart, it might have been thought, would have bled for the orphans, not much more than children any of them, who were thus left in the world to struggle for themselves.

It was Mildmay who took all the

trouble about the funeral, and read the service himself, with a voice full of emotion. The people had scarcely known before how much they felt the loss of Mr. St. John. If the new parson was thus affected, how much more ought they to be! Everybody wept in the churchyard, and Mr. Mildmay laid that day the foundation of a popularity far beyond that which any clergyman of Brentburn, within the memory of man, had enjoyed before. "He was so feelin' hearted," the poor people said; they shed tears for the old curate who was gone, but they became suddenly enthusiasts for the new rector. The one was past, and had got a beautiful funeral, carriages coming from all parts of the county; and what could man desire more? The other was the present, cheerful and full of promise. A thrill of friendliness ran through every corner of the parish. The

tragedy which preceded his arrival, strangely enough, made the most favourable preface possible to the commencement of the new reign.

"Do you think I might call upon Miss St. John?" Mildmay asked, the second day after the funeral. "I would not intrude upon her for the world; but they will be going away, I suppose—and if you think I might venture——"

He addressed Mrs. Ascott, but her husband replied. "Venture? to be sure you may venture," said that cheerful person. "Of course you must want to ascertain when they go and all that. Come, I'll go with you myself if you have any scruples. I should like to see Cicely, poor thing! to tell her if I can be of any use—— We are not much in the governessing line; but you, Adelaide, with all your fine friends——"

"Tell her I should have gone to her

before now, but that my nerves have been upset with all that has happened," said Mrs. Ascott. "Of course I have written and told her how much I feel for her; but say *everything* for me, Henry. I will make an effort to go to-morrow, though I know that to enter that house will unhinge me quite. If she is able to talk of business, tell her to refer any one to me. Of course we shall do everything we possibly can."

"Of course; yes, yes, I'll say *everything*," said her husband; but on the way, when Mildmay reluctantly followed him, feeling his purpose defeated, Mr. Ascott gave forth his individual sentiments. "Cicely St. John will never answer as a governess," he said; "she is far too independent, and proud—very proud. So was her father before her. He prided himself, I believe, on never having asked for anything. God bless

us! a nice sort of world this would be if nobody asked for anything. That girl spoke to me once about the living as if it was *my* business to do something in respect to what she thought her father's rights! Ridiculous! but women are very absurd in their notions. She was always what is called a high-spirited girl; the very worst recommendation I think that any girl can have."

Mildmay made no reply; he was not disposed to criticise Cicely, or to discuss her with Mr. Ascott. The rectory was all open again, the shutters put back, the blinds drawn up. In the faded old drawing-room, where the gentlemen were put by Betsy to wait for Miss St. John, everything looked as usual, except a scrap of paper here and there marked Lot—. This had been done by the auctioneer, before Mr. St. John's death. Some of these papers Betsy, much outraged by the

sight of them, had furtively rubbed off with her duster, but some remained. Mr. Mildmay had something of Betsy's feeling. He, too, when Mr. Ascott was not looking, tore off the label from the big old chiffonnier which Mab had called a tomb, and threw it behind the ornaments in the grate—a foolish sort of demonstration, no doubt, of being on the side of the forlorn family against fate, but yet comprehensible. He did not venture upon any such freaks when Cicely came in, in the extreme blackness of her mourning. She was very pale, keeping the tears out of her eyes with a great effort, and strung to the highest tension of self-control. She met Mr. Ascott with composure; but when she turned to Mildmay, broke down for the moment. "Thanks!" she said, with a momentary pressure of his hand, and an attempt at a smile in the eyes which filled at sight of him, and it took

her a moment to recover herself before she could say any more.

"Mrs. Ascott charged me with a great many messages," said that lady's husband. "I am sure you know, Cicely, nobody has felt for you more; but she is very sensitive—that you know too—and I am obliged to interpose my authority to keep her from agitating herself. She talks of coming to-morrow. When do you go?"

"On Saturday," said Cicely, having just recovered the power of speech, which, to tell the truth, Mildmay did not quite feel himself to have done.

"On Saturday—so soon! and you are going——"

"With my aunt, Miss Maydew," said Cicely, "to London for a time—as short a time as possible—till I get something to do."

"Ah—h!" said Mr. Ascott, shaking

his head. "You know how sincerely sorry we all are; and, my dear Cicely, you will excuse an old friend asking, is there no little provision—nothing to fall back upon—for the poor little children, at least?"

"Mr. Ascott," said Cicely, turning full towards him, her eyes very clear, her nostrils dilating a little—for emotion can dry the eyes as well as dim them, even of a girl—"you know what papa had almost as well as he did himself. He could not coin money; and how do you think he could have saved it off what he had? There is enough to pay every penny he ever owed, which is all I care for."

"And you have nothing—absolutely nothing?"

"We have our heads and our hands," said Cicely; the emergency even gave her strength to smile. She faced the two prosperous men before her, neither of

whom had ever known what it was to want anything or everything that money could buy, her small head erect, her eyes shining, a smile upon her lip—not for worlds would she have permitted them to see that her heart failed her at sight of the struggle upon which she was about to enter ;—"and fortunately we have the use of them," she said, involuntarily raising the two small hands, looking all the smaller and whiter for the blackness that surrounded them, which lay on her lap.

"Miss St. John," said Mildmay, starting up, "I dare not call myself an old friend. I have no right to be present when you have to answer such questions. If I may come another time——"

To look at his sympathetic face took away Cicely's courage. "Don't make me cry, please ; don't be sorry for me!" she cried, under her breath, holding out her

hands to him in a kind of mute appeal. Then recovering herself, "I would rather you stayed, Mr. Mildmay. I am not ashamed of it, and I want to ask something from you, now that you are both here. I do not know who has the appointment; but you must be powerful. Mr. Ascott, I hear that Mrs. Jones, the schoolmistress, is dead—too."

"Yes, poor thing! very suddenly—even more suddenly than your poor father. And so much younger, and an excellent creature. It has been a sad week for Brentburn. She was buried yesterday," said Mr. Ascott, shaking his head.

"And there must be some one to replace her directly, for the holidays are over. I am not very accomplished," said Cicely, a flush coming over her face; "but for the rudiments and the solid part, which is all that is wanted in a

parish school, I am good enough. It is difficult asking for one's self, or talking of one's self, but if I could get the place——"

"Cicely St. John!" cried Mr. Ascott, almost roughly in his amazement; "you are going out of your senses—the appointment to the parish school?"

"I know what you think," said Cicely, looking up with a smile; but she was nervous with anxiety, and clasped and unclasped her hands, feeling that her fate hung upon what they might decide. "You think, like Aunt Jane, that it is coming down in the world, that it is not a place for a lady. Very well, I don't mind; don't call me a lady, call me a young woman—a person even, if you like. What does it matter? and what difference does it make after all?" she cried. "No girl who works for her living is anything but looked down upon. I should be free

of all that, for the poor people know me, and they would be kind to me, and the rich people would take no notice. And I should have a place of my own, a home to put the children in. The Miss Blandys, I am sure, would recommend me, Mr. Mildmay, and they know what I can do."

"This is mere madness!" cried Mr. Ascott, paling a little in his ruddy complexion. Mildmay made a rush at the window as she spoke, feeling the situation intolerable. When she appealed to him thus by name, he turned round suddenly, his heart so swelling within him that he scarcely knew what he was doing. It was not for him to object or to remonstrate as the other could do. He went up to her, scarcely seeing her, and grasped for a moment her nervous interlaced hands. "Miss St. John," he cried, in a broken voice, "whatever you want that

I can get you, you shall have—that, if it must be so, or anything else," and so rushed out of the room and out of the house, passing Mab in the hall without seeing her. His excitement was so great that he rushed straight on, into the heart of the pine-woods a mile off, before he came to himself. Well! this, then, was the life he had been wondering over from his safe retirement. He found it not in anything great or visible to the eye of the world, not in anything he could put himself into, or share the advantages of. He, well off, rich indeed, strong, with a man's power of work, and so many kinds of highly-paid, highly-esteemed work open to him, must stand aside and look on, and see this slight girl, nineteen years old, with not a tittle of his education or his strength, and not two-thirds of his years, put herself into harness, and take up the lowly work which would sink her in social

estimation, and, with all superficial persons, take away from her her rank as gentlewoman. The situation, so far as Cicely St. John was concerned, was not remarkable one way or another, except in so much as she had chosen to be village schoolmistress instead of governess in a private family. But to Mildmay it was as a revelation. He could do nothing except get her the place, as he had promised to do. He could not say, Take part of my income; I have more than I know what to do with, though that was true enough. He could do nothing for her, absolutely nothing. She must bear her burden as she could upon her young shrinking shoulders; nay, not shrinking —when he remembered Cicely's look, he felt something come into his throat. People had stood at the stake so, he supposed, head erect, eyes smiling, a beautiful disdain of the world they thus

defied and confronted in their shining countenances. But again he stopped himself; Cicely was not defiant, not contemptuous, took upon her no *rôle* of martyr. If she smiled, it was at the folly of those who supposed she would break down, or give in, or fail of courage for her work; but nothing more. She was, on the contrary, nervous about his consent and Ascott's to give her the work she wanted, and hesitated about her own powers and the recommendation of the Miss Blandys; and no one—not he, at least, though he had more than he wanted—could do anything! If Cicely had been a lad of nineteen, instead of a girl, something might have been possible, but nothing was possible now.

The reader will perceive that the arbitrary and fictitious way of cutting this knot, that *tour de force* which is always to be thought of in every young woman's

story, the very melodramatic begging of the question, still, and perennially possible, nay probable, in human affairs, had not occurred to Mildmay. He had felt furious indeed at the discussion of Cicely's chances or non-chances of marriage between the Ascotts; but, so far as he was himself concerned, he had not thought of this easy way. For why? he was not in love with Cicely. His sympathy was with her in every possible way, he entered into her grief with an almost tenderness of pity, and her courage stirred him with that thrill of fellow-feeling which those have who could do the same; though he felt that nothing he could do could ever be the same as what she, at her age, so boldly undertook. Mildmay felt that she could, if she pleased, command him to anything, that, out of mere admiration for her bravery, her strength, her weakness, and

youngness and dauntless spirit, he could have refused her nothing, could have dared even the impossible to help her in any of her schemes. But he was not in love with Cicely; or, at least, he had no notion of anything of the kind.

It was well, however, that he did not think of it; the sudden "good marriage," which is the one remaining way in which a god out of the machinery can change wrong into right at any moment in the modern world, and make all sunshine that was darkness, comes dreadfully in the way of heroic story; and how such a possibility, not pushed back into obscure regions of hazard, but visibly happening before their eyes every day, should not demoralize young women altogether, it is difficult to say. That Cicely's brave undertaking ought to come to some great result in itself, that she ought to be able

to make her way nobly, as her purpose was, working with her hands for the children that were not hers, bringing them up to be men, having that success in her work which is the most pleasant of all recompenses, and vindicating her sacrifice and self-devotion in the sight of all who had scoffed and doubted—this, no doubt, would be the highest and best, the most heroical and epical development of story. To change all her circumstances at a stroke, making her noble intention unnecessary, and resolving this tremendous work of hers into a gentle domestic necessity, with the "hey presto!" of the commonplace magician, by means of a marriage, is simply a contemptible expedient. But, alas! it is one which there can be no doubt is much preferred by most people to the more legitimate conclusion; and, what is more, he would be justified by knowing

the accidental way is perhaps, on the whole, the most likely one, since marriages occur every day which are perfectly improbable and out of character, mere *tours de force*, despicable as expedients, showing the poorest invention, a disgrace to any romancist or dramatist, if they were not absolute matters of fact and true. Pardon the parenthesis, gentle reader.

But Mr. Mildmay was not in love with Cicely, and it never occurred to him that it might be possible to settle matters in this ordinary and expeditious way.

Mr. Ascott remained behind when Mildmay went away, and with the complacence of a dull man apologised for his young friend's abrupt departure. "He is so shocked about all this, you must excuse his abruptness. It is not that he is without feeling—quite the

reverse, I assure you, Cicely. He has felt it all—your poor father's death, and all that has happened. You should have heard him in church on Sunday. He feels for you all very much."

Cicely, still trembling from the sudden touch on her hands, the agitated sound of Mildmay's voice, the sense of sympathy and comprehension which his looks conveyed, took this apology very quietly. She was even conscious of the humour in it. And this digression being over, "her old friend" returned seriously to the question. He repeated, but with much less force, all that Miss Maydew had said. He warned her that she would lose "caste," that, however much her friends might wish to be kind to her, and to treat her exactly as her father's daughter ought to be treated, that she would find all that sort of thing very difficult. "As a governess, of course you

would always be known as a lady, and when you met with old friends it would be a mutual pleasure; but the village schoolmistress!" said Mr. Ascott; "I really don't like to mention it to Adelaide, I don't know what she would say."

"She would understand me when she took all into consideration," said Cicely. "I could be then at home, independent, with the little boys."

"Ah, independent, Cicely!" he cried; "now you show the cloven hoof—that is the charm. Independent! What woman can ever be independent? That is your pride; it is just what I expected. An independent woman, Cicely, is an anomaly; men detest the very name of it; and you, who are young, and on your promotion—"

"I must be content with women then," said Cicely, colouring high with

something of her old impetuosity; "they will understand me. But, Mr. Ascott, at least, even if you disapprove of me, don't go against me, for I cannot bring up the children in any other way."

"You could put them out to nurse."

"Where?" cried Cicely; "and who would take care of them for the money I could give? They are too young for school; and I have no money for that either. If there is any other way, I cannot see it; do not go against me at least."

This he promised after a while, very doubtfully, and by and by went home, to talk it over with his wife, who was as indignant as he could have wished. "What an embarrassment it will be!" she cried. "Henry, I tell you beforehand, I will not ask her here. I cannot in justice to ourselves ask her here if he is the schoolmistress. She thinks,

of course, we will make no difference, but treat her always like Mr. St. John's daughter. It is quite out of the question. I must let her know at once that Cicely St. John is one thing and the parish schoolmistress another. Think of the troubles that might rise out of it. A pretty thing it would be if some young man in our house was to form an attachment to the schoolmistress! Fancy! She can do it if she likes; but, Henry, I warn you, I shall not ask her here."

"That's exactly what I say," said Mr. Ascott. "I can't think even how she could like to stay on here among people who have known her in a different position; unless—" he concluded with a low whistle of derision and surprise.

"Please don't be vulgar, Henry—unless what?"

"Unless—she's after Mildmay; and I

should not wonder—he's as soft as wax and as yielding. If a girl like Cicely chooses to tell him to marry her, he'd do it. That's what she's after, as sure as fate."

CHAPTER X.

THE PARISH SCHOOLMISTRESS.

I WILL not follow all the intermediate steps, and tell how the curate's family left their home, and went to London; or how Miss Maydew made the most conscientious effort to accustom herself to the little boys, and to contemplate the possibility of taking the oversight of them. They were not noisy, it is true; but that very fact alarmed Aunt Jane, who declared that, had they been "natural children," always tumbling about, and making the walls ring, she could have understood them. Perhaps,

had they been noisy, she would have felt at once the superiority of "quiet children." As it was, the two little tiny, puny old men appalled the old lady, who watched them with fascinated eyes, and a visionary terror, which grew stronger every day. Sometimes she would jump up in a passion and flee to her own room to take breath, when the thought of having them to take care of came suddenly upon her. And thus it came about that her opposition to Cicely's scheme gradually softened. It was a bitter pill to her. To think of a Miss St. John, Hester's child, dropping into the low degree of a parish schoolmistress, went to her very heart; but what was to be done? How could she oppose a thing Cicely had set her heart upon? Cicely was not one to make up a scheme without some reason in it; and you might as well (Miss Maydew said to herself)

try to move St. Paul's, when the girl had once made up her mind. I do not think Cicely was so obstinate as this, but it was a comfort to Miss Maydew to think so. And after everybody had got over their surprise at the idea, Miss St. John was duly installed as the schoolmistress at Brentburn. The few little bits of furniture which had belonged to them in the rectory—the children's little beds, the old faded carpets, etc.—helped to furnish the schoolmistress's little house. Cicely took back the little Annie whom she had sent away from the rectory for interfering with her own authority, but whose devotion to the children was invaluable now, and no later than October settled down to this curious new life. It was a very strange life. The schoolmistress's house was a new little square house of four rooms, with no beauty to recommend it, but with little garden plots in front of

it, and a large space behind where the children could play. The little kitchen, the little parlour, the two little bedrooms were all as homely as could be. Cicely had the old school-room piano, upon which her mother had taught her the notes, and which Miss Brown had shed tears over on that unfortunate day when Mr. St. John proposed to marry her rather than let her go back to the Governesses' Institute—and she had a few books. These were all that represented to her the more beautiful side of life: but, at nineteen, fortunately life itself is still beautiful enough to make up for many deprivations, and she had a great deal to do. As for her work, she said, it was quite as pleasant to teach the parish children as to teach the little ladies at Miss Blandy's; and the "parents" did not look down upon her, which was something gained.

And it was some time before Cicely awoke to the evident fact that, if the parents did not look down upon her, her old acquaintances were much embarrassed to know how to behave to her. Mrs. Ascott had gone to see her at once on her arrival, and had been very kind, and had hoped they would see a great deal of her. On two or three occasions after she sent an invitation to tea in the evening, adding always, "We shall be quite alone." "Why should they be always quite alone?" the girl said to herself; and then she tried to think it was out of consideration for her mourning. But it soon became visible enough what Mrs. Ascott meant, and what all the other people meant. Even as the curate's daughter Cicely had but been a girl whom they were kind to; now she was the parish schoolmistress—"a very superior young person, quite above her position," but

belonging even by courtesy to the higher side no more. She was not made to feel this brutally. It was all quite gently, quite prettily done; but by the time spring came, brightening the face of the country, Cicely was fully aware of the change in her position, and had accepted it as best she could. She was still, eight months after her father's death—so faithful is friendship in some cases—asked to tea, when they were quite alone at the Heath; but otherwise, by that time, most people had ceased to take any notice of her. She dropped out of sight except at church, where she was only to be seen in her plain black dress in her corner among the children; and though the ladies and gentlemen shook hands with her still, when she came in their way, no one went out of his or her way to speak to the schoolmistress. It would be vain to say that there was no mortification

involved in this change. Cicely felt it in every fibre of her sensitive frame, by moments; but fortunately her temperament was elastic, and she possessed all the delicate strength which is supposed to distinguish "blood." She was strong, and light as a daisy, jumping up under the very foot that crushed her. This kind of nature makes its possessor survive and surmount many things that are death to the less elastic; it saves from destruction, but it does not save from pain.

As for Mr. Mildmay, it was soon made very apparent to him that, for him at his age to show much favour or friendship to the schoolmistress at hers, was entirely out of the question. He had to visit the school, of course, in the way of his duty, but to visit Cicely was impossible. People even remarked upon the curious frequency with which he passed the school. Wherever he was going in the parish

(they said), his road seemed to turn that way, which, of course, was highly absurd, as every reasonable person must see. There was a side window by which the curious passer-by could see the interior of the school as he passed, and it was true that the new rector was interested in that peep. There were the homely children in their forms, at their desks, or working in the afternoon at their homely needlework: among them, somewhere, sometimes conning little lessons with portentous gravity, the two little boys in their black frocks, and the young schoolmistress seated at her table; sometimes (the spy thought) with a flush of weariness upon her face. The little house was quite empty during the school-hours; for Annie was a scholar too, and aspiring to be pupil-teacher some day, and now as reverent of Miss St. John as she had once been critical. Mildmay went on his way

after that peep with a great many thoughts in his heart. It became a kind of necessity to him to pass that way, to see her at her work. Did she like it, he wondered? How different it was from his own! how different the position—the estimation of the two in the world's eye! He who could go and come as he liked, who honoured the parish by condescending to become its clergyman, and to whom a great many little negligences would have been forgiven, had he liked, in consequence of his scholarship, and his reputation, and his connections. "We can't expect a man like Mildmay, fresh from a University life, to go pottering about among the sick like poor old St. John," Mr. Ascott would say. "That is all very well, but a clergyman here and there who takes a high position for the Church in society is more important still." And most people agreed with

him; and Roger Mildmay went about his parish with his head in the clouds, still wondering where life was—that life which would string the nerves and swell the veins, and put into man the soul of a hero. He passed the school-room window as often as he could, in order to see it afar off—that life which seemed to him the greatest of all things; but he had not yet found it himself. He did all he could, as well as he knew how, to be a worthy parish priest. He was very kind to everybody; he went to see the sick, and tried to say what he could to them to soothe and console them. What could he say? When he saw a man of his own age growing into a gaunt great skeleton with consumption, with a wistful wife looking on, and poor little helpless children, what could the young rector say? His heart would swell with a great pang of pity, and he would read the prayers with a

faltering voice, and, going away wretched, would lavish wine and soup, and everything he could think of, upon the invalid; but what could he *say* to him, he whose very health and wealth and strength and well-being seemed an insult to the dying? The dying did not think so, but Mildmay did, whose very soul was wrung by such sights. Then, for lighter matters, the churchwardens and the parish business sickened him with their fussy foolishness about trifles; and the careful doling out of shillings from the parish charities would have made him furious, had he not known that his anger was more foolish still. For his own part, he lavished his money about, giving it to everybody who told him a pitiful story, in a reckless way, which, if persevered in, would ruin the parish. And when any one went to him for advice, he had to bite his lip in order not to say the words which were on the

very tip of his tongue longing to be said, and which were, "Go to Cicely St. John at the school and ask. It is she who is living, not me. I am a ghost like all the rest of you." This was the leading sentiment in the young man's mind.

As for Cicely, she had not the slightest notion that any one thought of her so, or thought of her at all, and sometimes as the excitement of the beginning died away she felt her life a weary business enough. No society but little Harry, who always wanted his tea, and Charley, with his thumb in his mouth; and those long hours with the crowd of little girls around her, who were not amusing to have all day long as they used to be for an hour now and then, when the clergyman's daughter went in among them, received by the schoolmistress curtsying, and with smiles and bobs by the children, and carrying a pleasant ex-

citement with her. How Mab and she had laughed many a day over the funny answers and funnier questions; but they were not funny now. When Mab came down, now and then, from Saturday to Monday, with all her eager communications about her work, Cicely remembered that she too was a girl, and they were happy enough; but in the long dull level of the days after Mab had gone she used to think to herself that she must be a widow without knowing it, left after all the bloom of life was over with her children to work for. "But even that would be better," Cicely said to herself; "for then, at least, I should be silly about the children, and think them angels, and adore them." Even that consolation did not exist for her. Mab was working very hard, and there had dawned upon her a glorious prospect, not yet come to anything, but which might

mean the height of good fortune. Do not let the reader think less well of Mab because this was not the highest branch of art which she was contemplating. It was not that she hoped at eighteen and a half to send some great picture to the Academy, which should be hung on the line, and at once take the world by storm. What she thought of was the homelier path of illustrations. "If, perhaps, one was to take a little trouble, and try to find out what the book means, and how the author saw a scene," Mab said; "they don't do that in the illustrations one sees: the author says one thing, the artist quite another—that, I suppose, is because the artist is a great person and does not mind. But I am nobody. I should try to make out what the reading meant, and follow that." This was her hope, and whether she succeeds or not, and though she called a book "the read-

ing," those who write will be grateful to the young artist for this thought. "Remember I am the brother and you are the sister," cried Mab. It was on the way to the station on a Sunday evening —for both of the girls had to begin work early next morning—that this was said. "And as soon as I make money enough you are to come and keep my house." Cicely kissed her, and went through the usual process of looking for a woman who was going all the way to London in one of the carriages. This was not very like the brother theory, but Mab was docile as a child. And then the elder sister walked home through the spring darkness with her heart full, wondering if that reunion would ever be.

Mr. Mildmay had been out that evening at dinner at the Ascotts, where he very often went on Sunday. The school was not at all in the way between the

Heath and the rectory, yet Cicely met him on her way back. It was a May evening, soft and sweet, with the bloom of the hawthorn on all the hedges, and Cicely was walking along slowly, glad to prolong as much as possible that little oasis in her existence which Mab's visit made. She was surprised to hear the rector's voice so close to her. They walked on together for a few steps without finding anything very particular to say. Then each forestalled the other in a question.

"I hope you are liking Brentburn?" said Cicely.

And Mr. Mildmay, in the same breath, said: "Miss St. John, I hope you do not regret coming to the school?"

Cicely, who had the most composure, was the first to reply. She laughed softly at the double question.

"It suits me better than anything

else would," she said. "I did not pretend to take it as a matter of choice. It does best in my circumstances; but you, Mr. Mildmay?"

"I want so much to know about you," he said, hurriedly. "I have not made so much progress myself as I hoped I should; but you? I keep thinking of you all the time. Don't think me impertinent. Are you happy in it? Do you feel the satisfaction of living, as it seems to me you must?"

"Happy?" said Cicely, with a low faint laugh. Then tears came into her eyes. She looked at him wistfully, wondering. He so well off, she so poor and restricted. By what strange wonder was it that he put such a question to her? "Do you think I have much cause to be happy?" she said; then added hastily, "I don't complain, I am not *un*happy—we get on very well."

"Miss St. John," he said, "I have spoken to you about myself before now. I came here out of a sort of artificial vegetation, or at least, so I felt it, with the idea of getting some hold upon life—true life. I don't speak of the misery that attended my coming here, for that, I suppose, was nobody's fault, as people say; and now I have settled down again. I have furnished my house, made what is called a home for myself, though an empty one; and lo, once more I find myself as I was at Oxford, looking at life from outside, spying upon other people's lives, going to gaze at it enviously as, I do at you through the end window——"

"Mr. Mildmay!" Cicely felt her cheeks grow hot, and was glad it was dark so that no one could see. "I am a poor example," she said, with a smile. "I think, if you called it vegetation with me, you would be much more nearly right

than when you used that word about your life at Oxford, which must have been full of everything impossible to me. Mine is vegetation; the same things to be done at the same hours every day; the poor little round of spelling and counting, never getting beyond the rudiments. Nobody above the age of twelve, or I might say of four, so much as to talk to. I feel I am living to-night," she added, in a more lively tone, "because Mab has been with me since yesterday. But otherwise—indeed you have made a very strange mistake."

"It is you who are mistaken," said the young rector, warmly. "The rest of us are ghosts; what are we all doing? The good people up there," and he pointed towards the Heath, "myself, almost everybody I know? living for ourselves—living to get what we like for ourselves, to make ourselves comfortable

—to improve ourselves, let us say, which is the best perhaps, yet despicable like all the rest. Self-love, self-comfort, self-importance, self-culture, all of them one more miserable, more petty than the other—even self-culture, which in my time I have considered divine."

"And it is, I suppose, isn't it?" said Cicely. "It is what in our humble feminine way is called improving the mind. I have always heard that was one of the best things in existence."

"Do you practise it?" he asked, almost sharply.

"Mr. Mildmay, you must not be hard upon me—how can I? Yes, I should like to be able to pass an examination and get a—what is it called?—*diplôme*, the French say. With that one's chances are so much better," said Cicely, with a sigh; "but I have so little time."

How the young man's heart swelled in the darkness!

"Self-culture," he said, with a half laugh, "must be disinterested, I fear, to be worthy the name. It must have no motive but the advancement of your mind for your own sake. It is the culture of you for you, not for what you may do with it. It is a state, not a profession."

"That is harder upon us still," said Cicely. "Alas! I shall never be rich enough nor have time enough to be disinterested. Good-night, Mr. Mildmay; that is the way to the rectory."

"Are you tired of me so soon?"

"Tired of you?" said Cicely, startled; "oh no! It is very pleasant to talk a little; but that is your way."

"I should like to go with you to your door, please," he said; "this is such an unusual chance. Miss St. John, poor John Wyborn is dying; he has four children and a poor little wife, and he is just my age."

There was a break in the rector's voice that made Cicely turn her face towards him and silently hold out her hand.

"What am I to say to them?" he cried; "preach patience to them? tell them it is for the best? I who am not worthy the poor bread I eat, who live for myself, in luxury, while he—ay, and you——"

"Tell them," said Cicely, the tears dropping from her eyes, "that God sees all—that comforts them the most; that He will take care of the little ones somehow and bring them friends. Oh, Mr. Mildmay, it is not for me to preach to you; I know what you mean; but they, poor souls, don't go thinking and questioning as we do—and that comforts them the most. Besides," said Cicely, simply, "it is true; look at me—you spoke of me. See how my way has been made plain for me! I did not know what I

should do; and now I can manage very well, live, and bring up the children; and after all these are the great things, and not pleasure," she added, with a soft little sigh.

"The children!" he said. "There is something terrible at your age to hear you speak so. Why should you be thus burdened—why?"

"Mr. Mildmay," said Cicely, proudly, "one does not choose one's own burdens. But now that I have got mine I mean to bear it, and I do not wish to be pitied. I am able for all I have to do."

"Cicely!" he cried out, suddenly interrupting her, bending low, so that for the moment she thought he was on his knees, "put it on my shoulders! See, they are ready; make me somebody in life, not a mere spectator. What! are you not impatient to see me standing by looking on while you are working? I am

impatient, and wretched, and solitary, and contemptible. Put your burden on me, and see if I will not bear it! Don't leave me a ghost any more!"

"Mr. Mildmay!" cried Cicely, in dismay. She did not even understand what he meant in the confusion of the moment. She gave him no answer, standing at her own door, alarmed and bewildered; but only entreated him to leave her, not knowing what to think. "Please go, please go; I must not ask you to come in," said Cicely. "Oh, I know what you mean is kind, whatever it is; but please, Mr. Mildmay, go! Good-night!"

"Good-night!" he said. "I will go since you bid me; but I will come back to-morrow for my answer. Give me a chance for life."

"What does he mean by life?" Cicely said to herself, as, trembling and amazed, she went back into her bare little parlour,

which always looked doubly bare after Mab had gone. Annie had heard her coming, and had lighted the two candles on the table; but though it was still cold, there was no fire in the cheerless little fireplace. The dark walls, which a large cheerful lamp could scarcely have lit, small as the room was, stood like night round her little table, with those two small sparks of light. A glass of milk and a piece of bread stood ready on a little tray, and Annie had been waiting with some impatience her young mistress's return in order to get to bed. The little boys were asleep long ago, and there was not a sound in the tiny house as Cicely sat down to think, except the sound of Annie overhead, which did not last long. Life! Was this life, or was he making a bad joke at her expense? What did he mean? It would be impossible to deny that Cicely's heart beat

faster and faster as it became clearer and clearer to her what he did mean; but to talk of life! Was this life—this mean, still, solitary place, which nobody shared, which neither love nor fellowship brightened? for even the children, though she devoted her life to them, made no warm response to Cicely's devotion. She sat till far into the night thinking, wondering, musing, dreaming, her heart beating, her head buzzing with the multitude of questions that crowded upon her. Life! It was he who was holding open to her the gates of life; the only life she knew, but more attractive than she had ever known it. Cicely was as much bewildered by the manner of his appeal as by its object. Could he—love her? Was that the plain English of it? Or was there any other motive that could make him desirous of taking her burden upon his shoulders? Could she, if a man

did love her, suffer him to take such a weight on his shoulders? And then—she did not love him. Cicely said this to herself faltering. "No, she had never thought of loving him. She had felt that he understood her. She had felt that he was kind when many had not been kind. There had been between them rapid communications of sentiment, impulses flashing from heart to heart, which so often accompany very close relations. But all that is not being in love," Cicely said to herself. Nothing could have taken her more utterly by surprise; but the surprise had been given, the shock received. Its first overpowering sensation was over, and now she had to look forward to the serious moment when this most serious thing must be settled, and her reply given.

Cicely did not sleep much that night. She did not know very well what she was

doing next morning, but went through her work in a dazed condition, fortunately knowing it well enough to go on mechanically, and preserving her composure more because she was partially stupified than for any other reason. Mr. Mildmay was seen on the road by the last of the little scholars going away, who made him little bobs of curtsies, and of whom he asked where Miss St. John was?

"Teacher's in the school-room," said one unpleasant little girl.

"Please, sir," said another, with more grace or genius, "Miss Cicely's ain't come out yet. She's a-settling of the things for to-morrow."

Upon this young woman the rector bestowed a sixpence and a smile. And then he went into the school-room, the place she had decided to receive him in. The windows were all open, the desks and forms in disorder, the place as mean

and bare as could be, with the maps and bright-coloured pictures of animal history on the unplastered walls. Cicely stood by her own table, which was covered with little piles of plain needle-work, her hand resting upon the table, her heart beating loud. What was she to say to him? The truth somehow, such as it really was; but how?

But Mr. Mildmay had first a great deal to say. He gave her the history of his life since August, and the share she had in it. He thought now, and said, that from the very first day of his arrival in Brentburn, when she looked at him like an enemy, what he was doing now had come into his mind; and on this subject he was eloquent, as a man has a right to be once in his life, if no more. He had so much to say, that he forgot the open public place in which he was telling his ove-tale, and scarcely remarked the little

response she made. But when it came to her turn to reply, Cicely found herself no less impassioned, though in a different way.

"Mr. Mildmay," she said, "there is no equality between us. How can you, such a man as you, speak like this to a girl such as I am? Don't you see what you are doing—holding open to me the gates of Paradise; offering me back all I have lost; inviting me to peace out of trouble, to rest out of toil, to ease and comfort, and the respect of the world."

"Cicely!" he said; he was discouraged by her tone. He saw in it his own fancy thrown back to him, and for the first time perceived how fantastic that was. "You do not mean," he said, faltering, "that to work hard as you are doing, and give up all the pleasure of existence, is necessary to your—your—satisfaction in your life?"

"I don't mean that," she said simply;

"but when you offer to take up my burden, and to give me all your comforts, don't you see that one thing—one great thing—is implied to make it possible? Mr. Mildmay, I am not—in love with you," she added, in a low tone, looking up at him, the colour flaming over her face.

He winced, as if he had received a blow; then recovering himself, smiled. "I think I have enough for two," he said, gazing at her, as pale as she was red.

"But don't you see, don't you see," cried Cicely passionately, "if it was you, who are giving everything, that was not in love, it would be simple; but I who am to accept everything, who am to put burdens on you, weigh you down with others beside myself, how can I take it all without loving you? You see—you see it is impossible!"

"Do you love any one else?" he asked, too much moved for grace of speech, taking the hand she held up to demonstrate this impossibility. She looked at him again, her colour wavering, her eyes filling, her lips quivering.

"Unless it is you—nobody!" she said.

THE END.

Caxton Printing Works, Beccles.