LADY WILLIAM

BY

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LADY WILLIAM

I

THE village of Watcham is not a village in the ordinary sense of the word, and yet it is a very pretty place, with a charming picturesque aspect, and of which people say, "What a pretty village!" when they come upon its little landing-place on the riverside, or drive through its old-fashioned green, where some of the surrounding houses look as if they had come out of the seventeenth century, and some as if they had come out of the picture-books of Mr. Randolph Caldecott. It is a village of genteel little houses where a great many people live who have pretensions, but are poor: and some who have no pretensions and yet are poor all the same, and find the little, fresh, airy villa houses, with their small rooms and little gardens, a wonderful relief from London, even from the suburbs which are almost

as rural as Watcham. Watcham, however, has various advantages over Hampstead or Wimbledon. It is close by the river, where a little quiet boating may be had without any fear of plunging into the mob of excursionists from London on one side, who make some portions of that river hideous, or the more elegant mob of society on the other, who do not add to its charm. But I need not linger on the attractions of this little place, with which the reader will, no doubt, if he (or she) has patience enough, become well acquainted in time.

The church in Watcham is a pretty church of very old foundation, low in stature and small in size, its porch covered with climbing roses, its modest little spire rising out of a mantle of ivy. Inside I have always felt that there was a faint breath of generations past, perhaps not so desirable as the traces of them left on the walls—which mingled with the breath of the congregation, and the whiff of incense, which was now and then added to the composite atmosphere. For the Rector was "High," and, though he never laid himself open to troublesome proceedings, was watched with great attention by a little band of parishioners very anxious

to be aggrieved, who kept an eye upon all he did, in the hope of some day catching him at an unguarded moment, in the act of lighting a candle or donning a vestment which exceeded the rubric. But Mr. Plowden was quite aware of this watch, and delighted in keeping his critics up to the highest mark of vigilance without ever giving them the occasion they desired. The Rectory was an old red-brick house showing rather high and narrow above its garden wall, and the Plowden family consisted, besides the Rector, of his wife, a son, and two daughters, to whose credit the floral decorations, for which the church was famous, were laid, undeservedly, by the strangers and visitors who frequented the place —though this was always indignantly contradicted by the inhabitants, to whom it was well known that Miss Grey was the real artist who made the church so beautiful, and seemed to invent flowers when none were to be had by other persons, for the adornment of the little sanctuary. There were a few houses dotted about in their gardens in the neighbourhood of the church which contained the aristocracy of the place. These were generally very small, but, on the other hand, they were very refined, and contained old china and dainty

pieces of old furniture such as might have made a dozen connoisseurs happy. They, however, were inhabited chiefly by ladies, though there was an old soldier and an old clergyman among them who stood out very strongly on the feminine background. The old clergyman, indeed, was no better than an old lady himself, and so considered in the place, which sent him on errands, and set but little store by his opinion; but the General! the General was very different. He had seen a great deal of service; and on occasions when he went at strictly-regulated intervals to a levée or other great function, with all his medals upon his ancient bosom, he was a sight to see. It was believed generally in the village that he had won several victories with his own right hand, and the sword which hung in his room was believed to have been bathed in blood on many terrible occasions; but, as was to be expected, the old soldier bore no terrible aspect, but was very amiable and gentle to his neighbours. The Archdeacon, of whom nobody stood in any awe, was on occasion ten times more severe.

It will be perceived that society in Watcham was not without dignitaries. But

the person who was of highest rank in the place, whom all the ladies had to acknowledge as unmistakably their superior, who had the undoubted right to walk out of a room and into a room before them all, was a lady who lived in one of the smallest of those little houses which were as Belgravia to the population of the village. Such a little house! It had a pretty little garden all round it, with a privet hedge and green gate, which in their insignificance, yet complete enclosure and privacy, were a sort of symbol of their owner and her position. For it could not be denied that she was Lady William, sister-in-law to a marquis, connected (by marriage) with half the aristocracy; and yet not only was she very poor, but she was of herself, so to speak, nobody, which was the exasperating particular in the tale. Nobody at all, the Rector's sister, once a governess, whose elevation by her marriage —and such a marriage!—over the heads of the best people in Watcham was an affront which they never got over, though these ladies were too well-bred to make any quarrel, or to be anything but observant of the necessities of the situation. I do not pretend for a moment that it was ever sug-

gested to Lady William in any way that her precedence annoyed her neighbours, and that to have to walk humbly behind that governess-woman, as Mrs. FitzStephen, the General's wife, had hastily called her on her return to Watcham, was an accident of fate which made them furious. She was a woman full of perception, however, and she was quite aware of the fact, and derived from it a certain amusement. Above all was Lady William amused by it in respect to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Plowden, who, as a married woman, and the Rector's wife, not to speak of her own connections, had been vastly superior to Emily Plowden in her earlier days when that young woman was a governess and of no consequence at all. The first time Lady William dined at the General's, and was taken out by him before all the rest, the sight of Mrs. Plowden's face was almost too much for her gravity. Her elevation had cost her dear, and had brought her little, except that empty honour; but she was a woman with a fine sense of the ludicrous, and that moment compensated her for many troubles. She was the first lady in Watcham, where she had received many snubs once upon a time, and this was at once a balm

and an amusement to her of the most agreeable kind.

But Lady William was very poor. They were none of them rich in that little society, but Lady William had less than any, less even than Miss Grey. The small annuity given her by her husband's family, given very grudgingly, and sometimes in arrears, was all she had to depend upon. She had, as people said severely, as if it had been her fault, nothing of her own. The Plowdens were not rich, and all that Emily Plowden had had been bestowed upon a prodigal brother, who had disappeared in the wilds of Australia, and never had been heard of more. What she had thus lost would not have added fifty pounds a year to her income; but fifty pounds a year when you have only two hundred is a great addition, and she was very much reproached for having made this sacrifice "to that good-for-nothing boy," the neighbours said. I am afraid she thought it very foolish herself when she came to be what she was, middle-aged, with Mab growing up, and so little, so very little, nothing at all, so to speak, to keep her little household upon. Sometimes she would calculate to herself how much better off she would have

been if she had still possessed the interest of her thousand pounds which poor Ned had carried with him, and which probably only enabled him to ruin himself more quickly. Sometimes she would amuse herself by speculating how much it would have brought in. Thirty-five pounds perhaps, or possibly forty-five if she had been very lucky: and how many comforts that might have got during the year; or she might have taken a little off it—two hundred pounds or so—for Mab's education. And Mab had really got no education, poor child. However, these were nothing but speculations, and had no bitterness in them. She did not grudge her money to poor Ned. Poor Ned! How often is there one in a family who is never spoken of but with that prefix, and how often he is the one who is the best beloved!

Lady William was quite worthy in externals of her elevation, being of what is called an aristocratic appearance, though it is an appearance which is to be found impartially in all classes, and I have often seen a young woman in a shop who was much more like a duchess than the owners of that title sometimes are. Perhaps it would be better to say that Lady William

was conventionally correct in every way, with a rather tall and slight figure, an oval face, a deportment which strangers thought distinguished, and fine hands and feet, which are always considered to betoken gentle blood. But Mab, alas! who ought to have possessed more of these attractions, had none of them. She was rather short, and at seventeen she was certainly too stout. Stumpy was what Mrs. Plowden at the Rectory said, and there can be no doubt that there was truth in that unlovely phrase. Her nose turned up, her face was round and her features blunt, her hair no colour in particular. As for waist the poor girl had none, and her feet were good useful beetle-crushers, which she encased by preference in square-toed shoes without heels. In short, it was impossible even for Mab herself to entertain any illusions as to her personal appearance. She was a plain and homely girl. "Ah!" said the people who disliked the Plowdens, and those who did not know anything about it, except that her mother had been a governess; "the common blood bursting out." But, as a matter of fact, it was the noble family to which her father belonged whom Mab resembled. She was as like the present

Marquis as it was possible for a girl to be like an elderly man. None of his daughters (heaven be praised, they said) were half so like him as the niece whom he barely acknowledged. Mab was the very quintessence of that distinguished man. She had very light hair of a faint greenish tinge, eyes equally light, but bluish. To see her beside her graceful mother was wonderful. And she did not show her blood like the Princess in the fairy tale by feeling the pea that was underneath two mattresses. Mab might have lain upon peas, and she would never have been any the wiser. Her perceptions were not delicate. She was not sensitive. In short she was the most perfectly robust and contented little soul there was in Watcham, and met all her little privations with a broad smile.

You could not imagine a more minute drawing-room than that in which this mother and daughter spent the greater part of their life. There was nothing poetical or romantic about the house. The door was exactly in the middle, with a window on each side, which indicated the two sitting-rooms, and three windows which represented as many bedrooms above. The reader will perceive that

it was the rudimentary house designed by infantile art in its first command of a slate or other pencil with which to express its ideas. The narrow passage into which the outer door opened, and from which you entered the sitting-rooms, was scarcely capable of containing two persons at once. By dint of having the smallest specimens possible of those pieces of furniture, Lady William had contrived to have a sofa and a piano in the drawing-room. There were also some low chairs and two or three of those little tables which are so useful in this tea-drinking age, but which are chiefly remarkable as handy things to throw down. You could scarcely throw down Lady William's tables, however, for there was not room enough for them to fall. The ladies were sitting together in this little room with a large basket on the floor between them, in which it was their habit to put their work if it was not suitable to be beheld by visitors. They were both engaged at this particular moment in the making of a dress, of a kind which is generally described by novelists as "some kind of light woollen material." Shopkeepers say simply "material," leaving the light woollen to the imagination. I think, as I love to be

particular, that it was *biège.* There was a fashion-book, or perhaps a copy of the *Lady's Pictorial* — but I think the scene occurred before the commencement of that excellent periodical—lying among the folds of the stuff, half hidden by them. And this was Mab's spring dress, which her mother was making, aided by the less skilled yet patient efforts of Mab herself. "Do you think you like that sleeve?" Lady William was saying, looking at it in her hand, with her head a little on one side, as an artist looks at his picture; "these puffs are apt to look a little fantastic, especially when they are home-made——"

"You mean when they are on a fat little girl like me, mother."

"Well, Mab, you are a little—stout," Lady William said. She did not take it so lightly as Mab did, but half resented, half lamented, this unfortunate development.

"Don't say stout, please," said Mab. "Stout sounds such a determined thing. Call me fat, mother: it's nicer—it might be accidental: or I might, as Mrs. FitzStephen says, fine down."

Lady William shook her head with a suppressed sigh. She knew Mab would not

fine down. "Never mind about words," she said, "but tell me——"

Here she was interrupted by a rattle of small shots, as of pebbles, on the door. She knew very well what it was. It was the knuckles of Patty, the little girl who was groom of the chambers, and head footman, and kitchenmaid, and general aid to the woman-of-all-work at the cottage. She opened the door when she had delivered this volley, and thrust in a curly head at about the height of the keyhole. "Please, my lydy," she said, breathless, "it's Missis and the young lydies from the Rectory. I thought as you'd like to know——"

"Are they coming here, Patty?"

"Leastways, I think so, my lydy," Patty said.

"Thank you, Patty; as soon as you've let them in, bring tea."

There was no thought of closing the door to these privileged visitors. But the dress was carefully and swiftly disposed of in the big basket, which was thrust under the sofa. "They've nothing to do with your new frock," said Lady William, in an apologetic parenthesis. Mab, who required no apology, who had seen this little feat

of legerdemain accomplished more often than she could count, required no explanation; but she did not take up any other work. Lady William, on the other hand, had a piece of knitting provided for such occasions, and was working at it as if it were the chief occupation of her life when the Rectory ladies were ushered in. Mrs. Plowden had reversed the order which ruled in Lady William's house, for it was she who was short and stout, while her daughters were of the Plowden type, long and thin, like, and yet not like, their aunt, who was slim and tall, words that mean the same thing with a difference. The three figures came in like an army, filling the small room.

"Well, Emily, busy, as usual?" Mrs. Plowden said, a little breathless from her walk. "And Mab idle, as usual?" she added, after she had taken breath.

"Just as we always are, aunt," said Mab with a laugh, conscious of the half-finished dress.

"You might come, now and then, to the Sewing Society, Mabel," said Emmy, her cousin. "It's quite amusing, and it would show you how nice a quiet hour's sewing can be."

"But Mab does not like parish things—and neither do I," said the other, the heterodox daughter, under her breath.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Plowden, "that you don't set her in some way of employing herself systematically, Emily. Doing things by fits and starts loses half of the advantage. What should I ever have done with Emmy and Florry if I had not gone on in the most systematic way?"

"And look what examples we are," said Florry, as usual under her breath.

"Haven't we made up our minds to agree to differ on these points?" said Lady William. "I am sure you had something more amusing to tell me than the way you brought up your girls and how I have spoiled Mab."

"I don't know if you will think it amusing. There was something else I had to tell you. Have you heard that Mrs. Swinford and her son have come back to the Hall?"

"The Swinfords!" said Lady William, with a start of excitement. "Have they come back? I thought they were never coming back any more."

"I don't know what reason you had for

such an idea. I never heard of it, and as James is the clergyman, and knows most about his parishioners—but, at all events, they have come back: and I want to know what your ideas are about calling. People stood a little aloof, I have always been told; but it's a long time ago, and naturally the people here will take great notice of what you and I do, Emily. It will all depend upon what we do how Mrs. Swinford is received. Do you think you shall call?"

"Call!" cried Lady William. A little colour had come upon her face, a little agitation into her usual calm. The exclamation seemed like a kind of reply, but whether it meant "Call! of course I shall call!" or "Call! how could you expect me to do such a thing?" her sister-in-law could not tell; neither did she follow up that monosyllable with any further elucidation. She said, after a momentary pause, "How long it is ago, and how many things have happened since then!"

"That is very true—but it's always like that when people have been away for more than twenty years. Half the people that were living then are dead, of course: and other things—why, none of the children were born."

"Nor dreamt of," said Lady William. It gave her a great deal to think about; but after a while Mrs. Plowden grew tired of waiting for some definite response to her question, and took up the theme on her own account.

"As I am a new person here since her time it would be silly of me to keep up old prejudices. I know nothing about any old story. I am quite justified in saying so, for, of course, I was not even here. We had only a curacy, and your father was still alive: James did not get the living till a year after: and then, of course, I was a very young woman, thinking of none of these things. Your mother had a prejudice — but why should I take up her prejudices? And they are rich, and the son is an agreeable young man, people say; and probably they will entertain a good deal. It would be sinning against a merciful Providence if one refused to take advantage of what is brought to your very door. Everybody says that they will entertain, and probably a great deal."

"And Leo will want a wife," said Lady William.

"Good gracious, Emily! don't talk in that way before my girls! I keep all such

ideas out of their minds. But what I meant to say was, if you think of going don't you think we might go together? It would have a very good effect, and be an example for the parish. I suppose they have got quite French being so long away, and I have been so long out of the way of speaking it that—— But you are quite a linguist, Emily."

"You don't suppose Mrs. Swinford will have forgotten her native tongue?" Lady William said, with a laugh.

"Well, if you think not—oh! I suppose not; but one gets so rusty in a language one never uses. Look at me! I spoke both French and German like a native when I left school; but, for want of practice, you could put me out completely by a single question. So I think, as you have always kept it up, I should feel more comfortable. And as they can't all go, suppose we take the eldest. You and I and Emmy—three are quite enough to make a call. Don't you see?"

"I see," Lady William said; but it was not for a long time that Mrs. Plowden could get her to say more.

II

"THE Swinfords come back," Lady William said to herself, as she sat on the little sofa in the twilight by the light of the little fire. She had been very silent after the Plowdens withdrew, saying little except on the subject of the frock, which was resumed as soon as these ladies were gone. And when Mab went out, as she had a way of doing when the light began to fail, Lady William put the work away, and sat down in the corner of the sofa, which was the cosiest spot in the little room, almost out of reach of the draught. This is an extremely difficult thing to attain in small rooms where the doors and windows are at right angles, and you never can get far enough off from one of them to avoid the stream of cold air which pours in under the door, or from the window, or somewhere else in the sweet uncertainty of cottage architecture. But that end of the sofa was nearly out of the way from them all:

and there she sat when she did not go out, at that wistful hour when it is neither night nor day. Lady William was not old enough to like that wistful hour. She was young enough to prefer taking a run with Mab, being, though she was Mab's mother, quite as elastic and strong, and as fond of fresh air and exercise as she: and she was philosopher enough to take care not to think more than was absolutely necessary; for I do not disguise that there were episodes in her past life which were not pleasant to go back upon, and that the future, when she gazed into it closely, was too precarious and alarming to inspect. But to-day Lady William's mind had been stirred, and so many things had come up which forced themselves to be remembered that she had no resource but to allow herself to think. The Swinfords! They were the great people of the place. Their house was close to Watcham, its gates opening upon the road a little beyond the village—and they had in her early days exercised a great influence upon Emily Plowden's life. A flood of recollections poured back upon her, a succession of scenes one after another —scenes in the house, in the park, and in the conservatory, all about the place. She

remembered even the looks of certain eyes, glances that had been cast at herself, or even at others, swift changes of aspect, vicissitudes of sun and shade which were more rapid than the shadows upon the hills. What a thing it is to recollect over twenty years and more the way one look succeeded another on a face, perhaps gone into dulness and decay, or perhaps only changed out of knowledge, but equally separated from us and the scenes in which we remembered it! Lady William sat and recollected, and saw again the very light of the days that were past, how it came through a long window and fell upon — sometimes her own face, which was as changed as any of the others, sometimes other faces fixed in eager regard upon hers. How strange to think that she was the girl that stood then on the threshold of life, so full of many emotions, so easily touched one way or another, smiles and tears chasing each other over her face. And to think it was all over, and everything connected with that time was as a dream! She had met her husband there; a great many things had befallen her there; and now here was Jane Plowden coming to ask her to call —to call, of all things in the world, on Mrs.

Swinford, as if she were an ordinary neighbour, as if there was nothing between them that could not be told over the tea-table among the afternoon visitors! And she had consented to do it, which was more strange still—half for the wonder of it, half because now they had come back, she was curious to see how things looked across the abyss which separated now from then. Oh, as she thought of it there rose a hundred things she wanted to know! Her busy fancy figured how the patroness of her youth would look; what she would say; the questions she would ask. "So you have settled in Watcham again — in Watcham, after all? And you have a little girl? And you never see or hear of——Oh, but that is impossible — you must hear of them constantly, for it is in the papers." All these things she heard Mrs. Swinford say with the little foreign accent which was one of that lady's peculiarities. Then Lady William paused with a foreboding and asked herself whether she could not avoid the meeting—whether she could have a bad headache, or go off on a visit, or simply sit still and refuse to move. Alas! going off on a visit is not so easy—you want money for that, and there

was nowhere she could go except for a day or two. Neither would a bad headache last beyond a day: and as for sitting still, that would be equally ineffectual, for if she did not go to Mrs. Swinford, Mrs. Swinford would probably come to her. She considered that but one of two things could be done—either to go away altogether from Watcham while the Swinfords remained there, which was, of course, impossible—or to call with Jane as was proposed to her. She laughed at this softly, with a little secret fright, yet sense of the ludicrous—to call with Jane! walking in over the ashes of volcanoes (so to speak), over the dragons' teeth that had been sown in their time and produced such harvests, with that incarnation of the commonplace by her side. No doubt the ashes would be covered with Persian carpets, and Jane would think of nothing but the future parties to be given there, and whether perhaps young Mr. Swinford—Lady William could not be supposed to be particularly happy during this review of the things that had been and the things that would have to be, but she laughed to herself again. That eternal question could never be left out, she said to herself.

"What are you laughing at, mother?" said Mab, as she came in, bringing with her a rush of cold, and that smell of the fresh air which changes the whole atmosphere of a little room in a moment. Her whole person was breathing it out. Her hat, which she took off when she came in, was full of it, sending the mingled fragrance and chill into every corner of the tiny little firelit room. Lady William shivered a little.

"You have brought in the draught with you, Mab, like a gale at sea."

"I am sorry," said the girl, turning back to shut the door. And she came to the fire and knelt down before it, and repeated, with the pertinacity of youth, "What were you laughing at, mother?"

"Nothing very much—chiefly at Aunt Jane and this new thing she has got in her head!"

"Oh, Aunt Jane," said Mab carelessly, as if that was a subject already exhausted. Then, however, she added, still pertinacious, "but what is the new thing she has got into her head?"

Lady William thought of a certain baby in a book who wanted to see "the wheels go wound," and laughed a little once more.

"How do you know that I can tell you?" she said.

"Don't you tell me everything, mammy?" said Mab, rubbing her head against her mother's arm like an affectionate puppy: and Lady William stroked her child's hair, which glistened with a drop or two of cold dew upon it from the dripping branches outside.

"You have pretty hair, Mab," she said softly, with praise, which was a caress.

"Have I? Oh, I don't think there's anything pretty about me," said the girl. "What a little fool I was not to take after you, mother! It is you who are the pretty one: and Emmy has the impudence to be a little like you—Emmy, and not me! But never mind. What has Aunt Jane got in her head?"

"The pertinacious child! She has this in her head, that she wants to drag me to-morrow to go with her and call at the Hall."

"Oh, is that all?" said Mab. She felt that her lively curiosity, which was a pleasant sensation, had been wasted. But then she added, "Is there anything that makes it of importance that she should call at the Hall?"

How the child swept over the ashes of

the volcanoes, raising a little pungent dust, which got into her mother's throat: but she laughed a little, for Aunt Jane was always fair game.

"Do you remember the Bennets in 'Pride and Prejudice,'" she said, "and the commotion there was when Mr. Bingley first came?"

These ladies were great readers of novels, which held perhaps the first place among the amusements of their lives: and they were happy enough to possess an old edition of Miss Austen, which kept them, as much perhaps from their good luck as from good taste, familiar with all she has added to our knowledge of life, and fully prepared with an example for most emergencies that could occur in their little world.

"Yes," said Mab, a little wondering. And then she said, "Oh, I see. Aunt Jane is like Mrs. Bennet, and Emmy—But Emmy is not half so nice as Jane. And Mr. Bingley is—Oh, I see, I see——"

"Don't see too much," said Lady William, "for it is all in embryo; but I should not wonder if your aunt were at present in her imagination arranging Emmy's trousseau, and thinking over what hymns should be

sung at the wedding. 'The voice that breathed o'er Eden' is a little common. It was sung for Susan Green only last week, who said, 'No, my lady; we ain't got nothing to do with gardens nor apples, nor folks going about without no clo'es.'"

It is very probable that this story was told by the artful mother with the intention of throwing dust in the child's eyes and leading her away from a subject on which explanations were difficult; but, if so, she reckoned without her Mab. The girl owned the fact of the anecdote with a little laugh just proportioned to the occasion.

"Is Mr. Swinford quite—young?" said Mab doubtfully. "And then there is his mother, who lives with him——"

"Well, yes, I suppose that is the right way of putting the case," said Lady William. "He lived with his mother when I knew them—and as for his age, I remember him a little boy."

"Oh," said Mab, with partial satisfaction, "but you were young yourself then. I think I saw somebody in the village just now who may have been—this gentleman. He was in a big coat, all fur, and shiny shoes—fancy shiny shoes for going through the mud at

Watcham! And he was as old, I should think, as—as old as—Uncle James's last curate, the one who was *locum tenens*, and who did not stay—Oh, over thirty at the least. Now Mr. Bingley cannot have been more than twenty-five. I am sure he was not more than twenty-five—and I don't call that very young."

"Leo Swinford must be over thirty, as you say. He was about nine or ten when I was eighteen—a great difference then, but perhaps, as you say, not so great a difference now. Who is that, Mab, at the gate?" It showed how Lady William had been roused and disturbed by this afternoon's intelligence that she should be thus moved by the idea of any one at the gate.

"If you please, my lady," said Patty, the little maid, putting in her curly head once more; "it's a gentleman as I never see before. Nayther the Rector, nor the Curate, nor the General, nor nobody as I know; and he has got fur round his neck like a female," said Patty, with a cough which covered a laugh. "It's just like the thing as they call a victorine. I never see it on nobody but a female before."

"Let him come in, Patty," said Lady

William. She gave a swift glance at the candles on the mantelpiece, and then she decided not to light them. "Mab, get up and take a seat like a rational creature. You will soon have your curiosity satisfied, it appears."

She said to herself that she did not care for Leo Swinford, not a bit! It was his mother, not he, who had affected her former life. He had been a boy, and now he would be a man, just like the others. It showed that they meant to be civil that she should send him so soon. This was the only point of view in which Lady William regarded the visit; but that was the point of view which affected her mind most. She cared no more for Leo Swinford in himself than for any curate in the diocese—which was almost the only other specimen of young man which she was likely to see. She drew back into her corner, which was so near the fire that it was deep in shade, the reflection going quickly through her mind that *her* first question would be, How does she look? is she much altered? does she look old? That was what his mother would want to know. But she should be baulked in that desire at least. The firelight flickered about, making

a pleasant ruddy half-light in the little room. It danced about Mab, coming and going, giving a note of colour to her light hair, and showing the round youthful curve of her cheeks without any insistence upon the overfulness of her chubby, childish figure. It was very favourable to the child, this ruddy, picturesque, uncertain light. These thoughts flashed through Lady William's mind in the moment that elapsed before Patty threw open the door again, and with a loud voice announcing, "The gentleman, my lydy," shut it again smartly upon herself and the sudden chilly draught from outside. And then the scene changed, and the principal figure became, not Lady William and her thoughts any longer, but a solid shadow in the midst of the firelight, a man, unaccustomed intruder here, bringing with him a faint odour of cigars, and that sort of contradictory atmosphere which comes into a feminine household with the very breath of an unknown being of this unhabitual kind. It was an embarrassing position for a stranger; at least, it would have been an embarrassing position for most men. But Leo Swinford was not one of those who allow themselves to be affected by circumstances. He made a

bow vaguely directed towards the corner, drawing his heels together after the manner of France, and then spoke in the easiest tone, though his words expressed the embarrassment which he did not at all feel.

"I am under a double disadvantage," he said, "and how am I to come out of it? I came prepared to say that I feared you would not remember me, and now you cannot even see me. Never mind. I am Leo Swinford, and you cannot have forgotten altogether that name."

"No," said Lady William. She held out to him from the shade a hand which looked very white in the ruddy light. "I heard this afternoon that you had come home," she said, "and your name was on our lips."

"What a good thing for me," he said, "save that it does not at all test your recollection, which I had pleased myself with thoughts of trying. But it is all the same. Do not send for lights, and as you cannot see me, next time we meet I can put my question with equal force."

"I see you very well," said Lady William, "and I should not have known you. How could I? You were a child, and now you are a man. And I was a girl,

and now I am an old woman. Your mother will see innumerable changes. How is she? It was kind of her to send you to see me so soon."

"Ah!" said the visitor, "I said I was at a double disadvantage, but it seems there are more. She did not send me to see you, dear lady. I came on my proper feet, and by my proper will. Mamma is not changed, but she no longer sends little Leo on her errands. He has certain instincts of his own."

"Well, then, it was a kind instinct that brought you here," said Lady William.

"I am not so sure of that—an instinct very kind to myself: I foresee little pleasure in the society of home, you will not be offended if I say so. But there was one quarter in which I knew I could indemnify myself, so long as you permit it, madame."

He spoke very much like a Frenchman throughout, Mab thought, who sat breathlessly looking on, rather hostile but exceedingly curious, thinking it was as good as a play; but the "madame" was altogether French, not that harsh "madam" of the English, which comes at you like a stone, and which may mean more animosity than respect.

"We have not, indeed, much variety here," said Lady William; "you will soon exhaust our little resources. But then we are not very far from town, and I advise you to keep the house full. After Paris, Watcham! It is perhaps rather too much of a difference, unless you have a very strong head."

"My head is indifferent strong. I can stand a good deal in the way of change, from ten degrees below zero to twenty over it. Ah! I forgot you go by that other impossible standard of Fahrenheit here. You have not presented me to the young lady whom I see by glimpses, as if we were all in a fairy tale."

"My daughter, Mab; and as you have already divined, Mab, the gentleman whom we were talking of, and who remains in my mind ten years old, in a velvet suit, with lace, and, I believe, curls——"

He waved his hand. "Spare me the curls, they were the *supplice* of my early days. Picture to yourself, Miss Mab—Mab! how curious to put Miss before that name! One might as well say Miss Titania."

"One does sometimes in this day of fantastic names. There are Miss Enids and Miss Imogenes."

"I was saying, picture to yourself a very plain little boy, with very common hair, exactly like every other little boy's, only worse—in long curls upon his wretched shoulders! they made my life a burden to me. Mamma is a most interesting woman—not at all like other people—I am exceptionally happy in having had such a companion for my life—but so long as I was a child there were drawbacks. By degrees things right themselves," he added after a brief dramatic pause. "I have no longer curls, nor am I sent to call, and we have solved the problem of having two independent rulers in one house."

There was another pause, which Lady William did not herself wish to break. Perhaps his voice, the atmosphere about him, produced recollections that were too strong for her: or perhaps Leo Swinford by himself did not interest Lady William. It was Mab who blurted forth suddenly, with a juvenile instinct of relieving the tension of the silence, a piece of information.

"I saw you just now in the village, Mr. Swinford. I wondered if it was you. We don't see many strangers in the village—at least at this time of the year. I said to

myself: unless it is some one from the Hall, I don't know who it can be."

"Some one from the Hall is very vague, Miss Mab—Queen Mab, if I may say so. I hope you had heard of me, myself, an individual, before that vague conjecture arose."

"No, I can't say I had," said Mab bluntly. "Mother said something to-day to Aunt Jane about Leo wanting a wife; but then, you see, I didn't know who Leo was."

"If that is the only attitude in which I am to be presented to my new world! but I don't want a wife," he added plaintively, addressing himself to the dark corner in which Lady William was seated. "However, I am Leo," he added, turning to the girl again with such a bow as Mab had never seen before.

III

MANY messages passed between the Rectory and the Cottage the next morning on the subject of the visit to the Hall. How shall we go? Would it be best to get the fly, as there is a prospect of rain? Would it do to go in the pony-carriage, as the clouds were making a lift? Finally, when the sun came out, would it be best to walk? Emmy and Florry Plowden were running to and fro all the morning with notes and messages. Emmy (who was going) was anxious and serious on this great subject. It would be such a pity to get wet. "It is true it is nearly the end of the winter, and our dresses are not in their first freshness; but it is so disagreeable to go into a new house feeling mouldy and damp. First impressions are of so much consequence. Don't you think so, aunt? and Mrs. Swinford is Parisian, and accustomed to everything in the last fashion."

"You might as well go draggled as not," said Florence, "if that is what you are thinking of: for she will see there is not much of the last fashion about you."

"Aunt always looks as if she were the leader of the fashion wherever she goes," said Emily proudly. She it was who was conscious of being the only one who was like her aunt.

"Thank you for such a pretty compliment," said Lady William; "but Florry is right, I am sorry to say. We shall all be so much below her standard at our best, that a little more or less doesn't matter. Still, without reference to Mrs. Swinford or her impressions, it is unpleasant to get wet."

"Then you vote for the fly," said Emmy with satisfaction, "that is what I always thought you would do. One does not get blown about, one comes out fresh, without having one's hair all wild and marks of mud upon one's shoes. Thanks, Aunt Emily, you always decide for what is best."

In an hour, however, they returned, Florry, who was not going, leading the way. "Mamma thinks as it's so much brighter our own pony-chaise will do. It's much nicer being in the air than boxed up in a fly."

And she thinks it would make so much fuss, setting all the village talking, if the fly was ordered, and it was known everywhere that she was going to the Hall."

"I thought she wished it to be known.'"

"Oh, of course," said Emmy, who was the aggrieved party, "mamma wishes everything to be known. She says a clergyman's family should always live in a glass house and all that sort of thing. And to have the pony-chaise out, and everybody seeing where we are going, will be just the same thing."

"At all events it's your own private carriage, and not a nasty hired fly," said Florence. "'Mrs. Plowden's carriage at the door,' and you needn't explain it's a shandry-dan."

And the unfeeling girl laughed, as was her way: for it was not she who was going to have her fringe disarranged, and the locks at the back blown about by driving in the pony-carriage in the whistling March breeze.

"Tell your mother I think the pony-chaise will do quite well if she likes it; everybody knows what sort of a carriage a country clergyman can afford to keep."

"But you are not a country clergyman, Aunt Emily."

"Heaven forbid!" that lady said.

Next time it was Emily alone who ran "across," as they called it. "Mamma thinks on the whole we might walk. The roads have dried up beautifully, and it's not far. And walking is always correct in the country, isn't it, aunt?"

"It is always correct anywhere, Emmy, when you have no other way to go."

"Ah, but we have two other ways to go! There is the fly, which I should prefer, as it protects one most, and there's our own pony-chaise. It cannot be supposed to be for the want of means of driving, Aunt Emily, if we pleased."

"Of course not," said Lady William with great gravity. "And there is a gipsy van somewhere about. I have always thought I should like to drive about the country in a gipsy van."

Emmy gave her aunt a look of reproach: but by this time her sister had arrived with Mrs. Plowden's ultimatum. "If the sun comes out mamma will call for you at the door, if you will please to be ready by three; but if it is overcast she will come in the fly. So that is all settled, I hope."

Mab had maintained a great calm during

all these searchings of heart. She was not going, and had she been going it would have been a matter of the greatest indifference to her, consciously a plain, and what is still more dreadful to the imagination, a fat girl, whether her hair was blown about or not, and what first impression Mrs. Swinford or even Leo Swinford might form of her. As for Leo Swinford, indeed, in face of the fact that he had called at the Cottage the night before, she felt for him something of that familiarity which breeds contempt: and how it could matter to anybody what he thought was to Mab's youthful soul a wonder not to be expressed.

"What are you so anxious about, after all?" she said. "If your hair is untidy, what of that? Everybody in Watcham knows exactly how your hair looks, Emmy, whether it is just newly done and tidy, or whether it is hanging about your ears."

"I hope it never hangs about my ears," said Emmy primly, yet with indignation. If there was one thing upon which she prided herself, it was the tidiness in which she stood superior over all her peers.

"Oh, I've seen it, after an afternoon at tennis, just as wild as other people's," said

Mab, "and everybody in the village has seen it too."

"But then," said the other sister, "these are not people in the village; they're new people, and there's a great deal in a first impression—at least, so Emmy thinks."

"A first impression—upon whom?" said Mab, with all the severity of her age. Seventeen, being as yet scarcely in it, is a severe critic of the ages over twenty which are in possession of the field.

There was a pause, which Florence broke by one of her disconcerting laughs.

"Mab, you are too much of a baby. Don't you know the Swinfords are going to entertain? Perhaps you don't know what that means. They are going to give all sorts of parties, and we'll not be asked if—we don't please."

"Whom?" said Mab again.

And then there came another laugh from Florence, and an offended "What can you mean, Mab? Mrs. Swinford, to be sure. It is only she who could invite girls to make the house pleasant, and," said Emily, with a little dignity, "it is as much for you as for me."

"Oh! I thought it might be Leo Swin-

ford," said the audacious Mab, "who wants a wife, mother says. But he says himself no, he doesn't want anything of the kind."

"Mab!" said Lady William, in a warning tone from behind.

"He didn't say it in any secret," said Mab, "not the least. He didn't tell you 'But this is between ourselves,' or 'You won't mention it,' or anything of the kind, as people say when they confide in you. He said it right out."

"Who said it right out?" cried Emily. It was their turn to question now, and they looked at each other after they had looked, in consternation, at Mab—asking each other, with their eyes, awe-stricken, what could this little minx mean, and how did she know?

"As for Leo Swinford, I don't think anything at all of him," said Mab. "He was got up in a fur coat yesterday, when it was not cold at all, only blustering; and he had shiny shoes on and red socks showing, as if he were got up for the evening—to walk about the Watcham roads."

"Do you mean to say," said Emily severely, crushing these pretensions in the bud, "that *you* have seen Mr. Swinford, Mab? And how did you know it was Mr.

Swinford—it might have been some excursionist or other down here by a cheap train."

"A Marshall and Snelgrove young man," said Florence. "Absurd! red socks and evening shoes and a fur coat."

"And we have always understood Mr. Swinford was a gentleman," Emily said. "But it is not at all wonderful at Mab's age to take up such a foolish idea. For a new person in the village always looks as if there was an adventure behind him, doesn't he, aunt?—and Mab is such a child still."

"However," said Lady William, "I don't know how it came about, but it was Leo Swinford, my dear. I knew him very well when he was a child, and he sought me out because, I suppose, he didn't know any one else here."

There was another pause of consternation and disappointment: for to think that Mab had seen this new personage before any of them, and that he had seen Mab, was very disconcerting and disagreeable to these young ladies. But then they reflected that Mab did not count—a little fat, roundabout thing, looking even younger than her age, and that if it was ordained

that they should be forestalled by any one, better Mab than another. The horrid little thing! But then it was a good sign for future intimacy that he knew Aunt Emily, and had come in this way at once to her house.

"I am sure," said Emmy, "he might have come to the Rectory. Papa would have been very glad to see him, and the clergyman is generally the first person—unless when there is a squire. And of course he is the squire himself. But then Aunt Emily is the highest in rank, everybody knows."

"My rank had not much to do with it. All that Leo knows of me was as Emily Plowden, the Rector's daughter, just as you are now, Emmy," said Lady William, with a little laugh. She was going out of the room as she spoke, and turned her head to give them one glance from the door. If it occurred to Lady William that the second Emily Plowden was not precisely like the first, she did not give vent to that opinion. But it was a little ludicrous from her point of view to be told, as she was told so often, that Emily was "her very image"—"just what I remember you at her age." It was with, perhaps, a little glance of satire in her eyes that she flung this

parting word at her niece. But the Emily Plowden of the present generation understood no jest. She blushed a little with conscious pleasure and pride, and threw up her head. Now, Lady William had a throat like a swan, but Emily's could be described no otherwise than as a long neck, at the top of which her head jerked forward with a motion not unlike the darting movement of a hen.

"So you have really seen him, Mab? Think of having a man, a real man, a young man in Watcham! Were you much excited? Had you presence of mind enough to note any particulars as to eyes and hair and height, and so forth—as well as the red socks and the shiny shoes?"

"Oh, he's fair, I think," said Mab indifferently, "a sort of no-coloured hair like mine, and the rest to correspond. He was very talky and jokey with mother, just as if she had been a young lady. But he said little to me."

"It was not to be expected," said Emily, "that a gentleman and a man of the world like Mr. Swinford would find much to say to you; and I wonder that he should have remembered Aunt Emily. I have never

heard that men like that cared much for old ladies: but no doubt it was because he knew nobody else, and just to pass the time."

"Mother is not an old lady," said Mab; "if I were a man I should like her better than all of you girls put together. You are, on the whole, rather silly things. You don't talk out of your own heads, but watch other people's eyes to see what will please them. I don't call that talking! You never would have found out what would please that man if you had looked into his eyes for a year. Now mother never minds—she says what comes into her head: and if any one contradicts her she just goes on saying the other thing."

This somewhat vague description seemed to make a certain impression upon the young ladies, who probably were able to fill up the outlines for themselves. Emily gave a little sigh.

"Conversation's quite a gift," she said, "and it's always difficult with a new person till you know their tastes. I suppose Mr. Swinford knows about pictures and that sort of thing, and unless you've somebody to tell you when you go to the exhibitions it's so hard to know which are really the good ones.

Then books—Mudie never sends us any of the best. He puts all the common novels into the country parcels. At the Hall they will get everything that comes out."

"He said nothing about books or pictures either," said Mab—"Yes, by-the-bye, he's going to lend mother some—but they're French ones——"

"French ones!" said the cousins; and then there was a pause of consternation. "Papa once said if he had his will no French novel should ever come into the parish."

"Ah!" said Mab, "but then I suppose Mr. Swinford didn't write and ask uncle what he should bring."

Emily remained gazing out of the window with a troubled air.

"We shall never know what to say if that is the sort of thing; and as for going to their parties, if they are all made up of—— Mamma, too, who never read a French book in her life. We had a little practice in the schoolroom, when we had Fräulein, don't you remember, Flo—— Who was it we read? It was all long speeches, and one could never make out what they were about."

"And they sounded exactly like German when Fräulein read them. I never could tell which was which. But I know where the books are, and perhaps if you learned one of the speeches and said it to Mr. Swinford, he might like it, don't you know."

"I was not, of course, thinking of Mr. Swinford, but of Mrs. Swinford," said Emily, frowning.

"And you think you will get a chance of talking to her with mamma and Aunt Emily there?"

"Well," said Emily, "at least I can show her that I know my place, and how an English girl behaves."

"I wish you would not wrangle," said Mab; "it was rather fun listening to mother and him: they said no speeches out of books —I believe after all what they said was chiefly chaff. Mother is a wonderful hand at chaff. She looks so quiet all the time, and goes on till you are nearly jumping. But he liked it, and laughed, and gave her as good. There was one thing he said," added Mab demurely, "which wasn't chaff, and which you might like to hear. He said at once he didn't want——"

"What! I'm sure I don't care what he

wants or doesn't want—a gardener perhaps? and papa has just heard of one he wanted to recommend."

"A wife!" cried Mab, her blue eyes quickening a little with mischief. "Mother asked if he did, and he said he didn't. Perhaps she had some one she wanted to recommend."

"Perhaps," said Florence, coming to her sister's aid; "that is the way in France, the parents arrange it all. I shouldn't mind at all—that. I give my consent. It would be nice to be the bride's relations and always about the house. If you'll promise to ask nice people and always us to meet them—and be kind about sending the carriage for us, and that sort of thing, for papa hates a bill for flys—I shall give my consent."

"Me!" cried Mab, indignant, "I would not marry Leo Swinford, not if—— I'd rather marry the silliest of the curates. I'd rather——" She stopped short breathless, unable to find a stronger alternative.

"Then what a good thing for you," said Florry, "that he doesn't want a wife!"

"If you think it is nice," said Emily, "for young girls to talk about gentlemen, and whether they want wives or not, as if wives

were sold at the shop at so much a pound—I am not of that kind of mind : and Aunt Emily would not like it any more than mamma. Good-bye, you two. I have got to go home and get ready, whatever you may have to do."

And thus Emily retired with the honours of war. If there was any one who had formed plans on the subject of Leo Swinford it was she ; not plans, indeed, which are dreadful foreign things, but just a floating idea such as an English girl might entertain, that if a young man and a young woman are thrown much together, why, then certain consequences might follow. One never could tell what might happen, as Mrs. Plowden herself, who was the very essence of propriety, did not hesitate to say.

IV

THE road was a little muddy, but not much; and it was quite possible by taking a little trouble in walking to keep your boots quite clean. Under the trees in the avenue this was not so easy, for it was more sheltered, and the wind could not get in to sweep through and through every opening. There is a pond, or lake, in the grounds, as everybody knows, which had been the delight of the neighbourhood for the skating in winter, all the long time the Swinfords had been absent.

"I wonder if they will still let us skate now they are at home," said Emily, as they walked round the bank over the crisped and extremely living water, which did not look under the breeze as if it had ever been bound by chains of frost.

"Winter is a long way off," said Mrs. Plowden, who was a little blown by her walk. She desired her companions to pause a little

and look at the view. "I don't want," she said, panting, "to go in out of breath. These sort of people have quite advantage enough over one in their fine houses without going in panting like a washerwoman." She added, "Winter's a long way off, and, as we never knew whether they gave permission at all, or if it was only Howell at the gate, I wouldn't say anything about it, Emmy, if I were you."

Mrs. Plowden's loss of breath partly proceeded from the fact that she had been talking all the way. She had no want of subjects: the past history of Mrs. Swinford, whom they were going to visit, which she did not know; but that made little difference; and the character of her son, which nobody in Watcham knew; and the precautions to be taken in arranging their intercourse with the family so as to get all that might be advantageous out of that intercourse without in any way compromising themselves in respect to that which might be unsatisfactory. "If there should be any matrimonial entanglement," said Mrs. Plowden, "or that sort of thing, of course it would be for the girl's family to make every inquiry. But I dare say as he's half a

Frenchman, and not at all one of our sort, nothing of that kind will happen: and it is time enough to take it into consideration when it does."

"Quite time enough," said Lady William, very decidedly, "especially as nothing can be more unlikely."

"That is just what I say. Of course when young people are thrown together one never knows what may happen: and it is to be hoped that Mr. Swinford may see how much better it would be to settle down with a nice English wife than to bring over a French mademoiselle, who never would understand English ways. But it will be time enough, don't you think so, Emily? for I always acknowledge you know better than me when it is anything French that is in question—with your languages, you know, and all that."

"My languages won't help me much with Leo Swinford, who is just as English as I am —nor with his mother, who is cosmopolitan, and of no country at all."

"That's just one of your sayings, Emily, for how could a woman be of no country at all? What I'm most concerned for is whether they will come to church: and I

can see it's much on James's mind, though he never says anything; for a great house like that, almost the only great house in the parish, sets such a dreadful example if they don't go to church. One hears of it all through the place. If the people at the Hall don't go, why should we? I tell them it's quite different—that the people at the Hall have many opportunities, and are deeply interested all the same, and all that; whereas if poor people don't pay attention to their religious duties, what is to become of them? But often they don't seem to see it."

"I shouldn't see it if I was in their place. I thought that in Christianity there was no respect of persons."

"Oh! my dear Emily, you ought to know better than to bring up that common argument against us, and your brother the Rector of the parish. Of course there's no respect of persons! But if Mrs. Swinford comes to church she will be shown into the Hall pew, and old Mrs. Lloyd will just find a place for herself, if she is early enough, in the free seats. How could anybody do otherwise? We must be practical. Old Mary Lloyd would be very uncomfortable if she were to sit down with you or me. She

is much more at home in the free seats. And with the poor people it is only their individual selves that are in question, whereas the great lady sets such an example: and there are all the servants and the servants' families, and one doesn't know how many——"

"I think you may set your mind at ease, Jane. Mrs. Swinford will come to church."

"You take a load off my mind, Emily; but it is many, many years since you have seen her, and people change a great deal. I sometimes feel even myself, you know, an inclination to stay in bed on Sunday mornings. It is a thing to be crushed in the bud. If you give in to a headache once, there is no telling where it may land you in the end."

"But, mamma dear," said the sympathetic Emmy, "your headaches are so bad!"

"Hum!" said Mrs. Plowden doubtfully. "Yes, my headaches are bad sometimes: but it is a thing that one should set one's face against. It ought to be crushed in the bud—on Sundays, I mean; it does not matter so much on other days. And Mr. Swinford, Emily. I hear that you have seen him already. Now, I wonder what made him go to see you——"

"Why shouldn't he?" said Lady William, with a laugh.

"Oh, well, you know! I should have thought a gentleman would have looked up the Rector, or the Archdeacon, or the General, instead of a lady just living in a small way by herself, like you."

"Mamma, you forget Aunt Emily's rank," Emmy said in dismay.

"Oh, I never forget her rank!" cried Mrs. Plowden, with a little irritation. "I hear enough of it, I am sure."

"The Rector and the Archdeacon and the General are all very important persons. The only thing is that Leo Swinford did not know them, and he knew me."

"I have always observed that people in that sort of position know everybody," said Mrs. Plowden, "and my dear Emily, I don't want to seem censorious, but do you think it is quite *nice* to talk of a young man like that by his Christian name? *I* don't even know his Christian name. It may be Leonard or it may be Lionel, or it may be——"

"Oh! Leopold, mamma!"

"I don't see what you have got to do with it, Emmy. If your aunt knows him

so well as that, *you* don't know him—and perhaps never will if he is that kind of man!"

"Don't you think," said Lady William, with that perfect composure of which she was mistress, "that we might stop for a moment again and look at the view——"

"Oh, if you feel the hill, Emily—it is a little steep—I don't mind sitting down for a moment, if you feel you want it. It is very pretty here," said Mrs. Plowden, panting; "the water—through the trees—and the lodge—in the distance—with the wisteria just beginning to shoot."

The pause made here was a few minutes in duration, for Mrs. Plowden had heated herself much by her argument and by clambering up the ascent—which was, indeed, only a very gentle ascent. At last, however, the party reached the door. As they came up sounds were audible inside, which disclosed themselves, when the door was hastily opened, as produced by a game of billiards, played by Mr. Leo Swinford, and—oh! terrible sight—his butler: though for the first moment Mrs. Plowden's eager intelligence had not taken in this fact. She said, politely, that she was afraid they had driven the gentleman away——

"Oh! said Leo with a laugh, "it's only Morris—let me fulfil his functions and take you to my mother." He offered the Rector's wife his arm, but she drew modestly back.

"My sister-in-law, Mr. Swinford. Oh, I hope I know what is *comme-il-faut.* I could not go before Lady William." Mrs. Plowden had a flash of exultation in thinking of that word—*comme-il-faut.* It was something like an inspiration that brought it to her lips in the very nick of time.

The drawing-room at the Hall was a large room in three divisions, divided with pillars of sham marble with gilded capitals. It was too bright, notwithstanding the heaviness of the decorations. Large windows almost from the roof to the floor poured in floods of afternoon light, and shone pitiless upon the lady who rose languidly to meet her visitors, keeping her back to the light. She was a tall woman, exceedingly worn and thin, but with a great deal of grace in her movements, though she was old. Her age was the first thing which the eager rural visitors noted, for it was a sort of age which had never come under their observation before. She was dressed picturesquely in dark velvet with such folds and cunning lines

as they had never dreamed of, and which plunged them into anxious questioning whether that might be the latest fashion. If so, it was unlike anything that Miss Singer had in her books and papers, or even Madame Mantz, who was Miss Singer's great example in town; and her hair, which had not a white thread in it, was uncovered. No cap on her head! and approaching seventy, Mrs. Plowden thought, making a rapid calculation upon the facts she knew. Mrs. Swinford stepped forward a little with a faint cry of "Emily" when Lady William appeared, and took her, with every appearance of cordiality, into her arms, and they kissed, or at least Mrs. Swinford touched Lady William's cheeks one after the other, while the Plowdens made a respectful circle round and looked on. "This is indeed kind," Mrs. Swinford said. The ladies were so bent upon the aspect of the mistress of the Hall that they did not observe how pale Lady William was, or how little part she took in the embrace. "And though, of course, she could not take us into her arms," Mrs. Plowden said after, "never having set eyes on us before, she was quite as cordial, and hoped she would see a great deal of us,

and that it was so nice to feel that one was coming among people who felt like old friends." "I have heard so much of you through Emily," was what Mrs. Swinford really did say; to which Emily was so disagreeable as to make no reply. And then they all sat down, and Mrs. Plowden began to make conversation, as in duty bound.

"We are so glad to see you in your own house, Mrs. Swinford. The Rector has always said it was so cold like to feel that there was no one in the Hall. A squire's house makes such a difference. The poor people think so much of it, and the middle people are always looking out for an example; and of course the higher class, it is yourself—so you being here is, if I may say so, of the greatest consequence to everybody, and I do hope it will be agreeable to you."

"You are very good," said Mrs. Swinford, with a motion of her head. "It never occurred to me that it could be of any importance except to ourselves."

"Oh, I assure you it is of the greatest consequence. What we want in England is the higher classes to set a good example, to keep back those horrid democratic ways, and show us how we ought to behave. We

are very loyal to a good example in England, Mrs. Swinford. You have been so long away, perhaps you may not remember how in a well-ordered parish the people are taught to look up to those who are above them——"

"But suppose we do not set a good example?" said the lady, with a languid smile. She was looking at Lady William, who sat by, saying little, and who was in the full flood of the light, which she was quite able to bear. The elder woman, who was not, bestowed an interested attention upon the friend whom she had greeted so warmly—not even a look or movement, nor even a fold of the very plain black dress, which showed how little means of adornment the other possessed, yet how little it mattered to her whether she was adorned or not, escaped her. Mrs. Swinford was very deeply learned in all these arts, in all that tended to preserve beauty and enhance it. She had been a beauty herself in her day, and was very reluctant to part with it. She looked at her old friend with an eager, yet veiled attention, observing all that was in her favour, and the few things against her. Poorly dressed, but looking none the worse,

the black being in its way a kind of veil even of its own imperfections: the charm of the face enhanced by sorrow and trouble and many experiences, the outlines uninjured, the cheek almost as purely oval as in youth, the eyes as sweet, the hair—it had a touch of gray, perhaps, but that is no harm to such a woman, a woman not standing upon her appearance, perhaps not thinking much of it—at least, giving herself the air of not thinking of it at all. Mrs. Swinford did not believe that any woman was ever indifferent to her appearance, or not thinking of it. It did not matter much to herself at the present moment, when there was no one she cared to affect or charm, no one worth the lifting of a finger; and yet she was not indifferent to her own aspect, and why should Lady William be? Lady William? A strange smile crossed the elder lady's face as she remembered what was now Emily Plowden's name. She said to her in the middle of Mrs. Plowden's speech, to which she paid no attention, with a way that women of the world have, "How strange it is to think of you, Emily, by that name!"

The entire company pricked up its ears. Mrs. Plowden stopped short, much discom-

fited, in her explanation of what was the Rector's opinion, in which Mrs. Swinford had interrupted her with such absolute indifference as to what she was saying. And Emmy raised her long neck, remembering always keenly that it was she who was now Emily Plowden; and even young Mr. Swinford, who had been talking to Lady William, raised his head with sudden attention, glancing from her to his mother. Lady William herself coloured suddenly, and with an unusual air asked, "What name?"

"What but your married name, my dear?" Mrs. Swinford said, and laughed low, but very distinctly, with her eyes fixed upon her guest.

"Ah, yes," said Lady William, returning the look, "you are more used to my husband's name than mine."

Nobody had the least idea what this passage of arms meant—not even Mr. Swinford, who kept looking from his mother to Lady William with a questioning look. As for the other ladies, they stared severely, and did not attempt to understand. Mrs. Swinford was a little rude, and so was Lady William. They did not show the fine manners which ought to belong to fine ladies.

On the whole, Mrs. Plowden thought it might have been better for her to make her first call alone. Mrs. Swinford had talked to her quite sweetly, she said afterwards, but Emily and she did not seem to be on such good terms. It is always a mistake, Mrs. Plowden thought, to depend upon any one else in the way of introduction. The Rector's wife in her own parish is the equal of any one. And as for French, in which Emily was believed to be so superior, French was no more wanted, she reported to the Rector, "than between you and me."

"I dare say," she said, when this little sensation was over, "that you find our poor Emily much changed. Such a difference for her to come from the society in which she was, and everybody so superior, to our little village again: but, of course, all these things are little to the loss of a dear husband, which is the greatest a woman can have to bear——"

"You speak most eloquently, Mrs. Plowden," said Mrs. Swinford, "the very greatest a woman can be called upon to bear."

"It is very kind of you," said Lady William, "to feel so much for me."

"Yes, yes, the very greatest: and she has taken it so well. But naturally it makes a great difference. My daughter Emmy is considered by everybody to be extremely like her aunt," said Mrs. Plowden, directing with a look the attention of the party to Emmy, who bridled and drew up her long neck with that little forward movement which was like a peck, but did not at all mean anything of the kind.

Mrs. Swinford gave poor Emmy a look—one of those full, undisguised looks which again women of the world alone permit themselves; but she made no remark—which was very eloquent, more so than many remarks. She said, after a time, with the air of a person who has been puzzling her brains to keep up a conversation:

"You have other daughters?" adding to her question a smile of great sweetness, as if there was nothing in the world she was more interested in.

"One," said Mrs. Plowden, much gratified, "Florence, named after another aunt, and more like my side of the house. And I have a son, who we hoped would have gone into the Church; but he is like so many young men of the present day, he has religious difficulties.

And the Rector thinks it is not right to force his inclinations, especially into a sacred profession. I have great confidence in my husband's judgment, but I don't quite agree with him on this point; for I think if you only use a little pressure upon them when they are young, they are often most truly grateful to you afterwards, when they begin to understand the claims of life. I wonder," said Mrs. Plowden, with a glance at Leo, who was once more leaning over Lady William's chair, "whether you agree with me? I should like to have the support of your opinion, for you must have experience in dealing with the young."

Mrs. Swinford had delicately intimated her entire indifference to the homily of the clergyman's wife for some time past, but she was recalled by this appeal, which amused her.

"Yes," she said, "I have a son; but I do not think I have attempted to force his inclinations," she added, after a pause.

"Ah, then you would agree with James! I am sorry, for it would have been a great support to me; but we must all judge for ourselves in these matters—and in such a question as entering a sacred profession——"

"Leo," said Mrs. Swinford, "we are forgetting: our habits are not yet quite English. Offer Lady William some tea."

"Oh," said Mrs. Plowden, with a start, "let me pour it out! Or Emily will do so, I am sure, with pleasure, if you will permit. It is so awkward for a gentleman——"

"Pray do not trouble yourself. Leo can manage it very well, or he can ring for some one if he wants help. And you, Emily, have a daughter, too?"

"Yes, I have a daughter."

"Quite young? She can scarcely be grown up. I do not remember many dates, but there are two or three—— Eighteen perhaps, or a little less, or more?"

"She will not be eighteen for some months."

"And pretty? Like you? Do you see anything of the family? Do they take any notice of the child?"

"To tell the truth," said Lady William, "my child and I have been very happy in our cottage, and we have not thought much of any family—save our own very small family of two."

She had flushed with suppressed anger,

but with an evident desire to keep her feelings concealed, answered the questions very deliberately and in a tone of studied calm.

"Ah, I recognise you in that! always proud: but not prudent. One must not despise a family, especially when it has a fine title. You ought to consider, my dear Emily, how important it may be for the child; your excellent sister-in-law," said Mrs. Swinford, turning with her wonted smile to Mrs. Plowden, "thoroughly recognises that."

Mrs. Plowden, thus unexpectedly referred to, was taken in an undignified moment, when she had just begun to sip her first mouthful of very hot tea. She had felt that a second interruption in the very midst of what she had been saying was too much to be forgiven; but on being appealed to in this marked manner she changed her mind, and perceived that it was only Mrs. Swinford's way. She swallowed the hot tea hastily, to her great discomfort, in her haste to respond.

"Indeed I do," she said fervently, coughing a little. "Indeed I do—— I tell Emily often I would put my pride in my pocket, and

insist on having Mab invited to make acquaintance with her father's family. And she's such a Pakenham, more like the Marquis than any daughter he has."

"Oh, she's such a Pakenham!" said Mrs. Swinford, with a faint laugh.

"I think, Jane," said Lady William, "that you are forgetting we walked here, and that it is time we were going back."

"Oh, please, let these dear ladies finish their tea. Leo, Miss Plowden will take some cake. I am more interested than I can tell to hear that your child does not take after you, but is like the Pakenhams." The laugh was very soft, quite low, most ladylike, and, indeed, what is called poetically, silver in tone. "What an ill-advised little mortal!" she said.

V

"WELL," said Florence to Mab, "we two are left alone. We're the young ones, we have to keep out of the way. But I am sure the Swinfords would rather have seen you and me than Emmy. We are the youngest and we are the most amusing."

"Oh, please speak for yourself," said Mab, "I am not amusing at all."

Florence looked at her with an air of consideration. "Well, perhaps that is true," she said; "you have a turn-up nose, and you ought to be lively, but appearances are very deceiving. I wonder what that army of observation will do to-day? I call them our army of observation because they have gone to spy out the land, and decide upon what are the proper lines of strategy. It's quite new to us in Watcham to have a squire's family: and then it is not even a common squire's family. They are such superior

people, and their ways are so unlike ours. Shouldn't you say it would be a nice thing in Watcham to have people whose ways are not as our ways?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mab, with the indifference of extreme youth, "we are well enough as we are."

"It is easy for you to speak, with only Aunt Emily to think of, and your own way —and seventeen," said Florry, with a sigh. "I would give something to be seventeen again."

"Why?" said Mab. "It is the most ridiculous age—too old to be a child, too young to be anything else. One cares no more for dolls and that sort of thing, and one doesn't care either for what the old people talk about. How they go on and on and talk! as if anybody minded."

"You shouldn't listen," said Florry.

"Sometimes one can't help it. Sometimes there's a bit of story in it, and then it's nice—only in that case they say, 'You remember so-and-so: what a tragedy that was!' and then the other wags his or her head, and they shut up, not reflecting that you're dying to know."

"There's something of that sort about

Mrs. Swinford," said Florence; "there was quite a talk about calling before mamma made up her mind. Mrs. FitzStephen came in about a week or two ago, and she said, "I have come to know what you're going to do?" And mamma said, without even asking what she meant, "I am very much perplexed, and I don't know in the least.' And then papa, standing in front of the fire, with his coat-tails on his arms, you know, grumbles out, 'You had better let it alone.' 'Let what alone?' mamma called out quickly, and he just stared and said nothing. At this mamma said, 'They are sure to entertain a great deal; they are people that can't live without company.' And Mrs. FitzStephen, she said, 'Oh, I don't care for such company.' And then mamma replied, with her grand Roman matron air, 'You have no young people to think of, Mrs. FitzStephen.'"

Florence was a tolerable mimic, and she "did" those characters, with whom Mab was intimately acquainted, in an exceedingly broad style, and with considerable effect.

"Florry, you oughtn't to take off your own father and mother."

"Who then?" cried Florry. "I must take such as I have; I don't know such lots

of people. Wait till the Swinfords come on the scene and I'll do them."

"Ah, he's not so easy to do. The others you've known all your life, and they are all the same kind of people: but you never saw any one like—*that* gentleman. The General would give you no clue to him, nor anybody you know here. He is like nobody you ever saw; he is—I don't know what to say."

"You are always thinking of that fur coat of his and patent leather shoes. I wonder if they will see him to-day? They had much better have taken you and me, Mab. Emmy may be the eldest, but she will never make any impression. A man like that will never look twice at her."

"Why should he?" said Mab, raising her eyebrows, "or what does it matter whether he does or not?"

"Oh, Mab, you silly little thing," said Florence, "you must know, however silly you may be, that it matters a great deal. Think only what it would matter! To have a girl settled like that—rich, able to do what she pleased, one's sister; only think; or still more if it was one's self. We've got twenty pounds a year each for our clothes, fancy!

And Mrs. Swinford will have hundreds—she will have just as much as she likes, and whatever she likes, and a grand house where she could ask the Queen herself: and power —power to get Jim settled somehow, to make him sure of his living: perhaps to get something better for papa, and save mamma some of the anxiety she has. And if anything happened to *them*, why, there would be a home for—for—the other one, don't you see? Oh!" said Florence, with a deep-drawn breath that seemed to come from the very depths of her being, "it would matter so much that it is wicked, it is dreadful, to think that a man could make such a change in another creature's life only by looking at her and throwing his handkerchief. It's immoral to dangle a chance like that under a poor girl's very nose."

Mab was not unimpressed with this terrible truth. She felt also that to contemplate the differences that might ensue if one of the daughters of the Rectory became Mrs. Swinford of the Hall was more than words could say. The very possibility caught at her breath. She made a momentary pause of awe, and then she said, "But he never will, he never will!"

"Emmy, no," said Florence; "no—she's too—she's not enough—oh! she's impossible, and I can see that very well for myself. Emmy is—she's one's sister, and she is as nice as ever was. You know she is a nice girl! But she was never made for that; whereas if they had taken you and me——"

"Don't say me, please," said Mab, reddening all over that blunt-featured and irregular little face, which was unfortunately so like the Pakenhams. The flush was quite hot, and discomposed her. "I'm impossible, too—much more impossible," she said.

"Oh! you stand upon your family," said Florence, "and upon your mother's position, and all that; but you may take my word for it, that if you were the Marquis's own daughter instead of a disrep——I mean instead of his brother's, you would have to do the very same thing. If it is because you're not pretty, that's true enough; but there's never any telling what may take a man like that, and you've got plenty of 'go' in you, Mab, though I don't want to flatter you: and even in looks a year or two may make a great difference——"

"Will you stop! will you stop, please!"

said Mab; "Florry, stop! You make me ashamed. You make me feel as if——"

"You were going in for it, too?" said Florence calmly. "It makes me crazy, too, sometimes to think that—— But so long as girls are poor, and a man, just because they please him, can change everything for them —how can we help it? Even if you were to work, as people say, what difference would it make? I could perhaps make my living —and Emmy—— But dear, dear, to think of the Hall beside any little breadwinning of ours——"

"Don't talk so, *please*," cried Mab, with a shiver. She was not a visionary at all, nor had she any sentiment to speak of. But she was very young, still something between a girl and a boy, and ashamed to hear those revelations which she only half understood; or, rather, did not understand at all.

"Well, one needn't talk," said Florry, with a slight emphasis on the word. "But though you mayn't talk of it, you can't stop a thing from being true."

"Let's go out for a walk," said Mab, "a long walk, down by the Baron's Wood and up by Durham Hill; or let's go out on the river for a pull. Let us do something

—one can't stay quiet all this bright afternoon."

"I want so much to see them when they come back," said Florry. "I want to know what they think of him—if they saw him: and whether Emmy made any impression, and what happened."

"What could happen? Do you expect her to come home engaged to him?" said Mab. "However well things may go, they could not go so quickly as that."

"I am not a fool," said Florry, with indignation. She stood at the little gate looking out wistfully along the road by which the ladies had gone. The great trees hung over the wall which bounded there the nearest corner of the demesne of the Swinfords; the lodge and gate were just round the corner out of sight. It was too soon to expect them to come back. "Unless Mrs. Swinford had been out," said Florry. "She might be out, you know, and then they'd be back directly.

"She never goes out," said Mab; "it's too cold for her here."

"Or she might not receive them very well, and then they would only stay a few minutes. You are so indifferent, you don't

care a bit what has happened: and I am on pins and needles till I know."

"Then I shall go for a walk by myself."

"Don't do that," said Florry, putting out her hand to stay her cousin. She stood thus for a moment with her head turned towards the Hall, but her hand clutching Mab, gazing in one direction while her person inclined towards the other. She drew a long breath, and turned at last from her fixed gaze. "They must," she said, sighing again, "have stayed to tea. Yes, I'll go on the river if you like; but let us go round home on the way and fetch Jim."

"Jim!" said Mab. "He'll want to scull, and I prefer to scull myself."

"Oh, he doesn't mind. He is as lazy as—— He'll steer and let us pull as long as ever you please. I don't know anybody so lazy as Jim."

"We should be better by ourselves," said Mab; "not that heavy weight in the stern of the boat. When we go by ourselves it's no weight at all."

"He'll steer," said Florry; it's better to have some one to steer. And don't you see it will keep him out of mischief for one afternoon."

"You have always another reason behind," said Mab. "It never is just the thing you think of, but something at the back of it."

"Well," said Florry soothingly, "it's always so, don't you know, where there's a family. You are so lonely, you have no brothers and sisters. If you do well, then everything is all right. But our being right depends upon so many things: First, if papa is in good humour, and if Jim is going straight. Emmy and I have little questions between ourselves, of course, but these are the chief ones. Now, you have only Aunt Emily to think of, and she neither gets into rages nor goes wrong."

"I should hope not," said Mab, indignantly.

"It is all very well for you to throw up your head like that; but we cannot do it. We must manage the best we can. Mab, I do often wish there could be a change."

This was said when she had at last torn herself away from the road to the Hall, and the two girls were walking towards the Rectory and the river.

"What sort of change?"

"Oh! anything. That Jim should go away, or that he should do something dread-

ful that couldn't be forgiven—or that Emmy should marry. I would even marry myself —any one! to make a change in the family and get away."

"I should think, however bad things may be, that they would be worse if you were all separated and not knowing what happened to each other. And what is there so very bad? You are all happy enough for anything one can see."

"That is the worst of it," said Florry, "we are all pretending about everything. It's just one big lie all round—and it isn't right to tell lies, or at least the Bible says so. There is papa breaks every one of the commandments, you know."

"Florry, don't tell stories of Uncle James; I am very fond of him, and I won't have it."

"It's true all the same. I don't say it's his fault, it's Jim's fault. Papa swears—he does, he can't help it, at Jim, and then pretends it's something else—the gardener, or the overseer, or the poor people, or even poor Dash—that makes him so angry. Isn't that lying? Then mamma pretends Jim has doubts and won't go in for the Church because of them, when she knows very well

what it is really he has been sent down for. And Jim pretends that he is going back to Cambridge next term, and that he is quite friendly with all the dons, and came down to read—I've heard him say that."

"It may not be true," said Mab, doubtfully, "but I shouldn't call that lying—why should we all go and tell that poor Jim has not been good? What have the other people to do with it? Mother says we're not called upon to give them any information—and she just says the same as you do: but that is not to lie."

"We are all pretending, every one," said Florry. "Emmy and I are by way of knowing nothing at all. I believe Jim thinks we don't know anything. So we have to pretend not only to other people, but to him in our very own house, and papa too. I have heard papa say, 'Thank Heaven, the girls at least know nothing,' and mamma, the dreadful, dreadful liar that she is, thanks Heaven too, though she knows very well that we knew as soon as she did, and that she couldn't keep anything from us two. If you think of that, Mab, and just imagine how we go on pretending to each other, and to everybody.

"Now, if Jim were to go off to a ranche, as people advise, we should all be very wretched, and probably it would be his ruin, but it would be a little relief all the same. Or if Emmy were to get hold of this man—oh, it may be odious, and you may cry out, but it would be a great relief. There would be her wedding to think about, and her things, and altogether it would be a change for everybody; and then she could do something for Jim."

"Her husband could, you mean?"

"It is the same thing: he would, for his own sake, not to have an idle brother always about. It is killing all of us One could bear it, perhaps; but four all bearing it—all pretending something different, as I tell you; Emmy and I not to know; mamma and papa that it's another thing altogether that vexes them. Oh! we get exasperated sometimes to that degree, we could tear each other to pieces just to make a change."

"You are so exaggerated, Florry; mother always says so. You make a mountain out of a molehill."

"I just wish Aunt Emily had our molehill for a little while—just for a little while—to see how she liked it. What a lucky

woman she is to have only a girl. Nothing very bad can ever happen to you, Mab, or come to her through you. You may be dull, perhaps, just two women, one opposite to the other——"

"Dull! mother and I? Never. We don't know what it is to be dull!"

"Ah, that's very well just now," said Florence, "you're only seventeen; but wait a bit till you are older, especially if you don't marry, and year goes on after year, and nothing ever happens. See whether you are not dull then. I don't know which is worst," she added thoughtfully, "to have men in the family that make you miserable, or to have no men at all about to make any variety, but just women together, who never do any harm, but kill you with dulness. I really don't know which is the worst."

Mab was a little overwhelmed by this point of view. She was at the same time still indignant and resentful of the unexpected accusation. "When we begin to be dull," she said, "I'll let you know—but I don't see any reason for being so miserable. Poor Jim has never done anything so very bad. Sometimes he is silly——"

"There you are quite wrong," said

Florence, with great decision—"he is not silly: I wish he were, then one might think he didn't know any better; but even papa allows he is very clever. It is not from want of brains or sense either, if he would only be as good as he knows how——"

"Oh, if that is your opinion! Mother thinks he is only weak, and does what people ask him."

"Aunt Emily is just as far out of it as you are. Does he ever do anything that *we* ask him? There is papa at him for ever—is he any the better for it? Weak! that is what people say, thinking it's a kind of an excuse. I call it strong — to resist everything you ought to attend to, and take up everything you ought not. How can that be weak?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Mab; "I don't understand about boys. Jim is the only one I ever knew intimately. But mother thinks if some one were to get hold of him in the right sort of way——"

"What is the right sort of way? I suppose Aunt Emily thinks papa doesn't know—nor any of us who have it to do; that is just the way with people. You are always thinking of a thing, thinking, and puzzling, and

troubling: and then somebody comes in who has never spent ten minutes on it altogether, and says you are not taking the right way! Perhaps we are not; but who are they to pretend to know better? and since they are so wise, why don't they tell us which is the right way?"

"I am sure," cried Mab, "I never meant to make you angry, and mother is not one to interfere. She only said it to me. But since you're so full of this, Florry, I think I had better go, and not trouble you any more, for I only wanted some fun, and you are thinking of nothing but trouble. I'll run down to the water, and jump into a boat and have a little spin by myself."

"Oh, Mab, don't," cried Florence, clutching her once more. "Here we are at our gate, just come in and ask him. He will come far more readily for you than for me."

But it was with an ill grace that Mab followed her cousin through the Rectory kitchen garden, between the borders which veiled the lines of potatoes and cabbages. It might be flattering to suppose her capable of it, but she had not any desire to fill the place of missionary and guiding influence to her cousin Jim.

VI

THE Rectory was a red house standing in a garden, which its inhabitants, one and all, energetically declared not to be damp; from which the stranger might gather that they were not so certain on the subject as it would be well to be. Its doors were quite level with the ground, so that you walked in, without the interval even of a step to raise you above the drippings of the rain: and as the drawing-room windows also opened down to the ground, it was rather a trying business in wet weather, and kept both the housemaid and the family much on the alert. The two girls went in through the open window, for the afternoon was quite bright and fair, and no fear of rain: but they found nobody in the drawing-room, which was low and rather dark, notwithstanding those two good-sized French windows, which somehow seemed to keep the light within themselves,

and did not distribute it to the further side of the drab-coloured wall; this, unornamented with pictures or any variety, afforded a dingy background for the somewhat dingy couches and easy-chairs, which were covered with brownish chintz, intended to keep clean, or in franker language, "not to show the dirt" for as long a period as possible. Chintzes and wall papers, and even dresses, which were calculated not to show the dirt, were very popular at the time Mrs. Plowden married, as means of economy, and her daughters had been brought up in that tenet of faith. Accordingly everything in the room was more or less of this dingy drab complexion, which was not exhilarating to the spirits. There were signs that the room had been recently occupied by the untidiness of the loose cover of one of the sofas, which bore evident signs that some one had been lying there, and had jumped up hastily, and apparently fled, since the old novel he or she had been reading lay open on its face on the floor, and the antimacassars with which the sofa had been adorned were huddled up in limp bundles, and lay here and there where restless shoulders or limbs had left them. Florence gave her cousin a

look as she picked up the book and spread out the forlorn adornments on the arm and back of the sofa. "They were put on quite fresh two days ago, and look at them!" said poor Florry; they were chiefly in crochet, and the work of her own hands.

"He has been here," she said, "and papa has called him to see if he was at work. Papa might just as well let it alone, for he is never at work; but that is what they will not learn," said Florence, impatient of the blindness of her parents. "We," she added, "have to put the room tidy after him a dozen times a day; but I prefer him to be in the drawing-room, for at least he can't smoke here——"

"If he is out," said Mab, "let us go, Florry; we have lost half the afternoon already."

"I don't believe he is out—he is being 'jawed,' as he calls it, in papa's study: don't you hear them? Papa is at it hot! and what good will it do? He will only say the same thing over and over—I could say it all myself off by heart, everything papa says—and, of course, so could Jim, and what good can that do? Come and stop it, Mab. Jim will be so thankful to you: and poor

papa won't be sorry either," Florence said, with a more sympathetic perception, "for he knows it's useless; but when he once begins he can't stop himself."

"Oh," said Mab, "I can't go and disturb Uncle James."

"When he'll be so thankful to be disturbed!" said Florry, "and you much better than me, for you will have the air of not knowing what it all means. No; don't go to the study door. Go round by the garden, to the window where he can see you coming. Walk slowly, and make a little noise to attract their attention, so that you may not take them unawares. You might ring, or whistle, or something—or call to Dash—and then papa would see you, and have time to make up a face."

These domestic diplomacies were unknown to Mab, but she took to them with the natural instinct of femininity. There was a certain element of fun, too, in stopping what she still called "a scolding," and in getting the culprit off—even though the culprit did not commend himself very warmly to her partiality. She carried out the programme accordingly, while Florence waited just out of sight of the study window. It

was not a French window like those in the drawing-room, and it looked out upon the dullest portion of the surroundings—a bit of grass where the water lay treacherous during the long winter months in the slight concave of the ground, with shrubs cruelly green and unchanging around it, and a dead wall which they only partially veiled behind. Mab began to call Dash loudly as she walked round the corner to this sanctuary, scattering the gravel with her feet.

The scene that might have been seen inside the Rector's window at that moment was this: a tall youth seated on a chair presenting nothing more responsive than the crown of his head, supported on his hands, to his father's remarks, and saying never a word; while the Rector, who had risen from his own seat at his writing-table in his impatience, stood pouring out the vials of his wrath. He was putting before Jim all the enormities of which he had been guilty—his debts, the expense he had been to his parents, the disappointment, the disgrace. When, however, Mr. Plowden held up his hands to heaven and earth in grief and disappointment that it should be "*my* son" who had been sent down by his college, it

is to be feared that Jim was making angry comments in his mind to the effect that all his father cared for was that—"not me, or anything about me." He knew the circumstances very well—far better than his father could tell him; and was it likely his conscience would be more tender for being dragged over the same ground again and again? When the Rector cried, "What is the use of talking to an impenitent cub like you?" his son felt deeply inclined to reply, "There is none." He had, indeed, been wound up to the pitch of saying, "Why do you go on like that when you're so sure it will make no difference?"—a profoundly sensible utterance, but one, perhaps, which it does still less good to say.

When "Dash, Dash! come here, old fellow—get ready to come out for a walk," sounded into the study, that home of anything but retired leisure, the Rector came to a sudden stop. "There's some confounded visitor or other," he said in vexation, but not without relief.

"It isn't a visitor, it's Mab."

"Don't contradict me, sir! Who is she but a visitor, a silly girl breaking in where your mother herself—— Don't think I've

done with you because I'm interrupted. Don't let me see you stir from your book till dinner. Try whether you can't do something like your simple duty, for once in a way, just for the variety of the thing! Eh! —yes, my dear, you can come in if you really want to, if you have anything to say to me, but you know I'm always busy."

"Open the window, please, uncle," said Mab. "Is Jim there? We want him to come out with us, out on the river. The weeds are coming up already in the backwater, and we don't want to risk going over the weir. It would be a wetting, and it might be a drowning, don't you know: and we want Jim."

The weeds and the weir were the invention of the moment, and Mab felt rather proud of her skill; for of course the most obstinate of backwaters is not choked with weeds in March, and the girls, who were used to the river, were not so foolish at that season as to approach the weir. The Rector looked out upon his niece, of whom he was proud, with a look of helplessness: for even from his sister he had kept the secret (knowing nothing of Florry's indiscretions) of the sad state of affairs with Jim.

"My dear," he said, "it is quite true that Jim is here: but he's busy, almost as busy as I am, reading up, don't you know, for his examination. You really must not tempt him to-day. I am sure you know the river so well, you will take care not to go near the weir."

"But, Uncle James, it is getting near four o'clock, we shan't be more than an hour. Don't you think he will get on much better with his work when he comes back?"

Jim had gradually expanded himself while this conversation was going on; his father's back being turned he actually, not metaphorically, kicked up his heels a little in secret demonstration of his joy. Then he rose, and appeared exceedingly composed and respectful behind his father, who was leaning out of the open window. "Since it is a question of the girls' comfort, sir," said Jim, "an hour won't make very much difference. I can get up that Sophocles just as well after dinner as now."

"I don't put much faith in you after dinner," said the Rector, without turning his head.

"Oh, but why shouldn't you, uncle?" said Mab, "I'll answer for him! Of course

he'll work! Why there's nothing to do after dinner. Uncle says you may come, Jim."

"I don't say anything of the kind," said Mr. Plowden. But his eyes went from Mab outside to Jim within. They were both of them so young, and surely if there could be anything innocent in this world it would be an hour on the river with your sister and your cousin, both interested in keeping a boy straight. What was Sophocles after all (in which Jim took so little interest) in comparison with a more healthy rule of habit and purified nature? If only he would but be good, what would it matter about Sophocles? The Rector sighed with perplexity and impatience. It was all very well to attempt to keep Jim back, to say he was busy. Would all that keep him at his book a moment longer than his father's eye was on him? And if Jim escaped and stole out by himself, how could it be known whether his companions would be as innocent as Mab and Florry? Was it not even a good point in the boy, showing at bottom some traces of early innocence, that it was with Florry and Mab that he wished to go? Mr. Plowden turned in from the window and looked at his boy. He was the only boy of the house,

and no doubt he had been petted and spoiled, and taught to think that everything was to give way to him. The Rector looked at him with that longing of disappointed love, the father's dreadful sense of impotence, the intolerable feeling that a touch given somewhere, somehow, at the right moment, might bring all right if he only could tell when and how to give it. What did it matter that all his plans and arrangements should be put out the moment he had made them, if the right effect could be produced anyhow? Perhaps this little girl, with her childish innocent mind—who could tell? And at least how innocent it all was, the boy and the two girls! They would bring no harm to him, and perhaps—who could tell?

"You will come home straight, Jim, and get to work again as soon as you return?"

"Of course, sir," said Jim, opening large eyes, as if he had never departed from his word in his life. "Of course, when I say it I will do it. If you would but learn that it is the best thing to trust a fellow," he said, looking at the Rector with a grieved disappointment which quite outdid Mr. Plowden's sentiments of the same kind.

The poor Rector could not restrain a laugh as the young man hurried out of the room, leaving Sophocles just ready to topple over, on the very edge of the table; but it was not a cheerful laugh: though, perhaps, there was the chance that little Mab, if she had only been a little prettier—— Prettiness, however, as he knew, is not the only thing that matters in things of this kind.

"You little brick!" cried Jim, as they hurried along, "I owe you one for that. What put it into your little head to come and get me off to-day? for I was at the end of my patience, and could not think of any excuse to get away."

"What should you have done, Jim, if I had not come? read your Greek?"

"Not if I know it," said Jim. "I should just have cut and run, excuse or no excuse. A fellow can't be shut up all the afternoon, and the sun shining. It's cruelty to animals. The old Pater has forgotten that he was ever young."

"But you will keep your promise, Jim, and go back and learn up your Greek?"

"Oh, we'll see about that. Let's get our pull first. Oh, there's Flo! I thought you and I were going alone."

"It was Florry who wanted you to come," said Mab, with the frankness of extreme youth, "not me. I like to do the pulling myself."

"You shall if you like," he said. "I'm not fond of trouble. And it's not much fun you know, after all, to go out with your sister and your cousin. It's too much bread and butter. If I'd known that Flo was in it I shouldn't have come."

"You can go back if you please—to your Greek."

"Oh, catch me," said the young man.

"But you will when we come back, Jim?"

"Perhaps I shall; not if you bully me. So I warn you. I should do my work all right and make up lost time if I wasn't bullied for ever and ever. Every one is at me. You heard what papa said. He ought to know how a man feels and shut up. But it's being so much among women, I suppose, makes a clergyman like that. If he wasn't a clergyman he wouldn't nag, he'd leave that to the women, and then I should feel that there was some one who understood. But how do you suppose a fellow is to do anything when from morning to night he hears

nothing but 'Are you going to your work, Jim? When do you begin your work? How are you getting on with your work?' and so forth. If I don't pass it will be the family's fault, it will not be mine. Mab, do you row stroke or bow?"

Mab jumped into the boat and took her place, without otherwise answering his question; but when they had floated out amid the reflections of the still river she found that little tongue, which was not always under proper control.

"I like pulling," she said, "very much. I'd rather a great deal have an oar myself than sit still and let other people row me; and I like to bring mother out or—Aunt Jane." She was about to say *even* Aunt Jane, but happily remembered that Aunt Jane was the mother of both her companions. "But," said Mab, with a long, slow stroke, to which Florence, very anxious to hear what was passing, kept time very badly, "one thing I do hate is to pull an idle man."

"By Jove!" burst from the lips of Jim. He had been listening very calmly up to the last two or three words, amused to hear little Mab's statement of what she liked and didn't like, but quite sure that she could say nothing

that was derogatory to himself. "I say, you little cat, why did you ask me to come out if you meant next moment to give me a scratch like this?"

"I told you it was Florry who wanted you and not me."

"You might be civil at least," said Jim, who had actually reddened under this assault. "What did you come and butter up my father for, to let me go?"

"That was different," said Mab. "When it is against the old people, of course you are my own side; and then it was fun carrying you off as if you were something one had captured; and you looked so silly with uncle holding forth." She broke into a laugh, while Jim grew redder and redder. "But one thing I will never hold with," said Mab, "is that girls, who are not nearly so strong, should take and row a big heavy man."

"Not so heavy," cried Florence, pushing her head forward, neglecting her stroke entirely, and putting the boat out of trim. "Oh, Mab, why should you reproach him too? He's no heavier than I am."

"Shut up, Flo," cried Jim indignantly, "I'm close upon eleven stone, and that's the least a man should be of my size."

"Well," said Mab—("I'll pull you round, Florry, if you don't mind)—that is what I say; girls may do for themselves as much as they please, but to drag about a great heavy man, whether it is pulling in a boat or driving in a dog-cart, or whatever it is, is what I don't like. It is not what ought to be."

"You are so old-fashioned, Mab," said Florence anxiously from behind. "You and Aunt Emily, you have the old antiquated ways of thinking about women, that men should take care of them, and work for them, and all that, when perhaps it is the women that are most able to work, and take care of others too."

"I have no antiquated ways," said Mab. "I have no ways at all. I don't think about women any more than about—other people. Mother and I have not got many men to take care of us, have we? But I say, it isn't our place to pull a heavy man. He should do that for us. I prefer to pull myself. Do, do, Florry, keep time! And I don't want your help, Jim. I am not talking of to-day; I am talking of things in general. It isn't nice; it doesn't look well; it's not the right thing. I don't want to have any man working for me; I'd much rather do it

for myself. But he is the biggest and the strongest, and we oughtn't to be doing things for him. That's my opinion, without any reference to to-day."

"You are not very civil," said Jim. "Why didn't you leave me at my Greek, Miss Mab? I might have done a lot, and been free after dinner. Now, instead of father's jawing, which I'm used to, I have yours, which I'm not used to, and a slave in the evening as well. Hold hard a moment, till I shake off my coat and my boots, and I'll swim ashore."

"Oh, Jim! it will be your death," said the frightened Florence, starting from her seat and once more putting the boat dreadfully out of trim.

"Be quiet, sit down!" cried Mab, "or we shall have an accident. Do you hear? Jim is not going to do anything so silly. I was not speaking of him; I was only making a general remark. You can sit there and welcome so long as you steer against me, Jim: for I am pulling the boat round, can't you see, and Florry is not the least good."

"Girls never are," said Jim; "the least little thing puts them out."

"You see, Florry:" said Mab, "it was

on his account you were exciting yourself and behaving like one of the cockneys on Bank Holiday, and he doesn't mind. Let him alone. How far can we go to get back in daylight, Jim?"

Florence once more put in her word. "We can go as far as the island," she said.

"Coming back to-morrow morning?" said Jim. "How should she know? Going up you can go as far as the lock, and going down you can go as far as the lock, but not a step more."

"That's like an oracle," said Mab.

"Well, so I am. If I don't know anything else, I know the river. I know it every step up to Oxford and down to London. I'm as good as the Thames Conservancy man. They'd better put me on if they want to look after all the backwaters and keep the riparians in order. That's what I could do. I may not be a dab at Sophocles, but there isn't a man knows the river better. You ask any man that knows me, either at Oxford or here."

"Then why does not Uncle James try to get you an appointment on the river? It would be better than going out to the colonies."

"Oh, they don't think so here. In the colonies nobody knows you. You may go about in a flannel shirt and knickerbockers and a revolver in your belt; but if you stay at home they want some work for you that you can do in a black coat and top hat."

"Couldn't you take care of the riparians and the backwaters in a top hat, if you liked?"

"Oh, they like a naval man," said Jim; "their uniform gives them a little dignity, don't you know, whereas I'm nobody."

"But it is the same in everything. You can't be somebody all at once. You must begin low down," said Mab, bending her little person over her oar with that slow, steady stroke which confused Florence. Florry was choppy and irregular — one time slow, the next fast; never able to hit the time which Mab gave her with such steady composure. "The way to do," said Mab, "is to put everything else out of your head, as long as you are able to, and think of nothing but that. You should never mind what you like, or what you want, but just set your thoughts on what you are doing. Look at Florry; she wants to hear what we're saying, and she wants to defend

you, Jim, that I mayn't say anything unpleasant; and the consequence is that if you were not steering against me with all your might, I should pull the boat round and round."

"Florry is only a girl, and a bad specimen," said Jim. "You should have let me pull, and then you'd have seen something like pulling."

"I am only a girl myself," said Mab.

"But, then, you're a good specimen," said the young man, with a laugh. "You keep your eyes in the boat."

"Which is what you don't do, Jim?"

"How do you know, you little thing, lecturing people older than yourself? I may not with Sophocles — but I do with other things."

"Which other things?" said Mab.

But Jim made no reply; and here Florry interposed again with strokes shorter and more irregular than ever, to talk over her cousin's shoulder, and ask, though they were not half-way to the island, or even to the lock for that matter, whether it would be better to turn back and go home. They lay for a moment in midstream. Mab pausing on her steady oar to remonstrate, making a

picture in the water, the boat floating as a bird floats in mid air, between the sky and the river, which reflected every line of cloud and stretch of blue. Some cows at the water's edge stood double, feeding, on the very brink, and the trees still bare, but all downy with life, pushing out a greenness here and there, seemed to stretch out of the water in reflection to meet the others on the bank. Watcham lay glorified, one white house above the rest lighting up all the river with its white shadow in the stream. The boat lay like a thing enchanted with the three figures shining in afternoon light, above and below.

VII

JIM strolled down into the village when the boat came to shore. It was before the hour at which he had concluded he would go home, which, as was natural, was considerably later than the hour proposed by Mab. What was the good, he said to himself, of going in before dinner, or at least before the time which was necessary to get ready for dinner? In that hour, as everybody knows, very little can be done. Mrs. Plowden and the girls would be in the drawing-room talking about what had happened in the afternoon, and the Rector would not have come in. So it was quite a certainty in Jim's mind that no Sophocles would come of it if he had returned home when Florence did, as she begged him to do. He would not have worked; and, indeed, it would be a kind of breaking of his word if he had done so then, for had he not promised his father to work

after dinner, which was quite a different thing? And it was more amusing to prowl along through the village on the outlook for anything that might happen, than to go in and listen to the girls chattering, probably about the Swinfords. And Jim was sick of the very name of the Swinfords. He had that distaste which a young man who has fallen into objectionable ways so often acquires of party-givings and society in what his mother called "his own rank of life." He flattered himself that what he did dislike was the conventionalities and stiffness of society, and that his own desire to see "life" was a more original and natural sort of thing. He liked to hear what the people said when they were at their ease in inn parlours and tap-rooms. He liked, it is to be feared, what accompanied these sayings. And the more familiar he became in such localities, the more "out of it" he felt in the drawing-rooms, and among the staid and quiet folk who represented society in Watcham. So that the Swinfords represented nothing but a succession of fresh annoyances to Jim. If they gave parties, as his mother and the girls hoped, he would be obliged to get himself up in gorgeous attire and take a part in these

entertainments. There was a time when he, too, would have been excited by such a prospect; but that had departed after his first experiences of the life of the somewhat disreputable undergraduate, into which he had been so unfortunate as to fall. Now that he could not lounge into any resort where he could meet his peers in that class, Jim found his distaste for the home society grow upon him. He was tired to death of the girls. The old ladies bored him, which was not so wonderful. The correct old General and the clergymen about were old fogeys, which indeed was true enough. Where was the poor boy to find any one whom he could talk to with the freedom of those delightful but too brief terms at the University where he had been taught what life meant? It had been a shock to his own remaining scruples, and all the force of tradition, when he first strayed into the public-house. Oh, no; not the public-house, but the little inn at Watcham, which was quite a pretty little house, all brilliant with flowers, and where people from town came down to stay in the summer; it was so nice, so quaint, so respectable, and so near the river. But it is a very different thing coming

to stay at an inn for the sake of being near the river, and stealing in in the evening to the same place for society and amusement. There was nothing disreputable going on in the parlour of the "Swinford Arms," or the "Blue Boar," as it was vulgarly called, in reference to the Swinford crest, which presented that aspect to the common eye. The people who went there were respectable enough—the tradesmen in the village, good decent men who liked to see the papers and talk them over with the accompaniment of a glass of something, and a pipe: and the veterinary surgeon, who was a great deal about the country, and talked familiarly of Sir Thomas Barnes, and the Mortlocks of Wellwood, the great hunting people. It made a young man who felt acutely that he did not belong to the class of the tradesmen, more satisfied with himself to talk with a man who spoke of such people familiarly in a sort of hail-fellow well met way, even though he was only the vet. But by degrees as Jim acquired the habit of dropping in in the evenings to the "Blue Boar," he got to think that the village shopkeepers were very good fellows, and their opinions well worth hearing. So they were, indeed, as a matter

of fact: solid, decent men, whose measured glass of something probably did them no harm, and whose wives were rather glad than otherwise that they had this little enlivenment in the evening of a little respectable society in the parlour of the "Blue Boar," which was itself as respectable as could be desired. But yet it was not respectable, alas! for Jim.

When the Rector first discovered that this was where his son went when he went out in the evenings to take a walk, as he said, Mr. Plowden's feelings would be difficult to describe. The misery, the shame, the acute and intolerable sense of downfall were perhaps exaggerated. But who can say what the descent is from the drawing-room of the Rectory to the parlour of the village public-house? which is what it really was, no doubt, though it was a most respectable little inn, and frequented in summer by the best of company. The first interview between the father and the son was very painful, but not without hope, for Jim himself was very well aware of all that it meant, and did not stand against his father's reproaches. "I know it is not a place for the Rector's son," he said, humbly enough. "It's not a

place for anybody's son," the Rector said. "Do you think even White and Slaughter would like their sons to go there?" This was an argument Jim was not prepared for, and he acknowledged with humility that he did not think they would. The Rector was very gentle with the boy that first time. He pointed out that for Slaughter and White, and even the vet., it was a sort of club where they went to meet their friends—and whether or not there might be any objections morally to their glass of something, yet at all events it was a very moderate indulgence, and went no further. "I don't say it is quite right even for them; but that's a very different question," Mr. Plowden said, and Jim acknowledged the self-evident truth. The Rector said nothing to his wife for that first time, nor for several times afterwards; but he could not conceal his anxiety when Jim disappeared in the evening, as, after a few very quiet and dull nights at home, he again began to do. When Mrs. Plowden heard she cried, almost with indignation, "But why didn't you speak to him, James?" Speak to him! After two or three interviews poor Mr. Plowden soon began to recognise how little use there was in that.

Jim, accordingly, when he left the girls to stroll down the village street, did so against the remonstrances of Florry, who tried hard to persuade him to come back and hear what mamma and Emmy had been doing at the Hall, then offered herself to share his walk, with equal seriousness. "I like a stroll by myself," Jim said.

"It will very soon be dark, Jim; it is no fun walking in the dark."

"Not for you. But let me alone; if I like it, that's enough, Flo."

"Oh, Jim, mamma is so pleased when you come in early," cried Florence, pleading; "it does us all so much good. If you only saw the difference in poor papa's face when he knows you're in the drawing-room."

"I shouldn't be in the drawing-room in any case. I've got my Greek to do."

"Still better if you are at your Greek. Oh, Jim, do for once come home with me!"

"I'll come in in half an hour—will that satisfy you? I only want to shake myself up a bit after sitting there with nothing to do."

"Well, mind you don't forget: in half an hour," said Florence.

He went off waving his hand to her.

Then thrusting his hands into his pockets, with that idle lounging step of the man who is ready for any mischief, but has none immediately in sight, he strolled away. Florence stood looking after him, with anxiety in every line of her face, until she remembered Mab looking on, whom it was necessary to keep from knowing if possible: and then the poor girl laughed. "Isn't he lazy?" she said; "and it does vex papa so. Papa thinks Jim should like Sophocles as much as he does, which is nonsense, isn't it? But Jim says that old people never can understand young ones, and perhaps it's true."

"Mother always understands me," said Mab, with a child's unhesitating confidence.

"Oh," said Florence. Her secret thought was, "What is there in you, you little thing, to understand?" She said after a moment, "Boys are so different!" with a sigh.

"You should not nag at him so much," said Mab, with a reflection of her mother's sentiments, who as yet knew little of Jim's case, and gave her opinion privately in the bosom of her own home that the boy was being driven out of his senses by never being left alone.

"I don't think we nag at him," said Florence meekly: and then the two girls parted, Mab taking the way to the cottage, and Florry that which led to the Rectory. "You don't want to hear what they have got to say?" Florry said, with a faint smile, before the other left her.

"I shall hear it from mother," said Mab, "and I don't know that I care."

So the cousins separated—with thoughts so different. And Jim strolled away in the other direction with a thirst which was both physical and mental, in his whole being. It was physical, alas! and that was perhaps in its immediate development the worst: but it was also mental, a craving for something he knew not what; something that would supply the atmosphere, the novelty, he wanted, the something he had not got. He knew very well at other moments that the inn parlour, and the village society, and the pipes and the glass—in his own case so often repeated — would not give that. Ordinarily, he thought Oxford would give it and the society of the young men with whom he sometimes talked metaphysics, though usually it was only horses and racing, and boats and bumps, and the qualities of

the different dogs of the circle, that they discussed; but still, it was not to be denied that there was something in Jim's being which thirsted, as well as that fatal thirst in his body, which, alas! it was so much more easy to satisfy. The drab-coloured house at home, with its habits fixed like iron; the evening round the lamp; the mother's prolonged talk about her neighbours, and about people she once knew, and about getting on; his father's scanty, careless replies; the girls' talk, which was very often about their dresses, and how things were worn now—all these had become wearisome to the young man: and he did not care at all for his Sophocles. He had found in Oxford that opening out of the restricted household circle for which his young being craved; but it had not been the best of openings, and now poor Jim prowled down the village street, wanting that something which he could not tell how to attain to, neither what it was. He did not want to go to the "Blue Boar." He had never yet gone in daylight openly, but under cover of night, when the parlour window looked so bright in the dull village street. It wanted some courage to go now, in cold blood as it were, when there was no reason

for it, and he felt all that it meant, the son of the Rectory going in, in the light of day, to the village public-house. He did not want to do it, if he could only find somewhere else to go.

It happened in this way that Jim was very ready to be led in any quarter where a little novelty or amusement was to be found. Not in any quarter; for supposing he had at that moment met the good old General, whose company could do him nothing but good, who had told him, perhaps, that he had a young nephew, perhaps a pretty niece, to whom he wished to introduce the Rector's son, Jim would at once have found that he had to go back to his Greek: he would not have gone to the General's, nor to any house, as his mother said, "in his own rank of life." And why this should be I am quite unable to tell. Houses which were in his own rank of life did not seem to him to have what he wanted; he would have felt sure in advance that the General's nephew would be a prig, or perhaps an insolent young soldier, thinking nobody was anybody who was out of the service; and the General's niece, ugly and stupid. This he would have felt sure of, though he could

not have told why. Neither can I tell why, nor any of those to whom it would be of the greatest advantage to make this all-important discovery. It would be even more important than finding out how to resist a deadly disease; and in the one case as in the other, there are many surprises and many experiments. But nobody as yet has been able to find out the way.

It was while he was thus moving along on the other side of the street, not desiring to go to the "Blue Boar," yet not knowing where else to go, and having within him an imperious wish to go somewhere, that Jim suddenly heard in the soft stillness of the evening air—for the wind had quite fallen as night came on—a pleasant voice saying, "Good evening, Mr. Plowden"; a voice which was quite new to him, and which he could not associate with anybody in Watcham. He knew everybody in Watcham, great and small, so that it was not easy to take him by surprise. He turned round, startled, and saw a woman, a lady, standing in the half-light in the door of the house next to the schools, which was appropriated to the village schoolmistress. He knew there was a new schoolmistress, for he had heard it

talked of, but he had not seen her, so that this was about the only person in Watcham whose voice he did not know. Jim stopped suddenly and made a clutch at his cap. I hope he would on any occasion have taken off his hat to the schoolmistress, but at all events this voice made it imperative, for it was a refined voice, the voice of a lady, or else an exceedingly good make-believe.

"Good evening," he replied vaguely. He could not very well make out her face, but yet there was something in it which it appeared to him he had seen before.

"You do not remember me?" she said.

"You have newly come to the school, I suppose," he said. "I beg your pardon. I don't think I have seen you before."

"You have seen me before, but not here, and if I were quite sure you did not remember me I should be very glad."

"That is rather a queer thing to say," said Jim.

"Perhaps; but it is a true thing. I wanted to ask you, if you did remember me, not to do so—at least, to say nothing about it."

"This is more mysterious still."

"Yes, I dare say it does sound mysterious; but it is important to me. I don't know whether to trust to you in this way, that if you remember me after you will say nothing about it; or to be frank and recall myself to your mind."

"You had better let me judge," said Jim.

Here was the something he wanted, perhaps—an adventure, a mystery; of all things in the world the least likely thing to find in Watcham village street.

The woman—lady he called her—gave a glance round to see if any one was looking, then suddenly stepping back, bade him come in. There was nothing in the house of the schoolmistress that looked like mystery. He knew it well enough. He had been there with his mother when he was a child. He had come with errands from her to the late mistress. The narrow passage and the tiny little sitting-room that opened off from it were as familiar to him as the Rectory. He walked into the parlour, which, however, startled him, as if it had been a new place which he had never seen before. How well he remembered the black haircloth sofa, the square table with its heavy woollen table-

cover, which left so little room for coming or going. It was newly furnished, draped with curtains much more fresh than anything in the Rectory, a small sofa with pretty chintz, an easy-chair or two, the small tables which were not so common in those days. Jim did not notice those things in detail, but the general effect was such as to turn his head.

"Hullo!" he said, in his surprise.

"You see the difference in the room? No; I wouldn't have my predecessor's old things. I have done it almost all with my own hands. Isn't it nice?"

"It is very different," said Jim. His home was dingy, but it was natural, and he had an undefined sense that this was not natural. There was something fictitious in the air of the little room with its poor, coarsely-papered walls—a sort of copy of a boudoir out of a novel, or on the stage. He was not very learned in such things, and yet it seemed to him to be part of a *décor* rather than a room to live in. In Mrs. Peters' time it was very ugly, but as honest as the day.

"Sit down," she said, "and let me give you a cup of tea; or perhaps—for I think I

know gentlemen's tastes — there may be something else that you will like better. Sit down, at least, and I will try if I can find something to your taste; for I want to make a little bargain with you, Mr. Plowden, that may be for my advantage and yours, too. Sit down for a moment, and wait for me here."

She vanished as she spoke, and left him much bewildered in the little bedizened room. It occurred to him during the moment he was left there that perhaps, on the whole, it would have been better had he gone after all to the parlour in the "Blue Boar." But his entertainer reappeared in a minute or two, bearing in her hands a tray, upon which stood a tall glass, foaming as nothing ever foamed in the "Blue Boar." I don't pretend to say what its contents were. They were foaming, and highly scented, and they pleased Jim Plowden, I am sorry to say, better than tea.

"That is something like what we had at Nuneham that lovely day. Don't you recollect me now?"

"Mrs. Brown!" cried Jim. It was not a name which said very much to the ordinary ear. It would, indeed, be difficult to say

less. But the new schoolmistress made him a curtsey such as had never been seen in Watcham before.

"I am glad," she said, "that you remember me; though I ought to have been pleased and satisfied that you did not—for a woman, however she may come down in the world, never likes to think that she has been forgotten. I have recalled myself to your recollection, Mr. Plowden, in order to say that I hope you won't say anything to your father or any one of where we met last. I was then, if you remember, chaperon to some young ladies."

"Oh, yes, indeed, I remember perfectly," cried Jim, "your nieces."

"Well, yes, my nieces if you like; and I was not at all like a village schoolmistress, was I? Things happen so in this life; but it would do me no good, Mr. Plowden, with the Rector or the other good people, to know that I had been—well, helping you to squander your money at Oxford only last year."

"You did not help me to squander my money, Mrs. Brown. I was only one of the guests. I had no money to squander; but I fear what you mean is that you have come

down in the world. I am very sorry, I am as sorry as I can be. It is very different, this, from anything you have been accustomed to; but instead of saying nothing about it, which I can understand as a matter of pride, don't you think it would be better for me to tell my mother, who though she has her own ways which you might perhaps not care for, is very kind, and would, I am sure, try to make things as pleasant as she could and as little hard, and ask you up to the Rectory and all that?"

Mrs. Brown turned her back upon Jim, and he feared that she wept. But I don't think she wept, though when she turned round again she had her handkerchief to her eyes. She said, "I am sure your mother is goodness itself, Mr. Plowden; but I am a proud woman, as you perceive. No, you must not breathe a word to your mother. I have one friend who knows all about me, and that is Mrs. Swinford, at the Hall; but except her and yourself I want nobody to know. Will you promise me that nobody shall know from you, Mr. Jim?"

How did she know his name, Jim? How did she remember him at all, a little, young, ignorant freshman much honoured to make

one of the brilliant water party of which she and her nieces had been the soul? He was ready to have promised anything, everything she asked.

VIII

"SHE was nice enough to us," said Mrs. Plowden, "but very hoighty-toighty with your aunt. Did you observe that, Emmy? Poor Aunt Emily was very kind. She said in such a pretty way, 'That is Emily Plowden now,' and really Emmy looked so very like her at that moment—with the charm of youth, of course, added on—that nobody could help remarking it. Mr. Swinford looked from one to the other, making a little comparison I could see—and you may imagine in whose favour it was."

"It was in my sister's favour, of course," said the Rector. There was something in the way in which he emphasized the *my*, as if to mark the difference between his daughter, who was her mother's as well as his, and his sister who was all his own, that might have been amusing to a bystander, but to Mrs. Plowden was not amusing at all.

"It is most curious," she said, "the way you always stand up for your own family——"

"Whom do you mean by my own family? Emmy is my own family, I suppose?"

"You know very well what I mean. I mean your side of the house in opposition to mine. One would think that nobody born was ever equal to your people—not even your own children."

"My own children are as God has made them," said the Rector. He added, as if she had been somehow of a superior manufacture, "But my sister Emily was the sweetest creature I ever saw when she was Emmy's age. Emmy is a good girl, and she is very nice-looking or she could not be supposed to be like my sister. But as for comparing the one to the other, my dear, it only shows how little you know."

"Upon my word!" cried Mrs. Plowden, not without reason, "I hope my Emmy may be compared to any one. Your sister had always a great deal too much intellectual pride about her to please me. She was not content to be nice-looking, which nobody ever denied, but she went in for being clever,

too. I know you don't approve of women taking that sort of position, James. Indeed, you have said as much a hundred times—and now to go on raving about your sister, as if we haven't all had sisters that were out of the common in our day!"

"My dear, I didn't know there was anybody out of the common connected with you. My impression is I never heard you brag of that before—no more than poor Emily ever did about being more clever than the rest of us. Poor girl, it hasn't come to much in her case."

"I am not one to be always blowing a trumpet about my family," said Mrs. Plowden angrily; "but if you think my brother Thurston is nobody——"

"Not in the least; he is a very nice fellow, and a Q.C."

"Or my sister Florence!" said the Rector's wife, "poor Florry's godmother—and the girl takes after her, I'm glad to say—and it's to her credit, whatever you may think."

"Oh, your sister Florence!" said the Rector. This was a point that had been argued between them often before, for, as a matter of fact, though Emily Plowden was

understood to have done very little good for herself by her distinguished marriage, yet it was a distinguished marriage, and one of which the Rector's wife herself was more proud than any one. She quoted Lady William in her own family in a way which made her brother who was a Q.C. and her sister who was Florence's godmother very angry. "I wish you would not be always dinning that eternal Lady William into our ears," was what these good people said. But at home, in face of her husband, Mrs. Plowden liked to show her independence, and that she and her brothers and sisters were as remarkable as he and his brothers and sisters any day.

"Well," said Mrs. Plowden, "they were really more nice to Emmy, though she is only my daughter, than they were to your sister Emily, James. I did not think that Emily was received as her rank demands. They were more civil to me, a simple clergyman's wife, than they were to her. Now, though one is always pleased, of course, to be put in the first place, I don't think it was right. Oh! not Mr. Swinford, he was very attentive; but in such cases the man does not count, and the old lady——"

"Is she really an old lady, mamma?" said Florry, who had not yet found the opening for her anxious questions which she desired.

"Well—her son is not quite young. He is not like Jim; he is a full-grown young man of the world. As for Mrs. Swinford, she is so curled and frizzed and powdered and everything done to her, that you can't tell how old she is. But it is always safe to say the old lady when there is a son quite old enough to marry. Of course she will be the old lady as soon as he gets a wife."

"I am sure, mamma, it would not make you an old lady if Jim were to marry," said Emmy, always exemplary in her sentiments.

"Jim!" Mrs. Plowden said, with a sort of shriek. And then she added: "Poor Jim's not a landed proprietor like Mr. Swinford. He can never make me a Dowager, poor boy! And what chance has he of ever marrying? none that I know of, without any money, and not even a profession. Alas! there is a great difference between Leo Swinford and Jim."

"Is Leo his name? What an odd name!"

"But pretty, don't you think—and so uncommon?" said Emmy.

Emmy had a slightly dazzled look about the eyes, as one that has seen visions. She had been into that fairy palace, and come into absolute contact with Prince Charming. Florry knew that the details of the interview were not likely to come out until they two came face to face in their room, with no father or mother in the way.

"By the way," said the Rector, as if it had not been the prominent thing in his mind all the time, "did Jim come back with you from the river, Flo?"

"He thought he would like a little stroll before he came back—for half an hour. He promised me faithfully he would come back in half an hour."

"It is more than half an hour now," said the Rector, with his watch in his hand; and then he sighed and went away.

"Oh, children," said Mrs. Plowden, when his steps had died out in the distance of the rambling house, "how often must I tell you not to be so pointed with your half-hours? How can a young man tell, if he strolls out in the evening, exactly to a moment when he's to get back? He may meet a friend, or some little accident may happen, and he is kept, without any doing of his. And there

is your father with his watch in his hand as if he had never been a young man himself. I don't want you, I am sure, to be anything but truthful—but if you could throw a little veil over such things! Now, however soon he may come, and however right he may be, your father will never forget having looked at his watch. He will say you can never trust in his word because of that half-hour."

"I only said what he told me, mamma," said Florence, half offended.

"As if there was any use in saying what he told you!" cried Mrs. Plowden, "when you know that's Jim's weakness never to be sure when he is coming in; and to say in half an hour is just as easy as in—— Jim! why, here he is, as exact as clockwork. Run and tell your father, Florry: he can put his watch in his pocket. Oh, I am so glad! It is always a little triumph for us womenfolk who believe whatever you say, you troublesome Jim!"

"Do you believe whatever I say, mother?"

"Oh, more than I ought—more than I ought. And oh, Jim, if you only knew the pleasure of it, the pride of it! To see you walking in at your time as a gentleman should—and like a gentleman in every way!"

The words were, perhaps, capable of various interpretations; but the little party in the Rectory drawing-room knew precisely what they meant; and Jim knew very well that his mother, in the darkness of the room, where no lights as yet were lighted, was crying quietly to herself over his virtue and punctuality. It struck him with a sort of mingled shame and ridicule to think that, perhaps, had she known where he had been, she would not have been so much content. I may say that it was much more like an hour and a half than half an hour since he had left the two girls at the landing-place; so that he was not precisely a model of exactness after all.

When Jim came in all the other subjects in the world went out; and as he had no interest in the Hall and its inhabitants there was no further gossip about the Swinfords in the Rectory family that night, until, indeed, the evening was over, and the girls found themselves face to face in the room which they shared, which was a long and low one, under the eaves, with a number of small windows, and space enough to make up for a slanting roof on one side. It was indeed quite a large room, with two little beds, two

little white-draped toilet tables, two sets of drawers, everything double, as the two were who had lived in it all their lives. All their little confidences had been made to each other there, all that had happened had been discussed; their whole life, which was not eventful, had passed in this dim chamber, where the light came in through greenish lattices, and under the shadow of the waving trees. They came upstairs, following each other very demurely, each with her candle, but when they were safe in their shelter, and had shut their door, each put down her candle on her own table, and they rushed together, seizing each other's hands. "Oh, Emmy, tell me!" cried the one who had been left at home.

"There is nothing to tell, indeed," said Emmy, "except what you have heard already."

"I have heard nothing about *him*," said her sister.

"Oh, Flo dear! all that nonsense was amusing enough as long as he was only a dream. He has been a dream for so long; but now he's a man, just like another."

"Not like any other in the world, Em."

"That is, to you and me; but, thank

heaven, nobody knows except us two, and it is all over. He is like any other man, rather more nicely dressed, rather more careful of his clothes."

"Oh, Emmy!"

"That doesn't sound like our hero, does it? I suppose it is because he is half French: red stockings and patent-leather shoes, as Mab said."

"Well," said Florry, "if true hearts are more than coronets, they are certainly more than patent-leather shoes."

"That is very true, but somehow it goes dreadfully against one's ideal. And, Flo, he is not—tall."

Florence burst into a somewhat agitated laugh. "What does that matter?" she said.

"Oh, nothing at all. I know that little men are just as nice, sometimes nicer, than big ones; but you know what we always thought: and he is not the least like it—not one little bit."

Emmy looked as if she were going to cry; for the fact was that Mr. Swinford had been, by a piece of girlish romance not very uncommon among such unsophisticated girls as those of the Rectory, the hero of an entirely visionary castle in the air on the

part of this young lady. Florence was more wise; she had the ideas of her century, and was very strongly convinced that for her sister to marry well was a thing most essential at the present crisis of the family fortunes; but she had been very indulgent to Emmy's romance, possibly from the conviction that this was the only way in which her sister could be moved to take such a step—and partly because she had herself a sentimental side, and was deeply convinced that no true marriage could be made without love.

"Well," she said soothingly, "never mind; he may be everything that is delightful in himself, even though he is short and not handsome."

"I never said he was not handsome," said Emmy, with some indignation, "nor yet short. How exaggerated you are! I said he was not tall. He is very nice-looking. Not the way we used to think; not dark-haired and with deep dark eyes as we used to imagine — and not fair either, which is perhaps better: but yet very nice—in his own way."

"Brown!" cried Florence, "sober, sensible, common brown — like most people. After all, that must be the best and safest

since Providence makes the most of us of that hue."

"If you think he is common," said Emmy indignantly, "you are making the greatest mistake. He is not heroic — in appearance: but unusual — to a degree." Emmy's powers of language were not great, but her feeling was unmistakable. "I never saw any one at all like him," she said. "If he is not like a man in a poem or on the stage, he is just as little like the ordinary man you meet. Fancy, it was he who made the tea! His mother said he always did it. The way she calls Leo at every moment is the most curious thing. She has a sweet voice, but it is so imperious, as if she never thought it possible that any one could resist her; and, though it is quite low, he hears her before she has half called him, whatever he may be doing."

"All that is very interesting," said Florence, "but" — she seized her sister's hands and looked anxiously into her face — "of course you can't see how things are to go the first time — but, Emmy, oh, tell me——!"

Emmy shook her head; she withdrew her hands; her eyes drooped before her

sister's gaze. "How can you ask?" she said, "how could anybody tell? He was very nice, of course—as he would have been to the housemaid if we had sent her, or to Mrs. Brown at the school."

"Mamma said he was exceedingly nice to you, and not so nice to Aunt Emily."

"Ah, that was Mrs. Swinford she was thinking of. Mamma naturally thinks of her. No, no, Flo, we must not deceive ourselves; it was all the other way. If there is any one here whom Mr. Swinford thinks it worth his while to talk to and make friends with, it will neither be you nor me."

"Me, no! I never thought of such a thing. But why not you, Emmy? and, if not you, who else?"

Emmy clasped her hands together and shook her head. She had been shaking it for at least a minute before she let the words "Aunt Emily" drop from her lips, with an accent of something like despair.

"Aunt Emily!" said Florence in the profoundest surprise: her tone changed in a moment into one of disdain. "Aunt Emily! why, she is old enough to be—she is almost as old as mamma. She has nothing to do with it at all."

"Do you remember," said Emmy, with some solemnity, "*that* French novel which we found in Uncle Thurston's room."

Florence nodded her head. It had been a fearful joy to find in their uncle's room anything so wildly wicked, so universally condemned, as a yellow French novel. It had not been so delightful in the attempt to read it—for the girls were far too innocent to understand the stimulating fare there placed before them. But it was a terrible and alarming memory in their lives.

"Well, the heroine in that was a widow," cried Emmy. "She was the one everybody thought of. And Mr. Swinford is quite French, and Aunt Emily doesn't look old, and she is really handsome. Don't you know when people want to be very complimentary to me they say I am like Aunt Emily?—only when they want to be very complimentary."

"So you are; and the more he thinks of her the more he ought to turn to you, who are so like her."

"Oh! do you think so? I, for my part, feel sure that he will like her best. She will be able to talk to him. She has been in Paris, where he comes from. She will be like the people he has been used to."

"Oh! not like the people in Uncle Thurston's novel!"

"I did not mean that; but she can talk, and she is what people call elegant, and you'll see he'll think more of her than either of you or me."

"It is impossible," cried Florence, with the confidence of youth. "A woman with a grown-up daughter!"

"Wait," said Emmy oracularly, "and you will see."

IX

It was a day or two after these events before any new incident happened; and, indeed, the appearance of Mr. Swinford in the village of Watcham was not a very remarkable incident. For Watcham was not in the depths of the country, where the sight of a new face was in itself extraordinary. People from London were continually appearing in this little place. To be sure, it was too early in March for the shoals of men in flannels who were to be seen lounging about in summer; but still there were people who would come down "to have a look at the river" even in the winter season, when the boats were laid up. And boating men, and indeed others, had a way of appearing at the "Blue Boar" on visits from Saturday till Monday, and were very correct in their town costumes when they arrived, though afterwards falling into many eccentricities

of apparel. Mr. Swinford might have been one of them, as he walked down on Saturday afternoon. He was not very fond of walking, having had a French rather than an English education. It had already been discovered that his usual way of going about was in an exceedingly smart dog-cart, which he drove in a way rather unusual to the aborigines, with a rein in each hand. I need not pause to point out that Leo Swinford, an Englishman educated in France, was not at all an Anglomane, but probably more French than most young Frenchmen whose desire would have been to look English—at least in everything that had to do with riding or driving. But on this occasion he walked, and might have been taken simply for one of the Saturday to Monday men. But no; Watcham was too clever for that. None of them were so point devise as the young master of the Hall. Though it is always a little muddy on this riverside road, he still had the *chaussure*, so much admired yet scorned by the young ladies who had discussed it — the red silk stockings and glistening patent-leather shoes which had filled Mab with wonder and disdain. He had a warm greatcoat buttoned over a white

silk *cache-nez* which was round his throat. The cut of the coat, though excellent, was not like Bond Street — or is it Savile Row? I am of opinion that it had been made there, but it had acquired from the wearer a something, a little more shape than is common to a young Englishman, a *je ne sais quoi* of foreign and stranger. His hat, I suppose, was also an English hat, but somehow curled at the brim, as an Englishman's hat rarely does. The village got note of his arrival in some extraordinary way before he was within its bounds. People peeped over the little muslin blinds in the cottages; a woman or two bolder than the rest came out to the door to have a good look at him. Even the men in the bakers' and butchers' carts stopped and winked at each other; "awful Frenchy," they thought he was.

After a while it became apparent that this exquisite figure was bound for the Rectory; and some thrill running through the very path brought the news before he did to the Plowdens, who came together as by some electric current driving the different atoms towards each other. I have no doubt this is an impossible metaphor, and that

electric currents have nothing to do with atoms; but the reader who knows better will, I hope, derive a little gratification from his smile at my ignorance. Anyhow, the ladies of the house flew as by an instinctive movement into the drawing-room. Mrs. Plowden was the first to get there; and the girls found her shaking up the sofa cushions, and drawing the chairs about—not to range them against the wall and make everything tidy as her grandmother would have done, but to give them that air of comfortable disorder which is the right thing nowadays. Emmy followed her mother's example with a little flutter and agitation, shaking up anew the sofa cushions which Mrs. Plowden had just arranged to the best advantage, while Florence gathered up a leaf or two which had fallen from the flower vases, and picked off a faded flower or two from the pots of narcissus and jonquils which were in the room. It might have been the Queen who was coming, though it was only a natty young man. Then the Rector appeared, a little anxious, rubbing his hands. "What had I better do?" he said; "shall I be here with you to receive him, or wait in my study? He may be coming only to call on me."

This view of the subject filled the ladies with consternation, though they allowed there was a certain truth in it.

"You had better be in the study, anyhow, James," Mrs. Plowden said; "and if he asks for me, of course I will send for you; if he is shown in to you instead, of course you will say, after you have had your conversation, 'You must come into the drawing-room, Mr. Swinford; my wife and daughters will be rejoiced to see you;' or words to that effect."

"Oh, I don't suppose I shall be at a loss for words," said the Rector, who had no respect for his wife's style. He gave a glance round the room; not with any satisfaction, for he felt that it was rather dingy, and that a stranger would not be likely to see what he felt, being so accustomed to it, to be the real comfort of the room. It was looking its best, however. The sunshine was bright in the windows, the jonquils and narcissus filling it with the fragrance of spring—a little too much, perhaps; but then one window was open, so that it was not overpowering. The green of the lawn showed through that open window, just on a level with the carpet; but it was so bright

outside that there was no chilling suggestion in this. And the girls looked animated, with more colour than usual, in their fervour of anticipation. The Rector gave a little note of semi-satisfaction, semi-dissatisfaction peculiar to men and fathers, and which is not in the least expressed by the conventional Humph! but I don't know what better synonym to give than this time-honoured one; and then he turned away and shut himself into his study to await there the advent of the great man. There was no reason why he should be deeply moved by the coming of Leo Swinford. It would be well that the Rectory and the Hall should maintain amicable relations, but that was all. Mr. Plowden was not likely to be any the better whatever happened, except perhaps through the parish charities. There was no better living or dignity of any kind to which this young man's influence was likely to help him. Jim? Was there perhaps a possibility that Leo, if he pleased, might do something for Jim? or at least bring him into better society, make him turn to better things, even if he did nothing more? There was surely that possibility. One young man can do more for another, if he

likes to try, than any one else could do—if Jim would but allow himself to be influenced. And surely he would in this case. He would be flattered if Mr. Swinford sought him, if he was invited and made welcome at the Hall. These thoughts were not very clearly formed, as I set them down, in Mr. Plowden's head; but they flitted through his mind, as many an anxious parent will know how. And this was what made his middle-aged bosom stir as he sat and waited for Leo Swinford. Then a smile just crept about his mouth as he remembered what his wife had been saying about, perhaps, one of the girls. But the Rector shook his head. No, no, that was not to be thought of. They were good girls—invaluable girls. But she might as well think of a prince for them as of Leo Swinford, who was a sort of prince in his way. No, not that; but perhaps Jim——

The question between the dining-room and the study was now put to rest, for Mr. Swinford, when he had walked up briskly to the door, admired by the ladies from between the bars of the venetian blinds in the end window, asked for Mrs. Plowden, and was triumphantly ushered into the room by the

parlourmaid, who secretly shared the excitement, wondering within herself *which* of the young ladies? And he was received and shaken hands with, and set in a comfortable chair; and a polite conversation began, before Mrs. Plowden, looking as if the matter had just occurred to her, in the midst of her inquiries for Mrs. Swinford, broke off, and said, "Florry, my dear, your papa will be in the study; go and tell him that Mr. Swinford is here."

"Can I go?" said the young man; "it is a shame to disturb Miss Florry on my account; tell me which door, and I will beard the Rector in his den."

"No, no! run, Flo; my husband will be so glad to see you here. I dare say you remember him in old times, though we were not here when you were a child. It was his father then who was Rector, and Lady William —I mean my sister-in-law Emily—was the young lady at home, as it might be one of my girls now."

"I recollect it all very well," said Leo, with a look and a smile which did not betray his sense that the girls now were not by any means what the Emily Plowden he remembered had been. He even paused, and said with a tone

which naturally came into his voice when he spoke to a young woman—"I see now how like your daughter is to the Miss Plowden who used to play with me, and put up with me when I was a disagreeable little boy."

"I am sure you never were a disagreeable little boy," said Mrs. Plowden. "I have often heard Emily speak of you. She was very fond of you as a child."

"I hope she will not give up that good habit now I am a man. I hope, indeed, I am a little more bearable than I was then. I was a spoiled brat, I am afraid. Now, I am more aware of my deficiencies. Ah, Rector, how do you do? I am so glad to meet another old friend."

"How do you do, Leo?" said the Rector. The girls admired and wondered, to hear that their father did not hesitate to call this fine gentleman by his Christian name. "It is a very long time since we met, and I don't know that I should have recognised you: a boy of twelve, and a man of——"

"Thirty," said Leo, with a laugh, "don't spare me — though it is a little hard in presence of these young ladies. But it has not made any such change in you, sir, and I should have known you anywhere."

"Twenty years is a long time. What do you say, Jane? Eighteen years: well, there's no great difference. And so you have come home at last, and I hope now you are at home you mean to stay, and take up the duties of an English country gentleman, my dear fellow—which is your real vocation, you know, as your father's son."

"And what are those duties, my dear Rector," said Leo, with a laugh; "perhaps my ideas are rather muddled by my French habits—to keep up a pack of fox-hounds, and ride wildly across country: and provide a beef roasted whole for Christmas?"

"Well, you can never go wrong about the beef at Christmas—but I think we'll let you off the fox-hounds. If you'll subscribe to the hunt, that will be enough."

"That is a comfort," said the unaccustomed squire, "for I am not, I fear, a Nimrod at all."

To hear the familiar way in which their father talked, laying down the law, but not in the least in his imperative way, filled the girls, and even Mrs. Plowden, with an admiration for the Rector which was not invariable in his own house. He was at once so bold and so genial, so entirely at his

ease with this gentleman, who was so much out of their way, and beyond their usual range, that they were at once astonished and proud—proud of their father, who spoke to Leo as if he were no better than any other young man in the place, and astonished that he should be able to do so. But Mrs. Plowden could not longer allow these two to have it all their own way.

"It is so nice of Mrs. Swinford to give up her favourite place, and to consent to come home, in order that you may live among your own people—for it must be a sacrifice. We can't say anything in favour of our English climate, I fear. We all get on very well, but then we are used to it—but Mrs. Swinford——"

"Oh, your mother is with you, of course," the Rector said in no such conciliatory tone.

"Yes, my mother is with me. But, so far as that goes, Mrs. Plowden, Paris, where we have chiefly lived, is no great improvement, that I know, upon England. It's very cold, and now and then it's foggy too: but she likes the society: you know it's generally supposed to be more easy than in England. Not knowing England, except as a child, I can't tell; but if you can manage

to be more conventional here than people are in France, I shall be surprised. Of course, I should not have come, unless my mother had seen the necessity: for I am all she has, you know, now——"

"*Now*," said the Rector, with pointed emphasis.

At which Leo Swinford showed a little uneasy feeling. "For a great many years," he said. "You know my father died—shortly after we left here."

"I know," said the Rector, very gravely. Then he added, in a softened tone, "It is a very long time ago."

"Yes," said the young man, more cheerfully, "so long, that almost my only experience of life is, that of being always with my mother, her companion in everything. We have been a sort of lovers," he said, with a laugh; "everything in the world to each other."

Oh, how the girls admired this man, who said that his mother was everything in the world to him! It brought the tears to their eyes. An Englishman, they thought, would not have said it, however much it might have been the case: and Leo said it so pleasantly, as if it were the most natural

thing in the world; but papa, who had been so cheerful—papa kept a very serious face.

"I hope it will be found that Watcham is not injurious to Mrs. Swinford's health," he said, and then there was an uncomfortable pause.

"I suppose," cried Mrs. Plowden, rushing in to break it, "that you do not know any of your neighbours in the county, Mr. Swinford? They will be eager, of course, to make your acquaintance. There is quite a nice society in the county. We only see them now and then, of course, in this little village."

"Lady Wade was here on Tuesday, mamma, and the Lenthall people the Saturday before, and Miss Twyford——"

"Yes, that is true," said Mrs. Plowden, delighted that Emmy had been sensible enough to remember so opportunely, and bring in all these appropriate names. "They do not neglect us, though it is rather a long drive, from Lenthall especially; but Mr. Swinford will have better opportunities of seeing a great deal of them. When you have plenty of carriages and horses, everything is so much easier."

"Bobby Wade came to see us in Paris," said Mr. Swinford, "a funny little man: and I have met some of the Lenthalls.

One drifts across most people one time or another. The world is such a small world."

"Oh, then you won't feel such a stranger among them," Mrs. Plowden said; but she was a little disappointed. It had seemed to her that there would be a fine rôle to play in presenting this young potentate, so to speak, to the people about; but as she reflected, with a sort of disgust, people in that position have a way of knowing each other, and are always drifting across each other in that wonderful thing called society, which is such a mystery to those that are out of it. She made a little pause of partial discomfiture, and then she said, "Emmy, do you know where Jim is? Is Jim in the house, my dear? I should so like to introduce to Mr. Swinford our boy Jim."

"Most happy, I am sure. Is that the one who has religious doubts?" said Leo, smiling. "Perhaps, as I am not very orthodox, the Rector may think he will not get any good from me."

"Has Jim doubts?" said the Rector, with his severe, precise air, transfixing the anxious mother with that regard: and then he added, "Quite the reverse, Leo, the society of a man like you could not but be good for my boy; I should like you to know him. I'll go and fetch him myself."

But, alas! Jim was not to be found. He had gone out, the maid said, immediately after Mr. Swinford came in. He had indeed seized the opportunity to escape, fearing that he would be called in, and made to form an acquaintance with this new man, for whom he had a kind of aimless dislike, as quite different from himself. The Rector came back with a serious face, which he tried to conceal with a laugh.

"We might have known," he said, "this was not a time to find Jim. He is reading with me to make up a little special work for his college, and as soon as his hours of work are over, he—bolts: as I suppose most young men in these circumstances would."

"Every one of them," said Leo. "And do you find it answer, sir, this work at home? Mr. Jim must be a wonderful man if he keeps hours, and all that — at home with you."

There was not any reply made for a moment, but the father and mother exchanged a glance. Oh! God bless the man who speaks such words; it seemed as if there was nothing wrong, nothing but what was natural and universal in the shortcomings of their boy.

X

Mr. Swinford was afterwards watched by the village in his progress from one house to another of the great people of Watcham —the General's, where the family were at home, and he went in and stayed for a quarter of an hour: the Archdeacon's, where they were out, and where some close observers felt that he showed great satisfaction in leaving cards: and then he walked with his alert quick step round the village, as if to take a general view of it, and then returned towards the cottage, which all the spectators thought he was neglecting, the house of Lady William, generally the first on the list of all callers. He was not very tall, as Emmy Plowden had so regretfully allowed, but yet not short either, as she had indignantly asserted after. And it was true that he was neither dark nor fair, but brown, common brown, according to Florence's con-

clusion, the most well-wearing and steady-going of all colours. His eyes, I think, were blue, which is a pleasant combination; but I don't mean by that the heroical sentimental combination of black hair and dark blue eyes which is so dear to romance, and so distinct a type of beauty. Mr. Swinford's eyes were of rather an ordinary blue, as his hair was of an ordinary brown, a little curly on his temples. And he had a pleasant colour, and, what was really the only very striking thing about him, a waxed and pointed moustache, after the fashion of his former dwelling-place. He walked briskly, but like a man not used to rough and muddy roads; stumbling sometimes, not remembering that it was necessary to look where he set his foot, and looking down now and then, with a sort of smiling dismay, upon the spots of mud upon his varnished shoes; yet he pushed on briskly all the same; and walked down to the landing-place to take a look at the river, which was looking its best, reflecting the sunshine which began to get low, and to dazzle in the eyes of the gazer. He gave a little pleased nod, as of approval to the river, and then he came back again to the village green, meeting the bands of children just dismissed, who had

poured out of the school doors the minute before. He smiled upon them too, and their noise and their games, with little involuntary shrugs of his shoulders and uplifting of his eyebrows as he had to step out of their way: for they did not make room for him as they ought to have done, being rough and healthy village children, invaded by the spirit of the nineteenth century, and having passed beyond the age of curtseys and bows to the gentry. Some of the girls, indeed, stood aside with a little curiosity and pointed him out to each other, with whispers and giggles, which were less agreeable than the uproarious indifference of the rest. When he had got through the crowd, and passed the doors of the empty school, Leo suddenly stopped short at the sight of a face he knew. "What!" he said, "you here?" with very little pleasure in his tone.

"Yes," said Mrs. Brown, with a slight sweep of a curtsey, "I am here. You do not say you are glad to see me, Leo."

"You know I am not glad to see you, and I do not pretend it. What are you doing here?"

Mrs. Brown smiled. She was a handsome woman, and looked, as all the village

allowed, "superior" to a village schoolmistress. She was tall and dark, not like Leo, but there was a resemblance in her face to that of his mother which filled him with an angry impatience whenever this woman crossed his path. She smiled, and again made a scarcely perceptible obeisance as of satirical humility. "That is my own concern," she said.

"It is not mine, certainly: and I have no desire to know: but there is one thing I have to say," he said sternly. "Don't come to the Hall—I won't have you there. If I do you injustice I am sorry, but I don't want you, please, in my house."

"And what then about your mother's house?" she said. "Has she no house; or where are her friends to see her? It is hard if at her age she has no place of her own to receive her friends."

"How do you venture to call yourself one of her friends?"

"Ask her," said Mrs. Brown, with a smile. "I am sorry you let your prejudice carry you so far. Ask your mother, Leo, and then forbid me the house if you think well. I am going to see Mrs. Swinford to-night."

He turned away from her angrily with

a wave of his hand, while she stood for a moment looking after him. There was a faint smile of triumph on her face, but it was not malicious or unkind.

"Bless us all, Mrs. Brown," said her colleague, the master, coming up with no very amiable look, "so it appears you know Mr. Swinford, and all the rest of the grandees?"

"I don't know anything about grandees: but I taught Leo Swinford his letters," said Mrs. Brown.

"Oh, that's it," said the schoolmaster, with a sort of satisfaction. It was an intelligible relationship, and seemed rather to temper than enhance the painful superiority in appearance and manners of Mrs. Brown. He added, "It's a fine evening," and went upon his way. He had no house attached to the school, while the mistress had: and he had wanted to get the appointment for his wife, who was not qualified, on the idea that he could help her to "rub through somehow," and that the house would be very convenient; but this point of view had not been taken by the authorities, and there was thus "a little coolness" between him and his colleague, though she, of course,

could not be supposed to be in fault. Now to hear that she had taught Mr. Swinford his letters partly consoled Mr. Atkinson. It showed she was no lady who had seen better days, no fallen star, but only a member of the profession all through, probably a nursery governess. He liked to be assured of this, and thought the better of her from that time.

Leo's light-hearted and amiable countenance was covered by a passing cloud. He went on quickly, as if trying to throw off the impression. He had many recollections in his life connected with this woman, who had been a member of his family in his earliest remembrance, who had taught him his letters, as she said, and who had always played a part, he did not know what, in his mother's life. She was not a servant, nor was she an equal. She had disappeared when they left the Hall in his childhood, but only to reappear again at intervals, and he had always felt, for harm, though he could not tell what harm. The faint resemblance between her and his mother was a horror and annoyance to him more than words could say. It was, perhaps, her greatest offence, one he could not get over.

And now to find her here, at their very door, as soon as they had settled in their own house, gave him a feeling of angry impatience which was intolerable. He hurried on to the only place in Watcham which was not strange to him, the little house which the village speculators thought he was neglecting, the cottage of Lady William. All the rest were curiosities to this young man of the world—the village Rectory, the retired old soldier, the decorous little establishments where everything was on so moderate a scale, yet where the inhabitants were so calmly secure in their position, their social elevation above the masses. The stranger from a larger sphere is apt to smile in all circumstances at such a little hierarchy. But to Leo Swinford it was, in addition to all, so quaintly characteristically English, so unlike anything to be seen elsewhere, especially so unlike France to which he was most accustomed, that he had felt himself walking rather through a mild English novel—one of those he had read, amid more exciting fare, with amusement yet tenderness for the peculiarities of his own country—than through a real village and actual life. He had felt that he was

playing his part in this simple society, doing his social duty, much amused and often tickled by the oddity of all its novel ways. He had meant all along when those duties had been done, and when he had shown himself the amiable young squire friendly and accessible, to go to Lady William and laugh with her over the humours of Watcham. She would understand all that. She knew the other point of view and how odd it must all seem in the eyes of the cosmopolitan who knew French curés better than English churchmen, and to whom the rural parish was the quaintest thing. But in the meantime this last encounter was not in the harmony of the rural parish; there was another element, a tone of the more meretricious drama, a sort of Porte St. Martin, he said to himself, thrown in. Somehow that which was so much more exciting seemed vulgar to him in this quiet place. It was all so tranquil here and seemed so pure, that the other tone of the fictitious and conventional came in with a shock. Porte St. Martin, that was what this woman was. Whereas there was nothing here that savoured of the theatre in any way, but all pure nature

and simplicity, and real, though to him almost inconceivable life.

He went on all the same, even after this shock, to Lady William, with a wonderful comfort in finding that here was somebody who would understand him when he spoke. The cottage looked more ridiculously small than ever when he reached it. The Rectory, and the red brick mansions on the other side, were large in comparison with this little place standing lowly in its garden, with the trees hanging over it, and all the crop of climbing plants with the spring sap pushing up through their long shoots, and their new leaves forming. He almost stumbled over the gate, and felt that to step over it would be more natural than to open it and go in. Mab was in the garden busy about some new flower beds, at which she was working with a child's spade and trowel. She lifted her honest simple face flushed with work, and laughed that she could not offer him such a dirty hand. "I have been grubbing," she said, "but mother is in the drawing-room." Her face was not only flushed, which sounds well enough, but red, and her fair hair a little in disorder from stooping over her "grubbing." Her plump arm was half bare and looked very capable

of work. She was a girl, totally unconscious as yet of anything that was not homely and actual, not a budding woman with nerves and feelings, ready to thrill at a new presence. Whether it were Leo Swinford or any old woman that came in, it was quite the same to Mab. She laughed and pointed behind her to the tiny house, and the little open window. Even Emmy Plowden at the Rectory in all her English shyness and correctness might have made a timid effort to detain him a moment, to exchange a single word or two; but not Mab, who wanted to be rid of him simply, or even did not want that so much as to care whether he went or came. "Mother is in the drawing-room." She waited a moment with her trowel in her dirty hand till he should pass, then explained that she was in a hurry to get done before night, and stooped down again over her work.

"Can I help you?" he said, with the instinct of politeness, looking helplessly at her.

"Oh, dear, no!" said Mab, with energy. "I don't suppose you know anything about gardening; and then I like best to do it myself. Go in and talk to mother, Mr. Swinford. You'll find her there."

What a change it was to go into that little drawing-room! I am not of opinion that there was more "taste" shown in this little room than in the other houses about. There were no art stuffs, no decorative articles to speak of; one or two sketches which were not very good, and one or two prints which were better, hung on the walls; even the cheap "pots" which country ladies prize were not to be seen here: there were no Japanese fans. But Leo felt there was something in the room which he had not found anywhere else, and which made him feel himself at home, not playing the simple drama of a country life. But I really think that he deceived himself, and that the only thing different was Lady William, who was sitting by the table at her needlework, which she laid down when he came in. She was very constant at her needle, always busy, but she knew better than to keep on sewing when a man came to see her, especially such a man as Leo Swinford, who probably would have thought it an affectation, if not in her, yet in any one else who had treated him so. A conventional man would naturally think that the woman thought herself pretty in that attitude with her eyes cast down.

"Well," said Lady William, "you have been parading the village, paying your visits. I have heard of your progress this hour past; and now I presume they are over, and you have come here to rest."

"How pleasant it is," said Leo, throwing himself into a chair, "to be understood before one says anything! That is precisely what I have been doing, and what I have come to do."

"There was no great insight required in either case," said Lady William. "And how do you like us now you have seen us, Leo? The Rectory is homely, but they're all as good as gold. Yes, they are, though they are my people. You know one doesn't often admire one's sister-in-law, and I don't pretend to admire her; but she's a good woman, and the girls are excellent."

Leo allowed to breathe into his voice a slight, though very slight, suspicion of fatigue.

"You will not be surprised, dear lady," he said, "if I say that the member of the family who interested me most was your brother; and who is the son who could not be found, who is reading with his father?"

"Ah, Jim, poor boy!"

"Yes? I think I understand; there are then troubles even in this idyllic life?"

"It is so little a stranger knows. I think there is no idyllic life. We are very prosaic and poor, and our troubles are so very real—vulgar, you might call them. We look up, on the other hand, to what we call your brilliant and gay life, and think, surely there are no troubles there. Thus it is true, you see, the one half of the world never understands the other."

"But you," said Leo, "know both."

"Do I? I had a little share of the other, very short, and not, perhaps, very satisfactory. I never found it very brilliant or gay. The village life I know by heart, and its troubles, which are bad enough; small little vices and weakness, dreadfully poor and commonplace: you can't understand how pitiful they are."

"Can't I? Well, so far as it is of any use, you must teach me. For you know from henceforth I am English, and will do my duty. My duty, perhaps, does not demand an endless seclusion here."

"Seclusion do you call it? You will have half the people in London pouring down

soon, when your mother feels she has got established, and is ready to receive them."

"Very likely," he said. "That will not change matters much. Society is the same everywhere. At all events, I shall always have you to come to."

"It is very good of you to think that I can help you. There's metal more attractive. The village is not everything; in the county there are some pleasant people."

"If you knew how sick I am of pleasant people! In sober fact, don't you know, I want to feel that I have something to do in the world, and if this is my sphere, to make it really so, and fill the place which you would say God had appointed for me."

"Don't you say so, Leo?"

"I don't refuse to say so. I know so little. Religion has not held much place in my life. Between the abbé of the stage and the 'clergyman' of the English, what have I ever known? I have not been instructed by any one, except"—he laughed a little. "Do you know I remember scraps among all sorts of stuff, of the hymns you used to teach me—how long, long ago!"

"Yes, it is very long ago." The room was rather dark; the day was waning. Mab

outside was putting her tools together to leave off work. It was not possible for the two indoors to see each other's faces, but there was something tremulous in Lady William's tone. Leo Swinford put out his hand and laid it upon hers.

"You must begin again—not with the hymns, perhaps—but to teach me what is the best way."

Evidently there was a great deal of discrimination in what Emmy Plowden said.

XI

"Miss Grey knows, of course, everything about them. Miss Grey knows the whole story. She has been the longest here."

"Yes," said Miss Grey, "I know, I suppose, all the outs and ins of it; or, if not all, a great part; all is a big word to say. I don't suppose anybody knows all—about the simplest of us—except the Almighty who made us, and understands all our curious ways."

"That is a true speech," said the old General, "for curious are our ways, and strange are the devices we have to hide ourselves from ourselves."

"Come, Stephen," said Mrs. FitzStephen, "let us have none of your philosophising. You like a story, or gossip, if you like to call it so, just as well as any of us; draw your chair nearer the fire, and listen to what Miss Grey has got to tell us, for I can read a whole story in her eye."

It was General FitzStephen's drawing-room in which this conversation was taking place, in the March afternoon, when evening was falling. It had been cold and boisterous all day, with the March wind, which the farmer loves, drying and parching everything outside; the roads all gray and dusty; the fields looking as if every drop of sap in every green blade or leaf had retired to the heart of the plant. The wind had blown itself out, and fallen a little before the darkening, and Miss Grey, out, like all the rest of the world, for a little walk, had been met and apprehended by the General and his wife, and brought in for tea. How much this was on Miss Grey's account and how much for their own, I would not undertake to say. They were fond of Miss Grey, and so was everybody at Watcham: and people had a way of thinking that she was lonely and wanted cheering up—which, in most cases, only meant that they wanted cheering up themselves, and that there was nobody in the village who knew so well how to do this as the little lonely spinster. The FitzStephens' house was exceedingly cosy, and though it was not large, it was much larger than Lady William's, and more pleasantly built; with

cheerful irregularities in the shape of bow-windows, which gave more light, and agreeable little recesses and corners to talk in. It was not so plain in any way. It was almost richly furnished with warm Persian carpets and thick curtains, and a great deal of wadding and cushioning. The General and his wife had, indeed, reached a proficiency in the art of making each other comfortable, which only an elderly pair, without children, can attain, and which, in their hands, becomes a fine art. There were no rough corners in their house; nothing that was not padded and made soft. The draughts, which Lady William could only faintly struggle against, they shut out by curtains, artistically planned, to the arrangement of which they had given their whole mind, two together, which everybody knows is better than one, and each for the other, which is better still: for not a suspicion, nor even a sensation, of selfishness can be in the man who is afraid of a chill for his wife, or the woman whose whole soul is bent on keeping her husband comfortable. The candles had not been lighted, but the firelight was shining brightly through the room, giving a brightness which no other artificial light possesses: and, through the

windows, the yellow glow of a spring sunset, with a little pink in it, but none of winter's violent and frosty red, came in. Thus, between the day and the night, with the sweetness of the western light outside like a picture, and the warm domestic glow within, Mrs. FitzStephen's pretty tea-table was the most pleasant thing one could see on an evening while it was still cold. They had generally some one to share that darkening hour with them, and make it more cheerful; and on this particular evening there were two, Miss Grey, as has been said, and the wife of the Archdeacon, Mrs. Kendal, as quiet a meek woman as ever was, not capable of doing much in the way of addition to the mirth, but quietly receptive of it, which is the next best thing.

It is a curious fact, which I don't seem to have seen commented on, how well and easily a kind old man who has fallen into quiet society along with his wife in the evening of his days, takes to the feminine element which is apt to preponderate in it. An old lady rarely makes herself at home with men in the same way, or if she does it is perhaps with the young friends of her sons who look up to her as a mother. But old

soldiers as well as old parsons, to whom that might seem more natural, fall into ladies' society with a relish and satisfaction that is amazing. Pride of sex, which is rarely wanting, takes refuge, we may suppose, in the little superiority so willingly accorded, the deferences and flatteries with which he is surrounded, and which he repays with little gallantries and pretty speeches with which the ladies on their side are amused and pleased. General FitzStephen was a great hero among all the ladies at Watcham, and he took his place among them with little sense of incongruity, with a pleasant ease and simplicity, not sighing for anything better, not wasting, or so it seemed, a thought upon his club or his men. He liked Miss Grey to come in to tea as well as his wife did, and was as pleased with Mrs. Kendal as with her husband—more so, indeed, for he thought and said that the Archdeacon was an old woman, an expression which he never employed to any lady. For Lady William he had a sort of devotion, but that was not remarkable, for Lady William was of a different species, and not unlikely to secure the homage of any age or kind of man.

It was therefore a very cheerful old party that was assembled round the FitzStephen fire, none among them under fifty-five, the General within easy sight of three-score and ten, but all very well, with the exception of Mrs. Kendal, who had been more or less of an invalid all her life, but enjoyed her ill-health on the whole, and was as likely to live now as at thirty. She sat lost in the deepest of easy-chairs on the side of the fire opposite the window and where there was least light. Miss Grey was on the sofa in the full light of the fire, which sparkled in a pair of beautiful brown eyes she had, which looked none the worse for the number of years which had passed over their possessor. Miss Grey was very small, a little bit of a woman, with scarcely body enough to lodge a soul which was not little at all: at least the part of it which was heart, if there are any divisions in our spiritual being, was so big as to run over continually. She was very dark, with hair that had been black before it became iron-gray, and a gipsy complexion of olive and cherry. Her feet and hands were not so small as would have become her tiny person, but as they were feet that were always in motion for the good of her

poor fellow-creatures, and hands that were noted in their service, these things are the less necessary to look into.

Mrs. FitzStephen was remarkable for little more than the neatness of her cap, and the trimness of her dress and person generally. She had been what people call a pretty little woman, and on that character she lived. She was a pretty little woman still according to the limitations of her age, and her husband was still proud of her simple and somewhat faded beauty. He had always been pleased to hear it said what a pretty little woman Mrs. FitzStephen was, and he was still pleased with the thought. She had not changed for him. She was seated in front of the low tea-table, on a low chair, making the tea. The General, who was tall, looked taller than ever moving about in the little glowing room between the firelight and the dark, handing to the ladies their cake and tea.

"We are all quite new people in the place in comparison with Miss Grey," said Mrs. Kendal, in her little invalid voice, "though we used to come here, the Archdeacon and I, long ago, before he was the Archdeacon or I was delicate: dear me, we

used to go on the water! he was a great boating man once——"

"I remember," said Miss Grey, "he once took the duty for old Mr. Plowden, before the present Rector left College. I remember you very well — you were the bride — and there were ever so many little parties made——"

"To be sure," said the Archdeacon's wife, sitting up in her chair — "dear me — it is so strange to think of the time when one was young——"

"Emily was a little thing who was about everywhere—the child of the parish I used to call her. A girl who has lost her mother is so often like that, everybody's child. I don't say it's not very nice as long as they're children. One gets more used to them. She was always dancing about through everybody's house—thank you, General, I couldn't take any more cake—there wasn't a house in the parish, rich or poor, but Emily was dancing out and in——"

"Very bad for the child," said Mrs. FitzStephen.

"Do you think so?" said Miss Grey; "well, I don't know, as long as she was a child."

"If it was bad for the child, my dear, the woman has come handsomely out of it," said the General, carrying the cake into the dark corner to Mrs. Kendal. "My dear lady, one morsel more — to keep me company."

"Oh! General, on that inducement — but only a very, very small piece——"

"It's bad when the child grows into a woman," said little Miss Grey, shaking her little head; "she was as dear a girl as ever lived — not one of them now is fit to hold the candle to what she was. Mab?—Mab's a darling, the honestest little straightforward thing: and she would have been safer than Emily—she would never have been taken in —as her mother was."

"Dear Miss Grey," said Mrs. Fitz-Stephen, "another cup of tea: and you were going to tell us about the Swinfords—for we all know there was something: she was a Seymour, wasn't she, of a very good family?"

"But foreign blood in her," said Miss Grey; "I think her mother was a Russian; she always was fond of foreign things and foreign ways; he was a dear, good, quiet man. It never came into his head that anything could go wrong——"

"No: why should it, in a quiet neighbourhood like this——"

"Oh! I like to hear you speak of a quiet neighbourhood. When the Hall was in full swing it was about as quiet as—as Windsor Castle in the old days, before Her Majesty knew what trouble was; always something going on, the town full of visitors; entertainments that were in *The Morning Post*, and every kind of pleasure. They used to come down in the middle of the summer, from their town house, for a few days at a time, and bring half the town with them; and in autumn in the time of the partridges——"

"There could never be much shooting," said the General with satisfaction, as on a subject he knew.

"At the other end of the estate, the forest end—I have heard there was not very much, but it was very good; that is to say, it didn't last very long, but as long as it lasted—at all events the shooting might be only a pretence: but the house was always full, that is the only thing I know——"

"I dare say," said Mrs. FitzStephen, "it will be so again; a young man fond of company, like young Mr. Swinford."

"Oh! you may be sure it will be so

again. I don't know about him; but I do know about Mrs. Swinford——"

"Now, don't be spiteful, Miss Grey; when one lady does not approve of another it is the right thing to say that she is spiteful——" the General said in an explanatory way, to take away the sting of the word which had come out unawares.

"And it is very pleasant in a country place to see a little company," said Mrs. Kendal, "not that I care for great parties—nor the Archdeacon; but it makes a little stir——"

"It keeps a movement in the air," said Mrs. FitzStephen, retiring from the fire.

"Well, there will be plenty of it," said Miss Grey.

"But, my dear lady, we must not have you cross—cross is what you never were; and society, don't you know, in this paradise of Watcham is the only thing we want."

"It would be very nice," said Mrs. FitzStephen, with a little sigh; "though we have all done without it nicely, with our little tea parties, and a friend from town from Saturday to Monday, and so forth."

"I never wish for more," said Mrs. Kendal, "nor the Archdeacon; it is just

what we like: but dear me, when I was young—I've danced sometimes all night."

"We've heard the chimes at midnight," said the General, rubbing his hands; "so I don't see any great occasion, my dear ladies, to be afraid."

Miss Grey said nothing, but there was a little twitter and thrill in her, half visible in the firelight, as of a bird stirring on a bough; perhaps this proceeded from a little nodding of her head, very slight, but continued like a little protest under her breath.

"And then think of the young ladies," said General FitzStephen jauntily; "I have always heard that Lady William met her husband there——"

"There is not much chance for any of them to meet their husbands here: I often try to induce the General to ask a nice young man—from Saturday to Monday, you know—the only way we could ever induce a man from town to come here: but he says it isn't good enough—and asks his old fogies instead——"

"The old fogies are more agreeable to us, my dear," said the General, "and the young ladies must find their husbands for

themselves: but when the Hall is full of fine company as our dear friend predicts——"

Upon which Miss Grey, nodding, introduced what seemed an entirely new and uncalled-for assertion.

"James Plowden," she said, "though he is the Rector, is not a wise man any more than his father was before him——"

"My dear lady!" cried the General.

"Miss Grey!" said Mrs. Kendal mildly, out of the dark.

"Nelly, Nelly!" cried Mrs. FitzStephen, who was the one most intimate with the culprit.

"James Plowden," repeated Miss Grey, "is no Solomon, as you all very well know. I am saying nothing against him—he's a very good man: but though he hasn't very much wisdom, if he thought one of his girls was to get a prince for her husband in the same way as his sister got hers, he is not the man I think him, if he ever let one of them put a foot inside that door."

They all said "Lady William!" with a joint cry, which, though it was very quietly uttered by each individual, rose into quite an outcry when uttered by the whole.

"Poor little Emily!" said Miss Grey,

putting up her handkerchief to her eyes, "that's how I think of her—though if she gets any pleasure out of her title, poor child, if you can call that a title——"

"Of course it is a title—she takes precedence of all of us," said Mrs. FitzStephen.

"A courtesy title," said the General.

"Dear, I never knew there was anything against it," said Mrs. Kendal.

"I hope she gets some pleasure out of it, poor dear," said Miss Grey; "little else has she ever got. A horrible man, who never, I believe, made himself pleasant to her, never for one day: and a horrible life for I don't know how many years. If there had been a mother, or if he hadn't been——well, I won't call him names now he's in his grave—such a sacrifice would never have been made."

"But I suppose she liked him at the time," said one of the ladies.

"And no doubt he was in love with her," said another; "Lord Portcullis' son, and she a country clergyman's daughter."

"Oh, as for that, God knows: she was perhaps dazzled with the miserable title, and her father of course, who was only a silly old man—and then she was besought and per-

suaded, God knows how, by those who did it for their own sake, not hers——"

"But what reason could any one have?" said Mrs. FitzStephen; "my dear Nelly Grey, you must be making up a story in your head; what cause could any one have, unless to satisfy the man who was in love with a girl, or to help forward the girl to a match above her? These are the only two reasons possible, and there's no harm in them; we would, any of us, do it," she said.

"Not if the man was of bad character," said the General.

"And if the girl was not in love with him? Oh, I don't call that romantic at all," Mrs. Kendal said.

Miss Grey shook her head again, shook it till her little bonnet, and all that could twitter and tremble about her, shook too.

"You're all good people," she said; "you don't know the mystery of a wicked woman's heart—or for that matter of a man's either."

"Nelly," said Mrs. FitzStephen, almost sharply, "what can you know, a little single woman, about mysteries and wicked persons?

A soldier's wife like me, that has been knocked about the world——"

"Or, oh, dear me, a clergyman's!" said Mrs. Kendal, "and they are told everything——!"

"Whatever you may know, you don't know Mrs. Swinford," said Miss Grey, hastily tying her bonnet-strings—"No, I must go home, thank you; I want to be in before it's quite dark. And really there's not much to tell; nothing that I've seen with my eyes, as you may have, my dear, knocking about as a soldier's wife; or as a clergyman's wife may have heard dreadful things trickling out through her husband. No, I've no husband. I haven't knocked about the world. I may have fancied things, being always so quiet here. But good night, for I must go; it's nearly dark, and my little maid is always frightened if I'm not in before dark——"

"The General will step round with you, Nelly dear—General, you'll put on your greatcoat——"

"Of course I am going," said the General. It was a duty he never was negligent of, to see a lady who came by herself to tea safely home.

XII

"I HAVE been on a tour of inspection," said Leo Swinford. He had met on another beautiful afternoon all the villagers, that is, the gentry of the village, party by party, and he had repeated to them all the same phrase: "A tour of inspection!" Perhaps he liked the words, for he had the love of his adopted country for significant and appropriate phrases; and it seemed to that simplicity, which lies at the bottom of so much that is conventional on the other side of the Channel, that it was highly appropriate, and very English and business-like, to describe his prowl about the village in such words. But it was not until, after many little pauses and talks, he had come upon Lady William and her daughter, that he went further into the matter. When he saw the two figures coming along, one of which at least was like no one else in Watcham, Leo felt that he

had reached the society in which he could speak freely: so, though he repeated his phrase, he did not stop there. "I know now," he said, nodding his head in half disgust, half satisfaction, "what is meant in England when you speak of the slums."

"The slums!" said Mab, who leant across her mother a little, with an ear attentive to hear what he should say; "but there are no slums in Watcham; it is in London and in the East End that there are slums. We have no slums here."

Leo was too polite to say that what he said was not intended for little girls; but he gave that scarcely perceptible shrug of his shoulders which means the same thing, and answered with a smile:

"I did not suppose, Miss Mab, that you were ever permitted to go there."

"Not permitted," said Mab; "mother! why shouldn't I be permitted? I hope I know every cottage in Watcham, and about all the people, though of course they change a little. Mother, I suppose he has been down by Riverside."

"Very likely," said Lady William, "where the houses do not look attractive, we must allow. But Mab is right, Leo, though per-

haps she should not be so ready with her opinion. The houses do not look nice, nor, in some cases, the people that are in them; but we have nothing very bad here."

"I don't know, then, what you call very bad; it must be something beyond my conception. I should like to clear all those houses off the face of the earth. It is ugly; it is loathsome. How can the children grow up with any sense of what is good in dens like those? I have come home with the meaning to do my best for the people who belong to me, you know. I have not very clear ideas of what my duty is, perhaps; I only know it has been neglected for many, many years."

"That is true, perhaps," said Lady William; "but after all, you know, the squire of the parish is not everything, and we have all helped to keep things going. You don't know our aspect of poverty, Leo; perhaps it looks worse than it is. You will find plenty to do, no doubt. If you announce your intentions, I know several people who will be delighted to tell you just what you must do; my brother, of course, first of all."

"Shall I put myself, then, in the Rector's hands?"

"Oh, don't let him, mother," said Mab (that little girl again: how these little creatures are allowed to put themselves in the front in England!), "Uncle James has so many fads. He wants a new organ (we do want it very much) and a new infant school, and he is always, always after the drains! But I know a great many things that it would be delightful to do."

"Of course your advice will be the best," said her mother. "My dear Leo, it is so new to us to find a man delivering himself over to be fleeced, for the good of the people."

"Do not use such a word; I am so much in earnest; I am so anxious to do everything I can do. All these years I have been receiving revenues from this place and giving nothing back; and I am lodged like a prince, while these poor people, who do their duty to their country better than I have ever done, are in—what do you call them, sties, stables, worse, a great deal worse, than my horses——"

"You must not run away with that idea," said Lady William. "Mab, where can he have been?"

"I tell you, on Riverside, mother; there

are some houses there, old, damp, horrid places; it is quite true."

"Dear lady," said Mr. Swinford, laying his hand lightly on Lady William's arm, "you consult this child: but what can she know of the miseries which at her age one does not understand?"

Mab kept down by an effort the reply which was breaking from her lips. Child! to a woman of seventeen! and to be told she did not understand: she that knew every soul on Riverside, and what they worked at, and how many children there were, and every domestic incident! She kept leaning across her mother to catch every word, and cast terrible looks at the accuser, though she commanded herself, and allowed Lady William to reply.

"You forget," said Lady William gently, "that to us there is no horror about our poor neighbours, Leo. We know most of them as well as we know our own relations, perhaps better; for on that level nothing is hid; whereas on our own, if there is trouble in a house, there is often an attempt to conceal, or perhaps even to deceive outsiders, and pretend that everything is well."

"But, the very absence of concealment

— the brutal frankness — the vice — the horror——"

"Mother, I suppose Mr. Swinford means when the men drink, and everything goes wrong?"

"Yes, Mab, that is what he means; it is not so common in France as in England. It is the root of everything here. They are not unkind generally when they can be kept from drink. Mr. Osborne, the curate, is a fanatic on that subject, and one can't wonder. He would like you to oppose the giving of licenses, Leo, and to shut up every place in Watcham where drink is to be got. I am very much with him in my heart. But I would not advise you to give yourself altogether up to his guidance either."

"Not to the Rector's, nor to the curate's (whom I have not seen), nor to Miss Mab's? To yours, then, dear lady, which is what I shall like best of all."

"No, not to mine. I share all of these extravagances, one now, and the other tomorrow. Sometimes I am all for Mr. Osborne's way, sometimes I sympathise with my brother. You must put yourself in nobody's hands, but examine everything, and judge for yourself what it is best to do."

"Ah!" said Leo, throwing up his hands, "you give me the most difficult part of all. I will pull down their evil-smelling places, and build them better; or they shall have money, money to get clothes instead of rags, to be clean. These are things I understand; but to examine and form conclusions as if I were a statesman or a philanthropist—— can't it be done with money? I hear it said that anything can be done with money."

"Oh, mother, a great deal," said Mab eagerly; "don't discourage him: a little money is such a help. I know people who could be made so happy with just a little. There are the old Lloyds, who will have to go to the workhouse if their son does not send them something, and he is out of work. And there is George, who can't go fishing any longer for his rheumatism, and poor dear Lizzie Minns, who is so afflicted, and won't live to be a burden on her people. Oh, don't tell him no, mother! Mr. Swinford, people say it is wrong to give money," said Mab, turning to him, always across the figure of Lady William, who was between, with her eyes, which were not pretty eyes, swimming in tears, "but I don't think so; not in these kind of cases, where a few shillings a week

would make all the difference: and we haven't got it to give them, mother and I."

"They shall not go to the workhouse, nor die of their rheumatisms," cried Leo. He was so moved that the water stood in his eyes too. "Tell me how much it needs, or take my purse, or give me your orders. I was a fool! I was a fool! thinking the angels shouldn't know."

Mab stared a little across her mother, not in the least comprehending this address, or that she was the angel on behalf of whom Leo upbraided himself. She understood herself to be stigmatised as a little girl, but she was not aware that the higher being had anything to do with her. At the same time she perceived that his heart was touched, and that to the old Lloyds, etc., the best results possible might accrue. As for Lady William, she was half touched, half amused by the incident; pleased that her little girl had come out so well, and pleased with Leo's enthusiasm, yet ready to laugh at them both. She put up a subduing hand between.

"Don't beg in this outrageous way, Mab; and don't give in to her in that perfectly defenceless manner, Leo. I shall be compelled to interfere and stop both of

you. But here is somebody coming who knows all about it, better than Mab, better than I do, far better even than the parson of the parish. Here is not only the head of all the charities, but Charity herself embodied. Look at her coming along, that you may know her again when you see her, one of the great Christian virtues in flesh and blood."

Leo winked the tear out of his eye, though he was not ashamed of it, as a man all English might have been, and laughed in response to this new appeal, in which he did not know that there might not be a little satire. He said, "I see no white wings nor shining robes. I see a very small woman in the dress of a—no, I will not say that—but it's a little droll, isn't it? scanty, to say the least, and perhaps shabby."

"Oh, if you want an appropriate dress! It ought to be white, with blazons of gold: but it is only an old black merino, worn rusty in the service of the poor. Miss Grey, Mr. Leo Swinford wants you to remember him. He was only a little boy when you saw him last, and he wants to speak to you about the poor."

"Of course I should not have known you again," said Miss Grey, "for I don't

know that I ever saw you nearer than in the carriage with your mamma. But I am very glad to know you, Mr. Swinford, though not much worth the trouble—and especially to tell you anything I can about the poor."

"He has views," said Lady William, "of abolishing them off the face of the earth."

"Oh, you'll never do that," said little Miss Grey, with a flash of her beautiful brown eyes. "The poor ye have always with you; never, till you can make the race perfect, will you get rid of the poor."

"He thinks money will be able to do it: and Mab rather agrees with him."

"Money!" said Miss Grey, with a disdain which no words could express. She turned not to Lady William, who spoke, but to Leo, when she replied, "Money is of use, no doubt: but to sow it about and give it to everybody is downright ruin."

"Not to good honest old people, Miss Grey, like the Lloyds and old Riverside George."

"Pensions?" said the little lady, with her head on one side like a bird. "Well, there may be something in that. Come into my house and sit down, and we can argue it out."

Miss Grey's cottage was a smaller cottage even than Lady William's. It was lopsided —a house with only one window beside the door; one little sitting-room with a little kitchen behind.

The little parlour looked as if it could not by any means contain the party which its little mistress ushered in. "Step in, step in," she said, "don't be afraid. There is far more room than you would think. I have had ten of the mothers here at once, and not so much as a saucer broken. The ladies know where they can find places, but Mr. Swinford, as you are a stranger, you shall sit here."

Here was a large easy-chair, the largest piece of furniture in the room, which stood almost in the centre, with a small table beside it. And there was a big old-fashioned sofa against the wall, occupying the whole side from door to window. It was the wonder of all the Watcham people, how that sofa had been got into the room which it blocked up. But Miss Grey's response always was that she could not part with her furniture; and that the old Chesterfield, which was what she called the sofa, was a cherished relic of her dear home. But the most remarkable

thing about this little room was the manner in which it was lined and garlanded with china. Miss Grey was poor, but the china was not poor. It was of every kind that could be described, and it was everywhere, on little shelves and brackets against the wall, on the mantelpiece, on every table. There was scarcely anything in the room except the Chesterfield which did not support a row of dishes, or vases, or plates. Lady William and Mab, being closely acquainted with the place, managed to seat themselves without damaging any of these treasures: but to an unaccustomed visitor the entrance was one full of perils. It went to Miss Grey's heart that Mr. Swinford made his entrance as gingerly as if all these riches had been his own.

"Never mind," she said, as something rattled down from a corner, "it's only a very common delft dish; or is it the majolica? Only the yellow majolica, it doesn't matter at all; and besides, it isn't broken, or chipped, or anything. Oh, that's an accident that happens every day: but my ten mothers didn't even knock down that plate, and some of them were big bouncing women."

"You are a collector, Miss Grey?"

"Oh, I am not good enough for that; they are all old things, and I am fond of them; most of them, Mr. Swinford, came from my dear home; the things that were in one's home are never like anything else; and a few I have picked up, but very few, not enough to make any difference. The majolica, I dare say you think nothing of it, you that know what is really good. And neither do I, but not from that reason, because I only bought it myself at a sale. It is not from my dear home."

"And may I ask," said Leo, with polite attention, "what it means, your ten mothers? You must understand that I am very ignorant of many things."

"Oh, that is easily explained," said little Miss Grey; "ten members of my mothers' meeting, that's what they are; they meet in the schoolroom once a week, and now and then I have them here to tea."

"Mothers," said Leo, "of children? I understand." He was perfectly serious in his polite attention. "And they meet every week, and consult, perhaps upon education?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Grey, "poor things, they are not much up to that. They cut

out things for their children, little petticoats, and so forth, and work at them; and one of us reads aloud; and they pay only a little for the material, just enough to feel that they have bought it; and the schoolroom is nice and warm and bright, and it's a little society for them."

Leo's face was very grave; there was not even a ghost of a smile upon it. "I should never have thought of that," he said, "but it is good, very good. But why not give them the material to make things for their children? I understand the women love it, and it does them good to work at it. But I will buy the stuff for you, all you want, with pleasure. Would not that be the simplest way?"

"I think so too, often," said Mab, whose whole soul was in the question, and who understood nothing at all of the amusement with which her mother was looking on.

"Not at all," said Miss Grey, "for then it would look like charity; now they buy everything, it is very cheap, but it is no charity, it is their very own."

"But charity is no bad thing; charity is to give what one has to those who have not."

"I think so too, often," said Mab again.

She added, nodding her head, "It is in the Bible just like that."

"But we must not pauperise them," said Miss Grey; "we must help them to keep their self-respect."

"There is nothing about self-respect in the Bible," said Mab quickly.

"Oh, Mab, you are only a child. I am not against giving; sometimes it is the only way; and it's a great pleasure. But it isn't good for the people; we must think first what is good for them. We must not demoralise them; we mustn't——" The little woman hurried her argument till her cheeks grew like two little dark roses, with excitement and perplexity.

"It is this," said Leo; "everything has been neglected by me for many years. First I was a child and did not understand, and then I was a young man, taken up by follies. I have come back. I wish now to do my duty to my people. I will put into your hands money, as much as you want, a hundred or a thousand pounds, as much as is wanted, to make happy whom you can, if they can be brought to be happy; and to make clean, and plentiful, and good. Hush! dear lady, don't laugh at me. I would like

to pull down those frightful houses, and put all the poor people in pleasant, bright rooms, where they could breathe."

"What frightful houses?"

"He means Riverside, Miss Grey."

"He means Riverside! But they are not bad houses; the people are not unhappy there. Oh, I could show you some! But at Riverside they are only ugly. The people are not badly off; they get on well enough. One helps them a little sometimes, but they rarely come on the rates, or even apply to the Rector. Why, Mr. Swinford, you mustn't only look at the outside of things."

"I know," said Leo, repeating himself (but this was part of his excited state), "that I am housed like a prince, and they—not so well as the horses in the stables."

Little Miss Grey kept her eyes on him as he spoke, as if he were a madman, with a mixture of extreme curiosity and anxiety, to know if there was method in his madness. "Well!" she cried, "that is not your fault. You are not—what do you call it, Emily? for I am not clever—anything feudal to them. You are not their chief, like a Scotch clan. What makes them poor (and they're not so

very poor) is their own fault. They're as independent as you are. If they drink and waste their wages they're badly off; if they don't they're comfortable enough; if they're dirty, it's because they don't mind. Bless me, Mr. Swinford, it isn't your fault. If you pulled down the houses, they would make an outcry that would be heard from here to London. Besides, I don't think they belong to you!" said Miss Grey triumphantly. "They were all built by White, the baker. I know they don't belong to you!"

Leo Swinford sat and gazed at her with a rising perception that there was something ludicrous in the attitude he had assumed, which, at the same time, was so entirely sincere and true.

"And as for the stables being better—some stables are ridiculous—sinful luxury, as if the poor dumb brutes were not just as happy in the old way. Why, my little house," said Miss Grey, looking round, "is not all marble and varnish, like your stables. And you think, perhaps, it is a poor little place for me to live in, while you live in your palace like a prince, as you say?"

He did not make any reply. This little woman took away his breath. But he did

cast a look round him at the minuteness of the place; a kind of wistful look, as if he could not deny the feeling she imputed to him, and would have liked nothing so much as to build her a palace, too.

"Well!" said Miss Grey, "and I would not give it for Windsor Castle. I like it ten thousand times better than your palace; and the poor folk in Riverside are just like me."

"Dear lady," said Leo, in his perplexity, "it is not the same thing; but you take away my breath."

Here Lady William came to his aid, yet did not fail to point a moral. "You see," she said, "you must not follow a hasty impulse even to do good. There are two reasons against making a desert of Riverside; first, because the people there don't find it dreadful, as you do; and next, my dear Leo, because you're not their feudal lord, as Miss Grey says, and the houses don't belong to you."

He shrugged his shoulders, as a man discomfited has a right to do. But Miss Grey burst in before he had time to say a word: "If that is what you want, Mr. Swinford, I can show you a place!"

XIII

WHILE Leo Swinford was making his first attempt to revolutionise, or perhaps pauperise, the parish under the irregular and unofficial guidance of Miss Grey and Mab, who had, of course, no public standing at all, though he would have been a bold Rector indeed who had disowned the abounding services and constant help of Miss Grey—other incidents were going on of still more importance to the conduct of this history. Notwithstanding the indignation with which she had received the suggestion that money was strong enough to unlock all doors and solve all problems, it was astonishing how soon that unauthorised and unofficial Providence of the parish found ways and means to disembarrass Leo of a considerable sum of money, and to produce a list of requirements for which that vulgar dross would be very useful. She adopted all Mab's suggestions

as to the Lloyd couple and old George, permitting that little weekly allowances should be given them to keep them in life and comfort; and she pronounced and sealed the doom of a group of cottages which, though they were not ugly, like Riverside, rather the contrary, a picturesque group, making quite a feature in the level country, were not fit to live in, as Mr. Swinford was reluctantly brought to allow. He did not like pulling to pieces the venerable walls and high-pitched roofs, with their growths of lichen, which were a picture in themselves, and struggled long in the name of art against that dire necessity. Indeed, the case was a parable, since we are all but too willing to pull down the ugly but not uncomfortable tenements of White the baker, though it costs us a pang to do away with the unwholesome prettiness of our own. But while Leo's education in the duties of a proprietor was thus progressing, there was another young man whose training was going on in a very different way. Jim's Sophocles became more and more hard upon him as the spring days grew longer, and the east winds blew themselves out, and the sun grew warm. What was the good of all that

Greek? he asked himself, and there was reason in the question. If he were to be sent out to a ranch it would not help him much to know about Electra and Antigone. Less tragic heroines, and lore less elevated, would serve the purpose of the common day; or if he went into a merchant's office, there is no commercial correspondence in Greek, even if modern Greek was the least like the classic. What, then, was the use of it? And yet the Rector would hear no reason, but kept grinding on and on. Jim had some cause for his dissatisfaction: and he could not have understood the reluctance of his father, once a scholar in his time, to resign for his son all hope of the honours which Jim neither wished for nor prized. But the Rector could not wind himself up to the point of deciding that what he fondly hoped were his boy's talents should be hidden either in a ranch or in an office. He kept hoping, as we all hope, that fate would take some turn, that some opening would come which would still permit of a happier conclusion. And nothing was settled from day to day, and nothing done except that Sophocles, that sop to anxiety, that poor expedient to occupy the lad who hated it. It is a commonplace

to add that if the vexed and unhappy Rector had contrived a means to make his son's prospects worse and his life more untenable, he could scarcely have hit upon a better. To send him away had a hope in it, though it might have been destruction, but to keep him unwilling and embittered at home, held in this treadmill of forced and unprofitable labour, was the destruction made sure and without hope.

Jim was too sore and vexed with this fate from which there seemed no escape, yet too well assured that it was his own fault, and that nothing he could do was likely to restore him to the old standing-ground in which everything that was good was hoped and believed of him—to make any manly protest against it. There was no such power in him, poor boy. It was his nature to drift, and to resent the drifting, but to take no initiative of his own. When he was upbraided, as he was so often for his idleness and uselessness, he would make angry retorts now and then, that he would work fast enough if he had anything to do except that beastly Greek: but these retorts were growled out under his breath, or flung over his shoulder as he escaped, and the

angry father paid no attention to them, and did not perceive the reason that lay underneath this angry folly. Even when the Rector adjured him, as he did sometimes, to say what he would do, to strike out some path of his own, poor Jim had nothing to say. He had no path of his own; he had only an angry perception that the one upon which he was now drifting was the worst: but if they would only let him alone, Jim did not care otherwise much about it. What he proposed was to do nothing at all except a little boating and lawn tennis, or skating in winter. He did not think of the future, nor ask anything of it. If they would but let him alone.

When a young man in the country is what he calls bullied at home, work demanded of him which he hates, aims and purposes insisted upon which he does not possess, it is an infinite relief to him to escape to the society of those who will flatter and soothe, and make him feel himself a fine fellow and a gentleman in spite of all. Such was the company in the "Blue Boar" where the Rector's son was thought much of, and his opinions greatly looked up to, notwithstanding a conviction on the part

of the honest tradespeople who frequented the parlour that it was a thousand pities he ever came there. They asked themselves why didn't his father look to it, and see that Mr. Jim had summut to do, and friends of his own kind — in the same breath with which they flattered him as the nicest young gentleman, and considered it a pleasure to hear what he thought of things; but it was a long time before any one among them could make up his mind to utter the words which were on all their lips, and to tell Mr. Jim that the parlour of the "Blue Boar," though it was so respectable, was not the place for a young gentleman; and in the meantime the incense of their admiration and pride in his companionship was balm to the youth, notwithstanding his own knowledge that he ought not to be there.

And there was another place which was becoming still more agreeable to poor Jim. Since that first visit when she called him in, in the darkening, he had paid many visits at the school-room to Mrs. Brown. He could not go anywhere without passing the door, and in the evening, when it was not very easy to see who went or came,

she was almost always there, looking out, breathing the air as she said, after the day's work, and keeping a watch for Jim. He was flattered by this watch for him even more than by the admiration of the shopkeepers, and yet at the same time half ashamed. For there was no depravity about the boy, and these attentions on the part of a woman who was no longer young embarrassed him greatly, and gave him a sense of danger which, however, in her presence was entirely soothed and smoothed away. There was a sense of danger but still more a sense of ridicule, which seized him whenever he left her, and made him resolve with a blush never to go near her again. And, yet again, there was safety too. Had Mrs. Brown had a daughter, a girl whom he might have fallen in love with, whom people might have talked about, Jim felt that the circumstances would have been quite different; then, indeed, it would have been a duty to have stayed away: but a woman who might be his mother! If she liked to talk to him it was ridiculous, but it couldn't be any harm. Nobody thought it anything wrong that Osborne the curate should pay long visits to Miss Grey, and

take tea with her, and all that; and why not Jim to Mrs. Brown who was much more amusing, and who had no society? She was a capital one to talk; she had been a great deal about the world; she knew hundreds of people: and there was always a comfortable chair ready for him, and she had an art in manufacturing drinks which nobody Jim knew was equal to. It never occurred to him to inquire why she looked out for him in the evenings, and made those exquisite drinks for him. It was ridiculous, but it was not disagreeable, and in the evening as he prowled along, unwilling to go into the dull familiar house, where there was reproach more or less veiled in every eye, where even Florry, who stood by him the most, would rush out unexpectedly with an "Oh, Jim! why can't you do something and please papa?" —there was a wonderful seduction in the sight or half-sight, for it was generally dark, of Mrs. Brown's handsome head looking out from the door. "Good evening, Mr. Plowden; I hope you are coming in a little to cheer me up." It was said so low that, supposing somebody else to be passing, which was very rare, it could reach no

other ear but Jim's. Sometimes he resisted the call; sometimes when she was not at the door he went in of himself. It was all quite easy and irregular, and out of the way. The entrance to Mrs. Brown's house was close to a lane which led to the Rectory, and thus it was easy for him to dart in without being observed. Once, he felt sure, Osborne passing had turned half-back to stare, and saw where he was going. Confound that fellow! but, what did it matter what Osborne saw? He had never been friendly with Jim, never showed any relish for his society, which had rankled in the young man's breast, though he was too proud ever to have breathed a consciousness of the fact. But, whatever he was, the curate was not a sneak who would go off to the Rectory and betray what he had seen. Jim dived into the doorway, however, with an accelerated pace of which he was ashamed; and the ridicule of it came over him with a keener heat and flush. A woman old enough to be his mother! But what was the difference? That fellow Osborne would go off all the same to little Nelly Grey.

"Oh, Mr. Jim, what a pleasure to see

you!" cried Mrs. Brown. "I had almost given up hope: for it is near the Rectory dinner, isn't it, and you will be wanted at home——"

"Oh, I am not such a good little boy as all that," said Jim, with an uneasy laugh; "I am not so afraid of being late."

"That's very bad, very bad," said Mrs. Brown. "I am sure the young ladies are always in time and punctual; they come to see me sometimes, you know, and they always recommend punctuality. It's a great virtue. I have all the ladies to come to see me, but I sometimes think, Mr. Jim, if they were to know——"

"I don't know what, I am sure," said Jim, growing very red, yet looking at her steadily; "there is nothing I could tell that would make them less respectful to you, Mrs. Brown—only that you were once in a better position, and better off than you are now; my mother and the rest may be a little narrow, but they would never think the less of you for that."

Mrs. Brown was not a woman who was easily disconcerted; she could have borne the assault of all the ladies of the parish and given them as good, nay, much more than

they could have given her: for though Mrs. Plowden had a good steady command of words when she was scolding the servants at the Rectory, she never could have stood for a moment before the much more nimble and fiery tongue of the schoolmistress. But before Jim's assertion of her irreproachableness and conviction that her only disadvantage was that she had seen better days, Mrs. Brown was utterly silenced; she could not answer the boy a word; she was a woman quite ready to laugh at the idea of innocence in a young man, but when she was thus brought face to face with it, instead of laughing she was struck dumb; she could not make him any reply; she pretended to be busy with the lamp, raising and then lowering the light, and then she left the room altogether without a word. Poor Jim felt that he must have offended her by this untoward allusion to better days. Did she think by any chance that he was taunting her with her poverty, or that anybody in the world, at least anybody at Watcham, could think the less of her? Perhaps he ought not even to have said that; he ought to have made sure that it went without saying, a certainty that it was half an offence to put

into words. As, however, he sat pondering this in doubt and fear, Mrs. Brown came back all smiles, bringing that familiar tall glass foaming high with the drink which nobody in Watcham could compound—nobody he had ever known before.

"Oh," he said, "I thought you were angry; and here you come like—like Hebe, you know—with nectar in your hand."

"I am rather an elderly Hebe," she said, "but it's a pretty comparison all the same. If I were young and blooming instead of being old and dried up, I should have made you a curtsey for your compliment; but there's this compensation, Mr. Jim, that a Hebe of seventeen, which is, I believe, the right age, would probably not know how to make up a drink like this. Taste it, and tell me if it isn't the very nicest I have made for you yet?"

"It is nectar," said Jim fervently; "but," he added, "do you know, I wish you wouldn't make me such delicious things to drink. Why should I give you all this trouble, and"—he paused, and added, embarrassed—"expense too?"

Mrs. Brown laughed and clapped her hands. "Expense, too!" she cried; "how

good! Oh, you don't know how I get the materials, and how little they cost me; people I used to employ in—in what you call my better days, are so faithful to me. As you say, Mr. Jim, the world isn't at all such a hard place as one thinks; and even the ladies of the parish—but you do amuse me so with your stories of the parish—it's such an odd little world, isn't it? Tell me, what are they saying about Leo Swinford? Has any one made up her mind to marry him? That's what I expect to hear every day."

"I don't know anybody that wants to marry him," said Jim. "I suppose he must take the first step in anything of that kind."

"Do you think so, really?" said Mrs. Brown. "Now, do you know, I am not at all so sure of that; the ladies will think of it first, I'll promise you. He is a nice young man, with a good estate; and he hadn't been a week in the parish, I'll answer for it, before two or three ladies had settled who was to have him—and as for the young ones themselves—— Oh, my dear Mr. Jim, you are too good-hearted; you don't think, then, of the plans and schemes that may be laid for you?"

"Me!" said Jim, with a blush; and then he shook his head. "Nobody approves of me enough to make any plans about me."

"Don't you be too sure of that," she said airily; "but Leo Swinford is a new man, and he's got a quantity of money. Now, answer me my question, for I've known him all his life, and I take an interest in him: who is going to marry him? Does your——" She paused, and the mischief in her eyes yielded to alarm for a moment. However much a youth may be in your bonds, and capable of guidance, yet it is possible that he may rebel if you question him about his mother; so she changed what she was about to say. "Does your—aunt," she proceeded, "Lady William, don't you know, as everybody calls her—think of him for her little fat girl? Oh, I beg your pardon; I think she is a very nice little girl, but she is fat; when she grows older she will fine down."

Jim's delicacy was not offended by this statement. He laughed. "Yes," he said, "Mab is fat; but she is a nice little girl for all that."

"A dear little girl," said Mrs. Brown; "she comes and gives me advice about the children. You would think she was seventy

instead of seventeen. Well, is she to be the bride? Have the parish ladies given their votes for her?"

"For Mab!" Jim repeated with wonder. "Mab's not that kind of girl at all. She does not go in for — for marrying or so forth. She's too young. She thinks of her garden, and of boating, and that sort of thing. She is a very jolly girl. She has got a will of her own, just. The ladies might give their votes as much as they please, it would not matter for that."

"Of course I may be mistaken," said Mrs. Brown, "I am the poor schoolmistress. I don't judge the gentry from their own point of view as you do. I have to look up from such a very, very long way down." She laughed, and Jim laughed too, though he did not quite know why. "But I know that he is always at Lady William's. What a little cottage she lives in to be a lady of title, Mr. Jim; not very much bigger than mine!"

"Aunt Emily is not rich," said Jim, with a little uneasiness, feeling that he ought not to be discussing his relation.

"Poor lady; but if she marries her daughter to Leo Swinford? I know he is there almost every day."

"Yes, so I hear," said Jim, "but I don't believe he thinks of marrying any one. He goes to see Aunt Emily. He goes for a good talk. There are not many people to talk to here."

"To talk to a middle-aged lady, when there are plenty of young ones? Oh, no, Mr. Jim, you must not try to persuade me of that."

"But," said Jim, stammering a little, "it's quite true. What difference is there? just as I come to see you, and Osborne—but perhaps that's not quite the same thing."

"Osborne——" said Mrs. Brown. "Oh, the curate, the good young curate. As you come to see me—thank you, Mr. Jim, how nice you are!—Leo goes and sits with your dear aunt. And Mr. Osborne—to whom does Mr. Osborne go? Oh, I owe him something; he is so nice to me about the school. Tell me where he goes to have his talk."

"Well, perhaps it's not quite the same thing," said Jim, confused; "Miss Grey, you know she is almost like another curate, she knows as much about the parish; but if he goes and has tea with her, I don't quite see, don't you know, what anybody could say—

how anybody could object—or what is out of the way, don't you know, in me——"

"Going to sit a little in the evening with Mrs. Brown," said the schoolmistress with a burst of laughter, clapping her hands. "And quite right too; the analogy is perfect. So there are three of us," she said, "whom the young men prefer. You can't think how nice, and cheering, and pleasant for an old person; to think of three old ladies, Lady William, Miss Grey, and me! How much I am obliged to you, my dear Mr. Jim!"

How was she obliged to him? What had he said? Jim felt very uncomfortable, though he could not have told why.

XIV

WHEN Leo Swinford said that he was lodged like a prince there was little extravagance in the phrase. He was lodged like a prince indeed in the age of reason, not that of subdued æstheticism like this. The rooms in the Hall were spacious and lofty, and decorated with mirrors and gilding and marble, generally false marble, to an extent very rarely seen in England. And they were hung with pictures which would have been worth a king's ransom had the names upon them been genuine, which of course they were not. A Swinford of a hundred years ago, Leo's great-grandfather, had been one of those dilettanti of the eighteenth century to whom the languid Italy of those days was at once an idol and a place of plunder. He had filled his house with copies, with supposed antiques picked up here and there, with much old furniture and false statuary and bronzes. All the

splendid names of art flourished on the walls; I am not sure that there was not a fragment, so called, of Phidias, from some classic excavation, and I am certain that there were several Raphaels, and even a Michael Angelo (the day of Botticelli was not yet). The cabinets and carvings which were genuine gave an air of reality to much that was false. If it was not true art, it was at least a good representation of the age when connoisseurs were few, when the craft of the copyist was in great request, and when it was fondly hoped, with that stupidity which belongs to the cultured person in all ages, that the model of the Italian palace, designed for skies and customs so different from ours, might be made to improve the natural beauty of an English house; the attempt was a mistake, but here and there, when carried out regardless of expense, it was not without effect, and the Hall was a good specimen of its period. A hundred years is a respectable period of time, and an example of the aims and meaning of a past century is worth preserving. But the large suites of rooms opening from each other, with large windows and doors, and no system of warming, were chilly and severe in a season still scarcely

genial—England in this respect, with the cheerful open fires upon which we pride ourselves, being so much inferior to France with its calorifères, or Germany with its endless stuffy but effective stoves, in the art of keeping a house warm. Our houses, alas, are far from being warm, as many a shivering invalid knows.

It was on a Saturday, late in the afternoon in the beginning of April, but before the blasts were altogether over, that another visitor who was not at all so well received as Lady William and the Plowdens, walked briskly up the avenue and along by the side of the lake towards the Hall. She went quietly, looking neither to the right nor the left, with the air of a person who knew very well where she was going; and she was, I think, better dressed than Lady William, with something like fashion in the fit of her garments and the fall of her draperies, not over-dressed either, in black with a little veil over her face, a woman with a presence which all the poor in Watcham recognised as that of a lady, and a person who had seen better days. How it was that her air and aspect which impressed all the others, even Mrs. Plowden and most of the

other ladies of the parish, failed to impress Morris the butler I cannot tell. There are mysteries in all crafts, and though he was for a moment slightly flustered by her bearing, Morris put himself straight in the middle of the doorway and opposed Mrs. Brown's entrance with a decision which he would not have ventured to exhibit in face of little Miss Grey, who had the air of being dressed out of a rag-bag, or the humblest curate's wife. "Not at home," Morris said with the utmost audacity, looking the visitor full in the face.

"I know," said Mrs. Brown, "but I will come in till you have sent up my name, for I know that she will see me."

"It is quite contrary to my lady's habits to see any one at this hour," said Morris, who was a person of education—"if you will state your business I will report it to Madame Julie, who will convey it to her mistress at a fitting time, and then, if Mrs. Swinford will receive you——"

Mrs. Brown laughed.

"Do you ask all the ladies that call to state their business?" she said, with an air of amusement which confused Mr. Morris.

"Ladies," he said, with a slight falter in

his assurance, "who call at the usual hours is a different thing."

"Why, it isn't six o'clock," said Mrs. Brown, "and if I had not known Mrs. Swinford I should not have thought it too late. But it is precisely because it is too late that I am here; for I've no business except to see your lady, Morris, so you may as well go at once and not keep me standing here."

Morris began to grow more and more uncertain in spite of himself. Everything was against her; her look, though how he knew that, it would be difficult to tell; her composure, not angry as a real lady should have been (in his opinion) and indisposed to bandy words. A curate's wife would have retired in high dudgeon before he had enunciated his first phrase. Little Miss Grey would have transfixed him with a look, and turned away; but this visitor was not disinclined even to chaff the butler, therefore she was no lady. Yet there was something in her patronage, in her composure, and last of all in that sudden use of his own name, which gave the man a vague sensation of alarm.

"You seem to know my name," he said,

"but you haven't even taken the trouble, ma'am, to give me yours."

Upon which the visitor broke into a laugh.

"Mine is not very distinguished, Morris," she said, "I am Mrs. Brown, but not the dressmaker from the village to ask for orders from Julie, as you seem to suppose. Come, come, there's been enough of this." As she spoke, she passed Mr. Morris adroitly, and entered the great lofty hall which formed the vestibule of the Swinford mansion. "There has been no change made, I see," she said, with a rapid glance round; "do you mean to tell me, Morris, that your lady is going to support all this and make no change?"

The hall was almost dark, the lamps as yet unlighted, and only a dim evening light in the row of long windows. Some one stirred, however, in a corner, and came forward, only half distinguishable in the twilight.

"Morris," said this half-seen person, "you know my mother never receives at this hour——"

"Ah, Leo," said the visitor, with a slight quaver in the assurance of her voice, "is it you?"

When Morris heard his master called Leo, he retired discreetly with a momentary sense that the sky, or rather the gilded roof of the hall, was falling upon him. Had it occurred to him, so assured in his duties, to make a tremendous mistake? The feeling at first gave him a sensation not to be put into words, and his impulse was to take immediate flight; but on reflection, he felt it so very unlikely that he could have made a mistake, that he subsided into the shelter of one of the pillars and waited to see what would happen. Mr. Leo Swinford was known among the servants as a most affable gentleman; but Morris was well aware that his master was not one to submit to any impertinence. It was a moment of great excitement, almost too thrilling—for a butler has the pride of his profession, like another, and it would have been dreadful to him to have to acknowledge that he had made a mistake.

"I fear I must say that you have the advantage of me," Leo said, with a coldness that was balm to Morris's soul.

The visitor came forward with a short laugh, to one of the windows.

"You have a short memory," she said;

"but yet if you remember, we met only the other day."

Then there was a little pause, and then Mr. Swinford said in a tone which was half rage and half contempt:

"I thought I made my sentiments clear enough that day: but I might have known——"

"Yes," said the lady, "I think you might have known; but I don't blame you, Leo, your views and mine don't agree, and never will; all the same you can take off your bulldog and make him understand that the house is free to your relations. I needn't trouble you otherwise; of course I have come to see your mother, and I hope I know my way."

Morris behind his pillar beheld aghast an alert shadow glide through the gloom across the hall and up the stairs. There was now so little light that she looked like a ghost, a darkness moving through the gloom, but in no other way ghostlike, quite vigorous, full of life. The man could not move; he was humiliated in his tenderest point—a relation! and to think he should have made such a mistake; but on the whole, Morris was consoled by the fact that it was a relation; relations are not always equals,

they are not always friends; sometimes the people of the house would prefer to have them shut out. If it had been a lady of a county family, perhaps, or some intimate friend, it would have been different. He gradually began to raise again his drooping spirits; he was about to start away from his post of observation when his master called him briskly, having probably heard the noise of his retiring feet. Morris did not like to be caught eavesdropping; he was a functionary of a very high ideal; he allowed a moment to elapse, during which he judiciously and stealthily edged further off, and answered, as from a distance, "Did you call, sir?" with the air of a man who has heard imperfectly, being so far off.

"Come here, quick," said Leo impatiently. "Morris, I want to speak to you about that lady; you refused to let her in."

"I am very sorry, sir, very sorry if I made a mistake; but my lady's orders are, after half-past five, no one, unless there's an exception."

"Just so, you are quite right; but probably there will be an exception; I don't suppose my mother knew Mrs. Brown was here; she is a very old friend. Of course

you must take my mother's orders on the matter; but I suppose an exception will be made."

"Of course, sir," said Morris politely, with a sense of giving way from his absolute right as guardian of the Swinford House; "if it's your—or my lady's wish——"

This sacrifice made the master of the house laugh, and cleared his brow for the moment; and presently he retired into the great gilded pillared room which was the library. He was not without a little pride in the grandiose decorations which had been his ancestors' doing; but as he cast his eye round the great room, with the gilded gallery that ran round it, he thought, with a sigh, of the luxurious apartment in Paris in which he had been brought up. The one was so warm and gay, the other so glittering and cold; he believed there were a great many dummies on those huge shelves; unquestionably there were a great many worthless books; it was too big, too grand, too full of pretension to be made a home of, and everything was new and laborious and dull around him, even his own unaccustomed works of beneficence which had been amusing at first. Had he been allowed to give up

a portion of his income in order to make happy all the poor people without any trouble to himself!—but he had begun to be bored by Miss Grey and her intimate knowledge of everybody's wants, and to cease to be amused by the curate, who was all for shutting up the public-houses, those public-houses which Leo, in the toleration of his foreign training, looked upon as the only means of necessary relaxation which the poor people possessed. There was only one thing among his new surroundings that did not cease to amuse him, and that was the little, the very little drawing-room in which of an evening he found Lady William sitting in the firelight, and where he could talk of all that was in his heart. It was, perhaps, a little later than usual, for he had been detained by various matters of business, but still it was not too late, and in a few minutes more he had put on the coat with the fur lining which had made such a sensation in Watcham, and was walking very briskly down the avenue, with the gloom deepened and the vexation lightened, wondering how much he might tell her, and whether she would remember Mrs. Brown.

Now I wonder much whether the reader

would rather hear what passed that evening in Lady William's drawing-room in the fire-light, at the hour when people can talk more confidentially and cosily, only half seeing each other's faces, than at any other time; or whether he (or she) would prefer to be present at the interview in Mrs. Swinford's boudoir, which was going on at the same moment. I know which I prefer myself. The simple people in the world who have no mysteries about them, who have their little humours and follies, but mean no harm, and do no harm as far as human judgment can guide them, are familiar and well known. I know what they are thinking about, and what they say, and how much or how little they mean. But with the others there is a strain. I know, of course, very well what Mrs. Swinford and Mrs. Brown had to talk about and what they said, but it is a kind of artificial knowledge, and I don't like having much to do with these women of the world. There are different kinds of women of the world; but the lady who was Leo Swinford's mother was not of the good kind, neither was her old friend, or her relation, or whoever Mrs. Brown was. They were of the kind who are enemies of the good, perhaps not absolutely

meaning to be so, but because they were intent each of them on her own way, and on pleasing herself; and looked upon every obstacle to that, only as something to be cleared away. Therefore, if the gentle reader pleases, we will put off their talk for a while, and go cheerfully down with Leo through the dark avenue, and by the side of the little wistful lake, in which the clearness of the evening sky is reflected, and along the quiet country road; till we come to the village green where the lights are beginning to shine in the windows, past the church with its low spire rising against the sky, and the Rectory behind its damp and level lawn; and at last arrive at the quarter where the best houses stand out against the west, with their trees budding and the crocuses ablow in all the borders, and a pleasant scent of wallflowers in the air. Lady William's garden was more full of wallflowers than any of the others, and the narcissus were coming out, and the primroses taking the place of the crocuses; jealous people said because, if anything, it had the finest south exposure; but chiefly because Mab was the head gardener, and had a genius for that art. General FitzStephen was in his garden when Leo passed, and called "good

evening" to him over the privet hedge, for the General knew very well where the young man was going, and thought it very natural. The old gentleman was fond of little Mab, and hoped that it was she, though she was so ridiculously young, that was to make this great match; but he did not feel so sure as he would have liked to do, whether this was what Leo meant.

In Lady William's cottage things were a little different from the usual conditions—for Leo was late, later than he had ever been before—and he did not like them quite so well as usual. For one thing the lamp was lighted and the fire very low, the evening being, or so these ladies thought, warmer than usual; and for another thing they were very busy, Mab and her mother, over their necessary sewing. As everybody knows, the coming of summer is a much more troublesome thing, in respect to dress, than winter, when two warm nice dresses, one for common use and one for best, is as much as anybody wants. But in summer, besides the best frock on which Lady William was employed, with her daughter, when we first made her acquaintance, there are cotton dresses to be thought of, and things for the warm weather,

of which a girl who is always in movement wants a great many. And indeed, at this present moment the work in hand was a white frock, which was intended for a party, to be given by the FitzStephens, which very possibly might end in a dance; and this was naturally a very interesting piece of work.

"Shall I put it away, mother?" said Mab.

"No," said Lady William, "a man knows nothing about it, he will think we are hemming table-cloths; and he would not be any the wiser if he did know."

It is curious that Mab, an inexperienced little girl, should have known better in this respect than her mother, who was so much more acquainted with the world. She went on with her work, indeed, all the same, but she shook her head and felt convinced that when Leo Swinford saw what they were doing, he would perfectly well know; and, indeed, he had scarcely been ushered in by Patty, and found a chair for himself, than he said at once:

"Why, you are making a dress."

"Why not?" said Lady William; "we always do."

"It is for Miss Mab, and she is going to

a party," said Leo. "Is it a ball, and will they probably ask me?"

"Certainly, if you will go; but you are the great man, you know, here, and they may be afraid to ask you with all the little village people."

"I love the village people," said Leo; and then he laughed a little, remembering that there had been of late other thoughts in his mind.

"You are getting a little tired of them," said Lady William; "I told you so; between the time that they amuse you with their little ways, and the time that you know the real goodness of them, there comes a moment when you are bored. You must soon go to town for the season, and let Watcham rest, or yourself."

"I have no desire to go to town for the season, or let Watcham rest. I may be a little tired of the philanthropy: I am not tired of this room," he said, looking round upon it affectionately; "do you know I don't think I ever saw it lighted before."

"So brilliantly lighted, *al giorno*," said Lady William; "the firelight is kind and hides its little defects. But you are late to-night."

"Yes, my mother has had a visit, which sent me out untimely; it annoys me, and of course I must come and tell you my annoyance. Do you remember a certain Mansfield woman long ago?"

"Do I remember her!"

"Of course you must; there is always mischief where she is. She has appeared again."

"But is that a strange event? She is a relation, and your mother was much attached to her, too."

"I suppose so; though why——? Can anybody explain these things? And there is always mischief when she comes. I don't know what may be brewing at present, nor why she comes now. Does she live here?"

"Oh, no," said Lady William; "certainly not, she must have come from London: everybody that is uncomfortable comes from London. But you must not be superstitious. Mischief can't be created if the elements of it don't exist, and I see none that she can work upon now."

"She might make dissension; she will make dissension, dear lady, between my mother and me."

"Forewarned is forearmed; don't let her,"

said Lady William, "that is the only thing to say."

"But she will be too many for me," said Leo, shaking his head yet smiling; "I have no confidence in myself."

"You are too superstitious; she must not be too many for you; your mother's son is more to her than her cousin."

"Is she her cousin? and am I——"

"Her son!" said Lady William, with a laugh; "the wonderful question! I don't think any doubt can be entertained on that subject."

"No, no; I meant am I more strong as son than the other as—— How can I tell what to say?"

"My dear Leo! A son is stronger than anything in the world."

"Except a daughter," he said, looking at Mab.

"It is the same; one's own child is more to one than all the world beside."

"Do you know," he said, "there is one thing that I think is almost better, that clears away the clouds and brings out the sun, and makes one see him:—and that is you." He put his hand upon hers softly, with a momentary touch.

"That is a friend," said Lady William hastily. A little uneasy flush came over her face. She was very conscious, more conscious than was pleasant, of little Mab sewing on sedately, never lifting her eyes.

XV

Mrs. Brown walked quickly through the darkening house. She met a footman with a lamp, who stood bewildered at the strange figure, and a housemaid in the upper corridor, who stopped her to ask what she wanted, but was soon intimidated by her look and voice. The stranger wanted no guidance, no indication, to which side to turn, as the maid perceived, who stood watching her, and saw her swift, familiar approach to Mrs. Swinford's door. "Missis will go out of her senses," said Mary Jane to herself, and she hurried away, to be out of it, whatever might happen. "Nobody can say as I let her in," the young woman said.

Madame Julie, the maid, came to the door in answer to Mrs. Brown's light knock, but not before that lady, waiting for no one, had opened it and stepped into the anteroom, in which Julie sat. Mrs. Swinford's

apartment was as complete as English comfort and French refinement could make it. The ante-room, in which Julie sat, was finer than any of the village drawing-rooms, kept comfortable by many carpets and thick curtains, and lighted by a large window turned to the west, by the remaining light in which she regarded with alarm and fury the bold intruder.

"What you want here?" she said in her doubtful English, unintimidated by the aspect of the lady who had overawed Mary Jane. "Madame reçoit personne," she added, in a less assured tone.

"Moi exceptée, toujours, Julie," said Mrs. Brown.

Upon which Julie started and clasped her hands. "Mon Dieu!" she said, "Madame Artémise!"

"You need not announce me, I'll find my way by myself. Has she lights, Julie? Is she alone?"

"You will startle Madame out of her life, Madame Artémise."

"Not a bit. What is pleasant harms no one, and you know she is always happy to see me."

Julie knew, yet did not look quite sure.

"I will say but a word, a *petit mot.* Madame will not look up, but it will prepare her. Ah, she hears us talk!" for a bell at this moment tinkled into the stillness. Julie put aside the curtain and opened a door, from which came a gleam of light, and a voice saying querulously, "You are talking with some one; how often must I say no one must come here?"

"It is not Julie's fault: it is I, Cecile, come to welcome you home."

Mrs. Swinford rose up from the couch upon which she had been reclining, with a cry. She made a step forward, and allowed herself to drop into the arms which the visitor held forth. It was a strange embrace, apparently altogether on one side; the other passive, receiving only the marks of affection. Yet there was something in the *abandon* with which the great lady let herself go into the stranger's arms, which showed almost a greater warmth in the receiver than giver of the embrace. She put down her head on Mrs. Brown's shoulder with a murmur of welcome and satisfaction; then raised it to wave an angry hand towards Julie, bidding her go. The maid retired without a word. She was a middle-aged Frenchwoman, very

neat, and rather grim, black-haired, and dark-complexioned, with a black gown, and hair elaborately dressed. She obeyed her mistress in utter silence, closing the door noiselessly behind her, but threw her head and body, like a pendulum, to and fro as she went back to the work which she had been doing under the west window by the waning light. Evidently this stranger was no welcome apparition to Julie, any more than to more important persons in the house.

"What wind has blown you here? and where do you come from, just when I felt such enormous need of you?" Mrs. Swinford said.

"Some people would say it was an ill wind; and you know I feel always when you want me," said Mrs. Brown.

"You must have known that when I came here, where there are so many horrible associations, I must have wanted you. It is an instinct. Listen, Artémise. Leo has forced me here against my will. He has all his father's foolish notions, with more added of his own. And he has the upper hand, which his father never had——"

"Sometimes, my dear."

"Once, you mean," said Mrs. Swinford.

She was old, though she kept that fact at bay, and did not admit it by any outward sign: but she flushed over all her face like a girl at these words. "Once, no more: and you know how that is brought back to me here, and every incident of the time. That woman at my very door, bearing the name——which she never would have had but for me."

"I never liked the expedient, Cecile."

"Why, it was you who——and it was the only way. But now that the whole dreadful tale is swept away into the past, and everybody, except you and me, has forgotten it, there she sits at my door, calm, with that name. And I have to receive her; to call her friend; to kiss her——imagine! I have kissed Emily Plowden, and called her by that name!"

"I don't see what else you could do. It was your own doing, the whole affair. I will always stand by you, through thick and thin. But I never approved of *that*, Cecile. It was too heavy a responsibility. If you like to do certain things you know you will have to pay for them. You get nothing for nothing in this world. But I don't like meddling with another creature's life."

"I detest you when you preach, Artémise; you have so fine a position for that; hands so clean! From whence do you come now? from wandering to and fro upon the earth——"

"Seeking whom I may devour? No, I am devouring no one; I have settled myself —at your very door, too—to do good, my dear."

"To do——good!"

"You are surprised. Don't you know there comes a time when we would all like to be sisters of charity? But I have not gone so far as that. I have a very nice little post in the village, gained chiefly by a recommendation you once gave me, and your poor husband —— naturally that had great weight here — and other things. I am schoolmistress of the girls' school, Watcham parish. At your service, Madame Cecile."

Mrs. Swinford uttered that exclamation, which means so little in French and so much in English. She did not join in the laugh with which her visitor broke off. She was a more tragical person altogether than Mrs. Brown.

"Mistress of the school, living in the village! You are welcome, as you know, to

live with me. Why should you demean yourself in such a way? Why do you always try to compromise——"

"Not you, Mrs. Swinford. I have never compromised you. I don't choose to be your dependent; to eat that bitter bread. But you have never had any trouble brought into your life by me."

"Not that of being ignorant for years together where you are? of not knowing what you are doing? whether you may be in want? whether you may be ill? if you may have died——"

"On some roadside, or in some hospital, nobody knowing anything about me," said Mrs. Brown, with a harsh little laugh, "and not a bad thing either, and probably the way it will happen at the last. But I should always, unless it was sudden, take care that you knew. It is a curious thing," she said, laughing again, and winking her eyes rapidly, as if to shake off some moisture, "that you and I, two such women as we are, not of the soft kind, should in a sort of a way, not caring much for anybody else, love each other, Cecile!"

"We need not be sentimental and talk of it at least," said the other; "I see nothing

wonderful in it. With others always contradiction and contrariety, but between you and me understanding—even when you take upon you, so much younger as you are, not to approve."

"Oh, I must always reserve that power —if I were only four, instead of forty," said Mrs. Brown.

"Forty and a little more."

"If you think I am in any danger of forgetting the little more — forty-six — a sensible age. You would not imagine at that discreet period of existence that my chief friend in Watcham should be a young man."

Mrs. Swinford shrugged her shoulders as if nothing could be more perfectly indifferent to her.

"Who keeps me informed of all that is going on," she added, after a moment's pause.

"Ah!" Even this, however, did not awake the great lady's interest; for what were the village news to her?

"I hear of Leo's proceedings. He seems to mean to turn everything upside down."

"The foolish boy! he has got it into his

head that he has neglected his duties. What are his duties? I know not. One, that he does not regard, is to make life as pleasant as time and circumstances will admit to his mother. It is not much I ask. To reside where I can breathe. To see a few people whom I like, who understand me. To be kept from sordid calculations and cares. What he thinks more important is to come back here to look after his people, as he calls them. His people! How are they his people? They pay him rent, that is all. And he thinks more of them than of what is comfort and life to me!"

"I feel very much for you, Cecile, in many ways," said Mrs. Brown, not without a hidden tone of satire, "but do you know, I cannot see that you are much deficient in point of comfort here."

Mrs. Swinford looked round the pretty room with an air of disgust. It would have been difficult to imagine anything more luxurious. The old grandfather's decorations had been removed or softened with a taste more French than English, yet exquisite in its way. The curtains were of the softest rich stuffs. The walls were hung with a few bright pictures, little English water-colours, French

genre subjects, as cheerful and smiling as could be desired. It was lighted with soft lamps carefully shaded, giving a subdued silvery light. There were books of all kinds, from those in rows of beautiful binding, which filled the low bookcases, to the French novels in yellow paper, which occupied the table at Mrs. Swinford's hand. If there was anything wanting to the beauty or comfort of this wonderful little room it was difficult to find it out. Mrs. Brown instantly compared it with the sitting-room in the school-house, and burst into a laugh.

"You should see the rooms in which I live," she said, "and yet I don't think they are bad rooms. I have known worse. I consider myself very well off. Oh, you are different, a great lady, as you have always been, and I only a waif and stray."

"That was at your own will, Artémise."

"I know; I blame nobody. I have been the wilful one that have always taken my own way; you have generally succeeded in making other people take yours."

Mrs. Swinford smiled faintly, and then she said, her face resuming its discontented expression:

"That is over; now, it is my son I have

to deal with; my son, who owes me everything."

"Be reasonable; he owes you his birth, of course, and a great deal of petting when he was a boy——"

"And the sacrifice of my life," said Mrs. Swinford. "Do you think I ever would have done what I did and given up all I cared for, if it had not been for Leo? Do you think I would have cared for scandal or anything but for the boy? or for what his father might say or do? The whole thing was for him. Emily may thank him for her title, as they call it—ridiculous title! When I hear that name, and her rank, talked of—her rank, forsooth—and that she takes precedence of everybody—even, I suppose, she will," with a fierce laugh, "of me——"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Brown, "that's something, I did not think of that; but take care, Cecile, that she does not take precedence of you in other ways."

"In what way? You mean, I suppose, that she is younger and has a sort of beauty! I cannot deny that she has a sort of beauty. She is not the common pretty girl that Emily Plowden was. It is not for nothing that I helped to plunge her into the world. She

knows something of life, and though she will never make anything of the advantages she possesses, still she has them. You may imagine I looked at her with sharp eyes enough, remembering what she used to be and what she was. But her world is not my world, and what do I care for her village precedence, or for any comparison that may be made here?"

"There will be no comparison made, Cecile."

Mrs. Brown looked with a curious pitying glance at the woman, who was old, yet had never given up the pretensions of youth. She was nearly twenty years younger, and saw the futility of these pretensions with perfect lucidity of vision; but there was kindness as well as pity in her eyes. Did not her glass say anything to this old woman, that she should talk of comparison between her and Lady William's mature but unfaded years? Did not common sense say anything? As Mrs. Brown was much more near to Lady William's age than Mrs. Swinford's, the case was perfectly clear to her eyes.

"No, I do not suppose so," Mrs. Swinford said; "and my hope is that he will tire of it presently. What attraction can he find

in a country village in England? There is nothing. His philanthropy, bah! his people, ridiculous! It is ignorance that makes him talk of his people as if he were a great potentate, when he is only a country gentleman."

"It is his breeding," said Mrs. Brown. "How was he to find out the difference in Paris? and you always treated him, you who are, as I tell you, a great lady by nature, as if he were a *grand seigneur*."

"I must be patient," said Mrs. Swinford; "it is difficult, but I must be patient: I gave him three months to be sick of the life, and the half of the time is not gone; I don't think he will hold out a month more——"

"Unless there should in the meantime arise some other attraction."

"What other attraction?" Mrs. Swinford caught her visitor by the arm. "An attraction—in this village? Artémise, you have heard of something! A woman? who is she? I must know, I must know!"

"Do not be frightened. But I think you are imprudent, Cecile; you should have filled the house with company, you should have come back in a storm of gaiety; he should have known nothing of the village at all."

"Who is she?" said Mrs. Swinford, tightening her grasp on the other's arm; "some wretched girl with a baby face."

"It is no girl, it is nothing of that sort; it is a woman as old, nearly as old as I am. I told you I had a young admirer too, who comes to me for the superiority of my conversation, and my knowledge of the world. So does Leo; to discuss the world, and things in general, and the topics of the day."

"You are either laughing at everything, as has been your custom all your life, or you are announcing to me a great danger; the loss of all my power."

"Do not always be so high heroical. Let me tell you my own story first. My young friend is Jim, the Rector's son. He saw me with a gay party in Oxford, and I thought that he would betray me. But he is as innocent as a child, and respects and admires me as one who has seen better days. I keep him from vulgar dangers; from the 'Blue Boar'—but you don't know the perils of the 'Blue Boar'——"

"What are all these puerilities to me?" said Mrs. Swinford. "You weary me. Do you think it is interesting to me, this story of the Rector's son?"

"I am aware it wearies you; one sees that on your still fine countenance, Cecile: but I am coming to what will interest you. In the same way, Leo frequents a cottage, a very genteel cottage, far superior to the schoolmistress's house. There is a mother and a daughter in it. He may be falling in love with the daughter, but I think not, for the little thing is plain. But the mother is not plain; she is a woman who has known the world. She has been buried here, among the bucolics, for years. But when she sees a man of manners, who also knows the world, is there anything wonderful in it if she likes his conversation too?"

"Artémise, who is she? Tell me her name."

Mrs. Brown did not say a word, but looked at her companion with wondering eyes.

XVI

NEXT day the village was roused into great excitement by the appearance of a carriage from the Hall, in unusual state, with the coachman and footman in their gala liveries —or so at least it appeared to the unsophisticated ideas of the villagers, who came out to gape at the sight. A carriage passing is nothing wonderful in Watcham, however gorgeous — but a carriage which drives about from door to door, paying visits—this was a thing that happened seldom; the great people in the neighbourhood, the Lenthalls and Lady Wade, and the rest, would come occasionally to leave a card at the FitzStephens', or to show civility to the people in the Rectory: but the sight of the prancing horses, and the footman attending his mistress from door to door, was a delight to the eyes such as seldom happened. The children were coming from school, and they

ran in a little crowd to see and make their remarks with the usual frankness of a population in which the sharpness of town had crept in, modifying the bashfulness, but not the dull candour inaccessible to notions of civility, of the country. The Watcham children were, fortunately, more interested in the appearance of the servants than they were in that of the mistress, though some of the girls whispered together and indulged in pointed laughter at the lady who had to be assisted from the carriage, and who picked her steps, with such an expression in every turn of her person of impatient disgust, along the garden paths. Mrs. Swinford felt it a personal injury that the houses had all gardens and no entrance for the carriage, so that it was absolutely necessary for her, however reluctant, to walk so far before she could reach the door. But she was civil to the FitzStephens', who both met her at their drawing-room door with effusion, and handed her to the most comfortable chair —which, however, Mrs. Swinford turned from the light before she would sit down.

"My eyes will not support so much light. You seem to make really no use of curtains and blinds in this country," she said.

"My husband likes all the light he can get," said Mrs. FitzStephen: though she had been, as the reader knows, a pretty woman, and was a fool, according to her visitor's ideas, to face the day and show her wrinkles as she did. But the General's wife had no idea that her old beauty required to be taken care of in this way.

"It is all very well for men," said Mrs. Swinford — but she explained no further. She added: "I do not make calls generally, and country visits are an abomination, even when one can drive up to the door."

"We take your call as all the greater compliment," said the General, with his finest bow; but Mrs. FitzStephen remembering that she herself was a Challoner, and certainly as good as any Swinford of them all, not to speak of the claims of the FitzStephens —was not quite so complacent.

"It is a pity," she said, "that we have no drive, and that our garden must be crossed on foot. We feel it very much when we have company. It is impossible to put up an awning all the way."

"Oh, you sometimes have company!" said the fine lady.

"We are even looking forward to a

dance, in ten days," said the General, "a little ridiculous, you may think, for a quiet couple without children like my wife and me: but a dance is more pleasant to the young people than anything else."

"And consider," said his wife, "there is no need to do anything to amuse them, except to provide good music and as nice a floor as possible. They do the rest themselves."

Mrs. Swinford looked round upon the small drawing-room with an air of inquiry which she did not attempt to disguise. "I am not much interested in amusing young people," she said; "where do they dance?" in a tone that showed she was quite satisfied no dancing could take place there.

Mrs. FitzStephen grew red, and the General confused. They were very fond of this pretty drawing-room. Compliments upon its furniture and arrangements were familiar to them, and they were in the habit of deprecating too much praise by a fond apology as to its diminutive size. "Oh, it is too small for anything," Mrs. FitzStephen was in the habit of saying, with a mild inference that she was herself accustomed to something much larger. But the great lady's seeming simple question dashed all their

little pretences. Fortunately she left them no time to reply. "You have your little society in the village?" she said.

"Oh, we are not confined to the village," said Mrs. FitzStephen sharply, "we have a tolerably large list—I expect the Lenthalls, and some others."

Mrs. Swinford again permitted her eyes to stray—with a slight elevation of the eyebrows—round the tiny room.

"We did not venture to send an invitation to the Hall," said the General, with an uneasy laugh. "We scarcely ventured to hope—though I am happy to say that Mr. Swinford is coming, my dear."

"If you mean me," said Mrs. Swinford, "I never go out—at least to balls—since I have ceased to dance."

"Ah well, those days soon pass over," said the good old soldier, "we find other amusements at our age."

Mrs. Swinford gave him a look—which did not reduce the gallant General to ashes, for he was not at all aware what she meant.

"My husband is very fond of seeing the young people enjoy themselves," said Mrs. FitzStephen; "that amuses him more than anything for himself."

"Oh come, my dear, you must not give me too good a character," said the General. "I like a snug little dinner-party too, and a good talk."

"Do you talk here, too, as well as dance?" said Mrs. Swinford, with an ineffable smile.

"Oh, my dear lady, I assure you we have sometimes quite remarkable conversations. The Rector is an exceedingly well-informed man, and young Osborne has a great deal to say for himself, though he is taken up with fads—too much. And then, above all, there is Lady William——"

"Oh, Emily! I had forgotten Lady William, as you call her."

"One can't live in Watcham and leave out Lady William, I assure you, my dear madam," the General said; "besides her rank, which of course places her in the front of all."

"Ah, to be sure!" said Mrs. Swinford, with a little gurgling laugh, which stopped and then ran on again, as if with a ridicule impossible to restrain—"Her rank! I had forgotten her rank—such rank as it is."

"We think a good deal of it here," said Mrs. FitzStephen. "Lady Wade, you

know, is only a baronet's wife, and of course has to give place. It gives quite a little distinction to our village; everybody even in the county, at this end of it at least, must give way to Lady William. It is a great feather in our cap."

Mrs. Swinford went on laughing, breaking into fresh little runs of merriment from time to time. "This is really amusing," she said. "Poor Emily: and does she talk too?"

"She is an exceedingly cultivated woman, and one who has seen the world. I know few greater treats than to discuss either books or people with Lady William," said the General, with great gravity, holding up his head as if he were in uniform—which indeed this fine attitude almost persuaded his admiring wife that he was. What a champion for any one to have! But Mrs. Swinford went on with her little exasperating laugh like the vibration of an electric bell. It was very disconcerting to the pair, who were a little proud of their friendship with Lady William, and liked to wave her flag in any stranger's eyes.

"You see," said the great lady, "Emily Plowden, poor girl, was in the bread and

butter stage when I knew her best: and to hear now of her rank, and then of her accomplishments, is a new experience. I cannot convey to your minds the amusement it causes me."

"Ah!" said General FitzStephen gravely, "as I feel when I hear of a little ensign who came out to India at sixteen, and is now in command of my old regiment."

Mrs. Swinford's laugh ran on like the endless irritating tinkle of that electric bell. "More," she said, "for the boy would gain his promotion; but Emily! — it is more amusing than you can have any idea of to see that she takes it *au grand sérieux*, the rank and all."

"Perhaps, General," said Mrs. Fitz-Stephen quickly, "you will ring for tea, instead of standing there," which was the most uncalled-for, unjustifiable attack: for why should not he stand there, and where else could he have stood but respectfully in front of her chair, listening to their guest? He roused himself with a little start, and did what he was told, but not without a look of surprised appeal at his wife's face.

"No tea," said Mrs. Swinford, rising; "I have not acquired the habit: but I am

sure the General will kindly give me his arm to my carriage. I walk so little, I stumble; I have not the use of gravel walks."

Mrs. FitzStephen watched the lady sweep away. She had very high-heeled shoes and a long dress, too long for walking. The General's wife watched her along the gravel path, which she thought it very insolent of any one to object to. Mrs. Swinford did not sweep (except indoors) or glide, or march majestically, as would have been consonant with her pretensions, but accoutred as she was, hobbled, not more gracefully than if she had been any old woman in the village. Her step showed she was an old woman, however she might ignore that fact, and it gave the General's wife, whom she had rubbed so persistently the wrong way, a certain characteristic feminine satisfaction to feel that it was so. Also Mrs. FitzStephen strongly disapproved of the respectful and devoted air with which her husband conducted the great lady. It was Stephen's way; he could not help it. He was an old ——, taken in by any woman that would take the trouble. But what could she mean about Lady William, and all those scoffs at her rank? Could there be any doubt

about her rank? It might be a courtesy title, but what did that matter? The daughter-in-law of a marquis held precedence over quite a number of people who were Lady So-and-So. Lady Wade never disputed it, and the Wades had an old baronetcy. They were not upstart people. What did the — the — Mrs. FitzStephen paused for a word—the old hag mean?

"Oh, she meant nothing but spite," said the General when he came back, "feminine spite such as you all entertain towards your neighbours when they are prettier or wiser than you."

"Perhaps you will tell me what woman I regard with feminine spite," Mrs. Fitz-Stephen very reasonably said.

"Oh, you, my dear, you've no occasion; you are a pretty woman still, and can hold your own: but that poor old soul," said the General, "as you may have perceived, I had almost to carry her down the walk; that poor old creature must be seventy if she is a day—and to see her old subaltern taking the *pas* from her: I am not subject to the same kind of feelings—but I confess I don't like it myself, if it comes to that," the General said.

Mrs. Swinford went on to the Rectory

with a curious smile upon her face. She drove past the school-room door and saw her friend standing at it, sheltered in the depth of the doorway, by no means unlike a spider standing at watch, having laid all its nets, till some silly fly buzzes in. A salutation of the eyes only passed between the two women, the schoolmistress and the great lady of the Hall. In the daylight they resembled each other, though Mrs. Brown's plain black gown was not becoming to her dark good looks, and every particular of Mrs. Swinford's attire was calculated to enhance her antiquated beauty. There was a softening in both pairs of eyes as they met. They were not good women; their aims were not fine nor the means they were disposed to use; but yet, curiously enough, they loved each other. It was a strange sight to see. The walk from the little gate of the Rectory to the door was still more trying to Mrs. Swinford than the other had been. It made her quite sure that she had no vocation to call at houses where there was no drive. Her dress was long, and she resented the fact that it must trail on the gravel and get dirty and damp. As for holding it up, it did not occur to her: that any one should think she hobbled, or was not a

glass of fashion and mould of form wherever she went would have been incredible to her; but she resented much the length of that walk, and that she should be exposed to such trouble and annoyance in the act of doing what she thought her duty. Had it been only her duty, however, Mrs. Swinford would have cared very little for fulfilling it; but she had a different motive now.

There was a dreadful hurry-scurry in the Rectory drawing-room when she was seen approaching. The antimacassars, I am sorry to say, were much tumbled and untidy, and the loose covers of the chairs anything but what might be desired. Both mother and daughters flew with one impulse to the arranging of the room. Jim had been seated by the fireside all the afternoon with a bad cold, which they had been nursing; but he fled at once into his own cold room, which might, his mother thought, be very bad for him, but could not be helped in the circumstances. Florence ran, with more sense than any one would have given her credit for, to tell the parlourmaid to bring in a more elegant, less substantial tea than usual, and to give her father a hint in his study—"Mrs. Swinford, papa!" while Mrs. Plowden and Emily stood

nervously awaiting the visit, anxious to go out and meet her and bring her in by the drawing-room window, which would have saved the old lady a few steps; but kept back by the fear that it might be thought indecorous, too familiar, not dignified enough. Mrs. Swinford looked round upon the Rectory drawing-room as she had done on Mrs. FitzStephen's, but with a different air. "You have made wonderfully few changes," she said; "it is just the same damp little place it used to be." She was like so many of those great ladies, not careful of people's feelings; but that was, no doubt, mainly from want of thought.

"Oh," Mrs. Plowden said: and made a pause, that no explosion might follow, "I assure you," she said, "it is not damp at all. We have proved again and again that no water ever comes in. The elevation is small, but quite sufficient; and as for the furniture and doing it up——"

"Yes, I recognise all the old things," Mrs. Swinford said, with a careless wave of the hand (when there was not one thing, not one, except the Indian cabinet, that had not been renewed!); "and another Emily Plowden just the same. It is only you," she said,

with a sweet but careless smile upon the Rector's wife, "that are new——"

"New! But we have been here for fifteen years," Mrs. Plowden said: and her visitor smiled again as if in complacent consciousness of having said the most agreeable thing in the world.

"I am glad," she said, "there is no other daughter, no one to disturb the harmony of what used to be. Oh, but here is the other daughter."

"Florence, my second, Mrs. Swinford: not considered like the Plowdens, but taking more after my side of the house."

"I see she is not like the Plowdens," said Mrs. Swinford, with the look of indifference which was natural to her: it was of so little consequence! "The other is a little like Emily."

"Like her aunt, our dear Lady William."

"You are all much delighted," said the great lady, "with that name."

"My sister-in-law's name? Well, we like it, for she has no other, poor thing. We couldn't call her anything else—as long as she doesn't change it or marry again."

"Oh, mamma!" said Emmy and Florry together.

"No," said Mrs. Plowden, "I don't think she will marry again—now. I did once hope she would; for, though rank is nice, a good husband who would have looked after her and her little girl would have been nicer: while the late Lord William, as I have heard——"

Mrs. Swinford made a little movement of impatience. "Have the family," she said, "taken any notice of Emily—or the little girl?"

"It is very funny," said Florence, "to hear Mab, who has such a character of her own, spoken of as the little girl."

"Oh, Florry, hold your tongue, you are always making remarks. The family, Mrs. Swinford?"

"Poor little thing, poor little thing," said Mrs. Swinford, "I think you were very wise, my dear Mrs. Plowden, in advising your sister-in-law to marry again. What a thing it would be if after all it was found that nothing could be done for the little girl!"

"They have their little annuity," said Mrs. Plowden, startled; "there has never been anything said of taking it away. And I could not make such a statement as that I advised her to marry, for there has really

been no one that she could have married except——, and he was quite an old gentleman. Not to say that Emily ever thought of such a thing. She was not so happy the first time as to have any wish——"

Mrs. Swinford's attention had once more flagged, and here she interposed with her usual calm bearing, addressing Emmy. "I thought you had a brother," she said.

Emmy coloured high, being thus suddenly spoken to. "Oh, yes."

"Yes, indeed," cried Mrs. Plowden, recovering herself the more easily that this new subject was one on which she could be eloquent. "He has a bad cold, poor boy, or he would have been here at once to pay his respects. Is that you, James? Mrs. Swinford is making such kind inquiries."

The great lady held out her hand. "You have not taken the trouble to come and see me," she said.

The Rector had come in much against his will. He made a bow which had not his usual ease. "I must beg your pardon," he said very gravely. "I am aware that I have been negligent."

"Ah," she said, "you did not want to come? but I supposed when your excellent

wife did me so much honour, that bygones were to be bygones; and Emily——"

"My sister acts for herself; I do not try to influence her; and my wife thinks she knows what is best for her——"

"Her family, of course; good woman. She thought it would be a wrong thing to neglect opportunities, and so did your father, as you may recollect."

"I prefer not to recollect, any more than I can help," said the Rector.

"Which? that Emily has come to great promotion, very high promotion, as all those ladies think—while she was in my house? There would have been no title in the case —a title such as it is!—but for my house."

"The less that is said on that subject, I think, the better," said the Rector, standing bolt upright before the fire.

"Oh, James," said his wife, "when Mrs. Swinford is so kind——"

"I gave it," said Mrs. Swinford, bending forward, "and, my good Rector, you will take care not to be insolent; I may also, perhaps, take it away."

XVII

Lady William, on this eventful afternoon, had gone out with Mab on one of her rambles. The air was full of spring, the buds bursting on every tree, the cottage gardens all blooming with those common flowers which can be got anywhere, which are the inheritance of the poorest, and are more beautiful, spontaneous, and abundant than any other: the early primroses, daffodils and Lent lilies, the rich dark wallflowers that fill the air with sweetness. Mab had a little basket with her, in which to bring home any wild thing that pleased her in the woods and slopes of Denham Hill, on the other side of the water. It was a long walk, but neither mother nor daughter was afraid of a long walk. They came back, breathing of every sweet-wildness of the spring, just as Mrs. Swinford, disappointed and angry, was leaving a card, with a message, at the cottage

door; but the carriage had disappeared along the road long before they reached their own end of Watcham. It had been a lovely afternoon, warm, yet fresh with the dewy moisture of the April breezes, that germinating weather, and sparkle of showers and waters which is not damp. Several showers had fallen upon them in their ramble, but done no harm; they had taken shelter, after a laughing run against the wind and the bright falling veil of rain, under the trees, or in a cottage when one was near, and shaken the rain-drops off their dresses, and carried the freshness of the outside atmosphere, as if they had been nymphs of the air, into the little wayside houses. It would have been hard to say whether mother or daughter was youngest in these runs and shelterings. Lady William was almost more swift of foot than Mab, who more easily got out of breath, and was built on heavier lines; and though the girl's colour was higher, the delicate flush on the other's cheek spoke of almost finer health and brightness in its fluctuations and changes. They were both equally interested about the plants and roots which Mab grubbed up from under the trees, but hers was the delight of superior knowledge, as

she discovered a rare something here and there, a flower peculiar to one place or another. Mab was altogether absorbed in her botany and her researches, flushed with her digging, eager about her new treasures. But her mother was more free for the delights of the sweet air and sensations of the spring, the freedom of the woods, and sometimes would burst out singing, and sometimes fling bits of moss at her child, as she held the basket.

"Isn't that beautiful, Mab?"

"Yes, mother," Mab would say, digging, her head bent over the mossy soil, nothing free of her but the ear which took in the sound of the poetry in a kind of subdued pleasure which mingled with her humbler sensations.

"You are a little grub," said Lady William; "you are never so happy as when you are probing among the roots and the dead leaves."

"And you are of the kind of the birds, mother, and I like to hear you up among the branches," said Mab. I do not mean to say that Lady William was a musician, or that you could hear the bits of songs she sang, which had been Mab's lullaby as a

baby, and amusement through all her childhood—a few yards from where she stood. They were nothing but the spontaneous utterances of her fresh spirit, like breathing, or the trilling of the birds, to which Mab compared them. Mab did not herself require utterances, givings forth, of that kind. She worked away and was silent, wholly given to what she was about. But she admired the trill and movement of the lighter spirit, and thought her mother the most delightful human creature that had ever been upon this earth.

The basket was tolerably heavy when they came back, and Mab was still a little flushed with her hard work. The sky was very sweet and subdued in colour, a great band of softened gold binding the growing grayness of the afternoon, approaching night—and opening, as it were, a glimpse into the heavens, a broad shining pathway, reflected fully in the river, between the awakening greens and browns of the spring country and the soft clouds above. It was still light, but evening was in the air, and among the folds of the clouds a few mild stars were already visible. The cows were coming lowing home; the children were

leaving off their games; and people coming up from the river, who found a little chill in the air after the sun had gone down. The mother and daughter met everybody on their progress home. The doctor, another botanist, who sniffed at Mab's basket, and affected contempt at her brag of the peculiar coltsfoot she had found, which grew nowhere but on Denham Hill. "Common, common," he said, "you'll find it everywhere," as one connoisseur says to another, upon most new acquisitions; but that was because he had never had such luck himself, Mab felt convinced. And they met the tall curate, Mr. Osborne, stalking off to a meeting, who stopped to ask whether Lady William would not help in a temperance tea party of his, where the ladies and gentlemen were to amuse the villagers, and make them forget that there was such a thing on earth, or, rather, in Watcham, as the "Why Not?" or the "Blue Boar." Mr. Osborne wore his Inverness cape, as usual, and a quantity of books and pamphlets under it; but there was something a little different from his ordinary aspect in his looks. After he had passed he made a step back again, and called Lady William, with a hesitating voice.

"Do you see—young Plowden often?" he said, in the most awkward way.

"Jim!" she said, surprised, "my nephew?"

"Don't be vexed; I think he goes to——places which he had better avoid," said the curate. Lady William looked at him, but there was nothing further to be learned from his cloudy face.

"That is very possible," she said. "Do you mean——there?" for she had heard something of the "Blue Boar," which was now beginning to light up, and looked cheerful enough across the village green. The curate gave a little stamp of impatience as he saw some one else approaching, and said quickly:

"I can't say any more," and stalked away, leaving, as such monitors so often do, a prick of pain behind him, but nothing that could do any good. It was the General who was coming, and he walked a few steps with the ladies, congratulating them on their walk.

"For I should not wonder if it rained to-morrow," he said. And then he told them of Mrs. Swinford's visit, and how she had gone from door to door. "You see you

have missed something; you have not had that honour."

"I am glad that we went for our long walk," Lady William said. And then, finally, they met Mr. Swinford, who came up joyfully, with his hat in his hand, and his head uncovered from the moment he saw them.

"Ah, I have found you at last," said Leo; "I have waited for you in the cottage, sitting inside by the invitation of Miss Patty, who is very kind to me, and observing the proceedings of my mother."

"I hear she has been paying visits."

"To everybody, which is not, perhaps, the way to make the visit prized; but she does not like the English climate, and she is used, you know, to do as she likes," he said, with a smile.

"Surely, in such matters as that she has a very good right."

"Yes, to be sure," he said doubtfully, and then laughed. "She came to see you, too—and I lay there, like a spider in a web, wondering if she would also come in to wait for you; but Miss Patty was not so kind to my mother as to me. I heard her answer unhesitatingly, 'Not at home!' with a voice

like that of a groom of the chambers. She has great capabilities, Patty."

"And did you not go out, to say——"

"What should I have said? I was waiting, feeling that you would probably snub me for my pains, and why should I interfere with my mother? She left a card with a message pencilled on it, which I had the honourable feeling not to read. It got upon my nerves to be in the same room with it, and if I had not come out to meet you I should have yielded to the temptation."

"That would have been as bad as opening a letter," said Mab, who had as yet taken no part.

"Would it, do you think? It was open; there would have been no seal broken; but, at all events, I resisted temptation, so you must praise me and not censure, Miss Mab."

"And how did you know," said Mab, while her mother pondered, "that we were coming this way?"

"Give me the basket and I will tell you. What is in it? Worms? But also clay and earth. Have you not mud enough already in Watcham, that you must bring in more from the woods?"

"Give me my basket again," said Mab

indignantly; "there's a clump of wood anemones, beauties, and the famous coltsfoot that only grows at Denham. I have hunted for it for years, and I only found it to-day. Give it me back."

"I am not worthy to carry such treasures," said Leo, "but the contact will do me good."

"All the same you haven't answered," said Mab. "Who told you we were coming this way?"

"If you must know, it was the accomplished Patty again. She offered me tea, which I declined, and she offered me also my mother's card, which in my high sense of honour I declined too, and then she said, 'My lydy was a-going to Denham Hill, and you'll meet 'em sure, if you go that way.' Patty is my friend, Miss Mab; she has a higher opinion of me than you have."

"We must hurry home now, Mab, we have been too long away," said Lady William, with a serious face. "It does not do for a woman of my age to go out on your long grubbings. Come, Leo, give me the basket, and let us run home."

"I can run too," he said. "Are you really sorry, is that what you mean, that you missed my mother?"

"I cannot quite say that honestly. No, I am not sorry I missed your mother. Perhaps she and I have been too long apart to bridge over the difference now. How I used to admire your mother, Leo! How beautiful she was!"

"Was she, indeed?" he said, with a sort of polite attention, but surprised. Perhaps it is curious at any time for a man to realise that his mother may have been beautiful and admired. "I should not have thought," he said, "with submission, that her features, for instance——"

"Women don't think of features," said Lady William, with a little impatience. "It was she, not her features, that was beautiful. She had so much charm—when she pleased. It must always be added, that when she did not please—but we are not going to discuss your mother. She is a wonderful creature to be imprisoned here."

"You are not imprisoned here," he said, almost angrily, "who are still more wonderful: and you forget that my mother is old, and has had her day."

"The day will not be over as long as she lives; and as for me, I am not imprisoned; I dwell among my own people."

"How curious," he said, "pardon me, that the people here should be your own people! I say nothing against them, don't fear it; they are very good people, but not——"

"Thanks," she said, with a half laugh, "it was I who used to be the black sheep. Mrs. Plowden is not sure that she approves of me now; and if——"

"If what?"

"Nothing," said Lady William, with the slightest tinge of angry colour in her face.

"That is just like mother," said Mab; "she gives you a word as if she were going to say something of importance, and then she tells you it is nothing. I have known her to do it a hundred times."

"There is nothing like the criticism of one's children," said Lady William, with a laugh. "You, with your mother, Leo, and Mab with hers, you are two iconoclasts. Now, the humble people, like my good Emmy, are very different; they do not criticise. And then you despise them as common, you two—— Ah! here we are at our own door." She turned and held out her hand to Leo, who looked at her surprised.

"Are you not going to ask me in?" he said, holding part of the basket, for which Mab, too, had held out her hands.

They all stood looking at each other in front of the cottage door.

"It is late," said Lady William, with some hesitation—"yes, if you wish it: but don't you think it would be better to get back to the Hall before it is dark?"

"No," said Leo, "why should I hurry back to the Hall? Of course I wish it; and you never told me before that I was not to come."

"I do not say so now, but——"

"But what?"

"Nothing," said Lady William, with a faint smile.

"I told you that was her way," cried Mab, triumphant. "'Nothing,' and one is sure that she means heaps of things more than she ever says."

He followed her into the little drawing-room, where there was still a little bright fire, though it was no longer cold. Mrs. Swinford's card was lying upon a small table conspicuously, though there was not light enough to read its pencilled message. Lady William hesitated a little, not sitting down,

giving her visitor no excuse for doing so. He followed her movements with a disturbed aspect, standing within the door, watching her figure against the light. Mab, who had seized the basket when he put it down, had gone off to put her treasures in safety. "I perceive," he said at last, "that I have done something wrong. What have I done wrong? Am I troubling you coming in when you did not want me? Then tell me so, dear lady, and send me away."

"Leo," said Lady William, "you should not have remained here while your mother was at the door; I do not like it; it puts me in a very uncomfortable position. Why didn't you go and tell her we were out, Mab and I?"

"I am your devoted servant, dear lady," said Leo, "but I am not your groom of the chambers, and Patty is. How could I have taken her duties out of her hands?"

"That is all very well for a laugh," she said, "but it vexes me very much; it is very uncomfortable; why should you have been in my drawing-room while your mother was sent away from the door?"

"You mean I ought not to have come in to wait."

"That for one thing, certainly; but being in, you should certainly not have allowed——"

"What?" said the young man.

Lady William did not say "Nothing" again, but she stood at the window looking out with her back turned to him, and as strong an expression of discomfort and vexation in her attitude and eloquent silence as if she had used many words.

"I see," he said, "I have been very indiscreet; I have vexed you though I did not mean it. I don't make any excuse for myself, except that I thought at first you were coming back immediately. Forgive me: and I will go away, and never at any time will I do it any more."

She gave a little laugh, turning round. "No, I don't think you will do it again; but, unfortunately, that does not alter the fact that you have done it, and made me very uncomfortable. Are you going away? Then good night; you will have a pleasant walk up to the Hall."

"Not nearly so pleasant as if it had been an hour later," he said.

"Oh, that is merely an idea. You will really like it better. Mab ought to be here

to thank you for carrying her basket. Good night, Leo," Lady William said. She stepped out into the narrow passage after him to see him away; and, at the moment, in the open doorway Mab appeared with a cry of surprise.

"Oh, are you going so soon? Are you not going to stop for tea?"

"I am sent away," he said.

"By mother?"

"Yes. To make sure of amendment another time," he said ruefully, and went away with so much the air of a schoolboy under punishment, that Mab came in open-mouthed to her mother.

"Oh! what have you been doing to Mr. Leo? Oh! why have you sent him away?"

Lady William made no answer, but rang the bell, as it very seldom was rung in this small house; an unusual occurrence, which brought Patty in with a rush, still rubbing a candlestick she held in her hand.

"Patty, did you ask Mr. Swinford to come in and wait till Miss Mab and I came back?"

"Yes, my lydy," said Patty, with sharp eyes that gleamed in the light.

"And you did not ask Mrs. Swinford, when she called, to come in and wait?"

"Oh, no, my lydy," cried Patty, aggrieved.

"Why?" said her mistress solemnly.

"Oh, my lydy!" said Patty, thunderstruck.

"Yes, why? I want to know, why should Mr. Swinford wait for me and not Mrs. Swinford? I do not wish anybody to be asked to wait for me when I am out. If you were ever to do it again, I don't know what I might be obliged to say."

"Oh, my lydy," said Patty, "I thought as Mr. Swinford was a young gentleman as perhaps made it a little cheerful for Miss Mab——and I thought as the old lady wasn't a pleasure for nobody; and I thought——"

"If that is true of old ladies, why should you stay with me, Patty, who am an old lady, too, and not a pleasure to anybody——"

"Oh, my lydy!" said Patty, bursting into a torrent of tears.

"Go, you little goose, and think no more of it; but ask nobody to wait for me. Now remember! you are here to do what you are told, but never to think. Thinking is the

destruction of little maids. Ask Anne if she ever ventured to think when she was a girl like you."

"Yes, my lydy," said Patty, drying her eyes.

END OF VOL. I

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