LADY WILLIAM

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LADY WILLIAM

I

It is not necessary to make a room snug with curtains drawn and the draught shut out, in the month of April as it is in early March, so that it was some time even after the lamp was brought in before the wistful clearness in the east, and that gleam of yellow, "the daffodil sky" of the other quarter, which turns to ethereal tints of green, and has so many gradations of colour all its own, was shut out. Lady William liked to see the sky when she was in a cheerful or excited, not a sad mood. Such moods came to her as to every one by times; but she was angry and active to-night. Mab was not much used to such moments of commotion, to her mother's slightly disturbed condition, and the scolding which had made Patty cry. Scolding was very infrequent in the cottage. Now and then Lady William would launch a fiery arrow; she would throw

a distinct terrible light of displeasure upon dusty corners and silver badly cleaned. Sometimes even Mab would be brought to a sudden perception that her faults were quite visible and apparent, notwithstanding all her mother's love and indulgence. But a moment like this, when all was disturbed and broken without any apparent motive, was astonishing to the girl. It was not for some time that Mab felt even the courage to inquire: only after tea when Lady William's hasty ejaculations and movements of anger had almost died away.

"But, mother, now that we are cool," said Mab——

"Cool? I have never been anything but cool."

"Now," continued the girl, "that it is over, what was there so very bad in letting Mr. Leo come in to wait?"

"And not his mother?" said Lady William. "There would have been nothing particular, though very absurd if everybody who called had been asked in to wait. Fancy coming back to find the room crowded like a dentist's waiting-room! But to bring in one and leave out another! Though I confess," said Lady William, with an angry

flush, "that if the little goose had done so, and brought in Mrs. Swinford to find her son waiting, I should have been still more uncomfortable."

"Then you scolded her, mother, for what it was best to do?"

"Nothing of the sort; her sin was inviting a gentleman to come in and wait for us who—— Oh, it is too horrid altogether, and if Mrs. Swinford had found him——"

"Mother, what then?" cried Mab, a little alarmed.

Her limpid gaze, so full of innocent surprise, seemed to bring back all Lady William's annoyance. "You must take it for granted, Mab, that there are some things I know better than you do," she said. "By-the-bye, give me her card; let us see what message she left."

The card did not seem to afford Lady William any more satisfaction. It was a very highly-polished card, and the pencil had cut into it, and the writing was difficult to read. She put it down with a heightened colour, throwing it from her hand. "I wonder if she thinks I put any faith in her *câlineries*," she said.

"What are *câlineries*, mother?" said

Mab, taking up the card, which was inscribed as follows: "*Chère Petite*,— Much regret not to find you. Come to see me to-morrow; I have something important for your welfare to say." "*Chère Petite*," repeated Mab, "that is a *câlinerie*, I suppose. It seems queer to call you *Petite*—but I suppose she knew you when you were quite little."

"She knew me, certainly, when the title was more appropriate than it is now."

"That must be the reason; and perhaps she thought you might like it. Some ladies," said Mab, with her serious, almost childish, face, "like to be thought young."

"I don't think she can have thought I would like it, Mab," said Lady William, with a little shiver. "Close the window and draw the curtain, please. I have a sort of uncomfortable feeling of somebody looking in."

"You are uncomfortable altogether tonight, mother."

"Yes, I suppose it's my nerves; it's—that woman. I never thought I had any nerves before."

"Oh, but you have," cried Mab; "I know better than that. Nót nerves, perhaps, like Aunt Jane, but—— There *is* somebody

in the garden. Shall I go and see who it is ?"

Lady William started up and looked over Mab's shoulder. Whether she thought it might be Leo come again, or what other intruder at this untimely hour, I cannot tell. But she said, in a tone that was half relief and half annoyance: "Your Aunt Jane in person, Mab, and the girls. What can they want now ?" Her tone was a little fretful. They were in the way of wanting a great many things from her at the Rectory, and frequently her advice on one subject or another, which they did not generally take.

"It will be about their dresses for the FitzStephens' party," said Mab, to whom the ladies outside were beckoning that she should open the door to them. But Lady William shook her head.

"Run and let them in, at all events. They have not rung the bell," she said, drawing the curtains with an impatient movement. The little room looked so full that it could contain no more when the three ladies came in; but they knew all its accommodations, and settled themselves in their places at as great a distance as possible from the little bright fire. "It is such a mild night there

is no occasion for it," said Mrs. Plowden, "but you always keep up fires, Emily, later than any one."

"Do I? It's cheerful at least."

"And the window open! That's rather wasteful, don't you think? I like to do either one thing or another; to shut up the house and keep all the heat in, as one does on winter nights, or else to throw up all the windows, and get the full advantage of the air. But I don't see the good of dispersing all the heat outside, as if it could warm the garden. That would be a very good idea; but I'm afraid it would not be a success if you were to try it ever so much."

"I suppose," said Lady William, "you have come to tell me something; not to talk about the fire."

"I don't know. We came over just to see you. It's such a lovely night I thought I should like a walk. I said to Emmy, after James had gone back to his study, I think I'd like to have a little run; it's so sweet to-night, not cold at all. Let's run out and see your Aunt Emily, I said. I knew you were sure to be in."

"Oh, yes, we are always sure to be in."

"And, except ourselves, you are the only

person of whom that can be said; for the FitzStephens are always dining with the Kendals or the Kendals with the Fitz-Stephens; and Miss Grey, she goes in later to tea, not to put the table out, or she is at one of Mr. Osborne's meetings, or has some parish tea party of her own. We are never sure to find anybody but you; and it is such a thing in a little place like this to know somebody you can depend upon to be in, if you find it dull or want a little run."

"I am afraid that Mab and I can't do much to help your dulness."

"Oh, yes, you can. You can always talk nicely, Emily, on almost any subject; and I always say it is such a good thing for the girls only to hear you talk. And Mab is the most sensible little thing that ever was. I always tell the girls it's quite a treat to hear her; no nonsense, but so sensible, and taking up things so quick!"

"It is very kind of you, Jane, to have so good an opinion of my little girl."

"Oh, it is merely the truth, Emily. I have always heard the Marquis was a very sensible man, and we all know there was once a Prime Minister in the family. Of course that's a great thing to begin with. I can't

boast anything like that on my side, and I can't say I think the Plowdens are remarkable for common sense, do you? Our children have other qualities. My poor Jim complains that his father is always at him because he does not stick to his Greek, and how can you expect a young man to stick to his Greek when it is only in that interrupted broken way? James thinks he gives him his full attention. But you know what a parish is, Emily. Sometimes it's a christening, or some sick person to see, or a funeral. And then James has to tell him, 'I can't hear you, Jim, to-day.' Now, I ask you, Emily, honestly, do you think a boy can be expected to stick to his Greek like that?"

"I quite agree with you, Jane; it is very hard upon him."

"Of course it is hard; everything's hard. And he doesn't know what's the good of it, or what it's for. He cannot go into the Church, and it requires so much, all the technicalities, you know, to be a schoolmaster; and if James makes up his mind at the end to put him into an office, or to send him—which is terrible to think of," cried poor Mrs. Plowden, putting her handkerchief to her eyes—"abroad—what use would all that Greek be?"

"It is quite true," said Lady William, "and I wish we could persuade James to make up his mind. Do you know what friends Jim has in the parish; where he goes; who are his companions? Some one said something to me——"

"Oh, what did they say to you? Who spoke to you? Tell me what any one has to say about my boy."

"It was nothing, after all; it was Mr. Osborne. He said Jim went to some house where it would be better he should not go."

"Mr. Osborne!" cried the Rector's wife. "Oh, Emily, that one who belongs to Jim should listen to that man! There is a man," cried the troubled mother, "who, if he liked, might have done almost anything with Jim. Not preaching to him; that's not what I mean. But he is a young man, only five years older; a University man, a man wishing to have good influence. Where does he go to exercise this good influence, Emily? To Riverside; to the men who don't care, who laugh at him behind his back—and to get the old women to give up their glass of beer, and the little children, that know nothing, to take his blue ribbon. Oh, and

there was Jim in his way," said the poor mother, "Jim at his door, a University man, too; his Rector's son, his own kind. Did he ever try to get a good influence over Jim? to ask him of an evening, to take him for walks, to give him an interest? Never, never, never! He goes about the parish and makes the poor women promise to give up their drop of beer. What does he know about what they need, about their innocent drop of beer, him a strong young man, well fed, wanting nothing? But my Jim, that was what he wanted, a strong man of his own kind; a young man that he had no suspicion of; that didn't need to preach. That's what the boy wants, Emily; not his father, that is angry, or me that only cries, but one like himself. Is it better to gain a good influence over poor old Mrs. Lloyd than over Jim, or to hold temperance meetings when he might do a brother's part to get hold of that boy?"

"Oh, mamma, what are you saying?" said Emmy, still anxious to save appearances. "Aunt Emily will think that dear Jim——"

Florence said nothing, but sat staring into the vacant air with wide open eyes full of trouble, while Mrs. Plowden, altogether

broken down, put her head upon Lady William's shoulder and cried.

"It's mamma's nerves," said Emmy again; "she has been upset to-day. You are not to think, Aunt Emily, that anything dreadful has happened. Nothing is wrong with Jim; it is only that papa is angry with him, and mamma has got it on her nerves, and—mamma, this was not what you came to talk of, you know."

Mrs. Plowden raised her head after a minute with a piteous smile. "Thank you, Emily, you're always kind," she said; "and it's only my nerves, as Emmy says. I get agitated, and then everything looks black, as if it never would come right again. It isn't that there's anything to be frightened about, and you know what a true good heart my Jim has, and that's everything, isn't it? That's everything," the poor lady said.

"What mamma really wanted to ask you, Aunt Emily," said Emmy, "was whether you had seen Mrs. Swinford. She has been to call at the Rectory."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Plowden; "that was what we wanted, to be sure. Emily, you won't think anything more of the little fuss I've made about Mr. Osborne, will you?

You would think I meant that he intended to slight my son. You know I couldn't mean that. And he is a very good curate, and James puts great confidence in him. It's my nerves that get the better of me. But Emmy always brings me up to the mark. Yes, about Mrs. Swinford, that was it ; did she come here, too ? "

" I believe so ; but before we came in. She left a card with a message——"

" My dear Emily, I don't think Mrs. Swinford is a very nice woman," said Mrs. Plowden solemnly.

" Don't you ? " said Lady William, with a faint smile.

" You see, girls," said the Rector's wife, " your aunt will never say anything. Perhaps it is prudent, but it's a little confusing. One doesn't know what to say."

" If you think you will hurt my feelings, Jane, by speaking plainly, don't let that weigh upon your mind. I know very well what Mrs. Swinford is, and I don't care to make myself her champion."

" I don't think she's a nice woman," repeated the Rector's wife ; " I don't think she's a good woman. She looks to me—notwithstanding that she professes to be so

fond of you, and Emily this and Emily that —as if she would like to do you a bad turn."

Lady William took this alarming statement quite calmly. "Indeed, I should not be surprised," she said, "but I don't think it is in her power."

"We must try and make sure that it is not in her power. Don't you think she could perhaps do you harm with the family? It occurred to me, and you will wonder to hear that it occurred to James. He said to me, 'If that woman can injure Emily she will.' Dear Emily, you have never been such very good friends with the family, and they have never seen Mab. You know I've always wanted you to do something. If you were to put yourself forward a little——"

"You are very kind, Jane, and James too. I don't think the family can do us much harm; we have what they chose to give us, and they will not give us anything more, nor do I wish it. I have my pride, too."

"But their countenance, Emily!"

"Their countenance!" cried Lady William, rising to her feet with a quick start of indignation. "To me! I want none of their countenance; I can't help bearing

their name, and they cannot take it from me."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, there can be no question of that! They can't take away your rank, nor Mrs. Swinford either, whatever she may do. My conviction," said Mrs. Plowden, nodding her head, "is that she can't bear the thought of your rank. If you should meet anywhere *out*, and you were to pass before her, Emily—that's the thought that she can't bear."

A gleam of light passed over Lady William's face. "That would be a little compensation," she said, half to herself. "But don't put such hopes in my head," she added laughing; "she and I will never meet *out*, alas!"

"If it was only for that I should like to give a dinner party at the Rectory and ask her, Emily—just to show her. Oh, I should like that! It might look strange, James giving his arm to his own sister, but I should never mind how it looked. And it would be a kind of duty, by way of welcoming them back. But you know, Emily, though Mary Jane is an excellent parlour-maid, she is not equal to a formal party. We should require to have a butler, or some one who would look

like a butler. And the dinner-service is very shabby and a great many pieces broken. I am sure I would do it with the greatest pleasure, and, indeed, would think it a duty; but only——"

"No, my kindest Jane, you will do nothing of the sort for me. As for Mrs. Swinford, she will go out to no parties in the village. Don't imagine for a moment that I want to be avenged upon her in that very small way."

"Avenged! I did not think of it in that light. And do you know James was very cool to her to-day, scarcely civil. I thought she had been very nice to you in the old times."

"Don't let us talk of the Swinfords for ever," said Lady William, "we have had enough of them for one day. Let me know what the girls are going to wear at the Fitz-Stephens', and who is to be there——"

This new subject, notwithstanding that Mrs. Plowden had her head full of graver matters, was too interesting to be dropped quickly, and there ensued a long conversation, which Lady William, having set it going, left to be carried on by the others. Mrs. Plowden had naturally a great deal to

say, and Emmy, whose heart was full of the consciousness that any social occasion where she could see and be seen was more important now in her life than it had ever been before, lent her attention with great earnestness to her mother's view, to Mab's remarks, and to the occasional word with which Lady William kept up the talk. Only Florence took no part in it. She had taken up a book, and so appeared to have her attention fixed ; I don't know if she held it upside down, but I am very sure that she did not read a page. Her mind was occupied with affairs of her own.

II

THE dining-room at the Hall was gloomy but grand. The walls dark, save where they were relieved by scrolls of gilding and ornamental panels, in which were set some full-length portraits of doubtful merit, and more than doubtful antiquity. It was divided, like the drawing-room, by pillars, not of marble, though they assumed that virtue, leaving a darker strait at each end, intended, no doubt, to throw up the brilliancy of the larger central room, in which stood the dinner-table with all its lights. And this might have been the case had there been a large and brilliant party round the table, and abundance of light, with reflections of silver and crystal, as probably the builder of the house intended should be the case. But now the Swinfords, mother and son, alone at a round table of no great size, with a shaded lamp

suspended over it, furnished little more than an oasis in the great desert of darkness. There was, indeed, a large fire blazing, against which Mrs. Swinford sat, shivering from time to time, notwithstanding the mild softness of the April night. And the table was adorned with a great bouquet of flowers, dazzling white azaleas, and the other brilliant children of the spring who come in such a triumph over the footsteps of winter. Mrs. Swinford was dressed, as she always was, elaborately, and like a picture, in dark velvet, just showing a little colour here and there where the light caught it—and a great deal of lace. She had a lace scarf fastened over her head, fantastically indeed, and scarcely enough to have been allowed by Mrs. Plowden to pass muster as a cap, but still softening the age of the face, and the tower of the abundant dark hair piled unnaturally upon her head. She might have been a dethroned and indignant queen. She, and the flowers, and Leo's more youthful face, gave a centre to the dark solemnity around, through which the servants moved noiseless.

"You have been in the village," he said; "I hear, making calls." But this

was not till the lengthened and elaborate dinner, of which both ate fastidiously, with many criticisms and remarks little complimentary to a very ambitious and highly-paid cook—was done.

"I am glad you take so much interest in my movements, Leo, as to know."

"Of course I know. I saw the carriage for one thing; and besides——"

"You, I suppose, were paying visits, too?"

"Not much," he said, with an embarrassed smile. "I saw little Miss Grey about some of our schemes; but you don't give Miss Grey the light of your countenance."

"I have never noticed any but the principal people — who, in case of an election or any public matter, might be useful."

"I don't see what an election would be to us."

"Nor I, Leo. But it is part of our hereditary policy to keep the matter open, should you or any one of the family be of a different opinion."

"My dear mother," he said, with a laugh, "don't you think this hereditary policy is

overdone a little? I am afraid I thought myself a person of much greater importance than I prove to be."

"I don't admit it," she said; "but is that why you are taking so much trouble for the *canaille*?"

"No," said the young man, growing red. "I take trouble for the *canaille*, as you call them—our poor neighbours, Miss Grey says—because I thought I was somehow responsible for them."

"Responsible!"

"I should have been," he said firmly, "had I been their *seigneur*; which I suppose in my folly was something like what I thought: now that I know they are only our poor neighbours——"

"Well: you think you may at least get the benefit in popularity," she said, with a laugh.

"My dear mother, as we shall never think alike on these points, don't you think we had better choose another subject?"

"The subject of my calls?" said Mrs. Swinford. "But how, Leo, about your own? You find a wonderful attraction in the village, I understand."

"You know, I think, pretty well what

attraction I find in the village," he said coldly; "I have made no secret of my doings there."

"Perhaps not; but you have dwelt little upon a certain cottage. One knows how a man can be exceedingly frank in order to conceal."

"There is no certain cottage," he said, with indignation. "If you mean Lady William's, I certainly go there with pleasure, and often, and will continue to do so. In such a matter I may surely be allowed to judge for myself."

"Why do you call her by that ridiculous name? It makes me laugh—if it didn't make me furious!"

"What has she done to you?" said Leo. "I thought you were fond of her. It has always been represented so to me. What has she done, a woman not very powerful or prosperous certainly, not coming in your way, to make you hate her so?"

"Not coming in my way!—But what do you know of my history or my feelings? She is already again coming in my way—with you."

"That is nonsense, mother. No, I know little of your history, perhaps, except what

you have told me; and as you say, excessive frankness——"

"You forget, I think, Leo, that you are speaking to your mother?"

"I never wish to do so," he said. "Believe me, mother, there is nothing I desire so much as to make you feel my anxiety, my strong desire, to do what will please you——"

"By bringing me to this miserable country, for example, in the middle of winter," she cried.

Leo sprang to his feet, and began to pace about the room. "It is my country," he said. "If I have duties anywhere, they must be here. But I have never wished to bind you. Why, if you hate England so, should you stay here? We have always been together; but sooner than you should suffer, leave me, mother. I will bear my loneliness as best I can."

"Your loneliness! You would not be long lonely. You would find plenty to cheer you; whereas I am in a different position. Nay: come back with me. You have seen exactly how things are. If you want to be charitable, nothing is more easy. James Plowden, or if you prefer it, his sister," she

paused, with a harsh laugh, "will do everything you want in that way. Come back to the life we know; come back to the surroundings you are accustomed to. You—you can't, any more than I, be happy here. Where are your *courses*, your clubs, your theatres? There is nothing, nothing to amuse you. Leo, you know you would be more amused, you would be more happy, as well as I."

"But this," he said, "is my proper sphere."

"*Grand seigneur* again," she cried, with a laugh; "who takes up that view now? Your great-grandfather bought this estate; it is then four generations in the family. And you think that feudal! Ah! be kind to the *canaille* if you will; they will cheat you and hate you, but never mind. Leo, if you keep me here, and I am tempted beyond my powers, and do harm—harm, do you hear?—murder even—the guilt will not be on me, but you!"

"Mother, do you think there is any use in scaring yourself by such big words? Murder! Whom will you kill, for example? You who faint if you prick yourself and the blood runs! I am not afraid of you."

"There are more ways of murder than one. I will take no life."

"No, I don't suppose so," he said, with a laugh; "but if you think you will die of *ennui*, which, I allow, is a danger, my dear mother, your *appartement* is still open. I will make every arrangement. Pardon me if I feel it is my duty to live in my own house; but why should that affect you?"

"If I said, Leo, that I could not live without you, that you are my only child——"

"Mother," he said, "we both understand perfectly what that means. When I was a child you were very fond of me. I was part of your *ensemble*. You gave me everything I wanted. Now, it is not your fault nor mine that I am a man of thirty-five, not even in my first youth. If I am ever to be good for anything, I have no time to lose; but you have arrived at an age——"

"Ah!" she said, "I have arrived at an age when I am no longer good for anything, neither the pleasures nor the duties. It is fit that it should be you who say that to me."

"I say that you have arrived at an age when everything should be made easy to you, and pleasant, mother; and that you

should live, without consideration of others, as suits you best."

"And you?" she said with a smile; "as suits you best? Is not that what you mean?"

"It was not what I meant; but perhaps it is true," he said.

Then there was a silence, during which Leo stood by the high mantelpiece, leaning upon it, looking down upon the bright blaze of the fire, yet furtively watching his mother's face.

"I know who has done all this," she said rapidly and very low, as if speaking to herself. "I know who has done it. It was a caprice—a fancy that would have lasted a moment; a trick of his father's blood. But I know who has done it—who has stamped it in. I know—I know! for her own advantage as before: to put me under her foot as before. But let her take care, let her take care!" she cried, suddenly raising her voice, "*J'ai des griffes, moi!*"

"Mother, for heaven's sake what do you mean? Who is to take care?"

"A tigress, that's what men call a woman in respect to her children, Leo. I said that a tigress has claws, that was all."

"There is no question, surely," he said,

looking at her, at her soft lace, her warm velvet, her carefully-dressed hair, her air of luxury and delicacy, " of claws or anything of the kind here."

She burst out into a laugh, and rose, turning her face to the fire.

" No; at the worst of little pins to prick, little pins that don't draw blood, as you say, but still make a wound. Now, Leo, though we quarrel, you will not refuse to give me your arm upstairs?"

The drawing-room was also illuminated by a blazing fire, and groups of candles placed about which made it very bright, unlike the gloom of the room below; bright, yet with all manner of soft shades and contrivances to temper the light. It was full of flowers and sweetness, full of luxury. Mrs. Swinford paused and looked round with a satirical smile. "Charming!" she said; "and a little more or less feudal, *grand seigneur*, as we have been saying, with all that is novel and delightful added; but vacant, Leo. Were we in Paris, one would come, and then another and another, to talk, or chat round the fire; to bring the news, to discuss everything, spiritual, gay. These words have no meaning here."

"I fully feel it for you, mother. It is very dull; no one worth your trouble to talk to. I understand perfectly. But why not, then, fill the house?"

"For what end? There is not even shooting to tempt them at this time of the year. Nothing to amuse. It is not the time. In the autumn, perhaps, if I survive it so long——"

"Then there is London," said Leo; "it is not exactly a village, though I believe it is a happy slang to call it so. Let us go there."

"London!" Mrs. Swinford contracted her brows. "I have forgotten all my friends, or they have forgotten me. I don't go to Court——"

"Why not, mother?"

She looked at him with a gleam of fury in her eyes, and a sort of wild laugh, which was the most unlike mirth of anything Leo had ever heard. "Perhaps," she said, "Emily Plowden would present me once again—whitewashed, after all these years."

"What do you mean by whitewashed, mother?" There was something then in the look with which he faced her, insisting, with a flush on his face, and a look of determination for which she was not prepared.

"What do I mean by whitewashed? I mean"——she paused a little, looking at him with a malicious devil in her eye, as if undecided what she should say. But his look subdued her, though it was a strange thing for any look of Leo to do. It was a look of alarm yet dismay, excited and almost fierce, yet struck with sudden fear. Her eyes sank before his.

"I don't know why you should look at me so. I mean that I am forgotten—as well may be, in all these years."

She had placed herself in the deep chair covered with brocade, which had been carefully placed for her at the exact angle from the fire and the lights which she liked. The table beside it was covered with the evening papers; the French papers, arrived by the evening post; one or two yellow novels, an English book, and all the little paraphernalia which ladies of her period affect. She sat there, lying back in her luxurious chair, looking at her son with defiance in her eyes; defiance, and yet a certain uneasiness underneath. And he looked at her, uneasily too, with a doubt, yet no wish to question her further. She broke this silence by a sudden shrill

burst of laughter, clapping her delicate hands together.

"Could one give a greater pleasure to one's *protégée* of old?—to the little girl of whom one has made a lady? A lady of rank, if you please, according to all the clowns. Emily shall take me; she shall patronise me; she shall be my condescending superior. Mrs. Swinford, on her return to England, by Lady William—bah! the jest is too good."

Her laugh rang out shrill into the silent space about them. Leo, for his part, stood before her as grave as a judge. "I don't see anything so wonderful about it," he said.

"What, not that Emily! Emily, the country girl, not so good as your governess, not much better than my maid! Your governess? Why, for the moment, that was Artémise."

"Mother, I must warn you that you are speaking of a lady for whom not only I, but every one here has the most exalted esteem."

"Ah!" she cried, still laughing, "so Artémise tells me. The most exalted! She has thrown dust in everybody's eyes."

"And your Artémise — I give you warning I doubt that woman."

"Ah! perhaps you will forbid her the house."

"You know very well that the house is free to all you please to see here. For myself I shall certainly let her know that her presence is not agreeable to me."

"Well, Leo," said his mother, "that will do for a token between us. When you turn my friend, my near relation, the only creature whom I care for here, to the door—I shall understand that I have notice to quit, and that you want no more with me."

"What folly!" he cried, "when you know I would as soon try to interfere with the constitution of the earth as to lift a finger against any of your friends."

"Or consort with any of my enemies, Leo."

"Certainly, no, if I knew who they were; but I know of none here at least."

She laughed again; then, turning to her table, took up the *Figaro* which lay there. "Enough, enough," she said. "Enough, Leo; a quarrel is a fearful joy; but one wearies even of that at the last."

Leo stood for a time in the same attitude, while she opened her paper and began to read. Then he made a turn or two round the room, stopping here and there

to look at a picture, though he neither saw nor cared what it was. Finally, when this wandering had lasted for, perhaps, five minutes without any sign on the part of his mother, he went quietly out of the room and downstairs.

She did not move a finger until the sound of his steps had died away; then she put down the paper, and listened for the closing of his door. It came at last with a dull echo going through the silent house. That sound brought many memories to the mind of the lady left alone in the great room, which would have held a crowd. She remembered the times without number when his father had retired so, and gave vent to a low laugh of scorn. And then she remembered other things, and her face grew grave. The paper fell rustling at her feet. She cast a look round her upon the room with its flowers, its lights, its cosy atmosphere, which was a triumph of skill and care, just so warm, and no more. The comfort and the luxury were perfect; there was nothing that could be done to increase the beauty, the ease, the grace, and completeness of all about her; and there she sat like a queen—alone.

III

Lady William was still a little disturbed next morning, her usual composure gone, her countenance clouded. She had not forgiven little Patty, who in consequence went about her work watering with tears, instead of damp tea-leaves as usual, the carpet in the drawing-room which it was her business to sweep. Patty entertained the idea which, alas! is so little general among servant-girls, that her mistress was an angel, or something even more than that; for angels to Patty's consciousness were generally little boys with wings and without any clothes, to whom it would have been profane to compare a lady. It may be imagined how hollow the world was, and how little satisfactory the routine of work when Lady William frowned; everything went badly with Patty. She broke a china bowl and received from Miss

Mab—Miss Mab always so *bon camarade*, if Patty had known the qualification—a very sharp and decided scolding, not to say that Anne—old Anne, whom Patty considered almost too old to live, and whose work she was conscious of doing in great part—fell upon her and nagged till the poor girl nearly ran away. Lady William was not busy this lovely spring morning which ought to have put new heart into everything. She said very little even to Mab. She was evidently thinking of something with which even Mab had but little to do. But when the girl talked of her own afternoon's occupation, her mother interposed quickly. "I think you had better come up with me to the Hall, Mab."

"Then you are going, mother? in obedience to a call like that——"

"In obedience to nothing; because I hate it, and want to get it over."

"Do you hate Mrs. Swinford, mother?"

"Oh, I hope not," said Lady William, the tears starting to her eyes; "don't ask me such questions. I hope not: I don't want to hate any one. I would rather not think of her. But I hate going into a house

that has so many memories—into a house where I have known so much——"

"It was there you met my father," said Mab.

"Yes;" the monosyllable dropped from Lady William's closed lips as if dropped out against her will.

"But that ought not to be altogether a painful recollection, mother." Mab had never heard anything of her father who was so long dead; there was no portrait of him that she had ever seen. Her idea of him was not precisely a happy one. Other people talked of the husbands they had lost, especially the poor women who liked to enlarge upon the good or bad qualities of the departed—but Mab knew nothing of her father, whether he had been bad or good. And she had a great curiosity, if no more, to know something of him. It was seldom, very seldom, that an opportunity occurred even for a question.

"I cannot enter into the past," said Lady William; "there is a great deal that is very painful in it. I would rather not tell you the story, Mab. It would do you no good, nor any one. I had forgotten a great deal till this lady appeared again. So far as I

can see now, she is determined that I shall no longer forget."

"Is she your enemy, mother?"

"I don't believe in enemies, it is too melodramatic; and probably she means no harm; only she likes to stir up things which I prefer to forget. Do you understand the difference? Perhaps it keeps up her interest, but to me it spoils everything. Death is very dreadful to you, Mab; but it's very merciful, too. It makes you forget many things, when they are not forcibly brought back to your mind."

Mab eyed her mother very curiously with a hundred questions on her lips: but Lady William's face was not encouraging, and with a sigh the girl gave up her intended inquiry. She added, after some time: "The only thing, mother, is that Mrs. Swinford may want to speak to you of things that you don't wish me to know."

"That is very possible, Mab: and it is for that I want you to go with me, to protect me. She would never bring up old stories which would be painful, before you."

"Mother," said Mab, and then paused.

"What is it?"

"I want to know—if I am perhaps at the

mercy of a stranger like Mrs. Swinford to tell me things that would be painful—about my father—whether it would not be better for you, mother, who would do it in love and quietly, to tell me yourself and put me beyond her power?"

"Mab, you are very sensible, very reasonable."

"I don't know if I'm that: but it seems to me the better way."

Lady William began to speak: then hesitated, became husky, and paused a moment to steady her voice. "There is nothing to tell about your father, Mab, that could affect you; nothing that would hurt his name in the world; only private matters between him and me, in which unfortunately Mrs. Swinford was mixed up. There is no such thing," she went on after a pause, with a sort of painful smile, "as trouble—without faults on both sides. I was to blame as much as any one else. You would not think the better of either of your parents if you were to be told all that there is to tell. Will you take my word for that? and that there is nothing which it is at all necessary for you to hear?"

"Certainly, I will take your word, mother.

But I don't believe you were so much wrong. You are hasty sometimes, but you never keep on or nag. And sometimes you are so patient; if there were quarrels I know it was not your fault."

The girl came to her mother's side and gave her a kiss, putting down her soft young cheek upon Lady William's, which was as soft, though no longer young. The mother took the kiss with a smile. It was not wholly a smile of pleasure at Mab's approval and vindication of her—innocent Mab that knew of nothing but a quarrel, a difference of opinion, a nagging. Mab thought it was a great pity, that perhaps her father had troubles of temper which she was conscious herself of possessing, and that no doubt Mrs. Swinford had interfered and made things worse. It brought her father even a little nearer to her to learn that he had been cross. Poor father! he had been long forgiven and his tempers forgotten, when they were not thrust back upon the memory: and poor mother, who perhaps blamed herself more than was just, and thought now how often she might have answered with a soft word! Lady William smiled, reading in the child's mind as in a book, so easy was that young

interpretation, so desirable, so strange to the woman who knew all.

The afternoon was radiant: sky and air had been washed clean, as Mab said, by frequent showers, and there did not seem an atom of impurity, not even a cloudlet that was not white and shining, in the whole expanse of atmosphere. Lady William was grave, but had recovered her composure, and Mab was gay with an unusual freshness, ready to gambol about the path like the large loose-limbed puppy from the lodge who was fond of taking walks with visitors, and who came up and offered himself as guide and companion as soon as the two ladies had entered the gate. Mab was acquainted with the puppy's family for several generations, and knew his mother upon intimate terms, so that there was no need of ceremony. He and she had gone up the avenue to the point at which the house becomes visible, rising high above the little lake and among the trees, when Lady William called her daughter back. "You have had enough of the puppy," she said; "now you must turn into a young lady, Mab."

"It is not half so amusing, mother; but, oh, look at the violets, how thick they are under the trees!"

"About the ashen roots the violets blow," said Lady William.

"I never knew any one have so many bits of poetry ready for all occasions," said Mab admiringly. "It's a pity they're only dog-violets, and not sweet at all; but they are pretty like that all the same."

"Why, I wonder, should one speak of dog-violets, and dog-roses, and dog-daisies?" said Lady William. "I suppose it is in contempt of things that grow wild."

"A dog is the wisest thing that lives," said Mab; "there's no contempt in such a name. Puppy! puppy! where are you going? I must run after him, mother, and keep him from frightening those ducks."

"There's contempt, if you please! The famous Swinford wild fowl!"

"Oh, I can't bear them, the stupid things. Puppy! puppy! oh, don't be a fool, they are not worth your while."

"Nor yours either, puppy mine. You will be as red as a peony next, and what will Mrs. Swinford say?"

"I hate Mrs. Swinford," said Mab; but she walked soberly the rest of the way. Mrs. Swinford was in the same room and chair as she had occupied on the previous

night: with flowers piled in the jardinières, on the tables, everywhere; a wood fire blazing very bright, but more bright than warm, and the mistress of the house arrayed, as always, in dark velvet, with a crimson tone in the lights, but without the lace which had softened at once her features and her age. Her hair, in which there was not a thread of white, was dressed high on her head; her back was, as usual, to the light.

"Oh, you have brought your little girl," she said, in a tone almost of displeasure. "You are very perverse and contradictory, my dear, as you always were. I had something to say to you, alone."

"Oh, as for that," said Mab, angry, "I can go away."

Her mother gave her a restraining look. "There is so little," she said, "in my life that requires to be talked about *en tête-à-tête*, and Mab goes wherever I go."

"That is to say, you bring her with you as young women sometimes bring their babies, in defence." Mrs. Swinford laughed, and, holding out her hand, added, "Come here and let me see you, little girl."

"I am not a little girl," said Mab, still angry; but another glance from her mother

to the lady of the house restored that reasonableness in which the girl was so strong. "And I am not much to look at," she added steadily, "but, as it does not much matter, here I am."

Mrs. Swinford took her by the hand, and, drawing her forward, looked at her closely. Then she dropped the girl's hand and laughed. "She proves her parentage, at least," she said; "no doubt upon that subject; she is a Pakenham all over. And she is like them, Emily, in temper and intellect, too."

Mab, unfortunately, did not understand the whole weight of the insinuation in this remark, and she did not see her mother's face behind her. She answered quickly for herself. "I have not a very good temper, Mrs. Swinford. When people say nasty things to me, I can be nasty too."

"So I presume," said the lady of the house.

"Or to my mother," said Mab; "she is too patient and too much a lady; but I'm not."

"Mab!" said her mother's warning voice behind.

"It is that I think this lady wants to

provoke me," said Mab, "and I don't see——"

"My dear, you will show your superiority best by not suffering yourself to be provoked."

Mab went off to one of the jardinières with a little toss of her head, and it was at this moment that Leo came in, a little hurried and not without agitation. He came in saying quickly, "I have just heard that you had visitors, mother."

"Leo," said Mrs. Swinford, "I have something to say to Emily here. I did not expect her to bring her daughter, and I did not desire my son's company. You can go and show the young lady the pictures; it is a young man's business; and you ought to thank me for giving you the opportunity. Now, Emily, *à nous deux.*"

"I was not aware," said Lady William, pale but steadfast, "that what you wanted to say to me was of particular importance."

"You thought I only sent for you to say I love you," said Mrs. Swinford. "Well, you knew that already; but I had something much more serious to say. And I am glad, after all, you brought your little girl, Emily; for she is the strongest argument I can

bring forward to make you do what I want you to do."

"And what is that?" said Lady William. "I must warn you that I am not very open to advice."

"As if I did not know you were not open to advice! except, my dear, you will recollect, when you wished to take a certain course which was advised."

"Did I wish to take it?" said Lady William; "that is what has never been clear."

"Oh, did you wish it?" cried Mrs. Swinford, with a laugh. "However, that is old ground; but if I have any responsibility for that first step, Emily, I have the more right to speak now. For that child's sake you must make overtures to the family. Whatever they may do or say, it is for you to put your pride in your pocket, and make friends with them, if they like it or not. Your claims must be fully established."

"My claims?" said Lady William; "there has never been any question made of my claims."

"Probably not, so long as you live; but look at that child. You must make everything certain for her; I must press it upon

you with all my might, Emily. Life is uncertain, and you have nothing of your own."

"Not much, that is true."

"And what would she have to depend upon if you died? You don't even know what questions might arise. They might ask her what her proofs were, what evidence she had."

"Of what?" said Lady William, wondering. "What evidence does Mab require to prove that she is my daughter? But all the parish could prove that, with the Rector at their head."

"Oh, so far as that goes; but it does not suffice to be proved to be her mother's daughter when the money is on the father's side."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Swinford?" Lady William had grown red and a little angry. She fixed her eyes upon her adviser. "There is something in what you say that I do not understand."

"Nevertheless it is very true," said Mrs. Swinford; "the money is, you know, on the father's side, and the father's family have a right to know everything about it. It should be put quite out of their power to say afterwards that they never had any proof."

"Of what? You mean something that has not been suggested to me before. I have been told I ought to make overtures; but what is this? Please to tell me," she said, almost sharply, "what you mean."

"You must surely have thought of it yourself. Here you are, a widow, not very young, with an only child. They call you Lady William, and you enjoy the rank. Oh, you need not wave your hand as if to say no; I know you better than you know yourself; you enjoy your rank."

"For the sake of argument it may be allowed that I enjoy my rank, such as it is."

"Well, you do, I know, whether you choose to allow it or refuse. Emily Plowden, it is your first business to prove your claim to it, and your child's to her name."

"I am not Emily Plowden," said Lady William; "you mistake that, to begin with; and I can only repeat that my claim, which I have never required to prove, has been doubted by no one, nor my child's right. Is it for pure insult you say this? My movements have always been open as the day."

"What! when you left this house in the dark, in the middle of the night! I have

never questioned your claims till now. My motive is not to insult you, but to help you. Where were you married, Emily Plowden? Who married you? Have you your certificates all in order? You disappeared, and then you came back, and I never asked, but took it all for granted. It is only when I see your little girl that I begin to ask myself, Emily, have you got your papers, whatever they may be? Emily Plowden, are you sure that you have any right to another name?"

IV

In Miss Grey's drawing-room, which was as small as Miss Grey herself, there were three persons assembled. Miss Grey, seated at the writing-table—much too large for the place, like the rest of the furniture; Florence Plowden on the big "Chesterfield" sofa; and a large and tall individual standing in the middle of the floor. He was large in comparison with the ladies, and with the limited space in which he stood. But otherwise, though tall, he was a spare man; his length of limb and scantness of flesh made particularly apparent by his long clerical coat. Needless to say that he was the curate, and that it was parish business that formed the staple of the conversation. Florence had come in with her district visitor's book; and other books of a similar description were on the table. They were talking in that curious jargon of business

and gossip which makes up the talk of the workers in a parish or ecclesiastical organisation of any kind.

"In whose district is Mead Lane?" said Mr. Osborne. "A man came to me last night from No. 3, to ask me to go and see his wife. She had been in bed for about six weeks—very ill now. There is a baby, of course, and I don't know how many children; man occasionally out of work—though not now. Everything in disorder, as you may imagine. Nobody had called to see them for weeks. A lady had come once or twice before the woman fell ill; never since."

He made this report very drily, in staccato sentences, as if he were abridging from a book.

Miss Grey turned round, twisting on her chair to give Florence a look. "I knew it would be so," she said; "they are a couple of old maids wrapped up in themselves. She says: 'Do you think you should go out, my dear, such a cold day?' and he says: 'The parish can surely wait; but you mustn't go out, with your delicate throat, in the rain.'"

"This is very interesting as a social

sketch," said the curate, "but it does not answer my question."

Florence was far from being in high spirits, but her native genius was too much for her. She turned upon him with a little mincing air, and deprecatory friction of her hands. "Oh, don't you really think so, Mr. Osborne?" she said.

He laughed, though with a certain look of disapproval, as if amused against his will. "I see," he said. "Mrs. Kendal; what is to be done with her? If she will not do what she undertakes, some one else must be got to do it."

At which both Miss Grey and Florence shook their heads. "It would be such a slap in the face," said the little lady of the house. "They are good people in their way, and liberal enough. We must just manage it a little. Florence and I will go and see this poor woman, and if Mrs. Kendal hears of it we can say—— Oh, some excuse will be found easily enough."

"Excuse! When she has let the woman die nearly——"

"A miss is as good as a mile. I'll go over at once, and send in the nurse if she wants it. What did you say was the name?

Brownjohn! Oh," said Miss Grey, with a sudden diminution of energy, "I'm afraid, Florry, we know the illnesses of Mrs. Brownjohn. She has a great many, and whatever district she is in, the visitor always neglects her. We know her case very well."

"The woman is very ill now, and the house in a dreadful state; and the man, of course, as if things were not bad enough, taking refuge in the public-house."

"Ah, that I can understand——"

"The filthy place, Miss Grey, or the public-house?" the curate said, with a little severity.

"Oh, both, both! You must be a little human. The public-house is the natural consequence of a crowded little room, and no comfort—even without the dirt."

"But surely you don't think that ought to be so? Surely you don't suppose that it isn't the man's duty to rectify things instead of making them worse? If the wife's unable to do her part, instead of abandoning her brutally, and letting everything go to destruction, oughtn't he to stand in, to do what he can, to make life possible? That's how I read a man's duty, at least."

"Oh, my dear Mr. Osborne," said little

Miss Grey, "it's a man's duty to be a good Christian and a perfect man. And so it is everybody's duty; we all acknowledge that."

Mr. Osborne snorted slightly, with the impatience of a fiery horse suddenly pulled up. "I hope I demand less than perfection, though I know that I ought not to be content with less," he said. "But in the meantime," he added, pausing a minute to expel that hot breath of impatience, "I don't suppose you will think it right because of Mrs. Kendal's feelings, or even her own imperfections, that this poor creature should be left to die?"

Miss Grey and Florry exchanged glances behind the curate's back, with a slight shaking of heads. Oh, these arbitrary young men, wanting everything their own way, and thinking you have no feeling if you don't go so far as they do! This was the sentiment in the older lady's mind; but Florence was naturally more fierce.

"We are not in the habit of leaving poor people to die—when there is any truth in it," she said.

He gave her a look half fierce, half tender, full of the natural animosity of a man checked in his certainties of opinion, yet

with a longing that she at least should understand and know what he meant.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Grey, "I'll go; and have a little order put in the place, at least. That little girl—the eldest, Florry, don't you remember?—who was sent to the seaside after her fever, she ought to be good for something now."

"There is a little girl," said the curate.

Miss Grey turned round upon him with a laugh that made him furious. "As if we didn't know!" she said. Then, turning to Florence again, "You might go in, as you pass, my dear, to Mrs. Gould, and see if the nurse is engaged. Tell her, if she can, to run round to Mead Lane about two o'clock. She'll probably find me there, and if it is anything really serious we'll get the doctor to see her. Come now, let's see if there is anything else we want to consult Mr. Osborne about."

"I want to ask you, at least," he said, "if you will help me with my meeting, to give them an evening's entertainment. I recognise," with a little severity, "as well as you do, that they must be amused as well as looked after."

"Well," said Miss Grey, "if it's children

I am quite ready to play any number of games with them. But I'm not a great one for providing amusement, Mr. Osborne. In the first place I can't sing to them, or dance to them, or play the fiddle; in the next, I think they like their own amusements best."

"The public-house, Miss Grey?"

The little lady had tears in her eyes. "I am not in favour of the public-house, God knows—but I am not so sure that your meetings will do away with that. It's just as likely to make them thirsty coming out at nine, after you've sung to them and fiddled to them, and seeing the red light in the window that looks so cheerful to them. But never mind me—Florry and Emmy will sing, and the London young ladies in the new villa will play the piano, and you can get a quartette of fiddles, you know, quite easily from Winwich. And Jim — Jim might recite; he used to be very good at it."

"Oh—Mr. Plowden?" said the curate, with a slight hesitation.

"Jim I mean: he used to read very well when he was a boy."

"I asked Lady William," Mr. Osborne said hurriedly, as if to change the subject, "but she said like you, Miss Grey, that she

neither sang nor—I am not aware I suggested that any one should dance."

"They would like that! but the thing is not so much what they would like to see, but what all the ladies and gentlemen would like to do. And by-the-bye there is that dark-eyed woman at the school—whom I have a strong feeling I have seen before—and who looks no more like a schoolmistress than—any one does. I feel quite sure she could act or recite or something—or perhaps sing. I would ask her if I were you."

"I am unfortunate in not being of your opinion, Miss Grey; I should not think of asking that person to help in any case."

"Oh, you're too particular," Miss Grey said.

And then Florence got up to go.

"The old Lloyds," she said, "want to have a week of their pension in advance—may I say you will give it to them, Miss Grey?"

"Oh dear, don't say anything of the kind; if they get a week in advance how are they to live the next week when they have none?"

"I said so—but then she cried, poor old body, and said they were worse off now than

before—for if they wanted something very bad out of the usual way, some kind person used to give it to them—whereas now when they have a regular pension they have to stick to it, and nobody minds."

"There's a sermon," cried Miss Grey, "on the uses of beneficence in a small parish. You have only to tell Mr. Swinford, Florry, and he'll give them the advance and the week's money too, and next time they'll want a fortnight's advance—it's what I've always said. He's a nice young fellow and a warm heart, but to sow money about is no good."

"You said yourself, Miss Grey, that so much a week——"

"Oh, yes, I said it myself—I'd like to give them the advance and the week's money too, just as well as Mr. Swinford does—though Mr. Osborne thinks on the other hand that I am ready, because I've little faith in her, to leave a poor creature to die. Oh, don't say anything—I know of course you didn't exactly mean that. Are you going too? Good-bye; I'll get my bonnet and I'll be in Mead Lane before you've got to the Rectory gate."

It did not appear, however, that there was any intention in the mind of these two

young people to take the road which led to the Rectory gate. There was a momentary pause when they got outside, and Florence hurriedly, in view of the fact that the curate's way to his lodging did lie in that direction, held out her hand to him. "Good morning, I am going up to Mrs. Gould's to see about the nurse," she said, somewhat breathless and eager to escape.

"I am going that way, too," said the young man, but not without a blush. Curates are, after all, like other men, and do not hesitate to change their route and to assert that they always meant to go that way; but there is so much consistency in the young Anglican that he blushes when he announces that innocent fallacy. He was going that way: where, then, was he going to? The part of the parish in which Mrs. Gould lived was not in the curate's district, and he could not surely have any impertinent intention of interfering with what was in the Rector's hands? These ideas flashed through the mind of Florence, but naturally she did not put them into words. She was very angry with Mr. Osborne, full of indignation, and yet she did not wish him to turn back and leave her at Miss Grey's door. The blush

which had surprised him as he told that fib reflected itself on her countenance, but in both their hearts there was a thrill of pleasure as they turned thus into the wrong way—the way that Florry had chosen to elude him, without in the least wanting to go to Mrs. Gould's (for she knew all the time where the parish nurse was); the way that he falsely asserted to be his, though he knew it was nothing of the kind. It was a guilty pleasure, which neither of them would have owned to, but yet there was not much guilt in it after all.

"Miss Grey is a very good woman," said the curate, "and excellent for the parish—but she has very old-fashioned ways of looking at things."

"I don't see that," said Florence lightly, "at all."

"You would, I am sure," said Mr. Osborne, "if you would allow yourself to take a larger view. You won't, I am afraid, adopt my standing-point, for you think that I am opposed to her and that I don't appreciate her."

"You can't of course know her as we do," said Florence, "for all our lives she has been an example before our eyes."

"That is again entirely the individual

view of the question," said the curate gently, "and in that I grant you—but don't you think we might take a more extended range when the question is a public one? I don't in the least object to that, far from it. I know there is nothing so good as the way of working by individualities, of getting hold of Tom, and Will, and Peter, one by one, the door-to-door system, as I may call it; but when you have a great public evil like that of intemperance, don't you think, Miss Florence, it is well, while not leaving the other undone, to try what some large public method will do——"

"Like Father Mathew's?" said Florence.

"Father Mathew was too sensational," said Mr. Osborne; "and it is impossible to tell how much fiction there was in such a movement. Indeed, I rather think the one by one system is the best; but to interest them *en masse*, to make them see what a thing it would be for all their families, and themselves, of course, and how much purer and more rational pleasure they would get out of their lives——"

"Do you think they learn in that way?"

"If they don't, I do not know how they are to learn."

"But they all know beforehand how dreadful a thing it is—they know it's destruction. Oh, don't you think they know far better than we do, since they see it before them every day, and all day long?"

"What would you do, then," said the curate, "to bring this home to them? I've got all the statistics. Of course they know, for misfortune brings it home; but if we could fully convince them what a prodigious evil it is over all the country, how many better things they could do with the money. I remember proving to a man once, that if he only put by every penny he had been accustomed to spend in drink, he could buy his cottage, he could have a little garden of his own, and a pig, and I don't know how many things which every man prizes——"

"And did he do it?" said Florence.

"Do it!" said the curate. "Of course that meant a course of years. One could not tell whether he did it or not, till a long time was passed. Well, no," he added, with a sigh, "I am trying to deceive you, not to admit my failure; he did not do it. He went on just in his old way, and almost killed his wife, and starved his children, till he died."

"Is it true, Mr. Osborne," said Florence, "that you said to old Mrs. Lloyd, if she would give up her beer, and take the pledge, you would do so too?"

A flush came over the curate's face, of ingenuous pleasure and satisfaction. He liked her to know that he was capable of any sacrifice to save his flock. "It is quite true," he said. "I was quite ready, and had made up my mind to do it; for how can I ask my people to give up what I don't give up myself?"

"But why did you choose poor old Mrs. Lloyd? It did her no harm, her little drop of beer."

"Every drop of beer does harm, in a community like this, scourged by that vice——"

"Mr. Osborne," said Florence timidly.

"Yes," he said, bending towards her, "you were going to say something."

"I want to say something; but, oh, I don't know whether I ought, I don't know whether I may."

The curate trembled, too, as much as she did. They were in a quiet road, with nobody in sight. He put his hand suddenly upon hers with a hurried, tremulous pressure.

"There is nothing you ought not to say to me," he said. "Nothing, nothing that I will not gladly hear. If you should reprove me, even, it would be as a precious balm—whatever, whatever you will say!"

There was a little pause, and it was very still all about, a bird or two trilling in the half-clothed trees, not a harsher sound to disturb the two young creatures, there standing at the crisis of their lives. "But first," he said, "first let me say something to you——"

"No," said Florence, "no, that was not what I meant, not now—I had something to say. Mr. Osborne, listen. If, instead of an old woman, and her a good old woman that did no harm, it were a man, a boy, a gentleman, that you could have held out your hand to—oh, not to make him take pledges and things! and perhaps, you, hearing of him, thought him no company for you. But if you could have turned him away from harm to go with you; if you had suffered his society, not approving of it, because your society might have saved him; if you had thought to yourself that to be your companion might have been everything for him, and that to make him do things with you,

and almost live with you, though you might not like it, would have made life another thing to him. Oh, Mr. Osborne, would not that have been a better way?" Her eyes were so full of tears that she could not see him, but when he spoke she heard a sound in his voice which made her start and turn hastily to where the man who was almost her accepted lover, who had the words on his lips that were to bind them for ever, stood. The music and the softness had altogether gone out of these staccato tones.

"Miss Plowden," he said, as if a sudden gulf had come between them over which his voice sounded far away, "I will not even ask what you mean. I should feel myself a most presumptuous intruder, and impertinent—— Good morning. I find I have not so much time as I thought for this roundabout way."

V

FLORENCE went faithfully to Mrs. Gould's to ask for the nurse, though she knew the nurse was not there. A man, perhaps, would have departed from that position when it was no longer necessary, but she considered it needful, as a proof of good faith, to carry out her announced intention. It was a long way round, and then she had to make another tour to get to the place where the nurse really was, so that her walk altogether occupied some three-quarters of an hour more than it need have done, and the time was long, although, on the other hand, she was glad to have it to herself, and to get over the pang of that abrupt separation. She knew very well what it was that the curate had to say to her. It had been on his lips for many days, and she had dreaded it, not because she did not want to hear it, but because of a girl's natural evasion of the

moment she wishes for most, the shy, half mischievous, half visionary putting off of the sweet cup from the lips. The expectation of it was sweet; all the pleasures of imagination lay in that moment which would bring an entire change in her life, a remodelling of all its circumstances. Florence had taken a pleasure in stealing away, in postponing till to-morrow. But it cannot be said that she experienced that pleasure to-day. She felt that she had received a blow when the curate turned with that hasty leave-taking and left her. To run away is one thing, and hold off a joy which is on the way; but to be thus abandoned is another. It gave her a dull shock like that of an unexpected, uncomprehended blow. She had wondered how he would take her remonstrance, her statement of what she thought his duty, which had been on her lips so long; but she had never expected him to take it with instant offence, with a resentment which drove all other thoughts out of his mind. What did he resent? To have this duty which he did not wish to recognise pointed out to him, or that she should venture to point it out—she only a girl, and the girl who, by loving him, he perhaps thought was bound to see

no flaw in him? Florence was not one of those who can see nothing but excellence in those they love, but she felt, with a momentary gleam of insight sharpened by pain, that perhaps Mr. Osborne was of the kind which requires that in a woman. She had not thought of the possibility before, that this might not be merely a momentary offence, but a wound from which he would not recover, which he would not forgive. A love-quarrel ever seems thus even when of the most trivial origin. It appears at once tragic, a thing never to be got over: an end of all the romance. Florence's heart went down, down to the very depths. She said to herself that it was all over: that the last step would never now be taken, that there would be no more all her life but only an aching void, not even the recollection of words said that never could be forgotten. Had she let him speak she would at least have had that to cheer her; but as it was she would have nothing, not even the gloomy importance of an engagement to break off, a farewell that would have a whole tragedy in it: not even that: only a mere drifting asunder, a vacancy where there had been so much hope: a life blighted before it had come to bloom.

This thought occupied her mind sadly as she made that unnecessary round. He had gone off like a racehorse, scarcely touching the ground in the heat of his vexation and offence, but she went along very slowly, with the depression of the one who is in fault; whose interference and perhaps unreasonable censure had made the breach. Who, after all, was she that she should tell him of his duty, or that something else than the course he had adopted was a better way? she, only a girl with no education in particular, dictating not only to a man trained to discriminate what was the best, but a priest with the highest of vows upon him, and a special consecration to God's service? Her presumption overwhelmed her when she thought of it in this light. But perhaps to be a member of a clerical family, used to see gentlemen of that profession too closely, and amid all the little trials of life, takes away to a certain extent the visionary reverence which it would be perhaps better to keep like an aureole about them. Florence could not surrender her natural judgment to this extent, nor convince herself that she had done wrong. She had taken perhaps an inopportune moment, but she had not said

anything that was not true. She had managed badly for herself, and she would have to bear the result: but it was not wrong what she had said, nor was it wrong to say it; for perhaps, who could tell, he had never thought of that side of the question before? Very likely he had never thought of it. Some people are so happy that they never have in all their lives to encounter misery in their family, and how can they know, unless somebody who does know it, somebody who has been forced to understand it, tells them? And perhaps—she thought with a forlorn consolation—what she had said would bear fruit, though he might never have anything to do with her again. He was too much offended, wounded, hurt, to think of her any more; that was a thing to be received as certain once for all; but perhaps what she had said would come back to him, and he might feel that it was true.

Then if she had let it alone for the present, if she had allowed him to say what was on his lips, and had answered what was on hers, and had become his, and had pledged herself to him—why, then one time or other she must have spoken, not as now in the general, but plainly of Jim? And

what if the righteous young man's high disapproval and disgust with the unrighteous had gone even further, to the length of putting poor Jim, whom his sister loved, out of the charities of life altogether and casting him off as some good people do? Florence felt that no tie, not even marriage itself, would have made her bear that, and so concluded at last, mournfully, that what she had done was, perhaps, after all the best, so as to warn him off in time, and show him that her views were very different from his. Oh, what mistakes men can make even when they are the most highly instructed, the most high-minded and nobly purposed of their kind! Edward Osborne was all that; yet he thought that it was a more pious thing to make poor old Mrs. Lloyd and such harmless old bodies give up their little harmless indulgences than to risk a little trouble or company that, perhaps, might be distasteful to him, in order to save Jim.

Florence got home at last just in time for the family luncheon, which was a good thing for her, as it kept her from exposure to the close personal observation of her mother and sister, who were too well acquainted with every change of her countenance not to per-

ceive at once when anything was wrong with Florry. But the family meal occupied Mrs. Plowden, and Emmy was fortunately so full of her own morning's occupations that her sister escaped notice.

"You are not eating anything, child, and you have no colour," her mother said, "after your long walk."

"It is the long walk that has done it, she has over-tired herself; you shouldn't permit those long walks," said the Rector. This was his favourite way of treating any annoyance—with that consolatory conviction that it must be his wife's fault, which supports many men through the smaller miseries of life. Mrs. Plowden took an equal pleasure in the pleas of self-defence. "How am I to prevent long walks when there is always so much to do in the parish?" she said. "I am constantly telling you you should have more district visitors, or a mission woman, or something. Those girls have never a moment to themselves."

"Oh, it is nothing, mamma," said Florence. "I had to make a long round to get the parish nurse: for I went to Mrs. Gould's to find her, and, of course, she wasn't there."

"You ought to have known that, Florry,

so it is your own fault. Why, you sent her off yourself to the little Heaths."

"I know, mamma: I can't think how I could be so stupid," Florence said.

"And who wants her now?" said the Rector curtly.

"It is that woman in Mead Lane, who is always in trouble. Mr. Osborne," said Florence, so anxious to keep her voice firm that she gave the name an emphasis and importance she had no intention of giving, "had been sent for to see her last night."

"Osborne! he's always finding a mare's nest somewhere—do you mean that woman that always is in trouble, as you say?—trouble, indeed! drink you mean, and all that follows. If he could get her to take the pledge it might do some good: that's if she would keep it—which I don't believe for a moment."

"Then why should he take the trouble, papa, if it is to do no good?"

"That's what I tell him for ever: but he believes in himself, the young prig: I wish he would keep to his own business, and not mix himself up with things he cannot possibly understand."

"My dear James," said Mrs. Plowden, "Mr. Osborne is an excellent young man.

There has not been a curate in the parish I have liked so much since Mr. Sinclair's time. And he is very well connected and well-off, I believe, and altogether a creditable person to have about—an Oxford man and all that."

"That's why he gives himself so many airs," the Rector said—which was not to say that the Rector did not really approve of Mr. Osborne, but only that it was his rôle to take the critical side. Mrs. Plowden, for her part, knew very well what was going on, and though she had burst forth in the fulness of her heart to her sister-in-law upon his shortcomings, she was on ordinary occasions very careful to keep up Mr. Osborne's reputation, and to impress Florence with a due sense of all his qualities.

Now there arose a testimony in Mr. Osborne's favour which was totally unexpected. "He wasn't at all a bad lot at Oxford," said Jim. "Fellows that knew him liked him there: he played racquets for the University, and won. I wonder if he ever gets a game now."

"You astonish me, Jim," said Mrs. Plowden. "I never should have thought he was a man for games. What is racquets? is it a kind of tennis? for of course tennis is

played with racquets. Perhaps we could get up a game for him here."

At this Jim laughed loudly, and his father, who did not often join in his jokes, such as they were, backed him up faintly with a smile.

"No, I don't think we could get up a game for him here. It's a tremendous game; not like anything so simple as lawn tennis. It is the old *jeu de paume*, isn't it?" said the Rector, "the beginning of them all."

A conversation between the Rector and his son, on a general subject, on a question, something they were both interested in, without reproof on one side, or defence on the other: what a thing that was! Mrs. Plowden's eyes grew lambent with the light of unusual happiness; after a moment she said: "I suppose you play it, Jim?"

"I!" said the young man. "Oh, I'm not half enough of a swell for that, mother."

"I don't see," said the mother, half happy, half indignant, "why you shouldn't be swell enough, Jim, to do anything Mr. Osborne does."

"You don't remember," said the Rector sharply, "that it takes application to play a game well, as well as to study well, and that

Jim never thought it good enough, either for one thing or another."

Alas! how short the moment of happiness is!

"Oh, girls," said Mrs. Plowden, when lunch was over, and the three ladies were in the drawing-room again, "if Mr. Osborne would only take up Jim! He is the only man in the parish who could do it; and now that I hear he plays games and things I feel a little hopeful. For whatever your father may say, I know that Jim is good at all games. We might get up this racquets, whatever it is, and get them to play together. We might ask the General, Florry, what it is. Army men always know everything of that kind. Or, Emmy, you might remember to ask your aunt; and there's Mr. Swinford; perhaps he plays it too."

"I suppose it is a gentleman's game," said Emmy, with perhaps not so strong an enthusiasm.

"Do you think I might speak to Mr. Osborne about it?" said the mother, pondering. When she asked advice of her girls it was in fact a sort of thinking aloud, a putting of the question to her own mind. A thing often seems quite different put out in audible

words from what it does when only turned over and over in the recesses of your own heart. "I might tell him that Jim was very fond of it, and that hearing he was good I thought I would consult him how we should get it up."

"But Jim never said he was fond of it, mamma."

"Oh, how matter-of-fact you are, Emmy! Jim would be fond of anything that was a game. He would be glad of any break; and to get him surrounded with nice companions like himself, and taking his pleasure with them, wouldn't that be better for him than Sophocles, or any old Pagan of them all? Your father doesn't think so, perhaps, but I do; and, if you look at it reasonably, so will you too."

"I would not trust to Mr. Osborne if I were you," said Florence. She was standing in the corner beyond the window at the big old-fashioned round table, which had been dismissed from its old-fashioned place in the centre of the room, but was retained in the corner because it was so useful. Florence had her back to her mother and sister, and was very busy cutting out clothes for her girls' class, which, like Miss Grey's mothers'

meeting, met weekly for needlework. "I would not speak to him about it. He sometimes takes offence when you suggest a thing, and then goes away and does it. I would not say a word if I were you."

"But it never has been suggested to him, Florry! Why, you know I never heard of this even, till to-day. Here is your aunt Emily coming. We can ask her what she thinks. She has been more in the world than any of us, and probably she can tell us what racquets is."

A considerable time elapsed, but no visitors appeared; and then Mrs. Plowden, from wondering what Emily would say, at last came to wonder where Emily could be, or if her eyes had deceived her, and Lady William had not crossed the lawn at all. "I declare," she said, "I shall feel quite unhappy if your aunt does not appear: for I saw her as plainly as I see you. I saw her black gown, and the feather in her hat, which really ought to be renewed if she will go on wearing black for ever—and that umbrella of hers with the long handle."

"But, mamma dear," said Emmy, "you must have known at once whether it was Aunt Emily or not, without thinking what she had on."

"Well, so I should have supposed," said Mrs. Plowden, bewildered, "but then where is she, and what has become of her? She should have been here ten minutes ago. Oh, who is that? Mab! Why, child, where have you come from? And where is your mother? I am sure I saw her cross the lawn ten minutes ago or more."

"And we think it must have been her wraith, Mab."

"Mother has gone to talk to Uncle James," said Mab. "She says it's about business, but I think it is some worry, she looks so serious. So I came on after to wait for her. Oh, are you cutting out, Florry? Shall I help you, or do you want any help?"

"Some worry?" said Mrs. Plowden, with a sorrowful brow. "I hope it is not anything new about your uncle Reginald, girls."

Reginald was the brother to whom Lady William had given her money, and who had never come back.

"Hadn't we better wait till we hear what it is, mamma? I thought Uncle Reginald had not been heard of for years."

"That is quite true, and it was my

opinion we should never hear from him any more; but what worry can your aunt Emily have if it is not about him? For I am sure otherwise she is a happy woman, and never has the shadow of a trouble. Was it after getting a foreign letter that she grew so serious, Mab?"

"She has had no letter at all," said Mab, "and she did not say it was anything but business. The worry was only my own fancy; and I dare say I was wrong."

"What else could it be?" said Mrs. Plowden. "She may have heard he is coming home. And I am sure, if he is coming home, I don't know what I shall do. He shall not come here. I could not have him in this house. Our own burdens we must bear; but Reginald Plowden—oh, Reginald Plowden is too much! If he comes here I shall run away."

"Dear mamma, don't you think we had better wait a little? Aunt Emily is sure to come here when she leaves papa, and then you will know."

"Oh, it is all very well to tell me to wait—when Reginald Plowden would just put the crown upon everything," the poor lady said.

VI

Lady William had gone across the lawn, not to the usual door which admitted into what may be called the private part of the Rectory, but to the little parish door where people came who wanted the Rector on parish business. This was always open, always accessible, though I don't know that the parishioners used it very much. It was at least an excellent thing for them to have their clergyman always within reach, and suited the Rector's theory of his duty, which was a great matter, even if it were not of very much practical use. Miss Grey trotted in by it with her parish books, and the curate came, when something occurred about which it was necessary to consult his chief. He did not, Mr. Plowden thought, consult his chief nearly as much as would have been appropriate and desirable — being a young man who liked his own way, and

considered that the elder generation did not always understand.

The Rector, however, was much surprised when the door sounded with the familiar little click which he knew so well, and his sister presently appeared in his study. He had expected one or other of the two functionaries above named, or perhaps the churchwarden, or the treasurer of the schools, who was a troublesome person with nothing to do, and consequently an endless number of things to suggest. When he saw Lady William his heart—which you may say ought to have been sufficiently experienced to take things quietly—gave a jump. Experience does not make us indifferent in certain cases, and the Rector was as easily disturbed on one subject as if he had no experience at all. It flashed into his mind that his sister, who was not much in the habit of consulting him, must have something to say about Jim.

"Emily!" he said, with great surprise: and then, with a little attempt at a lighter tone, which was not very successful, "What, have you fallen into parish business, too?"

"No," she replied, with a quickly drawn breath, which the Rector, as a man ac-

customed to have to do with people in trouble, knew must mean excitement, or anxiety, or distress. "No," she said, "I want to consult you, James: but it is entirely about my own private business."

The Rector drew a long breath. He was not glad—oh no!—to think that his sister was in trouble: but nothing that affected her could be so serious, he felt, as if it had been something about Jim. He drew forward a chair near himself for her. He had always been both fond and proud of Emily. Perhaps the fact that she was Lady William (though he knew the marriage had not been a success) added a little to the feeling that she was a being by herself, not to be compared with any one else. But still, a great deal of it was very genuine, and meant a conviction that he knew nobody comparable to Emily. He was pleased that she should consult him on her own affairs, of which, generally, she said very little. She had thrown away almost all her own money upon Reginald—provided only that she did not mean to tell him that scapegrace was coming back to trouble his respectable connections again! Thus the same idea that had disturbed his wife occurred to the Rector,

both terrors, no doubt, arising from the fact that neither could imagine what Lady William could wish to consult the Rector about.

"My affairs," she said, with a faint smile, as she got her breath, "haven't for a long time been very troublesome to my family, James. I hope they are not entering now into a new stage."

"A new stage?" he said, and the Rector's middle-aged heart actually took a jump again. What could it all mean? Good heavens!—Emily's affairs in a new stage! What could she be going to do? It could not be about any change in her life that she was going to consult him. Change in her life! That was what people said when somebody was going to marry. He looked at his sister with sudden alarm. Emily marry! Vague things he had heard said of Leo Swinford and jests about Lady William's attractions, started up in his mind. It rarely happens, I think, that a man likes his sister (if she is not dependent upon him) to compromise her dignity by a second marriage. He did not like to think that Emily might intend to come down from her pedestal and show herself a mere common person, like the rest.

"What do you mean by a new stage?"

he said, with a pucker in his brow. "You are very well as you are, and occupy a very good position, and all that. I don't see what need there is for a new stage."

"Nor I," she said; "and I hope you will continue of the same opinion when I tell you. I knew," she continued, with a little hot colour flushing across her face, "that the coming of the Swinfords would upset all our tranquillity. I was sure of it. She is a woman of evil omen wherever she appears."

"Yet you were once very fond of her, if I remember right."

"When I was a girl, and she petted me, and made much of me—I was going to say for her own ends; but I hope it was not for her own ends from the beginning—that would be too diabolical."

"What ends could she have had that were to be promoted by you?" said the Rector, with a smile. He was sufficiently used to these preposterous notions women so often have of their own importance, prompting them to think the attention of other people, who probably never thought of them, is fixed upon them, and that intentions of various kinds are formed respecting them, without the least foundation in

fact. Thus his own wife was in the habit of thinking that her girls were watched and followed; that their movements and their dresses were the subject of constant remark, when in all probability nobody even knew that they were there. He was surprised, however, that his sister Emily should share this view.

"We need not discuss that," she said. "James, I want to ask you—do you think it is my duty by Mab to seek further acquaintance with her father's family? We are exceedingly well as we are. The allowance they make is not large, but it is enough, and there is something settled on Mab when I die. They have done their duty, if not very liberally, yet they have done it. And I don't want any more from them. Mab is quite contented, she likes her home better than anything; and though she is a very dear girl, and my hope and comfort, I don't know if she is fitted to shine in—what people call the great world. I might get them, of course, to bring her out in a way more fitting, perhaps—to take her to Court, and all that——"

"I don't see," said the Rector, "that that would do her much good." Men ought not, to be sure, to be touched by any of those

motives, which are entirely feminine ; but it did certainly flash across the Rector's mind that his own girls had none of these advantages, had never gone to Court or anything of the kind, and yet could not be said to be any the worse.

"No, that is just what I think. She is quite satisfied as she is : to go out with her Pakenham cousins, probably to their annoyance and against their will, and to be taken to places where she knew nobody, would be no pleasure to my little girl. She is such a thoroughly reasonable, sensible, understanding child. I am so glad that you agree with me on that point, James."

While she was speaking the Rector began to think that perhaps all was not said in that hasty opinion of his, and that a man consulted by his nearest relation should not be moved by any little trifling feeling—like that which might be legitimate enough in a mother, about his own girls. And he said, "Stop a little, Emily. You're still quite a young woman, but life is uncertain. Perhaps, you know, if anything were to happen to you : —as long as you are there, that is all right, of course—but she would be very forlorn, poor little thing, if she were left——"

"There would be you and Jane, James. You would both be very kind to her." But Lady William was a little startled by what he said. It is startling to all, however little objection we may have to that catastrophe, even however desirable it may be, to be spoken to abruptly of our own death.

"Both my wife and I are older than you are, and we could introduce her to nobody in —well, in her father's rank of life. If she married it would probably be a curate—the Marquis of Portcullis's niece!"

"Oh, if it were no worse than a curate!" said Lady William, with a laugh. The laugh was a little strained, and under her eyes there was a hot, red colour which did not consort with laughter. She grew suddenly very grave, and added hurriedly, "That was not exactly all. James, in case of the—risk of which you were speaking, do you think as Mrs. Swinford does——"

"What, Emily?" He was frightened when he saw the excitement that seemed to come over her.

"Well! That the family would have a right to—examine into—and have all the papers about—my marriage, and her birth, and all that."

It was of Lady William's marriage alone that Mrs. Swinford had spoken, but it made it a little easier to state it so.

"Oh!" said the Rector, startled. "Well," he added, "I suppose it's a very good thing to have your papers all in order, and saves trouble afterwards. It is so seldom that people take the trouble to do it. I am sure I don't know anything about my own marriage certificate, though I furnish them to other people. Have you got them all?"

Lady William's face blanched out of its momentarily high colour. "I have got none of them," she said, in a faint voice.

"Well, there is no particular harm in that. I don't know who has—not me, I am sure. What does your friend want you to do—send these things to the Marquis? What does the Marquis want with Mab's baptismal certificate? My dear Emily, I suppose that woman, being partly French, thinks that you should always have your *papiers* in order? There could not be greater nonsense."

"Do you really think so? I did myself. Why should there ever be any question? Nobody asks you, as you say, for your marriage certificate, James."

"No," said the Rector; but he added, looking at the question from a purely professional point of view, "of course, you can get that sort of thing, when it's wanted, at a moment's, at least, at a day's, notice. Where were you married, Emily?"

She was evidently not prepared for this question, and came to herself with a little start. The colour forsook her cheeks. She clasped her hands together nervously. "Oh, James, that is what gives it its sting. I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Is that dreadful? Is it dangerous? Might it throw a doubt? My father went with me, that is the only thing—to London somewhere."

"I knew you were not married at home," said Mr. Plowden, rising up and placing himself in front of the fireplace. "I knew there was something queer about it. In the name of wonder, Emily, why, if my father went with you, didn't he have you married at home? He can't, in that case, have disapproved."

"I don't think he disapproved."

"Then why, *why* weren't you married at home? My father went with you, and you

don't know? What a very queer business! And who went with you beside my father?"

"Old Meredith, do you remember, who used to be my nurse—and a lady. But Meredith is dead, and papa is dead—and the other——"

"This grows rather funny," said the Rector. "I mean it isn't funny at all. So there is nobody living who was there, and you don't know where it was? Does your friend, Mrs. Swinford, know these circumstances, Emily, and does she want to frighten you? It would be like her amiable temper."

"James, tell me, is there any real reason to fear?"

"Oh, dear, no. Of course not; the only thing is to find the place. Of course, it must be on the register. What a queer thing not to know the church you were married in! I thought a woman always remembered that, whatever she forgot."

"I was a frightened girl," said Lady William. "I didn't know what they were going to do with me. I was sent down from the Hall at midnight, as I thought in disgrace—though I could not tell for what. There was a great tumult in the house. Mr. Swinford, who was so quiet, in the

midst of it all; and then my husband came down here with me, and my father was called up to speak to him; and then it was all like a flash of lightning. I was taken up to London two days after, and there I was married. It was a little old church, in a district which I didn't know."

"How is it I never heard anything of this before?"

"How can I tell?" she said. "I was taken away, frightened, not knowing what had happened. Oh, I suppose that I was not unwilling: I did not understand it: but my father was there—and he liked it, James. He said it was a great match for me, and, though it was so hurried, I was not to mind. After, I understood better—but at the time not at all."

"It must have been by special license," said the Rector; "but why in the name of wonder didn't my father have it here?—Why—— But I suppose it's no use saying why and why. There must have been reasons——" He looked at his sister fixedly, yet avoiding her eye.

But Lady William neither met nor avoided his look. She sat before him, pale, with an air of deep and melancholy recollection.

"Oh, there were reasons," she said, shaking her head sadly. "It was years before I found them out. I would rather not enter into them even now—reasons which for a time made life odious to me. It had not been very happy before. Don't let us speak of that."

"They were reasons — which Mrs. Swinford knew!"

"Don't speak of her to me," said Lady William. "I was a fool to go near her, to see her again. Knew! ah, indeed she knew —indeed she knew! She was my patroness, my kind friend. My father thought it such a fine thing for me to be at the Hall. Oh, James, why should a girl be allowed to live when she has no mother? She ought to be put away in her mother's coffin, and not enter helpless into the world."

"In my opinion fathers are some good," said the Rector, with severity.

And then a few hot tears fell from his sister's eyes. "Poor papa!" she said. Mr. Plowden added nothing to this phrase. They remained silent, both thinking of the parent who had not indeed been very wise, but always kind. After a while Lady William resumed: "He approved: if he had

not approved—I should never—— But what could I do against my father? And Miss Mansfield told me I should be ungrateful to the friend who had made such a match for me."

"Who was Miss Mansfield, Emily?"

"The lady I told you of—a cousin of Mrs. Swinford's, who was with me that day."

"And is she dead, too?"

"I think not. No; Leo Swinford said something of her the other day—that she had been here."

"Then she must be found, Emily."

Lady William gave him a startled look. "Do you think, then, James, after all, it is necessary to go into all that again—to rake up everything? Oh! when I think of it—the hurry, the strangers, the unknown place, which looked as if there was shame in it——"

"My dear Emily, it is only the hurry and the unknown place that make it important. As soon as you know where to write to find the marriage in the register it does not matter, you can let it rest. But now that I know—even if Mrs. Swinford had never said a word—I shall not rest till I find it out."

"Then I wish," she said, with returning

spirit,' "that I had said nothing to you on the subject, James."

"Don't say that. To whom should you go but to your brother? And be sure I'll find it out, Emily. I don't like to say a word that will hurt you. I am afraid you have been the victim of some plot or other, my poor girl."

She did not answer for a moment, then she said: "I cannot have been without blame myself. I was pleased with the promotion, I suppose, and with the romance, and all that. Romance! it seemed so strange to be carried away, to be married almost in spite of myself; and I suppose the name—— It is all very vague and dreadful, though at the time I was dazzled, and it sounded like something in a story. I wonder, rather, that you do not despise your sister, James."

"Poor Emily!" he said, patting her shoulder with his hand.

VII

Mrs. Plowden awaited with some anxiety the appearance of her sister-in-law in the drawing-room, which was an ordeal which Lady William would have liked much to escape. But as this was not possible, she submitted to it with as good a grace as might be. The Rector kindly led the way, saying on the threshold : " Here is Emily, Jane," as if that had been at all necessary ; as if they had not all been on the outlook for her appearance for the last half-hour. Mrs. Plowden took her by the hand, and led her to a comfortable sofa in the corner, which was where she took her friends when they had something to say to her, or she something to say to them. " My dear Emily," she said, " I hear you have been sadly worried about something, and, of course, you know I have been trying to guess. You have heard from Reginald again ? "

"From Reginald?" said Lady William. "Poor fellow! Ah, no. I wish I had. And who said I had been sadly worried? I had only some business I wanted to talk over with James."

"Not Reginald—really?" said Mrs. Plowden. She was much relieved; but there sprang up in her a fresh curiosity, very lively and warm, to think, if it was not Reginald, what it could be? Of course she said to herself she would hear all about it from James; but she did not like to wait till the uncertain moment, never to be calculated on during the day, when she should find her husband alone.

And then it occurred to Lady William that to tell a half truth frankly as if it were the whole is sometimes a wise thing to do.

"To tell the truth," she said, "I was asking James's serious advice on that matter which you have so often spoken to me about, Jane—whether I should attempt to improve my acquaintance with the Pakenhams, and get Mab, now that she is almost old enough, introduced to the world in their way."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Plowden, making a very large mouthful of that word; astonish-

ment, and satisfaction, and pride, and yet a little drawback of another feeling was in her tone. "So you are thinking at last, Emily, that there may be something in what I said."

"I always knew," said Lady William, "that there was a great deal of sense in what you said. But, I was very unwilling to do it, it must be allowed. And now Mrs. Swinford says the same thing; and though I am very doubtful whether it would be to Mab's advantage, still—I am thinking it over once more."

"And what advice did you get from James? James is too like yourself in many ways, Emily, to be your best adviser."

"Do you think he is like myself?" The Rector had gone back to his study after, as it were, introducing his sister into the feminine part of the house. "Well, perhaps," said Lady William, with a smile, "there may be a family resemblance. There is so far as this—that he is by no means certain, I think, of the advantage to Mab."

"Oh, what nonsense," said the Rector's wife, "and what does he know about such things? Advantage! of course it would be

an advantage. Dear me, to go to Court with the Ladies Pakenham, to be taken out into society by the Marchioness, to see the best of company at her uncle's house! My dear Emily, you might just as well say, to confuse small things with great, that it would not be an advantage in the parish of Watcham to belong to the Rectory—and that is what nobody would say."

The comparison was one which made Lady William smile, though she was not much inclined to smiling. "There are differences," she said, "however; for you could not but be kind to a girl thrown on your care. Whereas, I doubt very much if the Marchioness would be at all kind to a poor relation; and I don't care to have my Mab thought of as a poor relation in any case."

"You are so proud," said the Rector's wife; and then she said, with a laugh, "fancy little Mab to be the one of us all that will see the great world, and make her curtsey to the Queen!"

If the Rector himself had thought of this, it would have been wonderful indeed that his wife should not think of it. She laughed continuously for a minute with an odd little

trill in her laugh, looking at her own girls, who she could not help thinking were more worthy than Mab of such a distinction. It was a thing she had urged upon Mab's mother since her child was ten. But now that it seemed an actual possibility, nay more than that—for Mrs. Plowden's mind leaped forward to the ceremony, and already wondered what Mab would wear, and if feathers would really be wanted upon her little head—the ridicule of the thought that Mab, little Mab, would be the one to go to Court, an honour which was quite beyond the hopes of Emmy and Florry, gave their mother a shock of half-irritated feeling. That their cousin should have this glory would not hurt them—but still—if honours went by merit in this world how different things would be!

"I wonder," said Lady William, as they walked home, "what your opinion, Mab, may be in the matter which everybody has been discussing. It was your little fortunes that Mrs. Swinford wanted to talk to me about yesterday, and that I have been advising about with Uncle James to-day."

"My little fortunes?" said Mab. "I never knew I had any."

"Your future, perhaps, it would be better to say."

"My future! is that to be detached and put separate from other people's like an odd piece in a puzzle? I don't know still what you mean, mother!"

"And yet it is plain enough," said Lady William, with a sigh. "The other girls here are all in their natural sphere. But you, Mab, are a bird of another species in a sparrow's nest."

"I hope you don't compare me to a cuckoo, mother."

"Something very different, my dear; the others are plain brown homely birds. Emmy and Florry will twitter under the eaves in some parsonage or other, probably all their lives; but you are a Pakenham."

"What's a Pakenham?" said Mab, "you speak as if it were a Plantagenet."

"Well, not so grand, perhaps—but still it is different. And I have brought you up only like what I was myself: a little country girl."

"Only like what you were yourself! You know very well, mother, and it's unkind to remind me of it, that if I were to live a hundred years I should never get to be like

you. It's Emmy that's like you. I'm not envious; but to think that your daughter should be a little—just a—Pakenham, as you say; and Emmy like you!"

"She is not very like me—if I'm any judge myself," Lady William said.

"She is not half nor a quarter so pretty as you are, mammy dear."

"You little flatterer! Emmy is a much better girl than I ever was, Mab, and perhaps that's pretty much the same thing. She is a much better girl to tell the truth than my own little girl is."

"I know; my own opinion is that Emmy is too good. She is never out of temper, always puts up with everything, is bored by nobody. That, I understand, is one reason why—as you say, mother. For I think, to tell the truth, that to look really nice, and be like a human woman, you must not be quite so good."

"That is a dangerous doctrine, Mab. And it is not the question; which is, what do you think? The Pakenhams are more or less fashionable, and of course they have a fine position. With them you would see a little of the world. You would meet people very different from any you ever see

here in the village. I am told that I ought to make advances to them; to tell them of my child who is growing up, and ought to be introduced properly into the world."

"Oh, is that what it means?" said Mab. "Tell me more about them, that I may be able to judge. I don't know anything at all about them, and how can I say?"

Lady William's heart sank a little at this calm and judicial tone on the part of her child. She, too, jumped, as Mrs. Plowden had done, to the spectacle of Mab's presentation under the wing of the Marchioness, and at all that might follow.

"I have never seen Lady Pakenham or the girls. Your uncle I have seen, and he was—not unkind. No, I am sure he was not in the least unkind; he did what he could for me. He took a little notice of you as a baby, and so did the other brother—your uncle John. They were not clever, nor distinguished in any way; but they were by no means without feeling."

"That was when my father died."

Lady William, who had rarely to Mab said anything about her father, nodded her head. Her eyes had a dreamy look, fixed far away. Mab never was sure whether

it was for grief that her mother was so reticent, or from some other cause.

"And do you mean to say, mother," said Mab, "that my aunt—if she is my aunt—never came near you when you were in such trouble?"

"She is just exactly as much your aunt as your uncle James's wife is—neither less nor more. No, she never came near me. But I was not surprised. It happened in Paris, and then I came away as soon as I could to this little place. I neither expected her to come to Paris, which would have been absurd: nor to come after me here, where she knew I would be among my own people."

"Why," said Mab, "you would have gone! You would not have minded if it had been in Paris, or at the end of the world."

"I do a great many foolish things," said Lady William, with a smile, "that wise people don't do; besides they hadn't approved much, as was natural. Substantially kind is what you may call them, practically kind; your uncles were that, and have been——"

"And yet I am seventeen and I have never seen them."

"If you had been a boy," said Lady William, "they would have felt their duty more; a girl is supposed to be best with her mother. You must not be surprised at that, my dear child. Your uncle Pakenham has always supplied all your wants."

"You never showed me any of his letters——"

"His letters! oh, he is not a man who writes letters. His lawyer does all that; but substantially, he has been very kind."

"Mother," said Mab, "instead of wishing to know these people, to visit them, and all that, I'll tell you what I should like to do. I should like to be able to work for you, and throw their money in their face—which is what you mean, I suppose, when you say they are substantially kind."

"That would be very foolish, Mab; the money is your right, and for that matter mine too."

"It may be right, but I should like to fling it in their faces all the same. Had my father nothing to leave us, to give us to live on, that you should have to accept it from them?"

Lady William made no answer for some time. Then she said in a low tone: "Your

father had many things to do. I cannot enter into such questions, Mab; you are not old enough. No; we were destitute but for them."

"You had money of your own, mother?"

"Fortunately," said Lady William, "that did not come to me till after." And then she stopped short and bit her lip with annoyance. "I didn't do much with it when it did come," she said. "I gave it to your poor uncle Reginald. He was to make his fortune, poor fellow, and ours."

"Perhaps he may yet, mother."

"Thank you for the suggestion, Mab; perhaps he may. Alas! I am afraid it is not very likely——"

"If he were to do so, mother, you would take this dirty money and fling it back in their faces?"

"I don't know that I should, Mab. I doubt if it would be kind or just—and still more, whether it would be wise."

"Oh, you may be sure they wouldn't mind, people like that! They would only be glad to have it back, whether you flung it at them or not, provided they had it."

"My dear, you are very hot-headed. In that respect you are, I fear, of my side of the house."

"And Emmy, who is like you, isn't. She would eat any amount of dirt; she thinks it her duty not to resent anything. That's not my way of thinking," cried Mab. "I resent it, and I should like to fling it in their face."

The two ladies went on after this in silence for a little while, Mab pondering many things in her heart. Some she knew about, and some she did not know. Of her father she had very little idea, scarcely any at all. She had never seen any one belonging to him. He was dead; that was all she knew; and she had never missed him, or any one, having her mother. Vague ideas that he had not been good to her mother had floated through her mind, and yet she never was sure that it was not out of great love that Lady William spoke of him so little. She had known in the parish people who grieved like that, who could not mention the names of those who were gone. It might be for that reason. She walked on pondering, saying nothing till they had nearly reached the cottage door. Then she suddenly turned on her mother, having forgotten till this moment what was the question that had been given her to answer.

"And you want me," she said, "to say that I would like to go to those people—to leave you?"

"Not to leave me, Mab, except for a little time."

"Then I won't, mother, short time or long time! What! to a woman that knew you were in trouble, and never went to you—whom you don't even know! If I am allowed to have any say in it, I would not for anything in the world. And what is it for? To go to parties with them, to be taken out, to enjoy myself? Mother, mother, do you think I am like that—to enjoy myself with people who don't know you, who leave you, who are insolent to you?"

"No; they are not insolent—they ignore me; but, then, I have always wished to be ignored. To tell the truth, Mab, I doubt very much whether you would enjoy yourself. It is possible that you might, but I fear it is more likely that you would not. That is why I am against it."

"Then you are against it, mother?"

"For that reason—that I could not bear my Mab to be treated like a nobody, to be taken out, perhaps, because they could not help it, or left alone and snubbed——"

"Snubbed! They should not snub me twice, mother!"

"No, you little hothead! But everybody here thinks it would be so much to your advantage to go to Court—that is something—to be introduced as you ought to be."

"Introduced to whom?—to the Queen? Yes, that would be nice. But then I don't suppose the Queen would take the least notice of me, would she? I would just be another little girl among so many. No, mother, people here—Aunt Jane, or whoever it is—may say what they like. I will have nothing to say to those people who took no notice of you."

"Your uncle James is of the same opinion—and Mrs. Swinford."

"Odious old woman!" said Mab.

"My dear child, how do you know that she is an odious old woman? She was a very fascinating woman once. When I was like you I would have laid down my life for her." Lady William breathed forth a long, soft sigh involuntarily, unable to restrain herself. "I think I did," she said under her breath.

Mab did not hear these words, but she said somewhat loudly, "Odious old woman!" again.

"Who is that you are describing so succinctly?" cried a voice behind them. "Miss Mab has an energy and conciseness of expression which I admire."

"She has a pitch of voice occasionally which is not at all admirable," said Lady William, turning round. Mab, as may be supposed, turned a bright scarlet up to her hat, her very hair warming in the quick suffusion of colour. But her mother was skilled in such emergencies and betrayed nothing.

"It is always admirable to know what you think, and to express it clearly," said Swinford. "I was on my way," he added, putting his hands together with a supplicating movement, "to inquire whether I might consider myself forgiven. You know you turned me out the other day. May I come back with you now? You take so much from me when you shut your door. Miss Mab will intercede for me. She was as much shocked as I was when you sent me away."

"There was no sending away," said Lady William. "We have been having an argument—my daughter and I. You shall be the impartial umpire and set us right."

"With all the pleasure in the world," he said.

VIII

"It is a very good thing to have somebody impartial to refer to," said Lady William; "all our advisers take a side strongly. Now, Leo, you are of no faction, you can give us fair advice."

"I am of your faction always," he said.

"Ah, but I am of no faction. I am the seeker of advice. We want to be well advised, Mab and I. By the way, she does take a side strongly, but I will not tell you which it is."

"Expound the case, Miss Mab; I must know before I can say."

"So you shall know; but Mab must not tell you, for she has a bias. The case is this: Mab you see is grown up——"

He gave a glance at her in her (still) short frock, with her (still) large waist, and round, artless, almost childish look.

"I see," he said, with a smile.

"And must presently be introduced into society. The question is, must it be the society of Watcham, and is the dance at the FitzStephens' to be her *début*? or is she to enter the world in a different way, and be taken to town for a season with all that follows? What is your opinion?"

"Can there be two opinions?" he said, opening his eyes wide. "This is not treating me well. I hoped it was to be a difficult and delicate question, but it is no question at all."

"You see," said Lady William to her daughter.

"If you put it to him in that way, mother: but that is not the way. Imagine, Mr. Leo, what they all want!—that mother, who is, I know, better than the whole of them, every one, whoever they may be—should go and—and—petition my uncle and his wife, who have never taken any notice of us—to take me by the hand and introduce me, as people say, into society: to introduce me—me, Mab, do you understand, to the Queen and all the rest; to get me asked to parties with them — me, Mab, do you understand?" said the girl, beating upon

her breast, "only me; and that is what everybody wants, and mother hesitates and wonders whether she ought to do it: and I," cried the girl, her dull eyes growing bright, "I will obey mother. I have never gone against her yet except in the way of reason, and if she were to tell me to jump into the river I would do it (hoping to scramble out somewhere lower down); and I'll do this of course if I must, and perhaps escape alive—but never, never of my own free will. Now say what you think, Mr. Leo. Isn't it I that am in the right?"

"The question has a very different aspect, certainly," said Leo, "from Miss Mab's side."

"Hasn't it?" said the girl triumphantly. "Now I should be proud, mother, if he who is of your faction should pronounce for me."

"But there is a great deal more to be said on both sides," said Leo; "we have not come to a decision yet. And just tell me why you should not go to town yourself as everybody does, and introduce your daughter in your own person, and show yourself in the world? That would seem so much the most natural way."

"Ah!" cried Mab, with something like

a shout of triumph. "That is something like advice! I did not think much, I tell you true, of consulting Mr. Leo—but now I see he is a Daniel come to judgment. And to think that none of us ever thought of that before!"

Lady William grew red and she grew pale. It had not occurred to her, strangely enough, that any one would suggest this simple alternative. The other advisers, indeed, knew her position too well to think of it. She said with a laugh: "You speak very much at your ease, you young people. Where am I to get the money for a campaign in town? I might squeeze out a few dresses for Mab—that is all I could do. You forget that I am not a wealthy person like you, Leo. And then I know nobody. We might as well stay here for anything I could do for her. Yes, the Lenthalls might invite us, or Lady Wade, who belongs to this neighbourhood: but nobody else. And we should be ruined! No, no; that is more impossible than anything else. It must, I fear, be Lady Portcullis, or nobody. Her aunt is her only hope."

"If I am to be sent off to Lady Portcullis like a brown-paper parcel," said Mab, "I

will do what I'm told, mother; but I won't discuss it any more. Mr. Leo, I would ask you to stand up for me, if I thought you could ever stand up against mother."

"It's hard, isn't it?" said Leo; "but I will try as much as I can." He got up to open the door for her (for by this time they had reached the cottage), which was a thing Mab hated, feeling the attention very right for her mother, but a sort of mockery in the case of a little girl like herself. She submitted with her head bent; and then bolted like a young colt, which she still was. It must be allowed that the young man, who, according to all laws, ought to have preferred her company, was relieved when she was gone. He came quickly back to where Lady William sat, her head bowed upon her hand in much thought, and drew a low chair, Mab's little baby-chair, to her feet.

"I have a counter proposition to make," he said, lightly touching her hand to draw her attention.

She smiled, and said, "What is that?" with a friendly indifference which made him frown. It was very clear that his proposition, whatever it might be, awakened no excite-

ment, scarcely even curiosity, in Lady William's breast. He made a very long pause indeed, but she took no notice until there had been time for various tumults and revolutions of thought in his mind. Then she looked up, with a little start, to see him in an attitude which was strangely like supplication, though he was in reality only seated in the low chair. "Well," she said, in her easy tone, "what is it? You keep me a long time in suspense."

"It was—nothing," he said.

"Ah," said Lady William, with a laugh, "you pay me back in my own coin."

"Rather," he said in a changed tone, "let us say that it was this. We must, I suppose, go to London next month—though my mother does not seem to care for it now as I thought she would. However, we shall go; and why should not you come too? Come with us; take Miss Mab where you please, and come back when you please. It would obviate all the difficulties you were speaking of, and secure all the—— What! You will not listen to such a simple suggestion as that?"

There had been a great many exclamations on Lady William's lips as he went

on, but she had smothered them one by one till it was impossible to keep silence longer. "With your mother?" she said, almost under her breath.

"Well: I should like it, oh, a great deal better, if it were with me; but you think of me as if I were a cabbage, and my mother was your friend—was she not your friend?—and I am your servant—to mount behind your carriage, if you like."

"Do not speak nonsense, Leo; you are my very kind friend, and the greatest acquisition, and if you had been going to town with your wife instead of your mother—— It is not indispensable, don't you know, that old friends should continue friends for ever. Your mother was very good to me once—that is, I believe, for a time: but it would do no good to go into those old questions. She would not suffer me with her, nor would I—— No, no; forgive me. That does not mean necessarily any harm, does it? that we do not now—see things—exactly in the same light——"

"Then that is settled," he said gloomily, "so far as my mother is concerned; as for me, though, you call me a friend and all that——"

"My dear boy," said Lady William, "you don't imagine for a moment, I hope, that I would let you pay my expenses—for the benefit of Mab?"

He paused again, gazing at her, saying nothing; then threw up his hands with an impatient sigh.

"And yet friendship is supposed to be something more than words," he said.

"There is one thing that friendship is not," said Lady William; "at least, in England, Leo. It is not money. When that comes in it is supposed to spoil all."

"What an absurd, false, conventional, inhuman, ridiculous view!"

"Perhaps. Oh! I don't know that it need tell between two young men. There is an allowance to be made in that way for *bons camarades*. But I think it is a just rule on the whole. My poor little experience is that it is best not to be very much obliged to one's neighbours. No, no! I don't say so for you, Leo. I believe you might give everything you have to a friend, and never remind him of it—never recollect it even yourself, as long as you lived."

"Is that much to say?"

"In the way of the world, it is something

extraordinary to say ; but this is a totally different question from my little problem, which is urged upon me by your mother, Leo, as well as by my innocent people—my brother and sister here."

"You think my mother is not innocent—that she had some other motive?"

"I did not say so; why should she have another motive? Whatever there may have been between her and me, I, at least, have done her no harm."

"Then it must be she who has harmed you?"

"No; what can any one do to you, outside of yourself? All our troubles come from our own faults or mistakes. We say faults when we speak of others, mistakes when it is ourselves. You told me once that Miss Mansfield—Artémise—had appeared again?"

"Ah! I should like to know what she had to do with it," he cried.

"Nothing," said Lady William; "but it would be important to me to know where to find her. Will you find out for me? There is something which she only knows which I am anxious to make sure of."

"Something important to you?"

"They tell me so. I was not aware of it, and yet—if you could bring me to speech of her, Leo, for five minutes. She was never unkind to me."

"She is a bird of evil omen!" cried Leo; "wherever she appears some harm follows."

"Ah!" said Lady William, "and you said she was here the other day!"

"There is something which has happened between you and my mother—something she has done to you which you will not tell me?"

"What could she have done to me?" Lady William made a movement as though shaking off some annoyance. "No; all she has done is to persuade me to this—about Lady Portcullis and the introduction of Mab into society. What could be more innocent?" she said, with a laugh.

"There is one thing," he said, "that one ought to do before giving an opinion. Has Lady Portcullis ever shown any interest? I have met her; she is very commonplace—one of the rigid English. Oh! very English. You do not know her? she has not sought your acquaintance? Would she?—has she ever?—do you think it is likely——?"

Lady William laughed again, but uneasily, painfully. "You are a sorcerer, Leo—this is

the doubt I have never mentioned to any one—not to Mab herself, not to my brother. Do I think it is likely——? Since you ask me, I must answer no; my pride prevented me from saying it—not even to your mother did I say it—but she—ah!" Lady William broke off again, still laughing—and the evening was beginning to fade, but Leo thought he could see the hot flush on her cheek.

"I am not my mother's champion," he said; "she has her peculiarities. She may have thought it would embroil you with the family."

"That," said Lady William, "was the least of what she thought!"

"Dear lady," he said, "here is some mystery. You know that I am of your faction whatever happens. But you must tell me before I can do any good."

Lady William did not make any immediate reply. She said at last: "Artémise: if you can bring me to speech of Artémise, I shall want nothing more." Then with a change of tone—"Here is Mab coming back; no more of it—no more of it! there has been too much already. Mab, Leo is waiting till you give him some tea."

"Give it me strong and sweet," said Leo, who had jumped up from his low chair with perhaps a touch of embarrassment—but Lady William felt none—"sweet and strong; for my head is a little confused, and I want it clear."

"Is it all about me and my father's people? That is very good of you, Mr. Leo," said Mab, "to take so much interest—and have you converted mother to my way of thinking?—which is the thing I want most."

"I have been doing my best," he said, standing up beside her against the waning light in the window. And then it was for the first time that it occurred to Lady William—— Well, she was no more a matchmaking mother than you or I; but to see two young people together—one of them your own child, and the other a very good match—very well off, and kind, and true, and good, *par-dessus le marché*—this is a thing which will make the most unworldly woman think. To be sure, Leo was twice or nearly twice the age of Mab—but at their respective ages that was of no consequence. It was true also that Leo gave unmistakable signs at this present moment of much preferring Emily, the mother, to any

seventeen-year-old; but that Lady William in her wisdom thought less important still. That would blow over quickly enough; it was scarcely even worth a thought; but they were smiling at each other in a very happy, pleasant way, she appealing, he answering the appeal. It was nothing, but yet it was a suggestion—and how many pleasant things it would involve! It was far too distant, too misty and vague to suggest to the mother how she should feel in her cottage if her Mab was spirited away. But it was a suggestion—and gave a new and agreeable direction to her thoughts.

Leo remained until the lamp was brought in by little Patty, whose eyes shone at the sight of him, partly because it pleased her to see "a gentleman" again in the house (for Patty was a matchmaker, if you please, and never looked upon a "gentleman" without an immediate calculation whether or not he would "do" for Miss Mab), and partly because she felt that she must now be wholly forgiven for any wrong thing she had done in respect to him, seeing he was allowed to come back. Patty had never been sure what it was that she had done which was wrong; but none the less was it evident to her that

she herself must have shared the pardon of the worst offender. And in the meantime there had been a pleasant little hour over the tea-table; as if to encourage her mother's imagination, Mab had for once been seized with an impulse to talk, which was a thing that happened to her now and then. And it was beyond doubt that Leo was amused by her chatter, and responded gaily. They discussed Lord and Lady Portcullis with great mutual satisfaction, and the Ladies Pakenham, whom Leo had met in Paris; and he gave Mab a great deal of information as to her family, which the girl received with a mixture of amusement and offence, proving to her mother that there had been more things even in little Mab's thoughts than were dreamt of in her philosophy. And then the young man went away, and they were left alone to resume the controversy or not, as fate might decide. Lady William, who had been brought into very close observation of her daughter, left the subject in Mab's hands —but Mab did not enter into it again. She changed the subject to the FitzStephens' dance, which was now so near, and led her mother to a discussion of the dresses they were to wear, which had the air of absorbing

all Mab's thoughts. "Do you think I will look very fat in white, mother? and my arms so red and healthy," she said. And this sort of conversation was carried on until Mab fairly put her mother, with all her anxieties and questions, to bed. The little girl was not without questions in her own mind, questions about her father, about the life she could not remember, or scarcely could remember, in Paris; about the family and relations she had never seen. By dint of much reflection it appeared to her that she could recollect a stiff gentleman with a fat face, who must have been Lord Portcullis himself. Why was it she knew nothing of her uncle? Why did he take no notice? Was there any reason for it? or was it her mother's fault? If so, Mab was as strongly determined that she was of her mother's faction as ever Leo Swinford could be; but more still than Leo Swinford she wanted to know from the beginning, and find out how and why it all was.

IX

THE night of the FitzStephens' dance was a great one in Watcham. It was not precisely a dance, to tell the truth, as, to temper the pretensions belonging to the name of a ball, there was to be a little musical performance to begin with—a duet from Emily and Florry Plowden, a few pieces for violin and piano, and so on—which was sufficient to give something of the air of an impromptu and accidental performance to the dance, which, of course, was the real meaning of the whole. Some of the people were so unkind as not to arrive till the music was over, which was thought exceedingly bad taste by the performers and their families, and gave the General and his wife a moment of dread lest the party they had got up so carefully might not be a success after all. But by ten o'clock the music was over, the piano rolled into its appointed corner, and the music stands, which

had been prepared for the violinists, put away. The musicians who were engaged for the dance did not want any music stands, and the assembled party required every scrap of room that was available. The excellent FitzStephens had done wonders to enlarge the space. They had taken away everything —almost the fixtures of the house: doors were unhung, carpets lifted: I cannot really calculate the trouble that had been taken. Even after the party assembled, the removal of the chairs on which they had been seated to hear the music was a matter of labour, for they were not all light chairs like those which people in Watcham borrow by the dozen from Simpkinson of the "Blue Boar," but included a number of comfortable easy-chairs for the ladies who did not dance, of whom there were a considerable number. The FitzStephens did not see the necessity of leaving the elder people out. They were old themselves, and though they delighted in seeing the young ones enjoy themselves, as they said, yet they liked also to have their own playfellows, with whom to have a comfortable talk, while they looked on. What Mrs. FitzStephen would have liked best would have been to keep the elder ladies

apart in the room which was called the General's study, which had a door (removed) into the dancing room, by the opening of which (had it not been crowded by the elder gentlemen) the matrons could have seen enough of their children's performances, as well as have been out of the way. This, however, was the one point which was not successful in the arrangements, for the mothers preferred to cling to the walls in the dancing room itself, at the risk of being swept away by flying skirts, or trodden upon by nimble feet; and the fathers occupied the doorway in a solemn block, so that nobody could see anything through them. Even Lady William, who generally was so great a help in getting people to stay where they were wanted, herself got into a corner in the dancing room, taking up, it must be admitted, very little room, as she stood up against the wall to watch how Mab got on among the dancers; and Miss Grey, in a costume in which she had gone to all the parties in the neighbourhood for the last twenty years, flitted about like an aged butterfly, getting the puffs of superannuated tulle about her into everybody's way, in order to see not only how Mab got on, but how everybody got on

in whom she was interested, and that meant every girl in the room. Thus Mrs. Fitz-Stephen had one little point of vexation amid the perfect success of everything else. But it was so natural. The General declared that he himself liked to see the dancing, and was not at all satisfied to be sent away into another room.

The reader, perhaps, would like to know at once how Mab, who was the *débutante* of the evening, got on. Her white frock was very simple, being, as has been said, the manufacture of her mother and herself; but Lady William was universally allowed to have great taste, and it is saying a great deal to say that she herself was satisfied with the effort. As a matter of fact, the finest dress-maker in the world could not have disguised the fact that Mab's figure was too solid, and her well-formed, round arms a little too rosy with health, for perfect grace. But that solid form and rosy tint agreed very well with the childish roundness of the face, under the dimpled and infantile softness of which Mab hid so much good sense and independent judgment of her own. She looked as she was, like a little girl just escaped from the trammels of childhood, en-

joying the dance with all her might, without thinking for a moment whether anybody admired her, or what people thought of her dancing or demeanour, and without the slightest thrill of consciousness in mind or person. Mab was so popular that she was a little bored at first by her own success, for many of the most dignified persons present, men quite old enough to be her father, considered it a right thing to show their interest in her by "coming forward" and performing a solemn dance with her—General FitzStephen himself (who might have been her grandfather) taking her out for a quadrille as he might have taken Mrs. Swinford had she been there. There passed through Mab's mind a devout thanksgiving that Uncle James was a clergyman, or perhaps he might have asked her too. The Archdeacon, indeed, who was also prevented by his cloth from any such escapades, insisted on taking her to have an ice, which she did not want, and which almost lost her one waltz. It will be seen from this that the dance was all that a first dance ought to be to Mab. Her card was filled before she had been two minutes in the room, the gentlemen crowding round her, so that before the end of the evening she, who accepted everybody

at first with smiles and pleasure, became critical, and actually threw over young Mr. Wade, one of the county people, whom most girls delighted to dance with, in order to career over the floor with Jim for the third time in succession, to the astonishment of everybody. Jim, with whom she was on terms of easy family intimacy, finding fault with him all the time, was, on the whole, the dancer she preferred — though there was much to be said for Leo, who was making himself extremely agreeable, and whose "style" most of the ladies admired greatly as something quite out of the common, and not in the least like the careless romping of Bobby Wade, who had been supposed to be the representative of the fashionable world, and to bring the last graces of the *beau monde* to astonish the villagers. That Mr. Swinford, on the contrary, should be so quiet, so far from any ideas of romping, filled the ladies with surprise, who had been watching Bobby as the glass of fashion and the mould of form. But Mab thought, and did not hesitate to say so, that Leo was a little stiff. She said whatever came into her head, that daring little girl—she was not afraid of offending anybody, especially not

Mr. Leo, as she called him, to the admiration and wonder of all the other girls.

Mab, in short, enjoyed herself so much, and was so frankly delighted with the progress of events, that the questions that were poured upon her by all the old ladies became superfluous.

"Well, Mab, are you getting partners?" Mrs. Plowden said, whose attention had been riveted upon her own children, and who, in sincerity, had scarcely noticed Mab until she danced with Jim.

"Partners! she has never once sat down the whole evening," cried Miss Grey.

Mrs. Plowden was aware that Emmy had not danced the two last dances, and she felt the humiliation; but she smiled. "Everybody is anxious that a girl should enjoy her first ball," she said. "Jim wanted you so much to enjoy yourself to-night."

"Well, she paid him back for it," said Miss Grey; "she threw over Bobby Wade for him."

"Bobby Wade!" cried Mrs. Plowden.

Bobby Wade had not asked either of the Rectory girls. This little heartburning ran on along all the line of mothers who sat or stood by the wall. Mr. Wade and Mr.

Swinford were the two men whose approach made every heart beat. Those who had not been asked by them — or, rather, whose daughters had not been asked by them—felt the vanity of the whole affair, and that the apples which were so bright outside were but ashes within. Leo, for his part, worked very hard that nobody might be left out; but young Wade did not care in the least, dancing up with his arm extended to the young lady he fancied, when he pleased, and carrying her off sometimes under the very nose of her partner.

"He had better not try that on with me," said Jim.

"What would you do? You couldn't knock him down in Mrs. FitzStephen's room?"

"No, I don't suppose I could do that," said Jim, "for their sakes; but I should certainly give him to understand——"

"How could you give him to understand?" said Mab, pursuing her cousin with pitiless practicality. But, as it happened, the proof of what Jim could do occurred at once, for Mr. Wade made a long step up to her—her very self—and held out that insolent arm.

"Our da-ance, I think," he said.

"Indeed, it is nothing of the kind!" said Mab; "I am not engaged to you at all——"

Wade opened his eyes very wide, and looked as if he could not believe his ears. "I assure you this is ours — booked first thing in the evening. Come!" he said.

"We are losing half the waltz," said Mab to her partner, and they dashed off, brushing against Mr. Wade's extended arm. It was very rude, and Lady William took her daughter very much to task for her want of politeness.

"But it wasn't the least his dance—he had nothing to do with it, mother."

"That may be," said Lady William, "but it is one thing to refuse a partner and another nearly to knock him down."

"Oh, did we knock him down?" said Mab, delighted, and softly clapping her hands. She was disappointed to hear that he had not been knocked down at all, but was standing in a corner of the room very sulky, and vowing vengeance upon the little fat thing who had rejected his condescending offer. When, however, the Rectory girls and some others surrounded her open-

mouthed, to hear what it all meant. Mab took higher ground. "If I hadn't snubbed him," she said, "Jim would have punched his head, or something. He told me he would not stand it, so I thought it better a girl should do it than a boy. He may sulk, but he cannot do anything to me. And what do I care for his sulking? He cannot dance a bit," said this high-handed young lady, who had not a dance, not even an extra, to give to any one; others who were not so deeply engaged did not, perhaps, feel themselves so free. They surrounded her, however, with a certain wondering admiration, and those girls who were not acquainted with Bobby Wade, and who had hitherto been a little ashamed of the fact, now proclaimed it as a superiority.

"He is such bad form," they all said.

It need scarcely be said that there were other things in Lady William's mind than even her child's success, as she stood up in her corner watching the dancers. It would be to do great injustice to Mrs. FitzStephen, a woman of very good connections, and who had taken so much trouble to make her party everything that a party in a village, out of London, out of

the great world, could be, to say that it was in any sense of the word common or inferior. They were all very nice people, some even, as has been seen, from the county, for Bobby Wade had brought his sisters with him, who really gave themselves no airs at all among the village folk, though they did what they could to appropriate Leo, and gave him to understand that he was the only man in the least degree of their own set. But Lady William, as she looked round the room, was haunted by an altogether unreasonable regret and discomfort, which she was indignant with herself for feeling, but which came into her mind in spite of her. This was not the scene, she said to herself, in which Mab should be making her first acquaintance with the world. Then, why not? her self said to her, hotly. It would have been far better for Mab's mother if she had never known any other; if she had looked forward to an innocent dance in the village as her greatest pleasure, and never stepped out of that simple circle. Ah, but she had done so, the other visionary party in the argument said. She had stepped out of that circle, and her daughter was Lord William Paken-

ham's daughter as well as hers: and was it not a wrong to Mab that she should be here where everybody looked up to the Wades, people who were of no particular importance, whose origin could not be compared to hers? These things Lady William was pondering with a grave face, when General FitzStephen came up to her, dodging between the dancers, to take her to supper.

"I know you never take supper," the General said, "but none of the ladies can move till you do, and I should think you would at least be glad to sit down a little."

None of the ladies could move till she did. That was true enough; she had the benefit, such as it was, of her rank. Lady Wade it was well known would not come to the village festivities because she was unseated from her usual priority by the superior claims of Lady William. She had the advantage, such as it was; but the child——

"Mab is having a thoroughly 'good time,'" said the General. "You need not concern yourself with her any more. She is as happy as the night is long, and I hope the young ones will make it long and

keep it up. They all seem to be enjoying themselves tremendously now."

"Yes; they all seem very happy. It is so kind of you——"

"To give ourselves the pleasure of seeing them so?" said the old General. "I don't call that kindness but selfishness on our parts. My wife was always fond of young people—which made it more a regret to us in former times that we had no children of our own."

"Yes, indeed; how strange it is—you who would have done them so much justice—who would have been such perfect parents! and they seem to be sown broadcast about the streets at everybody's door."

"We must not say that, for, of course, Providence arranges for the best," said the General, "and I don't regret it now—I don't regret it now. The worst troubles that people have come through their children—either they have not enough for them; or they spend everything their parents have got; or they are ill-behaved; or they are unhappy. And there is scarcely a moment of their lives that fathers and mothers are not at their children's mercy, to be struck to the ground by one thing or another—

perhaps misfortune, perhaps death. Oh, no, my dear lady, I do not regret it. I am very glad to be ending my life with my dear wife without anxiety—now."

"And yet I can't contemplate life at all without my Mab," Lady William said.

"Ah, my dear lady, that is exactly what I say. You are entirely in her power. You can't call your soul your own. If she were to take a perverse line, or if she were to fall ill——"

"For Heaven's sake, General, don't be such an evil prophet," she said, with a shiver, and then laughing, "I had meant to distinguish myself at supper, and you have taken all my appetite away."

"I don't believe in your appetite," said the fatherly old gentleman; "I have never seen it yet. But seriously, even you must be pleased with Mab's little success; and I hear she snubbed Bobby Wade. Do him all the good in the world to be well snubbed by a little girl. The little fool thinks he has all the girls at his feet. But Mab will never be of that mind."

"She is independent enough. I wonder what you will think of my puzzle, General. They say that I ought not to keep her

here in the village—that she ought to come out under her aunt, Lady Portcullis', auspices, instead of living so quietly here with me."

"They talk nonsense, my dear lady," said the General; "a girl is always best, and I think she always looks her nicest, by her mother's side."

"Thank you for that kind opinion, General."

"But I can't see any reason," said the old gentleman, "why her mother, a lady whom we all admire and honour, should not herself abandon the quiet corner a little (though we should miss her dreadfully), and bring out her daughter, which would be better than any Lady Portcullis in the world."

"Ah, but that is impossible," Lady William said quickly. She was moved a little out of her place by the rush of the procession from the drawing-room, all the elder ladies going in; but presently she went back and addressed herself to doing her duty by Mrs. FitzStephen in guiding these elder ladies as they returned into the smaller room. "We may as well make ourselves comfortable here," she said, "since all the children are happy and in full swing." It

was always Lady William who settled these things—and so quietly. The ladies were very glad of comfortable seats after standing half the evening against the wall, and the General managed to get up the quiet rubber he loved, while still one waltz followed another, and the whirling figures went round and round.

"Tell me," said Leo Swinford, coming in behind her a little out of breath, "why Miss Wade tells me I am the only one of her set. I am not of her set, or any set; is it intended to be civil, or what does she mean?"

"She means that the rest of us are of the village, and she and you are of the county, which is a very different thing."

"It is a distinction I do not understand. Nobility and gentry!—yes, I know what that means: but we are not noblesse at all, neither she nor I. We are more or less rich—no two of us the same—but is that the only distinction here?"

"Oh, no; there are a great many grades of distinction. The county means the aristocracy——"

"Permit me; you and Miss Mab are the only persons noble here—is that not so? Ah, you will have to give me many

lessons to bring me to a proper understanding."

"And yet I condemn Mab to be nobody," said Lady William. "Yes, that is what I am doing. Her old friends are very good to her. She has her little triumph to-night. But it will not always be her first ball. And it is I who keep her in obscurity. I think I am learning my lesson more quickly than you do yours."

X

THERE is nothing that happens more frequently in human experience than that, after long doubting what to do, and hesitation over a new step, the whole matter is suddenly taken out of our hands, and the question solved for us in a moment, and in the most summary way. Lady William had found many reasons for resisting the advice, whether given in love or enmity, of her friends. Her husband's family had not been hostile to her, but it had been bitterly indifferent, taking no notice, making no inquiry into her condition or that of her child, and she had but small inducement to endeavour to draw closer that very loose and artificial tie which united her to the great people. It seemed to herself a sort of accidental tie, meaning so little to anybody except to herself—and to herself whose whole life it had shaped, it was no pleasure to recur

to the few years of marriage in which she had been taken so entirely out of her sphere without attaining anything else that was of pleasure or advantage to her. Sometimes she had been tempted to ask herself whether that was more than a terrible dream, a sort of fever through which she had passed, and at the end of which she had found herself back again in her native place, among the quiet scenes of her childhood, but with a different name, a changed personality, and Mab—the greatest sign of all that things were not as they had been. The Rector and his wife, however, did not take into consideration the great indifference of the family to Lady William and her child. They knew but little about the details. Mrs. Plowden for one could scarcely have got into her head that to be Lady William, to have lived in France, as well as in the great world, and to have grown familiar with many things that appeared very grand and delightful to a country lady who had never moved out of her parish, was perhaps to be rather humiliated than elevated both in one's own opinion and in that of the world. Such an idea could have found no place in her intelligence. And she had not the slightest doubt that

Lord and Lady Portcullis, if it were properly represented to them, would do their duty by their niece if not by their sister-in-law. She thought it was Emily's pride which alone stood in the way. And though her husband knew the world better, yet he, too, was of opinion that it was chiefly Emily's pride. Mrs. Swinford's thoughts on the subject were of a very different complexion, even before she had thrown that horrible uncertainty into Lady William's mind, that feeling that even her position, so modest as it was, might be assailed and turned into shame. If she had held back hitherto it was not from pride nor from fear of inquiry, but from a doubt whether it would be of the least advantage to her child to make any overtures or petition. Petition, that was the right word—and a petition which was more or less likely to be rejected, as she felt sure.

She was seated in her little drawing-room full of these doubts and questions one morning very soon after the FitzStephens' ball. It seemed impossible now that things could go on as they were. The mere fact of all that had been said on the subject shook the foundations of life. And Mab's age made a change in everything. So long as she was

a child, the obscurity of her position was of no consequence. All that was needed for her was her mother's care, and to be with her mother wherever she might happen to be; but with every day the position changed. Lord William Pakenham's child was one thing, and Emily Plowden's another. Was it her duty to let Mab grow up in the humbler region, perhaps fix her own fate in that, and settle for ever as a poor man's wife in the village, while another world might be open to her? Had she any right to bind her child to her own limited fortunes, to keep her all her life a mere pensioner on the bounty of those who ought to recognise and care for her in a very different way? But if she made any attempt to alter the position, might she not make it worse instead of better? Might she not subject herself only, and Mab, who was of more consequence, to a repulse which would be much worse than neglect, to perhaps a question even of the humble rights which had been already recognised, the right of the widow and child to a subsistence, however doled out? The thought of having to fight for those rights, to open up the secrets of her life, and prove that she had a right to her name, was an idea

intolerable to Lady William. She said to herself with a sick heart that she would rather die—she would rather die! Oh, that would be an easy way out of it; but that she should die and leave Mab behind her to fight it out, to prove her own lawful birth, her mother's honour, that was impossible. If she were to die she must climb out of her grave, she felt, to prevent that, to take the brunt upon herself, to save from such a horrible struggle the child, the little girl who did not know what dishonour was—Mab, of all creatures in the world, to have any stain upon her of any kind! Then Lady William tried to brace herself up to think that she must no longer hesitate, that for Mab's happiness she must venture everything, and prove at last, beyond any question, that whatever her fate might be there could never be in it any doubt or possibility of shame.

She was seated thinking of all this, her needlework going mechanically through her hands, her head bent, and every faculty occupied with this debate within herself, when she heard the little click of the gate which announced a visitor, and then the rap of Patty's knuckles upon the door. "If you please, my lydy, it is Mr. Swinford and a

strange gentleman. Am I to say as your lydyship's at home?"

"Did I ever tell you to say I was not at home, Patty?"

"I don't know, my lydy. You wouldn't speak to me not for two days, 'cause I let Mr. Leo come in."

"You are a little nuisance," said Lady William, which was enough to make Patty's heart dance as she rushed along the narrow passage to answer—what was not yet, however, a knock at the door.

For the two gentlemen had met Mab in the garden. Mab was very busy in the garden in the end of April. She had a hundred things to do. She had a large apron with pockets heavy with all kinds of necessities covering her dress, and a very homely hat upon her head—one of those broad articles plaited of brown rushes, which are called reed hats, and may be bought for sixpence anywhere. It was not unbecoming, though it was entirely without decoration. Mab's hair was slightly untidy from much stooping over the flower-beds, and her cheeks were flushed by the same cause. She had fortunately large gardening gloves on, which kept her hands from the soil and pricks which

were too familiar to them. Mab met the two young men as they came in. She was hurrying past with a box full of roots in one arm. But she was not in the least embarrassed by the encounter. She put the trowel which she carried in the other hand, among the roots, and stopped to speak. "I am very busy," she said. "It is beautiful this morning, isn't it? but we shall have rain before night. So it is just the very opportunity to put in my carnations. They are a little late, but I was waiting for some good kinds."

Of course, while she spoke to Leo her eyes had wandered to the other man with him, who was of quite a different kind—younger than Leo, still in the twenties, Mab thought, and not handsome; but surely she had seen him somewhere before. He was fair, like herself, with blunt features, and eyes that were blue, but not bright. In every way his appearance was quite different to that of Leo Swinford—no foreign air about him—clothes that looked much less thought of and cared for, more carelessly worn, but somehow giving, Mab could not tell how, a more perfect effect. She gave him a friendly glance, though she did not

know him. But, indeed, she did not feel at all as if she did not know him. She was confident that the face was quite familiar to her, and that she must have seen him before.

"I have brought a friend to introduce to you, Miss Mab: and I expect you to be friends at once, although you have never seen each other before."

"Have I never seen him before?" said Mab. "Perhaps you are mistaken, Mr. Leo. I am sure I know his face, though I don't know his name."

And then the young men both laughed. "I will tell you where you have seen his face—in your own glass when you dress in the morning—I am sure you never look at it afterwards. This is Lord Will Pakenham, Miss Mab, and to be sure you ought to have known each other all your lives."

"Lord Will——" Mab grew very red from the tip of her chin to the untidy locks on her forehead. "Does that mean Lord William—my father's name?"

"And I am your cousin Will," said the young man.

Mab paused a few moments longer before she held out to him her big gardening glove.

"I do not remember my father," she said, "so you cannot remind me of him. Did we ever—perhaps when we were little children—see each other before?"

"Every time," said Leo, "did I not tell you, that you have looked in the glass."

I do not know what was the effect at that moment upon Lord Will, but the impression on Mab's mind was one full of pleasure. These other people, with their clean-cut features, Leo himself, her cousin Emmy, who had the impertinence to be like Mab's own mother, who belonged to her—were a sort of reproach to the girl. But here was somebody who had a blunt nose, and eyes which were rather dull in colour, like her own, and who looked friendly, homely, as if he did not mind—who also smiled upon her in a very natural way, as if he too felt that he had known her all his life. "Stop," said Mab, suddenly drawing off her glove with her white, strong, small teeth. "This time my hand is cleaner than my glove." She caught the glove in her other hand as it fell. If she had been a year older, of course she would not have done it: and her frock was short and her manner entirely at ease. Though she had been at a dance, and

might be supposed to have come out, she was still Lady William's little girl.

"Come in to mother; she will be glad to see you," she added immediately. "I can't go into the drawing-room, can I, with all this? and I must get these put in before I do anything. Mr. Leo, please go in to mother; you know the way."

Next minute Leo was presenting Lord Will to Lady William. It was a very curious scene. She rose up in the midst of her thoughts, wondering, questioning with herself what she was to do, and heard in a moment her husband's name pronounced in her ears. The effect was so great that as she rose hastily from her chair the blood forsook her face altogether. She held by the table before her, letting her work fall out of her hand.

"Dear lady," said Leo, "we have startled you. I ought to have known."

"Whom did you say?"

"I am William Pakenham," said the young man. "I beg you ten thousand pardons. Swinford has brought me to make acquaintance with—my relations."

She sank back into her chair, and for a moment covered her eyes with her hand.

"You must forgive me," she said, "I am very foolish ; but the sound of your name so suddenly in the midst of all I was thinking——" She paused a little, and then looked up at him. A smile came upon her face. She felt like one who has looked up and, expecting to see some painful apparition, sees instead a smiling face. "You are like my Mab," she said, tears coming with a rush to her eyes.

"So Swinford tells me ; but I am not like my uncle."

Lady William did not say anything, but something in her eyes, something in the momentary tremor of her lips, seemed to say, "Thank God."

It was an exceedingly awkward, stupid, uncalled-for remark upon the part of Will Pakenham, who knew that his uncle had been a scamp, but did not know whether or not his wife might have cherished his memory all the same. There are some wives who deify a blackguard after he is gone. But the visitor was young, and this possibility did not occur to him.

"You have been living here," he said, "a long time."

It may be supposed that Lady William

was very much shaken out of her usual self-command before she would allow the stranger to take the conversation thus into his own hands, and to begin an interrogatory examination. It was not so much the suddenness of his introduction that had this effect upon her, as the bewilderment of thoughts in which she was involved when these intricacies were thus cut as by a knife, by the appearance of such an astonishing and unexpected figure upon the scene. She began now, however, to recover herself, and to realise that these questions were not at all of the manner in which she chose to permit herself to be addressed. Accordingly, though she smiled in reply, she gave no other answer, but turned to Leo, who stood by watching her, and by no means at his ease.

"You were telling us the other day of the ladies of the family," she said, with a half-reproachful smile; "but you did not tell us of Lord Will——"

How quick she was, seizing the diminutive which made the name less dreadful to her—though she had never heard it before!

"We are old friends," said Leo; "but I did not think—in short, it is years since

we saw each other. He has come on purpose to make your acquaintance, and his cousin's."

"He is very good," Lady William said, with a little bow towards him. "I have been here for many years open to a visit. And you, are you adopting any profession or service? or are you merely a gentleman at large?"

She smiled upon the young man with her usual gracious reserve; and he began clearly to perceive that questions to her were practicable no more. He answered, "Oh, Coldstreams," a little awkwardly, feeling somehow that this lady in the little cottage, whose daughter did her own gardening, and who had a little charity girl for a servant, had put him back in his own place.

"That is a great deal better than doing nothing," said Lady William; "but it is not very hard work. I thought you were all adopting professions, to work hard, you young men about town. Has your father come to town yet?"

"My father?" said Lord Will vaguely. "Oh, he's —— somewhere fishing. My mother comes up after Easter. The governor's not very fond of town."

"And your uncle John?——"

"Oh——" said the young man, colouring a little, "we thought you would be sure to see it in the papers—everybody is supposed to see everything in the papers: he died about a fortnight ago."

"Died!"

"Well, he was rather an old fellow, don't you know," said Will in an apologetic tone, "and lived hard. I don't think it was ever expected he'd have dragged on so long."

"In France," said Lady William, "there is such a thing as a *faire part*. They don't exist in England, I suppose?"

"They are hideous things in France," said Leo, with a shiver, "when you get a letter black to your elbow with a long string of names which you don't know, till you come to one little one at the end——"

"They are better, however, than no information at all."

"Oh, I hope you will not think there was any incivility meant. I myself heard my mother say that you must be informed. There was a search through all the address books, but we could not find at first where you lived. And then I volunteered——"

"To come here, of all places in the

world—next door to my cottage! How extraordinarily acute your *flair* must be, my dear Lord Will!"

"It's not that," said the young man, very red. "I knew that Swinford knew you. He wrote to one of the girls, saying what a stun—I mean that you were in his neighbourhood, and about your daughter, and all that——"

"Perhaps it was the first intimation you had of our existence," she said.

"Oh, no—no; don't think so. Besides, you are in the peerage; there can be no mistake about that."

"That is an honour I didn't think of. And so your uncle John is dead? He was a very strange man—not like any of the family——"

"Not at all like the rest of us. None of the others had ever two sixpences to rub against each other. He has died leaving a great fortune."

"A great fortune!" said Lady William, startled.

The young man looked as if he had said more than he intended. "A—a good deal of money," he said. "I don't mean a great fortune as people think of fortunes

nowadays. A good bit of money." He paused a little as if unwilling to go further, then quickly throwing the words from him like a stone, "And no will," he said.

XI

"So," said Mrs. Swinford, "you have seen your dear aunt."

Lord Will had arrived in the afternoon, and she had scarcely seen him until dinner. After that meal — in the moment always anxiously awaited when there is any subject to talk of, when the servants had left the room—she entered into conversation. It was not by her invitation that he had come to the Hall—neither, of course, were any of the circumstances of her arranging. Sometimes, strangely enough, when there is an evil deed to be done, Providence will seem to arrange all the circumstances for it with special care—to give the intending sinner a clearer light for the resistance of temptation, or to commit him to his evil choice and inevitable doom? Thus Mrs. Swinford's whole soul was set upon the ruin of Lady William—if she could

fathom it — and the chain of possibilities seemed woven for that end.

"Yes," said Lord Will, though a little embarrassed by this description, "I have seen Lady William: and being a dear aunt whom I never saw before, and whom I did not expect to be proud of, she is the greatest piece of luck I ever came upon. You know her, I suppose?"

"Know her!" said Mrs. Swinford, with that little continuous laugh which was like the tingling of an electric bell. "Indeed I know her—to my cost."

"Ah! there's mischief in her, then?"

"There are always old sores in a friendship of twenty years. Isn't that true, mother? But whatever they are, they must be of very old date, and there can be no reason for bringing them forward now."

Thus Leo, who was evidently very uneasy, and had showed symptoms of rising from the table though his mother had as yet given no sign.

"Leo," said Mrs. Swinford, "has fallen under the fascination which a woman of that age often exercises—too old to be dangerous, but old enough to know how to make herself very agreeable."

"Oh, she's very agreeable," said Lord Will; "as for fascination, one doesn't associate it somehow with the name of an aunt, don't you know."

"That is true, but you see she is not everybody's aunt. To some people she is——"

"I should say to everybody a charming woman. Do you take your coffee downstairs to-night, mother?"

"I know what you mean, Leo: but coffee or no coffee, you must understand that I have a great deal to say to Lord Will. It may be now, or it may be later—but I have a great deal to say——"

"I need not tell you I am entirely at your disposition, Mrs. Swinford."

"You know," said Leo, almost angrily, "it is bad for your health to stay up late: and Will wants a glass of wine, or perhaps to knock about the balls a little——"

"I hope I don't look like a fellow to knock about balls—when I have so much better within reach——"

"It's always well," said Mrs. Swinford, "to know how to turn a compliment. Will you now give me your arm upstairs like a Frenchman, or wait like a Britisher till you have had your glass of wine?"

"Perish the glass of wine!" said Lord Will with a laugh, "though I hear ladies say nowadays that they like the British fashion best."

"These are strong-minded ladies, who are, I believe, the fashion, too—whom the men don't care for, and who, consequently, pretend not to care for the men."

"Well, that's very flattering to us, at least," said Lord Will. He was perhaps a little too much in the movement of his time to accept it as the gospel it has always been supposed to be, and was even a little disposed to laugh in his sleeve at the antiquated charmer who held by that old doctrine. Mrs. Swinford's air of the ancient seductrice and devourer of men was not a new thing to this experienced youth.

"It comes to much the same thing," said Leo, "for the Frenchmen adjourn for their cigarette after they have reconducted the ladies. Come, mother, let him be English for to-night. I have something to say to him, too."

"My son," said Mrs. Swinford, with the blandest smile, "Lord Will shall choose between us. I am not going to exercise any pressure, or pull against you."

The natural result, of course, was that in a minute or two more Mrs. Swinford was established in the great drawing-room in her favourite chair, just within reach of the influence of the blazing, cheerful fire, amid the banks of flowers and pleasant twinkling of the lights, with Lord Will before her, at her feet.

"We need not detain you, Leo," she said, with a nod and a smile, "I know your liking for this hour by yourself."

"I have no choice of one hour more than another by myself," said Leo, "and I, too, prefer the company of my guest to my own."

"Go, dear boy," she said, kissing the tips of her fingers. "I prefer that you should not remain: I have a great deal to say, and it is grave. You can say your say afterwards. At present, I don't want to be contradicted. It puts me out."

Leo looked at her with an earnest remonstrance in his eyes, but she continued to nod and smile at him, waving him away with that action of her arm which had once been so graceful and playful. Leo had been brought up to think all his mother's movements graceful, and herself the most distinguished of women. But there was a painful sense of unwilling ridicule in his

mind as he looked back at her waving him away, placed in the most careful pose in the great chair, and with the young man, much perplexed between curiosity and embarrassment, and a sense of ridicule, too, in the low chair at her feet. He withdrew into the shade beyond the pillars, but he did not go away. His mother could still see him moving in the partial dark, standing staring at a half-seen picture, or taking up and throwing down again book after book.

"We are not to be left quite alone," she said, shrugging her shoulders; "Leo acts sheep-dog. It is a new rôle for him. But whether it is in my interest or yours, Lord Will, I cannot tell."

"There can be only one of us who is in any danger," said the young man.

"I might say that was enigmatical still: but I will receive it as I am sure it is meant, and I congratulate you upon a very pretty turn of speech. Few young Englishmen deserve that. My Leo I used to think—but he is getting heavy in England, as most young men do."

To this Lord Will, who was much intent upon the revelations to be made to him, was prepared with no reply; and serious as this

old woman's meaning was, and fatal in intent, she was nevertheless half disappointed that he did not continue a little the badinage with which she would have been pleased to preface what she had to say. She had an eye to serious interest even in desiring to prolong this moment. For no man likes to see his old mother imitating the coquette, and it might have resulted in sending Leo away.

"I think I heard you say—and you must pardon me for interfering with your family affairs—that there was a question of money involved in your coming here to see after these unknown relations?"

"Yes," said Lord Will, straightening himself up with relief; "there is money. My uncle John died the other day, rich, and without a will. There were only two other brothers, my father and my uncle William. In that case, uncle William's heirs would come in for half the estate." He stopped with a little embarrassment. "And my father was of opinion—my mother thought—— It seemed a little hard perhaps that people we know nothing of—and then, for his rank, and with all he has to keep up, my father is a poor man."

"So you came to see——?"

Whatever her own motives might be, Mrs. Swinford had no thought of letting off a culprit of another kind. The young man grew red under her searching eye. "You thought it a pity," she went on, "that the money you could spend so much better should be wasted upon a couple of insignificant women—who perhaps had never heard, never knew that they had any claim to it, so would have been none the worse?"

"You take me up too sharply," answered Lord Will. "I don't think I meant anything like that. I meant that it was best to see something of them—to know something. My father has given Lady William an allowance all along. I don't know that he was compelled to do it. He has not abandoned his brother's widow. We thought that perhaps——"

"I will not ask what you find so much difficulty in putting into words. What would your father say to any one who gave him a chance of proving—that Emily Plowden was not William Pakenham's widow at all?"

She had lowered her voice, but yet spoke with such a keenness of meaning that she was heard further than she intended. Leo

M 2

came striding out of the dark where he was, calling out in a voice of indignation, "Mother!" She turned to him and waved her hand quickly, threateningly, without any of the former consciousness of a gracious pose.

"Go away!" she cried, "go away, go away! What I am saying is not for you. Go away, Leo Swinford, or you may hear something you will like still less—go away, go away!"

"Swinford," said Lord Will, standing up, "this you see is too serious to be suppressed. Whether it's fact or not, don't you see I must hear out what your mother has got to say?"

Leo did not make any reply. He retired again to the darker part of the room, but instead of lounging about drew forward a chair almost ostentatiously, and placed himself therein.

"I see," said Mrs. Swinford, with a laugh, "the Devil's Advocate—on the part of his client. That will not make any difference. Would you like me to tell you how these two came together? I can do so in every detail."

"The question for me is," said Lord Will,

after a pause: for to tell the truth, being a young man with a clear view of his own interests, but no wickedness in him, nor desire to harm his neighbours—at least no more than was essential to benefit himself—he was a little frightened by the gleam of devilry in Mrs. Swinford's eyes; and he was well enough aware—as people in society are aware of everything of the kind—that there was something about Mrs. Swinford herself which had kept her out of England for so long. "The question for me is simply about the marriage. If there is scandal there is no use in raking up old scandals; besides, whatever happened before, if she is his wife and the girl his child, nothing else matters to us. I am sure it would be all very interesting—but you see——"

"I am not going to rake up old scandals," Mrs. Swinford said, "but as it all happened within my knowledge—— She was here—a pretty little country girl, nothing more. She has immensely improved—quite, quite a different creature. A girl I had taken a fancy to. I am not sure that she did not teach Leo a little. That was her standing, the daughter of the parish clergyman."

"That I am sure she did not," said Leo

from behind; "you forget that I had a governess, mother."

"Oh, you are there still, old Truepenny! You seem practising for the ghost in *Hamlet*, Leo. No, decidedly I cannot go on while he is there. It shall be for another time. To-morrow you will come to me in my boudoir before you go away."

Lord Will looked round to his friend with an appealing air. Then going up to him, "Swinford," he said, "like a good fellow, let me hear it all now. I must know it."

"In order, if you can, to keep what is theirs from two helpless women?"

"I want to keep nothing that is theirs from any one," said the young man, with an angry flush.

"And yet it appears this is what you came here for. But forewarned is fore-armed. Yes, you shall hear it all now; I will not interfere."

"Is he gone?" said Mrs. Swinford, "really gone? Leo is the most scrupulous and delicate of men. He hates your talk of the clubs, gossip and scandal, as he calls it. If I had brought him up in England would it have been so? Shut the door, and draw the curtain, Lord Will. I have

the temperature kept up as well as I can, but there are always cold winds about." She shivered a little and drew round her a film of a white shawl that had been hanging over her chair. "Now come back and put yourself there. Now I may speak my mind."

"You must know," she went on after all had been done as she ordered, "that your uncle William was a great deal here in this house—a very great deal—it was a kind of home to him. I cannot say that I myself remarked that he had been attracted by Emily Plowden, but I have told you that she had a certain bread-and-butter prettiness. I do not say *beauté de diable*, for it was neither *beauté* nor had she enough in her for the devil to have anything to do with it. Youth alone sometimes attracts a man. *Enfin*, I never saw anything of it: but one evening, nay, it was pretty late—he came to me"—she paused a little and drew a long breath—"to tell me—it was a confused story—something about having committed himself. Mr. Swinford, Leo's father, was a little like Leo, but more English, more rigid. He burst in while this was being explained to me, took up a false idea,

got what you call the wrong end of the stick——" She spoke not with her usual ease, but with strange breaks of breathlessness. "Enough, he got it all wrong, completely wrong from beginning to end, and stormed and made a scene. And when he understood that it was Emily who was concerned—Emily had always been a great favourite," with the electrical tinkle running through her words, "he insisted that a marriage should take place at once. She left our house late that night, escorted by your uncle: and what happened I cannot tell. I never met her again except in Paris, where she was called Lady William, but saw no society, except the sort of men among whom your poor uncle, by that time heartbroken and misunderstood——"

"But why heartbroken—if he had been in love with her?"

"You are an innocent young man," said Mrs. Swinford, tapping him on the shoulder with her fan. "Oh, a very innocent dear boy! You don't think what a man like that would feel with a creature like her—a country girl tied to him, and no doubt leading him a life! She kept him—from saying a word to me, watching over him

like a cat over a mouse. He was burning to tell me—something; I know not what. My husband also was much prejudiced, and would not let us meet. So that I never heard his secret, if there was a secret, as I suppose there must have been. I have never seen her again till I saw her last month, shining as Lady William, and believed in by all the country folk—taking precedence," Mrs. Swinford cried with her little laugh, throwing up her fine hands, with all her rings flashing, "upon next to nothing a year."

"But she was acknowledged by my uncle as his wife."

"She was called Lady William among the sort of *demi-monde* they lived in. But what happened between the time she left my house and the time I saw her there——"

"Do you mean to say that my uncle eloped with this young lady, Mrs. Swinford?"

"My dear Lord Will, you are young, but you know the world. They left the house together, late at night. I tell you, quite late, after midnight. He, a man who was known to be—well, not the safest for women: and she a country girl of nineteen—oh, very well able to take care of herself, but as silly

and ignorant as they usually are: and—I know no more."

Mrs. Swinford threw up her hands again, with the dazzling rings. There was a thrill and tremble in her whole frame with the excitement of the story, which was so elaborately false yet so nearly true. The young man had not seated himself a second time. He stood leaning upon the mantelpiece, his head bent, looking down upon the blazing fire.

"And you?" he said, "you allowed a girl to go out of your house like that—a girl, unprotected?"

"What could I do?" said Mrs. Swinford. "I was not her keeper, neither was I in command of affairs. I tell you that my husband insisted——"

"For the marriage, you said, for a marriage—that was very different."

"Ah, you are *difficile*! And she, a hot-headed girl full of her own attractions, do you think she would be restrained——"

"From leaving home with her lover in the dead of night?"

"Her lover!" cried Mrs. Swinford, with the tingling laugh; "her lover!"

"Was he not her lover? For heaven's sake say what you mean."

There was a little pause again, through which her laugh ran on, as if she could not stop it when once it had begun. Lord Will was the first to speak. He said: "All this is very curious and dramatic and strange; but the one question of my uncle's marriage is, after all, the chief thing. I don't think my father ever entertained any doubt. It is in the peerage——"

"That is no proof," said Mrs. Swinford sharply.

"I know; but still—my father was sent for at his death. There was no suspicion. I have heard that it was a *mésalliance*, but that is all I have ever heard."

"Your father arrived when he was dying, had no communication with him, nor had any of his true friends. She kept them away. Lord Will, perhaps we have talked on this question long enough; it is no matter to me, it is only you who are affected. If there is money involved it is of the more consequence. You will require proof of the marriage before you do anything further. That is all you have to do. Ask her to send in her certificates, child's birth, and all that. Women of that class are very wary; they generally see after their papers. I have thought it over; I

thought it all over before I made up my mind to speak to you. I felt that I could not allow what might be a great wrong to be done to the family of one who was once a dear friend——"

Mrs. Swinford put her handkerchief lightly to her eyes; it was scarcely substantial enough to have imbibed one tear. And there were perhaps other reasons why tears would have been out of place; but, had they existed at all, they would have been not dew, but fire.

XII

Lord Will was greatly impressed, as may be supposed, by that interview with Mrs. Swinford. When he joined Leo downstairs he had very little to say. He had not the heart to play a game at billiards, but knocked the balls a little vaguely, and took the refreshment which was given to him while he puffed at his cigar. "I say, Swinford, your mother and this aunt of mine don't seem to hit it off," he said.

"Don't they?" said Leo. "I don't know, indeed; they were great friends once."

"Which makes women hate each other all the more when they fall out."

"Does it?" said Leo. "You seem to know so much. I am older, but my knowledge is much less."

"By Jove!" said Lord Will. "You ought to have learnt a thing or two," and

then he became suddenly silent, thinking it would be very difficult if he were called upon to explain himself. Leo did not ask any questions, but he was not indifferent to what his friend said.

"I think you should not take anybody's opinion," he said. "If you want to know about your aunt, go and see her for yourself."

"I've done that, thanks to you, Swinford; and I thought her stunning—that's the truth. But you see there's money in it, and we're not to call rich at Pakenham. It would be a deal pleasanter for my father to keep all Uncle John's money than to divide with a lady who perhaps has no real right. Don't jump up in that way—I think her stunning. But still you know that's a very queer story of Mrs. Swinford's. Uncle Will was no end of a bad old man, I've always heard. Why mightn't he do that as well as the rest?"

"I do not know," said Leo, who had grown pale, "what your respected uncle is supposed to have done. He may have been the greatest reprobate that ever lived; but I do not see how that furthers your case. I presume there must have been two of them before it would do you any good; and the

man who will endeavour to cast a blemish upon that lady—well, I may say he will have to do with me first."

"Swinford! for goodness' sake don't take up that tone. Why, what have you to do with it? Do you mean to challenge me? These are your French ways—you know as well as I do they're no go here."

"The more's the pity, when it is a question of injuring a woman!" said Leo, whose moustache had taken a warlike twist, and every nerve in his person seemed strung.

"I don't want to injure her; but if you think fifty thousand pounds or so—that's a nice bit of money to hand over for no motive but sheer love of justice—if it should turn out perhaps——"

"If what should turn out?"

"Well—that perhaps they had no real right. I don't mean that it would be their fault. She might have been taken in, and never known. I've always heard he was a horrible old scamp, up to everything—and would have cheated you as soon as look at you. It would be nothing wonderful if he had cheated a girl who, I suppose, was fond of him. A woman will be fond of anything that notices her, I believe. And fifty

thousand pounds is a big bit of money to throw away."

"Well, my friend," said Leo, "I am quite well aware that fighting is, as you say in England, no go; but I am bound also to allow that it is a farce in France, and that if it were ever so serious and real it is not a way to decide a question like this. However, let us try, if not to decide it at least to throw some light upon it."

"Oh, that's easy enough done, old man," said Lord Will. "You needn't trouble yourself. She has a solicitor, I suppose, and he will have to send in all the papers to our man, and they'll manage it between them. Of course, if our fellow has a hint that there is anything irregular he will be more particular. That's more or less what I came for, don't you know: to see what she had heard about old John, and so forth, and what she expected and——"

"What you say," said Leo, "sounds as if you meant—that you were to try whether she could be made to be content with less than her rights—with anything that it was thought well to give. I don't suppose that is what you mean."

"It's kind of you to add that much,"

said Lord Will, who had stopped in his amusement of knocking about the balls, which he had been doing savagely, to stare in a threatening way at his friend. Then he threw down the cue and began to walk up and down the hall. "Swinford," he said after a while, coming back to the table, "do you know that is, I believe, exactly what I was intended to do? I knew it in a kind of a way, but I never put it into words. I believe they thought she might have been put off with a thousand pounds or two, as if it had been a legacy."

"But your lawyers—I suppose they have a character to lose—would not have consented."

"Oh! there's no saying what lawyers will consent to when they're on your side. I note what you say, about having characters to lose. I suppose you think that we—haven't much, perhaps."

"I did not mean that," said Leo briefly.

"Well, perhaps you will now—but that would be a mistake. We're none of us lawyers. Don't you know that people sometimes take up an idea that looks quite allowable until you put it into words? Here's a woman living quite by herself in a

corner, wanting very little money. And the governor, you know, has been making her an allowance all this time. What can she want with a lot of money like that? It would only worry her, make her think, perhaps, she could set up in a different way of living, and bring her to grief in the end. And she as good as owes the family her allowance all these years, which my father wasn't any way compelled to give. D'ye see? Well, it doesn't sound very high-minded, I allow, but it's very plausible. It would be no end of use to us—fifty thousand pounds, or say forty-five with five thousand or so off to her——"

"Oh! you mean to be so liberal as that!"

"By Jove! don't drive me to it, or I may—— Look here, don't let's quarrel, Swinford. It's so caddish. I never thought of the business, I tell you, from your point of view. It sounds very plausible. It's quite possible the lawyers wouldn't have stood it; I don't know. They never thought of the law, nor that she had any natural right, don't you see, to old John's money. They knew very well he would never have left it to her, when he knew how

heavily the governor was dipped and all that. I fail to see even now what harm there was in it. The allowance, of course, would be continued, and five thousand pounds is as much to a woman living like that, as fifty is at home. It would have been an enormous windfall; that is what my mo—I mean what my people thought."

Leo Swinford had a mind which was very tolerant, and he wanted of course, now he had calmed down a little, to make the best of it. He nodded his head, and said: "I allow that perhaps it was plausible; but I presume it would be felony all the same."

"Felony," said the other with a stare of astonishment—the word seemed to puzzle him. "The governor is the head of the family," he said vaguely, which somehow seemed a reason.

"It would be defrauding one of the heirs of an intestate person of her just share. The heir would be Mab, I suppose, not her mother."

"Oh," said Lord Will, quite confused; what between the transference of the heirship, the inattention of his friend to his plea that his father was the head of the family, which to himself seemed to be a condition of

importance, and the extremely big word that Leo had used, this young man, who was not clever, but who was not at all a bad fellow notwithstanding the mission in which his dull intelligence had not seen any harm, was quite bewildered, and did not know what to think.

"Yes," said Leo, "I don't know much about English law, but Mab no doubt would be the heir; and any reasoning brought to bear upon her to make her accept a portion of her natural right in place of the whole, would be the same, I presume, as if you had stolen so much from her."

"Oh, stolen! rubbish!" cried Lord Will; then he explained ingenuously, "there was to be no reasoning brought to bear; I was to inform them simply that Uncle John had left—a legacy."

"That would have been what I believe is called in English—lying."

"Swinford! you mean, I think, to make me forget that I am your guest, in your house."

"In French," said Leo, taking no notice, "it is called *mensonge*, and has sometimes interpretations more or less favourable. When you save your mother's reputation or your

father's honour, as it is called, *mensonge* is the word, and you are not judged too severely; but I have always heard that in England to lie was the worst offence."

Lord Will was a little stupid, and therefore very placable. But this stung him to the quick. He knew what a lie meant, and though he felt a resistance and profound objection in himself to accept that dreadful word as representing his action, still, he felt there was a horrible resemblance between his intentions and that theory. Certainly the legacy would have been a lie. He did not see that though he had come to say this, he had already in the frankness which was far deeper down in his nature than any intention of guilt, committed himself to the actual truth. No consciousness of that fact softened his sensations. What Leo said was true. He had come not only to say but to act a lie.

"You're tremendously severe," he said. "I should knock you down by rights for hinting at such a thing."

"Yes, you might," said Leo, "and you could if you liked. You are bigger than I am; but I don't see what difference that would make."

"I don't either," said Lord Will. And then there was a pause; he was not clear enough in his mind to stop there. "But if this," he said, "that Mrs. Swinford tells me is true——"

"What did my mother tell you?"

"Well! you ought to care more about what she says than about any other woman's pretences. She says that it's very uncertain whether they were ever married at all. Look here, don't you know, it isn't me, it's your mother. She says they went off from her house together, eloping, as far as I could make out, in the middle of the night: and that the next time she saw them, she—this lady—was with my uncle in Paris and called Lady William. That's all. Of course, if it was a marriage she'll be able to prove everything about it; but if not, it does seem a little hard, doesn't it, that those fifty thousand pounds of old John's money should be lost? And you must remember, Swinford, it is your mother who says so, it is not I."

Leo was silenced by this speech. He had not been prepared for so bold a statement, nor that Mrs. Swinford would interfere in such a way as this. Whence had she derived this hate against her old friend?

His mind went back easily to the period when Emily Plowden was the pet of the house. He had only been a child, indeed, but a child remembers every detail which older people forget. And he remembered more vaguely, yet well enough, to have heard his father speak of Lady William after their establishment in Paris. Leo had not known very much of his father, who was a reserved man, and not demonstrative to the boy, who was his mother's toy and darling, a little drawing-room puppet, everything that an English father would most dislike in his son. Leo was aware of all this now, and exaggerated it, as was natural, his own later conduct in life having been revolutionised more or less by compunctions and repentances in respect to his father. He could not tell how it was that in a moment the image of that father leaped into his mind. It seemed to him that he could almost see the little scene —the ornate suite of rooms in Paris, his mother lying back scornful and splendid in a great chair, his father walking up and down in high indignation and something about Lady William on his lips. What it was he did not remember, but that his father had spoken in respect, he was sure. The recol-

lection came to his mind like an assurance and pledge that all was well.

"You must take care," he said, taking the cue which Lord Will had thrown down, and beginning in his turn to torture the balls, "that the wish is not father to the thought. When it is for one's interest that a thing should be, it is so easy to persuade oneself that it is."

"That is not my case, Swinford. I did hope I might have made something of the business; but to have it settled for good and all in this way was never in my thoughts. The governor himself never knew, nor any one. I don't believe he ever suspected——"

"And yet you are certain, all at once?"

"Well, not certain," said Lord Will; "but when a lady, a friend of the woman, with nothing in her mind but justice, I suppose——"

"My mother," said Leo, "has told you nothing from her own knowledge. She informs you of a possibility of wrong. Your own father was on the spot; he went over when his brother died, but he suspected nothing; and my father, a man of the highest honour, though I did not know him as I ought, suspected nothing. Take care how you let a mere insinuation—a doubt——"

"It was your mother who made it, Swinford."

Leo was very pale, and an angry cloud came over his countenance. He turned round with an impulse of indignation towards the young man who forced this upon him. "My mother," he said, "may be mistaken; she is human, like the rest of us. In the meantime, I think you are showing little knowledge of human nature, Pakenham. Do you think that lady whom you saw to-day could have lived as she has done for all these years under a burden of shame? and could look as she does if she knew that she might be found out any day?"

"Women are dreadful hypocrites," said Lord Will. "They can face things out in a way no man could do. Why, I've seen at home how things can be faced out—and no doubt so have you, too."

"She is not of the kind to face things out."

"Oh, I quite acknowledge she's a stunner, and all that. Reason the more why she should hold her own, and refuse to understand if a fellow dared to put a question—oh, not that I should ever dare to do that. I'm no more a coward than most other people,

but say to a woman like that that I believed she wasn't rightly married, I'd sooner jump into the river any day with a bullet at my heel."

"Which means simply that your inner man—the better part of you—is aware of the fact, which, for your interest, you would like to deny: that is all about it. I advise you to drop the idea, like a hot potato, as they say here. It is not true."

"Prove that it isn't true, and I'll not say another word."

"I prove it by simply pointing to the lady in question," said Leo hotly.

"Oh, that! but even if I were to take that view, she mightn't know, herself. She might be deceived as well as the rest."

A look of sudden alarm came upon Leo's face. Lady William was a person of high intelligence, but she was not a woman of the world. In the quick look he gave upward, in his way of returning to his aimless play, and the impatience with which he struck again the innocent balls, sending them coursing to every corner, the trouble of his mind might be guessed. This gave his visitor fresh courage.

"You needn't fear, Swinford," he said,

"that I'll bully a—person like that. Whatever her position may be, there's nothing common about her, that's clear. I'll give our man a hint. Get it all clear about marriage and all that, and the proof of the child's birth and so forth—all in the way of business. You may trust me for that: not a word to her, but just what's necessary between the two solicitors, don't you know. I think now I'm going to bed."

"I advise you," said Leo, taking care not to see his companion's hand stretched out to him, "to be careful how you discount your hopes. Do not count your eggs, as they say here, till they are hatched."

"You mean the chickens: and I should not dream of putting the fifty thousand pounds in my own pocket. Why, man alive, it's not for me! I shan't get twenty thousand farthings of it, nor anything like that."

"Ah, then you are hopeless, for you will feel yourself disinterested," said Leo, so busy with the balls that once more he missed seeing Lord Will's hand stretched out.

"I say, Swinford, there's no ill-feeling, I hope."

"Why should there be any ill-feeling?" said Leo, raising his eyes for a moment with

a benign but too radiant smile. He turned to the balls again the next moment as he said lightly with a wave of his cue, "Good night."

It is confusing, it must be allowed, to a plain intelligence, to have one member of a family force information of the most serious kind upon you, while another avoids shaking hands with you because you believe it. Such things happen, no doubt, in the world, but they are rare, and Lord Will went upstairs to his room in a very uncomfortable state of mind, not knowing which he should depend on of those two conflicting powers. Leo remained for some time after, still knocking about the balls. Morris, with whom his master in the dearth of other companions had sometimes played an occasional game, hung about in prospect of a call. But Morris was disappointed, though it was perhaps an hour later before Mr. Swinford left that uninviting occupation. He went on with the gravest face in the world, but very devious strokes, evidently as indifferent to what he was doing as he was overwhelmingly serious in doing it. The click of the balls and of his steps round the table gave a curious sound in the midst of the silence of

the great house. Such sounds say more of solitude than the most complete stillness, and Leo's countenance was as grave as if he had been playing, like a man in an old legend, with some unseen being for his own soul.

XIII

It is not to be supposed that during this period the visits of Mrs. Brown, the schoolmistress, to her friend at the Hall, who was so like yet so unlike her — so unlike in personal importance—so superior in position, and yet so strangely resembling—should have ceased. There were no other two persons in all the precincts of Watcham so evidently belonging to the same world and species, and yet there were no two more separate in all those externals that distinguish life. Mrs. Brown's visits were almost all paid in the evening, sometimes very late, sometimes at that hour before dinner when Mrs. Swinford was known to receive no one. But there was no bar at any time against the entrance of this privileged visitor. On the evening which Lord Will spent at the Hall Mrs. Brown came late, while dinner was going on. She had an entrance of her own

by which she preferred to come in, a door which gave admittance to the servants' quarters, but which was always open, and spared the schoolmistress the intervention of Morris, whom she did not dislike to see now and then, and metaphorically put her foot upon with the pride of a superior knowledge which he could not understand. But this malicious gratification, though she enjoyed it occasionally, was not enough to make up for the disadvantage of having her movements known and chronicled, and it suited her character and habits better to have a mode of access absolutely free and beyond control. She was so swift and subtle in her movements, and so fortunate, as the clandestine often are, in finding her passage free, that on many occasions she had glided through the great house, mounted the great stairs, and appeared noiseless in the ante-room occupied by Julie, the maid, without an individual in the house being aware that she was there. It had so happened on this particular night when even Julie was out of the way. Mrs. Brown came in noiseless, slightly breathless, having hurried upstairs, and just escaped meeting a strange young man, whose wide shirt-front indicated him in the partial dark-

ness of the corridor as if he had carried a light, but whom to her surprise she did not know. A woman with her wits so much about her, knew by sight by this time everybody in the neighbourhood who was likely to dine with Leo. She avoided him by a rapid step aside, and consequently she was a little out of breath when she arrived in Julie's room, where there was no one, a dereliction of duty that might have cost Julie her place had it been known. Mrs. Brown looked round her with a nod of satisfaction as she put off the heavy veil in which she was accustomed to wrap herself on these visits. She went into the inner room, and looked round with an even more vivid look of satisfaction. Mrs. Swinford's luxurious room was as she had left it in the perfection of silent repose and comfort—soft light, soft warmth, everything that the most refined suggestion of luxury and ease could command. Mrs. Brown gave a sigh, and then a laugh. She said to herself, "How little a difference would have made me like this!" and then she said, "What a bore it would have been!" The laugh suited her better than the sigh. It called forth a twinkle of mischief and lurking vagabondism in her

eyes. She then lay down on Mrs. Swinford's sofa, put back her head upon the cushions, took up first one book, then another, and read a page or two. Then she threw them down one after another, and looked round the room again. How pretty it was! Her eyes lingered for a moment here and there on the pictures, the little graceful bronzes, the prevailing ornament, the lights, carefully planned to the advantage of the decorations. And then a strange shadow came over her face. Good heavens, to lie here, and remember! she said. Perhaps in her energy of feeling, these words were said aloud. At least, they brought in Julie, who had in the meantime returned to her room, not suspecting the presence of this visitor, and who peeped in suspicious, half-terrified, with her hand on her breast. "C'est vous, Madame?" she said, with a look of mingled terror and relief.

"Who else should it be, unless a thief?" said Mrs. Brown. "But as it might have been a thief and not me, you know, you ought not to be absent, *ma chère.*"

Julie clasped her hands and entreated that Madame would not say anything. "This is not the house for thiefs," she said.

"On the contrary, it is just the house. Don't you know all the robberies of jewels are done when the family are at dinner?" Mrs. Brown rose from the sofa and took a low chair beside the fire, where she continued to sit when she had dismissed Julie much alarmed by the admonition. Many thoughts went through her mind while she waited, and she had a long time to wait. She compared her own vagabond lot, now up, now down, which she had led after her own wild fancy—the life rather of a man than of a woman — with this beauty and luxury, with a shudder of pity going over her. The pity was not for herself, but for the other woman shut in, in this gilded cage to —— remember! The pictures on the walls, the carefully arranged lights, the unchangeable surroundings, all luxury and brightness, affected her like a spell. Good heavens! to sit there day after day, evening after evening, and remember! Mrs. Brown thought of her own little rooms which it had given her pleasure to arrange and decorate in a manner which she felt to be fictitious and out of character, but which amused her all the same, and which she laughed at, having done it, with a full consciousness that

it was trumpery, and that the trumpery was out of place, as a woman who knew better could not fail to see. "Ah, well!" she said to herself, "I'd rather have my trumpery that I can throw away any day, and probably shall some day, and that I can run away from when I like, when it gets too absurd." And then there were the books: French novels, going over and over with fantastic variations the one story—the story of (so-called) love—that is, the complicated ways by which two people, generally old enough to know better, are brought into the relations of intrigue or passion with each other—which ends badly, either in the death of one or the disgust of both: and so *da capo*, always beginning over again. "Good heavens!" said Mrs. Brown to herself again, "how can she go on day after day, day after day, reading *that*—and remembering!" The schoolmistress had no objection to a French novel of this class herself now and then; and reading only now and then—being within reach of such indulgences only now and then—naturally she got only the best, the ones that had wit and genius in them. But the unhappy woman who lived upon that food for ever! What garbage, what insipidity of

nastiness must go through her hands! The poor Bohemian whose life was a continual scuffle (chiefly of her own choosing) looked upon this unvarying luxury, ease, and wealth, with a horror and wonder which it would be difficult to describe. "Good heavens!" she repeated to herself; "why doesn't she take a little chloral and be done?"

Mrs. Swinford gave a start of pleasure when, sweeping into her room in those long and splendid robes which were more fit for a Court than for a country house of so little distinction as the Hall at Watcham, she perceived Mrs. Brown sitting by the fire. It was, perhaps, the only event which could have lighted up her face with pleasure. She was cross, excited, full of the impatience and exasperation of effort which she felt to be at least only half successful; and Julie had perceived by her first glance at the lines on her lady's brow that her evening's task to undress, and soothe, and persuade into calm and sleep this agitated and disturbed old woman would be no easy one. "You come at the best time. You always know when I have need of you," Mrs. Swinford said, letting herself drop, as was her wont, into Mrs. Brown's arms. The very passiveness of the embrace

was a habit—a habit of reliance and expected help which had never failed. If such a thing as affection had ever been in Mrs. Swinford's heart it was this other woman, so like her, and so unlike, who was its object.

"I see you are got up for conquest," Mrs. Brown said.

"Conquest! I am dressed as usual. There was one guest at dinner—an insignificant boy. You can leave us, Julie, till I ring. A boy, but with such a name! What do you think? A nephew—Lord Will they call him fortunately, or it would have been too much."

"A nephew——! of——"

"Do you need to inquire? Then you are growing dull, dull as your surroundings. You who used to understand everything *à demi-mot*!"

"I understand. I almost met him on the stairs. I thought there was something familiar in his face. And what does he want here?"

"Is it necessary to ask? Might he not come to see me, or Leo, whom he knows? But no, no, Artémise, I will not deceive you. He has come to find out about that woman—her rights to his name—which she has none,

having stolen it, as you know; and to some money that has fallen in, do I care how! He could not have come to a better quarter. I gave him some information."

"What information?" said Mrs. Brown, sitting up in her chair.

"I told him all that I knew. You will please to remember it is all I know: that she left the Hall hastily at midnight, that I met her after in Paris bearing his name." Mrs. Swinford, too, sat upright, with a colour in her cheeks and a fire in her eyes that recalled something of the beauty of old to her worn face. "What do I know more? Nothing," she said, with a movement of her hands which made the rings upon them flash and send out rays like sparks of light.

"Ah! you told him that?"

"There is money in the question," said Mrs. Swinford, leaning forward and speaking low, "and their object is to find out that she has no rights. He took my hints like milk; they were balm to him. Fancy so many thousand pounds—I know no details—and if not to her they will go to him. Is not that worth the trouble?"

"To the man, perhaps, Cecile—but why to you?"

"To me much more than to him," she said, with flashing eyes.

"Why?"

"You are stupid to-night," said Mrs. Swinford coldly; "not for a long time, for many years, have I found you so before."

"Because," said Mrs. Brown, "this that you have said is, as you are aware, not——"

"Your scruples are engaging, they are beautiful, they are something to put in a story-book," said the lady. "You to stand for that! You, who——"

"It is better not to go too far. I have done a great many reckless things. I am a reckless woman altogether, and have not cared what became of me for many a long day: but I have never done anything like that. Ah yes, I have scruples; every one has, you even, if one knew where to look for them."

"It was you," said Mrs. Swinford, "who made the suggestion at the first."

"To save you, Cecile, to save you."

"I should have found some other way to get out of it. There was never a difficulty yet but I found a way of getting out of it. I should have done so then, had you not come forward to say it was Emily—Emily,

a child, a nobody—whom he loved, and that I was his confidante. I can see it all now. He had no escape. Artémise, I have loved you better than any woman all your life, and you repaid me by taking away from me—handing over to that girl——"

Her eyes were ablaze in her flushed yet withered face. Her whole frame was trembling with angry emotion. Mrs. Brown rose quickly and went to her, taking her hands, holding her fast. "It is twenty years ago," she said, "and it was to save your honour, your position, everything, Cecile—your child, your wealth, everything you had in the world."

"I can see the scene now as if it was yesterday—my husband there, blazing like white light. He never looked like that in his life but once. And *he*—confused, afraid—on the other side of me, trembling for me."

"And a little for himself, Cecile."

"Silence! If you say so, I will strike you. And you, with your smooth tongue—always with your smooth tongue. How many lies it must have told first to be capable of that!"

"For your sake; you know it was for

your sake. If you remember all that, remember, too, how the storm died down in a moment, and all was well."

"Well!" said the other. She leant back her head upon the breast of the woman whom she was accusing. "If it had raged itself out, and done its worst, would not that have been better than all that has followed—the bitterness and the hate, and the horror, and that girl living at my very door, to make me mad?"

"Why did you see her, Cecile? You might have ignored her altogether, forgotten her existence."

"You forget," cried Mrs. Swinford. "She is the great lady of the village—takes precedence"—she laughed out with a hysterical violence which shook her from head to foot—"precedence of me, if we were in the world together! Don't you know that? But it will soon come to an end," she added, laughing again with that electric tinkle which wore out the nerves of all who heard her. "What a good thing they are so sordid a family, those Pakenhams, loving money as other people love their children, whatever is dearest to them! She will be called on to prove every step, and she will

not be able to prove one. And then!—we shall see what the village will think of her title and her precedence then."

"You have been agitating yourself in the most imprudent, in the most foolish way. Where are your drops? Her precedence, poor thing, will not hurt you, but a long faint will hurt you. Cecile, must I call your maid to see you in this state, or will you be quiet and listen to me?"

"Give me my drops. I must not, I must not, have another attack. The doctor says so. Artémise, don't leave me, don't leave me!"

"I will, if you do not turn from this subject at once. Throw it away from you. What on earth is Emily Plowden, or Pakenham, or whatever her name is, to you? Cecile, I begin to think a woman like you never learns, and that you are no better than a fool."

While she said these words, however, Mrs. Brown was busy with the most affectionate cares, soothing the excited woman, bathing her forehead, rubbing her hands, administering the specific, loosening the elaborate dress, which made the heaving of the shrunken figure, and the strain of the emaciated throat, so much the more dreadful.

The passion calmed down by degrees, and then Julie was summoned, and the robes of state replaced by a quilted dressing-gown, scarcely less fine, but more appropriate. After this the conversation was resumed in a less exciting vein. Mrs. Swinford was perhaps a little ashamed to have betrayed the fury of her feelings even to so trustworthy a confidante.

"It is fine to see a family like that," she said, "not carried away by passion, Artémise, like you and me. Love or revenge are not in their way, nor hatred; but money, money. To secure a few thousands, they will be my instruments, or any one's, to punish a traitor. And what you are horrified to think I should want to do, for such good reason as you know, they will do for nothing at all—for money, as I say."

"Many people think money a much more sufficient reason than what you call passion," said Mrs. Brown. "And it will be well to keep your Lord——whatever you call him, from knowledge of me, for I can spoil his little transaction."

"Ah, you—you were there!"

The two women looked at each other, and Mrs. Swinford, notwithstanding her age

and her knowledge of the world, was sensible of a sudden heat rising to the edge of her hair; not the blush that comes to more innocent faces, but that burning colour of shame at a self-betrayal which she ought to have been too strong to fall into. Mrs. Brown nodded her head gravely. "You said you had no means of knowing, but you perceive that you have: and for me, I can make an end of any such pretension. He had better not come across my path."

"You would not balk me, Artémise?"

"I would balk him, as soon as look at him, and the family, bless them; and I would not bring the innocent to shame, not even for you."

"Artémise! after all we know of each other, such a pretension——"

"My dear Cecile, what I know of you is one thing, what you know of me is another. I have broken every law, especially of society; but to harm the innocent is what I have never done—at least," she added after a moment, "not in that way. And though I'd give my head for you, which is, of course, a figure of speech, I will not ruin Emily Plowden for you, and that's flat, whatever you may say."

"Don't interfere, Artémise," said Mrs. Swinford, with a sound of tears in her voice, "don't, don't interfere. Go away, and let things take their chance. No doubt she must have other evidence; I was a fool not to think of that. But don't you, who are my nearest and dearest, go against me; don't interfere. It is not, it has never been, a fit position for you, wherever you are; go to London, where I will find a home for you, Artémise."

"Do you think after standing out so long, I will consent to be dependent on you now—for a reason?" Then she laughed, changing her tone. "If you can imagine a better place to hide myself in than the Girls' National School at Watcham," she resumed, "you have very much the advantage of me."

XIV

It was not very often the Rector found time to visit his sister. They saw each other constantly at the Rectory, at church, in the village street, in all sorts of places, almost every day ; but his visits were few, especially such a visit as the present. He paused at the further end of the garden and called over the hedge to Mab, to know if her mother was alone. "I have got some business to talk over," Mr. Plowden said. "Take the trouble, will you, Mab, to see that no one comes in to disturb us."

Mab thought it curious that, thus for two days within a week, her mother should have private business with Uncle James ; but she said nothing except a ready assent to what he asked of her. "I'll come towards the gate," she said ; "I've got some things to put in on that border, and if any one comes that I can't send away, you will hear me

talking with them, Uncle James." She walked through the garden with him, so to speak, she on one side of the hedge, he on the other. "Fancy who turned up yesterday," she said; "a cousin whom, of course, I never saw before—a Lord William like my father; but fortunately they called him Lord Will."

"Lord William!" cried the Rector, "a Pakenham—a son of the Marquis! Did he come to see you, or—for—for anything special?"

"I don't know what he wanted," said Mab. "To see us, I suppose. The funny thing is, he is like me. From this you may imagine he is not a beautiful young man, Uncle James."

"I don't know why I should imagine that; I like your looks very well, my dear."

"Thank you, Uncle James," said Mab, with a laugh. "He is staying at the Hall, and I think he said that he would come back this morning, so, of course, if he comes I cannot send him away."

"I understand," said the Rector, with a countenance somewhat troubled. And he went into the little drawing-room, where Lady William rose up to meet him looking

a little anxious. "You, James!" she said. "I did not expect, especially at this hour, to see you."

"I can't see why you should not have expected me, Emily; our last interview was serious enough," he said, shutting the door carefully behind him: and then he went across the room to the window, which was open. Being so nearly on a level with the garden it would, of course, have been easy enough for any one to hear from outside whatever conversation was going on within.

"You frighten me with these precautions, James."

"There is nothing to be frightened about. You may imagine I have been thinking a great deal of what you told me the other day."

"Yes: and I heard Mab tell you the new incident."

"The appearance of the cousin? What is the signification of that, I wonder? But let us take the other, which is more important, first. Did you know my father kept a diary, Emily?"

"I have seen him making little notes in various little books: but it is so long ago.

"And you were not here, of course, when we came into the Rectory. I found a quantity of these little books in the study, little calendars and almanacs, and so forth. I didn't pay much attention to them—that is, I looked into one or two and they didn't seem interesting. Queer, when people might really make such a record important, and they put in the merest trifles instead."

"'Chronicle small beer,'" she said, with a faint smile; but she was pale with an interest much deeper than any record of public events could have commanded.

"Eh?" said the Rector, who was not literary; "but I thought it might be just possible—so I have been making a hunt through them, and I came upon something that might—that must help us."

"Thank God!" she said, clasping her hands instinctively together.

"We must not be too sanguine: and yet, of course, a dead man's diary is evidence itself in a way."

"Tell me," she cried, with excitement, "tell me what papa said."

"Nearly twenty years ago," said the Rector, with a little emotion. "It's like hearing the old man talk — with abrupt

sentences, don't you know — just as he spoke."

"What does he say? What does he say, James?"

"This is the one, I think; no, it's the next—no. I hope I haven't brought the wrong ones after all."

Lady William sat very quietly with her hands on her knee, only her fingers, which clasped and unclasped each other, showing a little the excitement of the suspense in which she was, as he drew forth one little book after another from the ample pockets of his coat. At last the right one was found, and then a minute or two elapsed before the Rector with his spectacles could find the entry of which he was in search. Lady William made no attempt to snatch it from his hand. She sat quite still with a self-enforced patience which was belied by the glitter in her eyes.

"Here it is at last — October 23rd. Would that be the date?"

She bowed her head quickly, and her brother began to divine that she could not speak. He gave her a keen look, and then returned to the book.

"'October 23rd.—Very agitating and

extraordinary night. Em. came home after midnight accompanied by woman M., and Lord W. Extraordinary explanations. Marriage immediately or not at all. Leaving England. Gave consent.' Is that right?"

Lady William moved impatiently in her chair. "If you find it in the book, it must be right."

"Ah, well, that is true, no doubt. Then comes another — '25th. — Emily married. Old Gepps. Gave her away. They left train, Paris.'"

"Is that all?"

"It is all. I suppose old Gepps is the man who performed the ceremony. Did you ever hear my father speak of any one of that name? Do you remember the man?"

"I recollect an old man with a white beard. I think I have a vague recollection even of the name."

"It is most extraordinary," cried the Rector, getting up from his chair, "that on an occasion of such importance you should not have remembered both place and name!"

"Ah! it was just because it was an occasion of such importance, and everything so dreadful and so strange."

"Emily, I have hesitated to ask you:

why in heaven's name were you married like that? What was the cause?"

She pointed towards the book with a hand that trembled. "Papa has put it down there."

"He has put down the fact, but no explanation. The explanation apparently was given to him, but not recorded. But you—why should you not tell me? A sudden marriage like that, in such headlong haste—why was it? What did it mean?"

Lady William was silent for some time, clasping her fingers and unclasping them, gazing into the vacant air. At last she said: "James, you will think me too great a fool if I say that I did not know, at the time."

"Emily," he said, with a tone so sharp and keen that it went through her like a knife, "it is a long time since, and I have a right to know. Was it—was it through any fault of yours?"

She turned her eyes to him with a look of the utmost amazement. "Fault of mine!" she said. "What could that have had to do with it—any fault of mine?"

She was a mature woman, and was supposed to know the world; but Mab herself

could not have given him a more limpid look, could not have received his questions with more surprise. The Rector, quite confused, stepped back a pace, and said, "I beg your pardon," with a humility which was entirely out of his habits. He had grown quite pale, and glanced at her with a sort of fright, terrified lest perhaps it might dawn upon her what he meant.

"I was bewildered," she said. "I was taken altogether by surprise. It was the romance that dazzled me—what seemed the romance—and all that they told me: that he had to leave England, must go, would be in danger of I know not what, yet would not go without me. And poor papa thought of —oh the folly, the pettiness of it!—the title, perhaps, and what he thought the connection. My poor father thought a great deal of connection." She smiled a little sadly, looking back with a sort of tenderness upon the weakness and folly of a time so long past. Then she drew herself up unconsciously, holding her head high. "I discovered the real meaning, but not till after. It was very bitter and terrible; but after all it is Mab's father of whom we are speaking. James, let us return to the question of most import-

ance. What is gained by this I don't see. I don't understand things of that kind."

It was very conciliating and satisfactory to Mr. Plowden that she did not understand. "It gives a clue," he said. "We must look up Gepps. He must have been a friend of my father's, and he must, of course, be in the 'Clergy List.' I have been looking up what old ones I have, but I cannot find him. I have not got that year, but it can be got, it can be got. He was an old man, you say, and he must have died, I suppose, but he cannot have taken his church and his registers with him. We must ascertain what was his church."

"It was a little old-fashioned place, very dingy, with heavy pews; a small place with an old-fashioned pulpit and canopy. I remember the look of it—and the clergyman, an old man, with a white beard."

"In the City, most likely?"

Lady William shook her head. "I knew nothing of the City—nor anywhere except the parks and the streets round about that in which the Swinfords had a house. We went seldom, very seldom, to town in those days; I never, except with them."

"It must have been in the City," said

Mr. Plowden. "What you describe settles the question. Well, then, I think now, Emily, there need be very little difficulty. Gepps must be in the 'Clergy List.' If he is living, so much the better; he may have retired somewhere. But at all events the register must exist. I will go up to town to-morrow, and find the list for 'sixty-five, and after that it will be plain sailing. All the same, how my father and you, but especially my father, could be such a fool!"

Lady William made no reply. To have her mind so thrown back upon that wonderful tragic moment of her life: to think of herself, the bewildered romantic girl, with all the wonderful tales poured into her ear by the flatterer by her side—that flatterer who was not the silent, disturbed bridegroom who himself said so little to explain the hot haste, the desperation of the strange wedding—was of itself painful enough and exciting. She had herself broached the subject to her brother when the question opened up by Mrs. Swinford had burst upon her, but she had not then entered into it so fully as now, and her mind was shaken by all those recollections. She seemed to see the shabby

old church already, even so long ago, an anachronism among churches, with its heavy pulpit and pews and small round-headed windows, and the old clergyman with his white beard, and the complete absence of all those prettinesses with which a girl's imagination surrounds her bridal—prettinesses, however, made up for by the thrilling romance which, when the moment came, had begun to yield a little to the natural pain of the position. She remembered with what a start of alarm she had found herself consigned to the husband of whom she knew so little, who was so little like the romantic hero of such a marriage, and who—as she only began to see when the step was irrevocable—showed so little of any sentiment for her which could justify the impetuous impatience of the proceedings. She remembered the awful sensation in her mind when she looked back from the window of the railway carriage upon her father's smiling, complacent old face, enchanted by the consciousness that his daughter was now Lady William, sister-in-law to the Marquis of Portcullis, and on the mocking smile and exaggerated courtesies of Artémise: and felt everything she loved sliding from her, and

nothing left to her but the saturnine countenance opposite—the almost strange man, who if he loved her hotly had, as yet at least, shown no signs of it to herself. She did not hear her brother's voice speaking to her in the heat and hurry of her thoughts. Oh, what recollections were these! So much more real than anything that occurred to her now, so much more potent in their terror and excitement than anything that could happen. She had known nothing in all her experience, read nothing, so tragical and terrible as the feelings of that poor little bride of nineteen, as she woke up from her romantic dream, and saw her father's foolish old face so fresh and ruddy, so innocent and unconscious, just before it finally dropped out of sight to be seen no more. Perhaps it was her brother's question, though she was scarcely aware that she heard it, how could my father be such a fool? that gave the impression of foolishness, of strange, cheerful imbecility to her last view of that rosy old face.

"I repeat, Emily," said the Rector, with a little heat, "how could my father be such a fool? A girl of your age, of course, could not be expected to think of such things—

but my father!—And I suppose he knew that the man you married was not—a model of every virtue."

"He was Mab's father, James, and he was at least quite honourable, so far as I was concerned; he took no advantage—in respect to me."

"He could scarcely have been such a brute as that," the Rector said. "Well, I'll go, Emily. To-morrow I'll go to town and see if I can bring back all the papers square. Hush, what is that? Who is Mab talking to? We've done our talk, however, and it's no matter being interrupted now."

"Good morning, Lord William," Mab's voice was heard saying, perhaps a little louder than was necessary, to give her uncle the warning she had promised.

Lady William started violently at the sound of the name. She put her hand upon her breast where her heart had begun to beat loudly. "All those old recollections have upset my nerves," she said, with a little piteous smile. "Forgive me, James; it is the young man that Mab told you of, the cousin with the same name."

"Poor Emily!" he said, taking her hand in both of his. "You have, I fear, no

pleasant memories connected with it: but why, then, in the name of heaven, or the other place perhaps——"

"The other place," she said, bursting into a faint hysterical laugh. "But wait a moment, the boy is coming in."

"I thought you were going away this morning," said Mab, evidently leading the way into the house. "You need not think of shaking hands, for I am always muddy when I am working in the garden. Yes, I do a great deal of work in the garden—indeed, I'm the gardener. Patty's father gives me a hand for the heavier things, but do you imagine I would trust any one else with my flowers? Ah, it's a little too early, but if you came here in June, then you should see! It's not very big, to be sure. Mr. Leo has a great deal more space at the Hall, and I don't know how many men, but——" Mab said, ending abruptly with a little grimace (which, of course, could not be seen indoors) which said more than words.

"I dare say it's great fun working in the garden," said Lord Will, with a very serious face.

"A garden is no fun at all when you don't work in it," said Mab, "and, so far

as I've seen, most other things are just the same. They become fun if you take an interest in them, and not in any other way."

"But then Miss Mab was always a philosopher," said Leo's voice, with the faint sound in it that was not English.

"Oh, Swinford's there, too," said the Rector to his sister inside. "Don't you think, Emily, you have him a little too often here?"

"The other is staying with him," Lady William said, which was no doubt a subterfuge: but then it was very evident that she had no time to say any more.

XV

It was Leo who led the way, but the Rector was quite uninterested in Leo. His eyes followed to the other young man behind, who came in with something like diffidence, though that is not a common aspect for a young man of fashion to bear. He came in, indeed, with the air of a most unwilling visitor. He would have greatly preferred to go away without repeating his visit in the changed circumstances in which he found himself, but Leo had insisted that the visit should be paid. He shook hands with Lady William, and was presented to her brother, with the air of a man who wished himself a hundred miles away.

"I've just come, don't you know, to take my leave," said Lord Will. "I'm summoned to town. I thought that you would understand; but Swinford here said I ought to come—that is to say, I was glad to take the opportunity of saying good-bye."

"Yes," said Lady William, looking from one to another; "I should have understood, I think. It is a pity, Leo, that you gave your friend the trouble."

"Oh! delighted, of course," said Lord Will.

"I have been telling my brother," said Lady William, "about your visit: and to see one of Mab's relations is a pleasure—so un-looked-for."

"I will not say unlooked-for. I have always looked forward," said the Rector, "to making the acquaintance of the family. How do you do? And, of course, at once I perceive the likeness you spoke of, Emily. You are here on a very brief visit, it appears, Lord ——." It seemed to Mr. Plowden that to say Will would be too familiar, and to say William would affect his sister's nerves; therefore he stopped short there, and said no name at all. "You have scarcely had time to make your cousin's acquaintance," he said.

Lord Will had been quite unprepared for a man and a brother taking the part of the poor lady about whom he had been holding so many discussions. He was a little taken aback. "As a point of fact, a fellow has

so little time," he said, hesitating a little. "I came down to see Swinford—dine and sleep, don't you know—that sort of thing. Swinford's such a capital fellow to know in Paris—takes you everywhere—shows you all the swells, and that sort of thing."

Mr. Plowden had not, perhaps, very much acquaintance with the highest order of society, at least in its young and fashionable branches. To hear Lord Will Pakenham talk of swells took away his breath. He smiled, however, paternally upon the young man who was Mab's cousin and Lord Portcullis's son. He was unwilling to believe that a young man of such a family could make any pretext or tell any fibs about the plain duty of paying his respects to his near relations. "I hope," he said, "that we shall have other opportunities of seeing a little more of you. My sister, Lady William, has been for a long time established here, and all the neighbourhood would receive with pleasure any—any relation—any connection—I mean any member of such a family as yours."

Lord Will stared a little, as is the manner of his kind, but made no reply. What reply could the poor young man make? It was

so bewildering to be offered an enthusiastic welcome from the society of a village because of being related to the little gardening girl in the muddy gloves outside, that all his self-possession, which was sufficient for ordinary uses, was taken away. He gave a glance at Lady William, and espied a gleam in her eye which gave him a little comfort. There was agitation in her face, yet she saw the absurdity as well as he did. Decidedly, under other circumstances, this widow, real or fictitious, of his disreputable uncle would have been a woman not to be despised.

"But I hear," said the Rector, "that you are the bearer of bad news. Another relation, my sister tells me, has joined the majority. I had once the pleasure, many years ago, of meeting Lord John—before there was any connection between the families. And he is gone! Well, we must all follow—we have here no abiding city. It is almost fortunate for Mab that, not having known her uncle, the shock of his loss will affect her less than it would otherwise have done."

"My dear James," said Lady William, "Lord Will will excuse you from all condolence, I am sure. There can be no shock

to Mab, who has scarcely heard her uncle's name: and to the other members of the family the shock is also softened by, I believe, the joys of inheritance. For he has not carried his money with him, which is always a good thing."

"I did not think to hear, Emily, any such cynical speech from you."

"But it is true," said Leo Swinford, "and my friend has come for the reason of communicating this intelligence, *n'est-ce pas*, Will?—which Lady William did not understand, I am sure, yesterday. Lord John has died without any will: his fortune, which is all personal, is therefore divided—is not that so?—between the nearest relations: therefore, Miss Mab, on account of her father, will become——"

"Bless me!" said the Rector. He had seated himself in order to do justice to the new acquaintance who was at the same time a connection, but now he sprang to his feet. "Bless me!" he said, "an heiress! I must congratulate Mab. Emily, my dear——"

"An heiress is a big word," said Lord Will, who had sucked his cane with anything but a countenance of delight while Leo was speaking. "There's money," said the young

man, "but it would be a pity to make the mistake of thinking it's a big fortune. I told you," he said, turning to Lady William, "last night. I said there was no will."

Lady William had grown very pale. "I did not understand," she said faintly. "I was not aware—and that my Mab would come in——" The news had rather a painful than exhilarating effect upon her. She gave her brother an anxious look, then turned to the young man whose explanations were so disjointed. "It was kind, very kind," she said, with a troublous smile, "to come and hunt us up—strangers to you—to tell us this."

"Oh! as for that——" said Lord Will.

"You have no idea, dear lady," said Leo, "how disinterested, how high-minded are the golden youth in England. They will go any distance to make such an announcement, never thinking that what is given to another diminishes their own share."

"Shut up, Swinford," growled Lord Will over his cane.

"I hope," said the Rector, smiling, "that Mr. Swinford does not think this is any information to us, Emily? I hope I know

what the instinct of an English gentleman is. To a lady in my sister's position, living out of the world, who might never have heard even of the death, let alone the inheritance, that feeling is the best protection —as I hope we both know."

"Oh, sh——," murmured Lord Will. He could not say "shut up" to the Rector, but a more crestfallen and abashed young man did not exist. He sat with the head of his cane to his lips, but evidently deriving no consolation from it, when Mab, who had taken off her gardening apron and washed her hands, came in. Mab had her curiosities like other girls. She wanted to know what they were all talking of, and what was being done in the room where there were so many interesting people met together. She was by no means sure that it was not her own fate that was being decided. After all that had been said about her father's family, the sudden appearance of her cousin was too curiously well-timed to be a mere accident, and she could not help fearing that while she was busy over her carnations they might be settling the course of her future life. Mab had no idea that this should be done without

her own concurrence, or the utterance of her opinion, and accordingly, after turning it over in her mind for a few minutes, she left her flowers and hurried upstairs to make herself presentable. Such a conjunction as that of her uncle, so rare a visitor, her new unknown cousin, and Leo Swinford, her mother's counsellor, could not, she thought, have happened for nothing. But when Mab went into the room the first thing she saw was Lord Will—in whom she took a natural interest as resembling herself, and as being a relation, and a new-comer — seated in the middle of the group with a depressed and sullen countenance, his eyes cast down, and his lips resting upon the head of his cane.

"Mother," said Mab, "what have you been doing to Lord Will?"

No one had thought of Mab's appearance at this particular crisis of fate, and the mere sight of her as she opened the door sent a little thrill through the party, who were all aware of troublous circumstances involving Mab, of which she herself was entirely unconscious, and of prospects utterly strange to her, which were opening before her feet. They all turned to look at her as she stood there with the fresh morning air about her,

not beautiful, certainly, but honest and fresh as the morning, and so free from all embarrassment, so unaware either of troubles or hopes which could affect her beyond the wholesome round of every day, that even the Rector, the most ignorant of the party, felt something like a conspirator. Mab came forward quite unconscious of breaking into the middle of a strained situation. "What," she repeated, "have you been doing to Lord Will? Has he done anything wrong that you are all round about him, sitting on him like this? I'm glad I've come to see fair play."

"My dear," said the Rector, who was the only one who could speak, "you are quite mistaken. Your cousin is receiving on the contrary all our thanks for bringing some news which will be of the greatest importance to you, I hope, and will make your future more suitable, my child, to your rank."

"Oh, I thought that was how it must be!" cried Mab, in a tone of disgust. "Rank! I have no rank; and if it is this idea of recommending me to Lady Portcullis, and getting her to take me to Court and all that, which has brought Lord Will here—— Mother, let me speak; I am not a little child.

I want to judge for myself. I don't wish it, you must all know. I care not the least in the world for going to Court. I am quite happy as I am—a country girl. Lord Will is very kind if he came about that. I shall always remember it of him, that he is the only one of my father's family that has been kind; though why you should sit upon him for it—for you were all sitting upon him—I'm sure I don't know."

"I think I'd better go," said Lord Will, rising from his chair. "It's true they have been sitting upon me, though what for I can't tell—any more than I can tell why this"—he paused a little with the impulse to say little girl, but thought better of it—"this young lady should be grateful to me; for I have done neither good nor harm that I know of. But now I think I'd better go."

"Have I said anything wrong? Is it I that have broken up the talk?" cried Mab in consternation, coming to her mother's side.

"Well," said the Rector cheerfully, "perhaps we can scarcely go on with a business matter just now; but if Lord William Pakenham will do me the pleasure to come to the Rectory, which is close by——"

"I'm not a business man," said Lord

Will. "Swinford, you brought me into it, can't you get me out of it?—and be hanged to you," he said in an undertone.

"I am afraid you have broken up the consultation, Mab: but perhaps it is as well." Lady William held out her hand to the young man, who stood dangling his cane, and eager to get away. "I think we must have something to thank you for," she said, with a smile. "Of course, a piece of business is not settled by a friendly visit. I shall hear, no doubt, from the lawyers about what you have told me, or my brother will communicate with them for me. Thank you for the information, and for bringing it yourself. Good-bye."

He had been standing ready to tell her, as he took his leave, with a tone that might convey some of the suspicions that were in his mind, that the lawyers would communicate with her further. But in taking the words out of his mouth, Lady William took all the courage out of his mind. He stared at her for a moment with those heavy blue eyes, which she did not now think were so like Mab's, and touched the hand she held out with a cold momentary touch, as if he were afraid it might sting him. Mab stood by

looking on with an astonishment which slowly grew into consternation, and which burst forth as her cousin made her a stiff and slight bow.

"What is the matter?" she said, following him out. "Are you not my cousin after all? Why, you were very nice last night, and I was delighted to know somebody that belonged to me on my father's side. And they all said we were so like each other. What has gone wrong? Are you not my cousin after all?"

She went out after him as she spoke into the garden, where a little while before she had greeted him so heartily, filled with astonishment and dismay, yet with a sense of absurdity also. And the young man, who had made so abrupt an exit, was in fact rather sore in heart, feeling that he had not done himself any credit, and that he had been snubbed and "sat upon," as Mab said. Her frank surprise and regret gave him a little consolation. He turned round when they both came out into the garden from the narrow doorway. "I am just the same," he said, still somewhat sullenly, but melting, "as I was last night."

"But then," cried Mab, "why did you

call me 'this young lady'? and why did you look at mother so, and let her hand drop as if it had been a frog, and do like this to me?" Mab was not a mimic, like her cousin Florence, but the imitation she made of his stiff and angry bow was so ludicrous that he could not but laugh—stiffly. And Mab, who did not know what it was to be stiff, laughed out with all her heart, with a half childish cordial crow, which sounded into the fresh air with the most genuine tone of innocent mirth. "You had better shake hands with me after that, Cousin Will," she said.

"You are making peace, Miss Mab," said Leo Swinford, who had followed them out.

"No, I am not making peace, for we never made war," said Mab, who had given her cousin a warm grasp of the hand. And she stood at the gate looking after them with some regret. For Lord Will was young, and they were of the same blood, and he was a great novelty, something far more new than even Leo Swinford. She was unfeignedly sorry that he was going away. And she could not understand why, nor how it was that the young man who was so cordial yesterday should be so cold again now.

Lady William stood as she had done when young Pakenham dropped her hand until Leo Swinford, following his friend, had closed the door of the little drawing-room. I think she heard through the open window all that Mab said—at all events, the laugh so full of merriment and spontaneity bursting out into the pleasant air. Then she suddenly sank into the chair, and covering her face with her hands fell into a sudden burst of silent weeping. There was no sound, but her shoulder heaved with the effort to control and subdue the sudden emotion. Mr. Plowden had been standing, too, perplexed and disappointed by the stranger's sudden withdrawal, but a little consoled by the laugh which seemed to prove that there was at all events a good understanding between Mab and her cousin. He did not perceive for a moment the effect upon his sister, and it was only after the young man had gone out of the garden gate, that, turning to speak to her, he perceived the attitude of abandonment, the restrained but almost irrestrainable passion by which she had been seized. He was not so much afraid of seeing women cry as men less experienced are. But Emily had never been of the weeping kind, and the

Rector was startled and touched by the sight of the paroxysm with which she was struggling, to keep it down.

"Emily," he cried, "Emily, my dear, what is it? You're not breaking down?"

"James," she cried, but very low, suddenly lifting to him a face full of anguish and exceedingly pale, "if we should not be able to prove it; if we can't get the evidence! Oh, James, my Mab, my child!"

"Why shouldn't we be able to prove it?" he said, with half-angry calm. "Where is the difficulty of proving it? and what has that to do with it? Why, Emily, I never knew your good sense fail you before."

"My good sense!" she said, with a miserable smile.

"To be sure! Why, what is there to cry about? Such an unexpected windfall to Mab—a fortune, no doubt, though he did not tell us how much. You cut the young man short, Emily. I can't see why. He seemed a very civil young man."

Lady William raised herself up and dried her wet eyes.

"You are quite right," she said, "it is my common sense that is failing me, James."

"Failed you for a moment," he said,

indulgently patting her on the shoulder. For to be a man with a wife and daughters of his own he was very fond of his sister; and he was also agreeably excited by the sight of the second Lord William, actually one of the Portcullis family, Mab's own cousin, about whom the ladies of the Rectory, when they heard, would be so deeply excited. Mr. Plowden was anxious to convey that wonderful intelligence to them as quickly as was possible. "Well, my dear Emily," he said, "I must go. I have no doubt you've been a good deal excited this morning, and I should advise you to lie down and rest a little. And to-morrow—well, no, perhaps not to-morrow, for now I remember, I have some churchings and various other things to attend to, but the very first free day I have——"

She put her hands together beseechingly. "Oh, go at once—don't keep me in this suspense."

"My dear girl! you are frightening yourself in the most absurd way. After to-morrow, the very earliest minute that I can get away."

Lady William did not lie down and rest when her brother left her, but she went

upstairs and took refuge in her own room, very thankful that Mab had returned to her gardening. That Mab was an heiress and that "the family" were seeking her acquaintance was the news Mr. Plowden longed to tell. But Mab's mother was filled with another thought. If it could be that the search should fail! She believed more in failure than success with her experience. If it should fail, if there should fall upon Mab any cloud, any shadow of possible shame! She wrung her hands till they hurt her, but her heart was wrung more sorely still. It was a view she had not thought of before. Shame for herself would be bad enough. But for Mab! And even the possibility that Mab should turn astonished eyes upon her, should ask even with those eyes alone a question—should have such a thought suggested, even for a moment, to her mind! Lady William had borne many miseries in her not yet very long life, but in that there would be the crown of all.

XVI

It will be recollected that Mr. Osborne, the curate, ended very suddenly, and with no small amount of heat and displeasure, that walk with Florence Plowden which had so nearly decided the whole colour of his life. He had fallen in love (as people say—and, indeed, it is as good a phrase as any, for it is often by no means a voluntary action) with the Rector's daughter in spite of himself. It was so perfectly *banal* and commonplace a thing to do; the sort of thing looked for by everybody; so suitable, that bugbear of youth; so exactly what might—except by his own ambitious relations, who thought him worthy of a loftier fate—have been expected, that the young man had resisted almost fiercely the tide of being which led him to that commonplace conclusion. But yet, when there is fate in it, what is the use of

struggling? Florence Plowden was, Mr. Osborne thought, the prettiest, the most delightful and attractive of all the girls in Watcham—more than that, of all the girls he had ever seen. I do not know that this idea was justified by universal consent. Many people gave the palm in respect to good looks to Emmy, and, indeed, neither of them was at all up to the level of many of the girls from London who came down during the boating season, or of Dora Wade, for example, who was the belle of the county. However, the fact that this opinion was by no means universal did not affect the certainty of the curate, who had a very high idea of his own judgment, and, in fact, was better pleased that it should not chime in with other people's, which was the last thing in the world he wished to do. He was a young man who was very well connected, and to lift his eyes even to Dora Wade would scarcely have been beyond his pretensions. But the mere fact that she was the acknowledged beauty was enough to make that pursuit unlikely to Edward Osborne. The *banalité* of falling in love with his Rector's daughter was bad enough, but it would have been nothing in comparison with

the downright vulgarity of falling in love with the beauty who had, as it were, sign-posts put up all round her to indicate her position as the Queen of Hearts. Edward Osborne would have died rather than follow these indications. They convinced him instead that she was not fair at all, but a most matter-of-fact and commonplace Blowsibella, whose radiant complexion was of the mere dairymaid order, and meant nothing but high health and good digestion—good enough things in their way, but altogether devoid of romance, and of any attraction which could dominate a highly trained and fastidious spirit like himself. At first, when he came to Watcham, he would have also said that the attributes of a Rector's daughter, the delightful good young woman of the parish, acquainted with all the poor people and their wants, and occupied with clothing clubs, penny banks, sewing classes, and mothers' meetings, were also the very last things that would attract a young philanthropist of the higher order like himself, who proposed to get at the people in a loftier way, to convince them by reason and argument of their foolish ways of living, and to inaugurate some large movement

among them which would have little to do with the petty methods of feminine supervision. Florence Plowden, by universal consent, was made to be a clergyman's wife, which was almost as strong an argument against her as if she had been an acknowledged beauty. But, as a matter of fact, there is no rule which tells in those mysterious ways of mutual attraction which draw the most unlikely or, which is worse, the most likely people together. And it had grown a certainty with Mr. Osborne that he had never met any one like Florence before her attention had been directed to him at all, and before even it had occurred to himself as possible that he could ever get over the dreadful obstacle of all that there was in her favour, and think of her as in possible relationship to himself. He represented it to himself as a thing that could affect him in no possible way, but yet a certain thing—that Florence Plowden was as a swan among the ducklings about her, that there was no one at all equal to her far and near, and that it was one of the mysteries of humanity how such a creature could spring and blossom from such a root, and among such surroundings. But I will

not attempt to follow the matter from that first germ—obstinately held against all the force of the general idea that Florence was a nice girl and a very good girl (praises both calculated to drive an idealist mad), but nothing very particular—just like other girls, in fact, and a little like her mother. "When she is Mrs. Plowden's age, Florence, indeed, will, I think, be very much like her mother," the General had once said, without the slightest idea that the curate, who was an athletic young person, would have liked to knock him down for saying it. And why shouldn't Florence Plowden resemble her mother? But it was blasphemy to Mr. Osborne's ears.

I will not, I repeat, attempt to follow all that happened from that first impression to the moment when he had made up his mind that without the companionship of Florence life would be, if not unworthy living, yet so diminished in everything that was fair and sweet that all its glory and hope would be over. Many notions about life had been in this young man's head. He had once thought that there was no institution in the world so great as that of a celibate clergy, and that

it would be his highest duty to tread that austere and lofty path. I don't know whether Florence could be justly chargeable with the destruction of that ideal. He had come to see at last that it could not be made a general rule of, or universally enforced, before he arrived at the sudden conviction that he was not himself adapted for that form of self-abnegation. I am obliged to confess that all the different steps in Mr. Osborne's progress had been made suddenly, as with a bound, surprising himself as much as any one else. And perhaps he had no certain idea upon that morning when he found himself engaged in a discussion with his fast friend, Miss Grey, and opposed by the object of his affections — that these affections were to burst all the restraints with which he had bound them, and pour themselves forth in a burst of enthusiasm at Florry's feet. And then, to think that when the flood could scarcely be restrained — when despite her opposition, despite all her naughty ways, he was about to tell her that there was nobody like her in the world (a statement which would have been as astounding and incredible to Florry as any miracle)—that she should have stopped him by contradicting all his

theories, by finding fault with what he felt to be, in its way, a small martyrdom, and by suggesting something quite different—she a girl, a nobody—to him, a priest and consecrated person set apart to instruct and lead mankind, as the better way!

Edward Osborne would not pause to refute, to reprove, to pour down the thunders of his wrath upon the girl whom in another moment he would have asked to be his wife. He did what was the only thing possible in the circumstances, turned and left her, flinging her image and her counsel behind him in the fury of his indignation. He walked from that spot to his lodgings, which was about a mile off, in three minutes or thereabouts, his long steps skimming over the soil, his mind in a turmoil scarcely to be described, boiling with anger, with indignation, with resentment against this interference with his superior rights of manhood and of priesthood, as well as with the strong revulsion of thoughts thrown back upon himself and disappointed feeling. It would scarcely be too much to say that for the moment he would have liked something dreadful to happen to Florence, and if there had been a thunderbolt handy, which

happily is not a missile within ready reach, he would probably have blackened the face of the whole country in order to dumb and to frighten (for I don't think he would have gone so far as to blind) the girl he loved. When he got home he shut himself into his sitting-room, giving a stern order that no one was to be admitted, and betook himself to the writing of a sermon, which seemed the best way to *sfogarsi*, as the Italians say, to blow off the pernicious excitement which made his veins throb and his heart beat. But he soon threw that aside, finding it quite inadequate to the occasion, and wrote a letter to the newspapers, which was so fierce that it frightened the editor to whom it was addressed. I need scarcely say that it was on the subject of temperance.

After the vehemence of the first shock was over, which, however, took some time, Mr. Osborne made a distinct but insufficient effort to cure himself altogether of Florence. He never entered the Rectory, contriving to settle any question he might have with the Rector either when they met in church or by letter. He refused all invitations lest perhaps she might be there — for where, indeed, could a man go in the parish, to

dinner or tea or evening solemnity, without the chance of encountering the family of the Rector? Of course Mr. Osborne was unaware that for a somewhat similar reason Florence refused the same invitations at this crisis, and, indeed, awakened the curiosity of her mother and Emmy—to whom, even to Emmy, she had said nothing—by her disinclination to go "out." "I'd rather stay and keep Jim company," she was forced to say on several occasions — though, alas! with very little hope that the temptation of her company would have much effect in keeping Jim indoors. It did, however, once or twice, and that was both reward and justification.

But it is not to be supposed that this curious incident passed over the head of the Rev. Edward Osborne without a certain effect. His heart began to long after Florry long before the smart of the wound she had given him was healed. And what she had said rankled in his mind even before that. Was there any truth in what she had said? Was it, perhaps, a better way, to win a young man who was his equal—*i.e.*, whom no missionary effort was likely to be brought to bear upon, a man quite beyond the

blandishments of district visitors, Bible readers, temperance lecturers, or even, in a general way, of the curate—to the paths of virtue, than to persuade an old lady to relinquish her poor little glass of beer by the sacrifice of his own very moderate glass of wine? The latter sacrifice had been mentioned in one or two papers, and held up as an example to other men. He had been applauded, but with reproof which was another kind of praise, by his own people and others. "Remember," his mother had written, "that Timothy was bidden by St. Paul to take a little wine for his stomach's sake: and I am sure you are not such a giant of strength that you can afford to do without the little you take: though I quite appreciate the sacrifices you think it your duty to make, my dear boy." Sacrifice! It was no sacrifice. Osborne did not care in the least for the beer, which he took as a matter of habit, or the wine which was served to him at other people's tables when he dined out. He rather liked, if truth must be told, to gently, tacitly snub his hosts by taking nothing. And it seemed to him, on the whole, an achievement which partook of the nature of the sublime to get old Mrs.

Lloyd to give up her beer—not that it did her a great deal of harm, poor soul! But if she took none herself she would be strengthened to refuse it to her husband, and it would be an example to her sons and to the rest of the world—that small, dingy unenlightened world which it was so difficult to teach, which had so little to brighten or cheer it, and which pays so dearly for its indulgences in that sordid, dreadful way.

But Jim Plowden! that was a very different thing from Mrs. Lloyd. I do not for a moment believe that Mr. Osborne would have hesitated to take the pledge for and with Jim: but that was not at all what Florence had suggested. She had suggested that he should admit him to his society, take him for a companion, induce him to share in his pursuits—that last above all. She did not know, of course, that among the drawbacks to herself, of all of which Mr. Osborne was so conscious, her brother and her family took the first place. He would need to be friendly, or even more than friendly, with all the Plowdens. Nothing but the fact that Florence was unique in the world, that there was none like her, none, could make up for that. And now she demanded of him that

he should take her brother into his bosom, so to speak, not as a consequence of being accepted by her, but as a matter of duty in his capacity as a priest, as a better way than that of taking the pledge along with old Mrs. Lloyd. That lout! he repeated to himself: that fellow to whom had been given all the same advantages as other people, even as Mr. Edward Osborne, and who had thrown, or was throwing, them away: the brother, who frequented the "Blue Boar," who was the friend of the schoolmistress, who shunned all the ordinary assemblages of his kind; and yet it was suggested to him that to take up this rowdy undergraduate, sent down from Oxford, would be the better way!

Is it to be wondered at if Mr. Osborne was angry?—if, whenever it came into his head, for as long a time as a fortnight after, he flung down whatever he was doing and turned aside to something else that would be more exciting, to forget the exasperations to which he had been exposed? But this did not effectually chase the suggestion, it appeared, out of his mind. It recurred to him at times when he could not chase it away; in the middle of the night, for instance,

when he could not jump out of bed and write a letter to a temperance newspaper, and when it bored in quietly to his brain, like some fine, delicate instrument used by a cunning, persistent hand. It was not the hand of Florence, it was that of some demon, or some angel, or his own.

Had he, after all, perhaps as much responsibility for Jim Plowden as for Mrs. Lloyd? Was Jim Plowden, perhaps, in his youth, and with certain faculties that might be of use in the world, of as much, nay, even of more importance, than the old washer-woman? Strange questions for a young idealist, a young man deeply compassionate of the poor, deeply indignant as concerns those who throw their own advantages, their own education, and other good gifts away.

These wonderful convolutions of thought —returns upon itself of the disturbed mind, bubblings up of a suggestion not to be got rid of, however trampled upon and thrown aside—brought Osborne to the day on which the Rector had gone up to town, and Jim was left free of that controlling influence of his father's presence which kept him within certain limits. But the curate knew nothing of this incident of the day; indeed, save in

so far as concerned the church and "duty" he had known nothing of the movements of his chief since the day when Florence stopped the words on his lips which might have made him a son of her father's house.

Mr. Plowden went up to town by a morning train, and it was Jim's duty, of course, to go to his Sophocles, however unwillingly, as on other days. He was always unwilling, but his father being present, went grumbling to his work, as a tired horse goes into the shafts, knowing there is nothing else to be done. The morning, however, was bright, and when he got into the little room which was called his study—vain title! —the sunshine came in and called him, almost as if it had been a comrade at his door. The window was open, and the air could not have been more fresh and sweet (as far as we can tell) had it blown out of heaven. The breath of the first lilacs was upon it, and other celestial things of spring. The leaves waved above in all the first new greenness of spring leaves. The book lay open on a table before the window. It was not green nor bright, nor did it smell of the spring. A great lexicon was open beside it, and other books with pro-

digious notes to them, and notebooks lying ready to the hand. He was expected to construe into such halting English as he could manage that great page, and search into its difficulties by the help of the notes of a dreadful German worker (who no doubt liked that sort of thing), and some English ones. Unfortunate Jim—and the sunshine outside! and the soft air blowing in through the window! and the green leaves fluttering! and the silvery river flowing! And the Rector out of reach in London, after some private business of his own.

He made a little fight, be it said to his credit; but what virtue faintly said in favour of the Sophocles was boldly contradicted by something else, not virtue, and yet not vice either, which asked, "What good is there in Sophocles? I am not to go back to Oxford; I am to go to a ranche in America, or else I am to go to a merchant's office in town. What good will Greek, or all the finest poetry in the world, do me there? If I were learning book-keeping by double entry (whatever that may be), it might do me some good — or something about cows; but Sophocles!" One note of admiration was not half enough to express Jim's indignant

sense of a folly which could not be defended from any point of view. Sophocles! Slaughter, the butcher, who had greasy books to keep, could have shown him a mystery more worth knowing, if he went to an office; and the vet., with all his experience of animals, was a professor worth (to Jim if he went to a ranche) more than Sophocles, Eschylus, and the rest, with the German notes and the English dons all thrown into one. Fancy construing a hard chorus when you should be out after the cows! Fancy spending your time over a disputed passage when you have a batch of letters to write for the mail—much good Sophocles would do a man in either of these circumstances! And to fancy that father, who had such sense in an ordinary way (the day was so bright that Jim felt quite just and amiable even towards his father), should be so bigoted, so ridiculous in this!

It may be imagined that after such a self-argument, the sunshine, calling him exactly as one of his comrades used to do, drumming on his window, soon had the best of it. Jim—poor Jim—learned in clandestine movements by the very fact of the anxiety of all about him, listened a little to make

sure that the coast was clear. He heard his mother go upstairs, and the voices of the girls in a room they had for their work at the back of the house. All the exits of the house were therefore open to him—not a jealous eye about, not an anxious ear. He strolled out whistling softly, with his hands in his pockets—whistling, thereby convincing himself that he was afraid of nobody; that there was nothing clandestine, or stealthy, or wrong in the whole proceeding, but only that natural inclination towards the fresh air which everybody feels on such a day. When he had got beyond the bounds of the Rectory, and was quite free and at his ease on the public road, with nobody to make him afraid, and Sophocles as much out of the question as if he had never existed, Jim strolled on for a little, enjoying the air, and then paused to think what he should do. That, after all, was not so easy a question to decide. Everybody about was busy with something. No possibility of dropping in upon Mrs. Brown at this hour. There was the river, to be sure: but to go and get a boat, and then to toil up-stream by himself, which either coming or going he would have been obliged to do, seemed too

much trouble on this sweet, indolent morning. It occurred to him that if he dropped in at the "Blue Boar" to see the papers he might very probably meet the vet., and acquire from him some useful information; or something else might turn up; so he turned his steps that way with a delightful sense of freedom. There was nobody about, and he was responsible to nobody. For this once he would take his own way.

But Jim met Mr. Osborne before he reached the "Blue Boar."

XVII

JIM was not in any way afraid of Osborne, the curate—that is, he was not afraid of being stopped by him, or interrupted in any way in his career. He could not, indeed, go into the "Blue Boar" while the curate was about; that would be giving an occasion to the adversary to blaspheme. But Jim did not dislike Osborne. He was quite willing to walk along with him so long as their ways ran together, turning back when the curate turned the first corner. It would always be something to do; and whether he arrived at that undesirable destination half an hour earlier or later was of importance to nobody. He did not notice that the curate's salutation was anything more than usual, or that he came up to him with a distinct purpose, instead of the usual cool nod with which the two young men passed each other by on ordinary occasions.

"Oh, Plowden," Mr. Osborne said, "have you got work over early, or are you taking holiday?"

Few people in Watcham took Jim's work seriously. Most of them, having the advantage over him of having known him all his life, were disposed to be a little admonitory, and shook their heads when they met him out. "No work to-day, Jim?" the General would say: and most people shared the same feeling. But Osborne, probably because he also was young, never took a mean advantage. He spoke as if it were quite natural that Jim should have a holiday now and then.

"Well, yes," said Jim, moved to confidence, and to take the matter easily, too. "The Rector has gone to town, and I have half a day to myself. If I had been wise, no doubt I should have taken it in the afternoon," he added, with ingratiating frankness; "but then, who knows, it may rain this afternoon, and it's too fine this morning to work."

"Then you'd better come with me," said Osborne quickly. "I'm going to walk into Winwick to see if I can pick up some musicians for my entertainment. There

never was a finer morning for a walk. It is not too hot, and what with the shower this morning there will be no dust. Will you come? We can look in upon Ormerod for a bit of bread and cheese if we're kept late for lunch."

Jim hesitated a moment, but all the same there mounted up into his cheek a pleasant colour and into his heart a certain warmth of gratification. He had always entertained a certain admiration for Osborne, a fellow who had played for the University! On the other hand, it was agreeable to lounge into the "Blue Boar," where everybody was so very civil to him, and where he anticipated meeting the vet. Thus it was with a mixture of pleasure and reluctance that he received the unlooked-for invitation. To look in upon Ormerod, who was another parson in Winwick, was not without its temptations too, for that gentleman was a fine cricketer, known over all the county. Jim was not often led into such society—his usual cronies admired Mr. Ormerod at a distance, talking big of having seen him do this and that feat. A fear of being *de trop*, of being looked down upon by these men, of having to act the part of an undesired third, checked, how-

ever, his pleasure in that thought. Poor Jim was proud, though he had not very much reason for it, and his pride had received some severe blows, and was always on the watch for more. For a moment its whisper that he would be nobody between these two, and that he was always somebody at the "Blue Boar," had almost turned him back. But then "Come along," said Osborne, "come along, don't let us lose the best of the day!"

If Jim had known that Florry was at the bottom of it all—Florry, only a girl, one of the home police who kept that insufferable watch upon him, his sister! But, fortunately, no such idea could by any chance have crossed his mind. Florry! what could she have had to do with it? And he was moved by the cheerful call of the curate, who was not in general a very cheerful man, and who rather preferred in an ordinary way to tramp through the slush and cold than to take advantage of a beautiful morning for a walk. He said, "I suppose you will not be very late," hesitating at the corner.

"Late! You know how far it is to Winwick," said Mr. Osborne, "a matter of three miles—not much that to you and me."

"No, it's not much," said Jim. "I think I'll risk it," he added, when the turn was actually taken, and the Winwick Road stretched before them. "I'm on an easy bit to-day. I'll have time to get it all up when we get back."

"A good walk always clears a man's head," said Osborne; and he resumed after a pause, "What are you reading now?"

"Oh, it's Sophocles. Seven against Thebes, don't you know, with all those hard choruses."

"Oh, for Greats?"

"I wish I only knew what it was for," cried Jim. "You know I haven't been lucky, Osborne. I got into a scrape, don't you know. I suppose everybody knows: though we think at the Rectory that if we make-believe strong enough nobody need know."

"A great many men get into scrapes," said the curate oracularly.

"Don't they, now?" cried Jim, with eagerness; "that's what my people won't see."

"The only thing is to get out of them as fast as possible," added Mr. Osborne.

"Ah," said Jim, a little crestfallen. He went on after a pause: "If you knew what your governor meant, don't you know. He

wants me to read, and yet he says I'm to go out to a ranche or into an office in the city. Why doesn't he make up his mind? And what good will Greek do me on a ranche? Morris the vet. could teach me what would be more use for that than all the Sophocles in the world."

"But then you see," said the curate, "Morris is not just the kind of tutor for a gentleman."

"Oh," said Jim again. His pride was of the kind that could not bear to desert his friends, however undesirable. "He's a decent fellow enough."

"In his own sphere—I suppose so," said Osborne; "and clever, they tell me, in his way; but not our kind." He added: "I believe, from what I've heard, if you are going to a ranche, the best way of learning is just—to go."

"If any one he minds would only tell my father that," said Jim, gratified by the pronoun, and that Osborne had said "our" instead of "your." He was aware that Osborne's "kind" was different from his own, and that his kind would not have been, perhaps, very desirable for one of the curate's cloth. Thank God, there was no question

of Jim going into the Church, though it had been his mother's desire. "That's the chief thing I complain of," he said; "let them tell me straight out what I'm to do. Whether it's one thing or the other I don't mind. If it's to be Oxford over again, well, then the Greek's good for something; but if it's the ranche——"

"That is reasonable," said the curate, "and if you put it to the Rector like that, surely——"

"Poor father!" said Jim, moved to unusual sympathy, "I don't believe he knows himself. First he thinks one thing and then he thinks another. And chiefly, I suppose, he thinks that I am not good for very much, any way."

"That's an idea that you must get him out of, Plowden."

"It's easy to say so, but how am I to do it? When people lose their confidence in you——" said Jim. And then he hesitated and drew back. "What did you say you were going to Winwick for?" he added hastily. "Musicians for your—what did you say?"

"Musicians for my entertainment—to amuse my temperance people. Your sisters

are going to sing: and I hear you recite, Plowden."

"No, I don't—not good enough for you. I used sometimes to do things at penny readings; but that was before I went to Oxford," said Jim, with a sudden flush, which seemed to envelop him from head to foot—a flush half of unexpected pleasure, half of overwhelming shame.

"Well," said the curate, "you had better begin again: unless you disapprove of my temperance meetings, like"—he paused a little and said fiercely—"your sister."

"My sister!" cried Jim with amazement; and then he laughed. "I don't suppose you mind very much. Which was it? Emmy? She's dreadfully serious about everything that God has given us being meant for use. I think that myself, you know," he said.

"But perhaps you haven't seen, as I have, the terrible misery it has brought," said the curate, watching secretly with great interest to see what the result would be.

Now Jim knew a great deal about himself, more than anybody else knew: but he did not accuse himself in this respect. He had not realised the danger here. In other ways

he was aware that there was danger; but in this, for himself, no.

"I'm not such a novice as you think," he said. "I've known fellows at Oxford—Good God! if one was to think of it, it's enough to make your brain go round—nice fellows, men that there was no harm in, and yet——"

Jim walked on very soberly for a few minutes, thinking of tragic scenes he had seen. Even though he was so young, Heaven help him, he had seen tragic scenes. He had beheld with his own eyes the tribute of youth, which the infernal powers demand and receive wherever youth abounds. He knew it well enough. But for himself there was no question of that; for himself there was only a little escape from paternal coercion—a place to lounge in when he had nothing to do, a set of people obsequious, admiring him whenever he opened his mouth. Danger in the "Blue Boar"! He could have laughed at the thought; and so had the nice fellows by whose example he was not warned. He did not say anything at all for a few minutes, being deeply moved by things he remembered, though not by any trouble for himself.

"Plowden," said the curate, "that's one thing I wanted to speak to you about. I don't know how you feel, but to think upon those men makes me so sick at heart that I don't know what to do. They're so often nice fellows: and how are we to get hold of them? How are we to stop them? You're freshly out of it, you're of the present generation. What is a man that wants to stop them to do?"

Jim gave him a frightened half-glance, then lowered his eyes. "Good Heavens," he said, "what a question to ask! How am I to know?"

"How is one to get at them? How is one to get hold of them?" said the curate. "There's always some way of getting at the young fellows in the slums. You may not do any good, but yet you can say out what you've got to say. There's the river men, the boatmen, and all those. I don't say that usually they pay a bit of attention, but now and then there's a chance of getting hold of them and speaking one's mind. They can't help listening to you, and they know what you say is true. But the gentlemen are different. You can't get at them, and they wouldn't believe it if you did;

they don't know the result. They think they can stop when they please, and there will always be some one who will stick to them. How are we to get hold of them, Plowden?—our own very brothers, men of our own kind. They're all our brothers, every one, to be sure; but think, Plowden, those fellows at Oxford, in London, everywhere. God help us! all the harm isn't in the slums. There must be some way of getting at them too!"

Jim Plowden looked at the curate with an interest he had never felt before. He was moved by this earnestness, almost passion, that was in him. "The poor beggar must have a brother that's gone to the bad," he said to himself. That it should be he himself about whom the curate was concerned, or that there was any reason why anybody should be so concerned for him, never entered into Jim's head.

"I see what you mean," he said, "but I couldn't answer your question if you were to give me a fortune for it. They know fast enough. They see other men going to the dogs every day. I suppose that ought to be better than sermons or any other kind of missionary work, or what a

parson could do. I'm sure I can't tell you, or how you're to get hold of them. It won't be with any teetotal stuff, if I must say what I think."

A shade of anger crossed the curate's face, and he looked at Jim with a wondering gaze, which awoke that young man's surprise in return. "What do you look at me like that for?" he said, half irritated in his turn.

"Like what? I beg your pardon. I didn't mean anything—particular. I suppose I thought I saw the others, the men I want to get hold of, through you, or behind you," he said. This was not a speech which was very agreeable to Jim, who did not see any reason why he should be chosen as a type of the young man of whom the curate wanted to get hold. But Mr. Osborne here made a diversion by another reference to Jim's suspended power of recitation or reading, and by entering with him into a discussion of what would be suitable for the occasion, which distracted Jim's attention. Before they got to Winwick Jim had proposed to read something—unwillingly, yet not without a little gratification too.

When they had accomplished their business, and secured the aid of two or three

amateurs all very willing to exhibit themselves and their accomplishments, the two young men made their way to the lodgings of Mr. Ormerod, who was one of the curates of the place, and who produced for them the bread and cheese demanded in the shape of a beef-steak, round which they were all mildly merry as befitted the character of the party, and talked cricket and music, and other matters in which Jim felt himself quite able to take his share, and did so, to the surprise of his host, who had heard the usual derogatory murmurs which breathe into the air concerning every such young defaulter—and of his companion, who had given poor Jim the credit of being a fool as well as other troublesome things. The entertainment took solid shape in the hands of the two curates, and poor Jim felt a certain elation in feeling himself one of them —taking a part with those who were of "one's own kind," as Osborne had said. A passing reflection even glanced through his mind that it would not have been nearly so comfortable had he been leaving the "Blue Boar," a little heated by the refreshment which it was necessary to take there, after an hour or two's talk with Morris the vet., and the landlord, even on a subject so instructive as cows.

He knew exactly what would have happened in that case. He would have been very late for lunch, for which meal the ladies would have waited till he came in; and his feeling that his morning had not been very profitably employed, as well as the refreshment that had been necessary, would have made him irritable. He would have answered his mother (who of course would have said something brutal to him) insolently, and then there would have followed a hush at table, no one saying anything, since all were angry, for the sake of the servant who waited. And his sisters would have looked as if they would like to cry, and his mother would have been red with wrath, and as soon as the meal was over he would have strolled off—to his study in the first place, where he would have opened his books, and then sat down to think how hard it was upon a fellow never to be left to himself, never to have funds for anything, to get angry words and tearful looks whatever he did. And then, after half an hour's indignant musing, he would have strolled out again. Now how different everything was, as he walked through the hilly street of Winwick, keeping up with his companion's long strides, fresh and good-humoured,

feeling that he had done himself credit, with Mr. Ormerod's wholesome beer, light upon both mind and stomach, and the three miles stretch of leafy road before him. To be sure there would be a little rush at the Rectory to meet him, a cry of "Jim, where have you been?" But he was not afraid of that cry. If there were tearful looks they would be looks of pleasure. If his mother met him red with anxiety, she would soon be bubbling a hundred questions full of satisfaction. "Walked into Winwick with Osborne. I know I ought not to have done it, but don't be frightened, I've time to do the Sophocles before father comes back. And we lunched with Ormerod at Winwick, who gave us a capital beef-steak." What a secret thrill of pleasure would run through the faded drawing-room at this explanation! There was no virtue in having gone off to Winwick instead of doing his work. To tell the truth, it was not a whit more virtuous than strolling into the "Blue Boar." But oh, the difference! the difference! The difference to himself, walking home with a calm conscience and a light heart! And the difference to them, whose trembling would all at once in a moment be turned into joy,

though he did not doubt that for the moment they were unhappy enough now!

"Come over, will you, in the evening, and try over that 'Ride from Ghent,'" said Mr. Osborne, when they parted.

"I will, with pleasure," said Jim. They parted, though neither was aware of it, in sight of Florry, who had come out very wretched to see whether in her perambulations about the village she could catch a glimpse of Jim, and who came up to him a few moments after he had left the curate, in a state of curious commotion which Jim found it very difficult to understand.

"Oh, Jim," she cried, "where have you been?"—the usual phrase. But then she added, "Have you been somewhere with Mr. Osborne?" in a voice that fluttered like a bird.

"I have been to Winwick with Osborne, and we lunched with Ormerod off an excellent beef-steak," said the complacent Jim.

But Florence answered not a word. She put down her veil, which was unnecessary, and struggled with it a little to draw it over her face, turning away her head.

XVIII

JIM was very busy about the book-shelves that evening, taking out and putting back various books, until, at last, his movements called forth the observations of his anxious family. The Rector, who had come home moody and troubled, and who had made no inquiry into Sophocles, neither had shown the interest that was expected in Jim's expedition to Winwick with the curate, looked up fretfully and begged his son to have a little respect for other people's occupations if he had none of his own. Mr. Plowden was doing nothing more serious than reading the evening paper, so that the gravity of this address was a little uncalled-for; but he was put out about something, as all the family was aware.

"What are you looking for?" said his mother, who had boundless patience with Jim.

"I want to take two or three things over to Osborne," said Jim, "to let him choose. I'm to read something for him at his entertainment."

"What?" said the Rector, looking over the top of his paper with angry eyes.

Upon which Jim repeated his announcement a little louder and with a slight air of defiance; or, at least, the air of a man ready to be defiant, as—when there is nothing but virtue in his mind, a man feels that he has a right to be.

"His entertainment! His teetotal entertainment! Stuff and nonsense—cramming the fellows' heads with pride and folly, as if they were better than their neighbours."

"Oh, James!" said his wife, "let them be as silly as they like. What does that matter in comparison with ruining their families by drink?"

"They'll ruin their families by something else," said the Rector; "if not in one way they'll get it out in another—politics, most likely, and socialism, and that sort of thing. What Osborne will do is to make them all a set of insufferable, narrow-minded prigs."

"Even that, James——" began Mrs. Plowden.

"Don't tell me," said the Rector, "that you'll make men Christians by teaching them that there's a curse on one of the gifts of God. You may abuse any and all of the gifts of God; but to make a young ass think he is superior to his honest father, because he abstains, forsooth, and the old man likes his honest glass of beer!"

"Mr. Osborne doesn't teach them that, papa," said Florry from the further corner of the room, in which, her eyes, she said, being a little weak, she had established herself. Mr. Plowden turned upon her like a tempest.

"Who are you?" he said; "a little chit of a girl, to tell me what Osborne teaches them or doesn't teach them! I should hope I am still able to judge for myself—at least, in such a question as this."

"Hush, Florry!" said her mother, with a little nod at Florence. They were all aware that in certain conjunctures it was inexpedient to contradict the Rector. As for Jim, he held up two books to his mother behind backs over Mr. Plowden's head and disappeared with them, shutting the door softly behind him. He was too much in the habit of closing doors softly and stealing

out; but Mrs. Plowden's mind being otherwise occupied, she did not think of this to-night.

If there had been anything wanted to throw Jim into the arms of the curate, that tirade did it. Had his father sent him forth to Mr. Osborne's company with a blessing, it would have spoiled all; but to escape for all the world as if he were going to spend the evening with Mrs. Brown, put things at once on a right footing. Jim walked through the village, not in his usual lounging way, but with a long stride and head high. He glanced at the "Blue Boar," with the cheerful light shining through its red curtains, and thought with a little contempt of the fellows who were seated, he knew, in a cloud of smoke within, and with talk as smoky as the air, he thought to himself lightly. It was a place where a man might go to pass the time when he had nothing else to do; but he had never entertained any illusion on the subject of its dulness, Jim said to himself.

It is doubtful whether Mr. Osborne heard Jim's step coming through the little garden of the cottage in which he lodged with the same exhilaration. The curate,

indeed, had been of opinion that Jim was not at all likely to come, and had settled himself to his evening's occupation with that view. He had not found much pleasure in the young man's companionship during their long walk. He had caught the look of surprise, the lifting of the eyebrows, with which the people of Winwick testified their amazement to see such a superior person as Mr. Osborne accompanied by that unlucky Jim—and Mr. Osborne had not liked it. The fact that he did not like it, however, was the one good thing in the matter, for it gave him the conviction that since he did not like it, it must be the right thing. He had liked that little glorification of taking the pledge to induce old Mrs. Lloyd to do it; and this sensation had made him much less strong than he might have been as to the absolute virtue of the act. Mr. Osborne, as will be perceived, was really a very superior young man. When Mr. Ormerod had taken him aside, with again a lifting of the eyebrows, and asked him whether that young cub of Plowden's had turned over a new leaf as he (Osborne) had taken him in tow, the curate of Watcham had been angry. "Don't you think it might

be perhaps my duty to help him to turn over a new leaf?" he had said, with some asperity, at which the Winwick curate had lifted his eyebrows more and more. They had all thought that to consort with Jim was rather a token that Mr. Osborne himself was acquiring a relish for indifferent society, than that it was his duty to endeavour to reclaim that species of lost sheep. This naturally and beneficially excited the temper of Edward Osborne, which was a fine, animated, vigorous sort of temper, capable of doing a great deal to encourage him in an unpopular way. If it had been a young boatman on Riverside there would have been no lifting of eyebrows. So much the more was it evident that this particular thing was his duty, and that he was bound to pursue what these asses took upon them to disapprove of. A man may be a very good man, and yet feel his virtuous determination strengthened by the consciousness that those who are against him are asses. And just as Jim was encouraged by his father's angry opposition, so was Mr. Osborne by the surprise, whether put in words or not, of his Winwick friends. They had all been greatly complimentary and touched to the heart by the episode of old Mrs. Lloyd.

But he had thought that his reformatory effort was over for the day. The invitation he had given Jim for the evening had been a sudden and passing impulse, and he had never suspected that it would be accepted. Even when it was accepted in word, he still thought nothing more would come of it. The young fellow would not be able to pass the "Blue Boar," or he would be caught at the school-house by Mrs. Brown. Having done his duty amply, as he felt he had done, it was almost with relief that the curate concluded that Jim would never manage to pass the "Blue Boar." When he heard, on the contrary, a footstep ring upon the little line of pavement which divided in two the cottage garden where his lodgings were, Mr. Osborne was much startled, and it cannot be said that his start was one of pleasure. "Oh! here's this confounded fellow again." I am afraid that was the thought that passed through his mind: and he pushed away his work with impatience, clearing away several books which he had been consulting. He wanted to make a conquest, a convert of Jim. He had a hundred reasons for wishing it. First, the conviction that on the whole it

was a far more difficult task than administering the pledge to Mrs. Lloyd; second, that Jim Plowden, after all, would be a more considerable prize than the old woman, that he was at least worth as much trouble as a young waterman on Riverside; third, that perhaps it might be allowed that an Oxford man and a gentleman has a peculiar duty towards another Oxford man and gentleman who is going astray, even though that duty is very little acknowledged. Fourthly—— No! there was nothing at all about Florence Plowden in the matter, nothing but an undying resentment against the girl who had presumed to teach him his duty! She might be right. I presume he felt in his heart that she was right, or he would not have taken the measures he had done. But he also felt in his heart that he could never forgive her for her temerity, for departing from the woman's part so much as to venture to suggest to one of the priests of her parish what he should do. No, Florence Plowden told for nothing in the effort he was making. When her name floated up it awakened nothing but feelings of anger in his breast.

Poor Florry! She sat half in the dark

with her knitting, pretending she felt her eyes weak, in order that she might not betray the melting mist of happiness that was in her face, the soft dew that kept coming into her eyes. If anybody had seen how near she was to crying, they would have thought her unhappy: whereas she was almost too happy to think, certainly too glad—except in a momentary impulse like that which had called upon her the reproof of both parents—to speak.

Jim put his books before Osborne, who grinned at the sight. It was intended for a smile, but it was a poor version of a smile. "Oh, yes," he said, "Browning, the 'Ride to Aix.' Isn't it just a little hackneyed? Oh, no, not the poem itself. I don't mean that: but everybody does it. What's the other? Ingoldsby. O—oh. I don't know, if you ask me my opinion, that I care so very much for Ingoldsby, myself."

"Perhaps not," said Jim, who for this once was wiser than his leader, "but *they* do, you know. He's always the most popular of all."

"Eh—oh—ah," said Mr. Osborne, putting his head on one side as though to see in

that way the virtues which were visible to the people in general. "Now, I should have thought," he said, "that this sort of stuff was too—too conventional, too fictitious, in the wrong sense of the word, to please these sort of rough intelligences; that they would like something more—more straightforward, don't you know."

"Like the 'Ride to Aix'? But then they're awfully anxious to know," said Jim, "what it was for, what the news was, and when it was, and all that; and I've never found yet any one that knew."

Mr. Osborne discreetly turned that question aside, for on this point he had no more information than other people. "Suppose you read it and let me hear," he said. It was very good-humoured and kind of him. He expected nothing, if truth must be told, and he was really very full of occupation and had a great many things to do. But Jim, as it turned out, did not read badly at all. And there came a note of emotion in his voice as the gallop rang on; that sort of sympathy with the excitement of the strain, and climbing passion in the throat, which only a few readers are moved by. The curate listened in amaze while this high note of poetic

sympathy thrilled through the lines, which Jim read with a pause or two and strain of breath to overcome himself. He could not understand what it meant to feel thus, and yet to drift into the parlour of the "Blue Boar"; to tremble and flush with the poetry, and then listen to Slaughter and White maundering about politics, or sit with the schoolmistress. There came over the curate for the first time in a great many years a sense of humility, a sudden conviction that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy.

"By Jove," said Jim, "I got through it pretty well this time. The worst is my voice always breaks at that line: 'And into the square Roland staggered and stood.' One gets wound up so, don't you know. After that I can always manage the rest."

"Give me the book," said Osborne; and he, too, read the last verses, but his voice did not break at all, the water did not come into his eyes. He read it all as if it were one of his own sermons. Decidedly there were things in heaven and earth—perhaps he acknowledged it a little grudgingly: "Evidently, Plowden, you have the knack of it much better than I."

"Nonsense," said Jim, with a good-humoured laugh. "You read so well. I've got no knack. It is only that a few of these things get over me somehow. Because—because they are mere stories and of no consequence."

"Plowden," said the curate.

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you'd be dreadfully offended if I asked you one thing?"

"I am not very peppery," said Jim; "fire away?"

"Well," he said, "I will, but you will be angry, I fear. It is just this. When you feel these things so, more than most people—more," he added, with a naïve surprise, "than I do myself; how is it, you know—that—I don't want to offend you—how is it that——"

Jim's countenance grew deeply red, a cloud came over it for a moment; then he shook his head as if to shake off any consideration of such questions. "I say, don't ask me that kind of conundrum. I'm not good at guessing things," he said. "Will the 'Ride' do?"

"The 'Ride' will do capitally," said the curate. He too shook off with a flush the

questions which had risen involuntarily to his lips. He was grateful to Jim for passing it over, for neither taking offence in words nor jumping up and breaking off the conference. "What sort of people do you think will come," he said, "since you seem to have experience of these things?"

"Oh!" said Jim, "a number of the village people will come—the daughters of the tradespeople, and those shifting folks that live in Pleasant Place, and a number of the 'gentry'—the General——"

Mr. Osborne made a sign of impatience and dissatisfaction.

"Don't you want the gentry to come? But the others like it. I assure you they do. Mrs. White and Mrs. Slaughter will not come, they are too grand. They're able to pay for their pleasure when they make up their minds to go out."

Jim said this with a gleam of Florry's mimicry, which discomposed the curate more than he could say. "You seem to know all about it," he cried, a little sharply. "But I want the men from Riverside, the fellows from the boats. I don't want ladies and gentlemen. What I want is to keep the men from the public-house. Do you mean

to say the same sort of thing has been done here before?"

"Oh, yes," said Jim, "we have done it before; but I don't think we got any of the Riverside men. The people who come generally are—well, just the village people, Osborne, the people you know, particularly the women and the Sunday School lads, those that my sisters teach carving to, and so forth; and the ones that come to the night-school."

"Ah!" said the curate, "that is always something," with a sigh of relief.

"And all that my mother calls the nice, respectable people," said Jim, with a laugh, destroying the momentary good effect he had produced.

The curate put his face in his hands, and was silent for a minute. "So that I have been taking all this trouble," he said, "and getting people to come over from Winwick, and laying myself under obligations—to amuse the old women—and the gentry, as you call them."

"Well, yes; there will be old Mrs. Lloyd, and some more of her kind," Jim said.

Mr. Osborne looked at his visitor for a

moment, with as deep a colour as that which Jim had shown when he was being questioned—as much heat of embarrassment, and an air of offence much more marked. Mrs. Lloyd! The curate felt that the name of this old woman was a missile that any one was now at liberty to fling at him, to turn him into ridicule. Strange! when a very short time ago it appeared to him the finest feather in his cap.

"We must do something about this, Plowden," he said. "We must lay hold on some of these fellows, and get them to come. I've pledged myself it's for them. I've meant it all along for them. What can we do to get hold of them? You've been here all your life; you must have known half of them as boys. Can't we do something? can't we find some way of attracting them? Think for yourself. Do you want to read that 'Ride,' which you do so well, to——Mrs. Lloyd?" It would be impossible to express the tone of disgust with which Mr. Osborne said this name.

"I don't suppose she would understand much of it, poor old body. But she will like to hear the girls sing," said Jim, more charitable, after all, to the old lady than

was the instrument of her conversion from beer. "About the men, I don't know; they're very hard to fetch. Yes, I used to know a lot of the young ones as boys; but I haven't seen anything of them for a long time."

"I tell you what, Plowden," said the curate, "we'll go down there some evening when the fellows are about. You can talk to them, for old acquaintance' sake, while I—— Put your shoulder to the wheel! Of course, you could do a great deal if you chose. Don't, for the credit of the parish, let those fellows say we bring them over here to play to the old women. I can't stand it. I may have been a fool," Mr. Osborne said. He said it with a force and bitterness which Jim could not understand—not to Jim, that was clear, but to some unknown adversary. "But stand by me," he said, putting his hand on Jim's shoulder, "and we'll tell another tale."

"Stand by me!" Was it the curate that spoke, and was this Jim to whom he appealed?

END OF VOL. II

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